

AN OVERLOOKED DIMENSION IN AMERICAN DEAF EDUCATION: ETHICAL VALUES

Concetta Pucci, Ph.D., Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C., United States

ABSTRACT

All educators in Deaf Education are committed to the academic and life-skills success of their students. School administrators often face innumerable challenges especially with the issues posed by ethical dilemmas. Ironically, despite the moral importance of dealing with ethical issues, little, if any, professional literature is available to them. School administrators must become aware of their own value system before they can lead a healthy learning and teaching environment.

This study addresses a long-overlooked dimension in Deaf Education by applying the theory of ethics to the real-world level of today's schools. How? By evaluating how school administrators demonstrate their ethical values, by either supporting or blocking the provision of a Professional Ethical Learning Community within their schools. The empirical results show some contradictions. For example, school administrators say they are doing, but their teachers say them to be doing differently. To wit, the school administrators viewed themselves as being *deontologists*—that is, doing what they think is both expedient and also in the best interest of the school's protocols, policies, and procedures. Teachers viewed them otherwise, claiming that their school administrators could have done a better job.

Both school administrators and their teachers also reported that they truly care about the welfare of their deaf students; yet, the existence of unethical practices in the school prevent this from happening—thereby impeding the delivery of high quality education. And because of this, neither Deaf students nor their teachers are feeling valued as individuals.

AN OVERLOOKED DIMENSION—OUR ETHICAL VALUES

The two-century history of Deaf Education in America has yet to develop a research agenda focused on the ethical dimensions faced by administrators—an agenda that distinguishes, not only “right from wrong,” but also “right from right” in the daily decision making processes of their schools. Some ethical dilemmas have no simple and single “right” answer. Badaracco (1997) labeled such ethical intersections as “*defining moments*” of being what is “*right-versus-right*.”

The focus of Deaf Education is to provide every student with a set of life-long skills that will foster their success—academically, socially, and ethically as upright citizens. School administrators must take the initiative in showing their teachers that they are indeed knowledgeable about their student's socio-educational needs and Deaf culture (Pucci, 2012). Deaf students have a unique way of learning because they learn through their eyes as visual learners. Our deaf students depend on how well our school administrators lead the school including influencing how people in the school community interact with each other, how they work with each other, and how they learn from each other. Establishing the ethical value system in deaf education is essential because this promotes a professional ethical learning community not just to teach our deaf students content areas but teach them moral character.

Understanding Our Ethical Values

Our ethical values are often overlooked or simply dismissed out-of-hand because everyone is seemingly entitled to their own opinions about what is right, to what is less

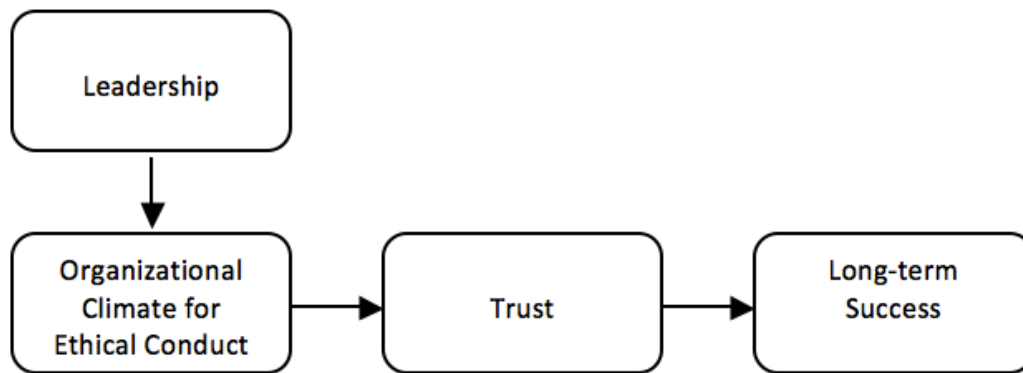
right, and to what is wrong. Arguably, we do indeed define our own value systems, and in the case of the highly visible school administrator, his or her ethical values must be perceived as being clear and consistently practiced by all the teachers, students, parents, and larger school community (Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002). So the questions become:

1. *“How much do school administrators in the Deaf Education really know about their own set of personal and professional ethical values?”*
2. *“How willing are school administrators to walk-the-talk, and have the courage of not only choosing “right from wrong,” but also choosing “right from right?”*

Some certain ethical dilemmas have pushed some of them over the edge that impacted on the deaf education. Their ethical integrity has been tested every day so each decision has to be right in the best interest of themselves, students, teachers, or school community.

Ethical values and educational leadership form two parts of the same coin in that set the culture of school. The tone of any organization is always set at the top! Ford and Richardson (1994) explained that *“the more ethical the climate and culture of an organization, then the more ethical will be an individual’s behavior become”* (as cited in Cooper, 2006, p. 206). There is a relationship between leadership and ethics, as illustrated in Figure 1, showing the importance of building a positive school culture based on ethical behaviors conducted by school administrators (Hitt, 1990). Doing the right thing requires a high level of trust where the school administrator needs support from the school community.

Figure 1: A framework for leadership and ethics



Source: Hitt, W.D. (1990). *Ethics and leadership: Putting theory into practice*. Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Press (p. 1).

School administrators—the key to the success of Deaf Education—must live out the Talmud’s wise saying: *“If not now, then when. If not you, then who.”* Historically, deaf individuals have been discriminated and oppressed through their lives because of misperception of their abilities. In deaf education, the misconception is that if deaf children are able to speak and hear, then they are more likely to succeed in education (Cf., Bauman, 2008; Lane 2006; Shapiro, 1994). The value of deaf education has been changing based on how we teach our deaf students through oralism or sign language. This has been an ongoing controversy on what teaching pedagogy works the best for the deaf children but the ethical values are being overlooked.

A Pressing Concern about Our Ethical Values in Deaf Education

The literature on ethical values in deaf education is minimal and they primarily focused on the concept of “*collectivistic ethic*” which means that any decisions that are made should benefit all deaf individuals as a whole group (Beattie, 2002; Harbour, 2010; Harvey, 2001; Marschark, Rhoten, & Fabich, 2007; Stewart & Ritter, 2008). The ethical values are not very much emphasized in the deaf education because the advocates of deaf education want to focus on providing a high quality of education. Yet, Christenen (2010, p. 81) felt: “*It is time to reevaluate our professional “truths” from a new perspective, to differentiate among stereotypes, myths, and reality, and to recognize what we have gained from research and experience that is useful to the contemporary education of deaf children. An ethical approach to educational decision making carries with it responsibility for present and implications for the future. Much is at stake.*” With this being said, it is worthwhile to evaluate the school administrators’ ethical values on whether if they have influenced on either supporting or blocking the presence of a professional ethical learning community within their schools. Thus, this study addresses an overlooked dimension in American deaf education, by asking: “*What defines the ethical values in our schools for the deaf?*”

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a concurrent transformative design of mixed method research that includes: (a) quantitative data by asking school professionals to take the Ethical Type Indicator™ (ETI) and the Professional Ethical Learning Community® (PELC) instruments, and (b) qualitative data by asking them to respond to the researcher’s open-ended questions, simultaneously. This method can draw on the depth of information and multi-perspectives from eight superintendents, eight principals, and thirty-eight teachers in eight schools for the deaf. According to Teddlie and Tashakkori, the researcher, who conducts a mixed-method study, is trying to “*solve a problem that is present in a complex educational or social context*” (as cited in Mertens, 2005, p. 293). This can lead to a deeper understanding of school administrators’ and teachers’ perspectives about how the ethical values are demonstrated in the school. This Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan pointed out that: “*We shape our tools then our tools shape us.*” Thus, the results will help the researcher and school professionals to understand deeper about the ethical values in deaf education.

DISCUSSION OF THE SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Results from this study show that a focus on ethics in deaf education must be transparent because this can lead to an understanding where the school administrators and teachers can strive the mission of providing a high quality of education for deaf students. School administrators, who understand their own ethical values, can lead schools more effectively and more efficiently that can impact on our deaf students to succeed in education and in the future.

Yet, results show some contradictions between how school administrators and teachers viewed on the ethical values in deaf education and on what is in the best interest of their students. But, one thing that all school administrators and teachers agreed is that their students are their priority. They have different idea of how to ensure that their deaf students are receiving a high quality of education based on their responses.

Understanding School Administrators’ Ethical Values

Resolving an ethical dilemma can be perplexed and complicated. Why? Because school administrators must consider all factors such as: (a) the interests of self, (b) the interests of others, and (c) the interests of community. Larimer (2003) stated that the individual’s

decision-making comes from the individual's ethical value system. Hence, the school administrators resolve their ethical dilemmas based on their values system.

School administrators viewed that they are following the ethical value system of *deontology*—what is the best interest of the protocols, policies, and procedures. They are very clear with their responsibilities as an administrator as they have to “(1) keep promises; (2) do no harm; (3) help others; (4) act reasonably in relation to others; (5) pay for your mistakes; and, (6) take care of your family” (Larimer, 2003, p. 14). School administrators may feel safer to have the deontology in their leadership because all they need to do is to follow the procedures. However, they can block the school from having a healthy professional ethical learning community because of without any teachers' input in their decision-making.

Teachers viewed otherwise because they also agreed that their school administrators are deontologists but also have the characteristics of the ethical value system of *egoism*—what is the best interest of self. School administrators resolve their ethical dilemmas based on what is the best for themselves without any regard for others. Larimer (2003) revealed that the egoism is being the least preferred by followers and they are perceived as self-centered individuals who protect themselves. School administrators may feel it is right thing to focus on what is best of self rather than figuring out what is the best for others however this can negatively influencing morale of the school community.

Teachers also viewed that their school administrators adopt the ethical value system of *conformism*—what is the best interest of their colleagues, families, and friends. Individuals who use the conformism style are thinking of what others would think of them when they resolve ethical dilemmas (Larimer, 2003). School administrators may feel it is important to please others especially their closed ones. Teachers, who are not friends with their school administrators, are more likely to lose the sense of belonging in the school community. This can cause popularity, favoritism, and competition within the school. School administrators, as conformists, can divide the people that impacts on the morale of the school community.

Promoting a Professional Ethical Learning Community in Schools

Establishing a healthy professional ethical learning community in the school also can be a challenge for school administrators. Why? Because school administrators must consider all factors involved in human relationships, personality factors, and behavioral influences within the school. The goal of establishing a positive professional ethical learning community is to commit that everyone feel that they are belonged in the school (Lickona & Davidson, 2005).

In this study, school administrators strongly believed that they are promoting a healthy professional ethical learning community but teachers reported that they could have done a better job. School administrators may not realize how their ethical values can affect on others so it is critical for them to be aware of how their leadership practices contribute to school community. Davidson, Khmelkov, and Baker (2011, p. 38) said: “*The leaders shaped the norms; the norms shaped the practices; [and] the practices shaped the character [of the] competencies of the individuals [comprising] the culture.*” School administrators need to shape the culture of the school in a healthy way. Evidently, ethical values and ethical community characteristics are indispensable attributes of the best quality of deaf education.

Building Character Education in Deaf Education

School professionals face many challenges on how to teach deaf students the subject area but they also need to teach them to become well-rounded citizens of our future. Building character education in deaf education is essential because more unethical and unprofessional practices have become more frequent on the news. In order to build a character education, we need to promote academic excellence through *performance character* and social development excellent through *moral character*.

In this study, school administrators and teachers certainly care about the well being of their students because they feel the urgency to demonstrate ethical values so they can prepare their students to become responsible citizen. One of the principals commented on what is needed to establish a professional ethical learning community within the school: “...*providing ethical leadership and leading by example.*” Also, one of the teachers echoed: “...*seeing strong examples of ethical behavior from our administrators.*” Apparently, school administrators must be ethical leaders in order to establish a positive professional ethical learning community.

A CONCLUDING THOUGHT

Deaf students are our top priority in the deaf education. School administrators must consistently model their ethical values and set a positive ethical culture within their schools. One of the school superintendents said:

“I think leaders need to be foremost role models and visible in the school. They need to be involved in every aspect of the school promoting a positive influence on students and staff. They need to ‘walk the talk’ by being working managers when on the campus and promote the school’s mission when off campus. I think we have a pretty good positive professional ethical environment here. We address issues that come up and do not tolerate disrespect of students and staff.”

School administrators and teachers clearly have passion in being advocates for our deaf students and they deserve to feel valued as a person. However, there are reports of unethical practices happening in our schools for the deaf that makes the job challenging for both administrators and teachers. Ron Ritchart from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education emphasized a powerful point: “*We must educate students not just to be smart but to act smart.*” (as cited in Lickona and Davidson, 2005, p. 86). Exactly! School administrators must “walk the talk” in their ethical values, which means that they must do what they say and show by their visible behaviors that they really do care for the well-being of the school. Lastly, school administrators must question themselves: “*How do I want to be remembered?*”

REFERENCES

- Badaracco, J.L. (1997). *Defining moments: When managers must choose between right and right*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Bauman, H-D.L. (2008). Introduction: Listening to deaf studies. In H-Dirksen L. Bauman, *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Beattie, R.G. (2002, April 29). Ethics in deaf education. *Audiology Online*, Retrieved June 1, 2011, from http://www.audiologyonline.com/articles/article_detail.asp?article_id=343
- Christensen, K.M. (2010). Where do we look? What do we see? A framework for ethical decision making in the education of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. In K.M. Christensen (Eds.), *Ethical considerations in educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing* (pp. 75 – 86). Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Davidson, M.L., Khemlkov, V.T., & Baker, K. (2011, Fall). Sustainability and enduring impact: Shaping an intentional culture of excellence and ethics. *The Journal of Character & Leadership Integration*, 2(11), 35-51.
- Harbour, W.S. (2010). Educating students who become hard of hearing or deaf in school: Insights from disability studies. In K.M. Christensen (Eds.), *Ethical considerations in educating children who are deaf or hard of hearing* (pp. 87 - 100). Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Harvey, M.A. (2001). "Does God have a cochlear implants?" *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 6(1), 70 – 81.
- Lane, H. (2006). *The deaf experience: Classics in language and education*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Larimer, L.V. (2003). *The ethical type indicator: A personal assessment tool that reveals how you resolve ethical dilemmas*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press, Inc.
- Lickona, T. & Davidson, M. (2005). *Smart & good high schools: Integrating excellence and ethics for success in school, work, and beyond*. Cortland, NY: Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility)/Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership.
- Marschark, M., Rhoten, C., & Fabich, M. (2007). On ethics and deafness: Research, pedagogy, and politics. *Deafness and Education International*, 9(1), 45 – 61.
- Mertens, D.M. (2005). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating, diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Picucci, A., Brownson, A., Kahlert, R., and Sobel, A. (2002, December). Shaping school culture. *Principal Leadership*, 3 (4), 38 – 41.
- Pucci, C.T. (2012). *Ethical Values in Deaf Education: Do the Ethical Preferences of Superintendents and Principals Leading Residential Schools for the Deaf in America Influence how Teachers Characterize their Schools as being Professional Ethical Learning Communities?* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from Proquest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3575139)
- Shapiro, J.P. (1994). *No Pity: People with disabilities forging a new civil rights movement*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Stewart, E. & Ritter, K. (2008). Ethics of assessment. In R.G. Beattie (Ed.), *Ethics in deaf education: The first six years* (pp. 67 – 87). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group.