



The Right of the Individual vs those of the School Community
A Case Study: An Elementary School Principal's Dilemma
Luigi DeMarzo

Background

Al Lewis was the newly appointed principal of a kindergarten to grade five elementary school. The school was located in an urban city. It was in a middle class neighbourhood with a mix of newer and older homes. Parents were involved in their children's education. Teaching and support staff ages ranged from late twenties to late fifties. Teaching experience ranged from relatively new to the profession to a few years until retirement. Other than the few new teachers who were on temporary assignments, the majority had taught at the school for five or more years. Several teachers had been there for 10 or more years.

Al was excited and nervous as he embarked upon this latest leadership journey. His previous administrative experience consisted of six years as an elementary vice-principal and two years as an elementary principal in two different school districts. Al knew that coming to new a school community would involve a lot of listening and observing. More importantly, it was a time to get a sense for the school's "culture", build trust and nurture relationships.

(Note to reader: This case is based on an actual dilemma. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality and identities of those involved. In addition, some of the details have been changed.)

Tensions Rising

Every organization eventually reveals its history through its daily "rhythms". Traditions, procedures, rules, and other school functions are demonstrative of the values and culture of the place. Characteristics of school personnel, students, parents, and other community partners begin to surface. For Al, it quickly became evident that trouble was brewing in one particular grade 3 classroom. The assigned teacher of the class was new to

the school. The student dynamics of this class had a cast of “characters” that would make life interesting for any teacher regardless of experience.

Jason became the central “actor” of this saga. He had come to the school the previous year. Jason had been diagnosed during that year as having Autism after a tempestuous year at a different school. He continued to have difficulty with a variety of behaviours that year as well. As the current school year began, the emotional outbursts, violent actions toward classmates and physicality toward his assigned teaching assistant continued. Various supports and processes were put in place to reduce the incidences described and to teach Jason appropriate coping and social skills.

Pressure from the various partner groups began to mount. Al was confronted with the demand to have the student removed from the class and school. During a meeting with staff, a few parents and a district support teacher, emotions came to a head. Al, sensing the meeting had lost its original purpose, ended the meeting.

This was not the end but the beginning of the controversial drama. Parents began to demand for the removal of the student from the class or to have their children moved to another class. A few parents questioned and wanted reassurance that the classroom was safe for their children. Some made calls to the superintendent's office to lodge complaints. As well, the parent of the student in question felt growing tensions from other parents. The teacher's union representative also weighed in asking for explanations. In addition, Jason's teaching assistant was given information from her union that she could refuse to work with the student due to his emotional and physical assaults of her. Al saw this precarious dilemma as having the ingredients of the “perfect storm”.

A Contextual Cauldron of Perspectives

At first glance, the case's overarching premise pits the rights of the student in question with those of his classmates, class parents, teachers, support staff and the school community at large. The basic philosophical underpinning here is that all students should be entitled to an education in a safe learning environment. According to the Ministry of Education's (2012) *Safe, Caring, and Orderly Schools*:

Safe schools are ones in which members of the school community are free of the fear of harm, including potential threats from inside or outside the school. The attitudes and actions of students, staff and parents support an environment that is resistant to disruption and intrusion, and enables a constant focus on student achievement (p. 11).

From the perspective of the students in the classroom, it stands to reason that they would want to feel safe by being free from emotional outbursts and physical threats. In any given classroom with its diversity of learners it is not uncommon for behavioural issues to occur. There must also be consideration given to the student dynamics of the classroom in terms of causal factors that may unknowingly trigger aberrant behaviour from particular students. It is difficult to know what each student's perception of "feeling safe" in this classroom might be. From a utilitarian viewpoint, Nash (1996) asserts "that the rightness of ethical conduct is judged by the extent to which it produces the greatest balance of good over evil for the greatest number of people" (p. 113). Thus, it would be in the class' best interest for Al to remove the offending student. However, there is much more to consider in this situation.

A parent perspective of the situation has its focus on that of the individual child. Their viewpoint is from that of the safety for their child as well as an appropriate learning environment. They might also consider the general well-being of all the students of the class as well as those of the teacher, principal and school community. Parent perceptions of the situation are usually formulated by accounts retold by their children, other adults from the school community or possibly witnessing incidents involving Jason. Concern is further heightened if an incident directly involves their child with the particular student. Hence, Al must deal with a few vocal parents that demand immediate action to remedy the situation. Other parents may make cursory inquiries in order to shed some light on the unfolding drama and to seek reassurance for the welfare of their children. Al understands that the parents are looking out for the best interests of their child as an individual in the classroom/school community. Parents are concerned about the rights of their child being violated by the actions of Jason. Conversely, they may see

it as Jason infringing on the rights of the children as a whole. Al wonders if Kidder's (2004) "individual versus community" paradigm is at play here?

The teacher and support staff perspective adds a different wrinkle to this dilemma. From the teacher's view there are several factors to consider. Firstly, the overall welfare of the class is of utmost importance to her as well as that of the teaching assistant. Similarly, the well-being of Jason is also a priority. She would also be thinking of her own well-being. Another consideration is the overall class environment and its conduciveness for meaningful learning. The teaching assistant needs to consider her safety. She may also think about whether she has sufficient skills/training to be able to help Jason in this inclusive environment. Al thinks about how the teacher's experience, skills and actions/reactions might contribute to a learning environment that can either minimize or exacerbate potential behavioural challenges. The same could be said for the teaching assistant's competencies in terms of being effective or not with Jason. Ultimately, Al needs to consider all the above perspectives during the course of his deliberations.

Synthesis

Al is aware that the situation will necessitate the involvement of both the "local" actors of this drama and others. Jason is a student with special needs so this will involve personnel from the school district learning support services. It is an important support in terms of reinforcing the inclusion of all students. In addition, because the superintendent's office has been contacted, a senior management member will be kept abreast of the situation and assist where needed. There is also the thought of involving outside agencies who can provide expertise in areas of behavioural and social skills training for Jason at school and home.

As the school leader, Al has many issues to weigh in this case. There are a variety of rights and multiple perspectives that require careful consideration of this dilemma. There may be policy, contractual rights, and possibly human rights to consider. There is an obligation that schools have a safe and caring learning environment according to the *Safe, Caring and Orderly School: A Guide (2012)*.

Al must consider the safety of all students of the school. Although, most of the incidents have occurred in the confines of the classroom, some have not. He must grapple with the rights of the individual and those of the school community with respect to receiving an education in a safe environment. However, the Ministry of Education's Special Education Policy (2011) mandates that schools be inclusive and that all possible avenues of support be explored to assist students with special needs to be successful.

Should Al decide to allow students to move to another class this could open the door for more parental requests. This would be unsettling for the current class as well as producing inequities in classroom composition for both classes. He also wonders if there has been adequate time given for the teacher and teaching assistant to implement the strategies that the district support teacher suggested.

In addition, pressure from parents to immediately rectify the situation adds to the urgency for a resolution. Al knows that Jason is entitled to due process that allows him time to learn corrective behaviours. Yet, any new incidents that do occur during this period only further reinforce parent demands to move their children or remove Jason. Then there is the pressure from the teachers and teaching assistants which centers on the right for a safe working environment.

Finally, Al thinks about Jason and his parent. Here is a student with a disability that struggles to function under "normal" school expectations. Al ponders what it must be like for a single parent trying her best to raise a child with special needs. What does she think about a school community that appears to be ostracizing her son? Or the hurt she must feel because of what she has heard others directly or indirectly say about her son. Is this fair or compassionate, he thinks? Al stares out his office window and thinks about how Kidder's (2004) paradigms of *justice versus mercy*, *short term versus long-term*, *individual versus community* and even the *ethic of care* might help with the ethical decisions confronting him. If only life was so simple...

Denouement

The complexity of any dilemma is not conducive to a single ethical framework for resolution. Instead, as Stefkovich & O'Brien point out, "[by] considering [various] paradigms as complementary parts of a whole, the school leader has access to a more advanced set of tools for decision making" (p. 200). AI examined the following ethical frameworks: *individual vs. community*, *justice vs. mercy*, *ethic of care*, *ethic of critique* and *ethic of profession*. It is apparent that the duality of each framework (i.e. justice vs. mercy etc.) is its negative opposite. The ethics of care, critique (closely tied to social justice) and profession have a more relational aspect to their frameworks. It is a focus undergirded with a social justice emphasis. In addition, the *profession* ethic highlights a leader's personal and professional principles. It is inevitable then, that a leader will struggle with many internal and external pressures during the decision-making process.

References

- BC Ministry of Education. (2012, May 22). *Safe, Caring, and Orderly Schools: A Guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/sco/guide/scoguide.pdf#page=31>
- BC Ministry of Education. (2012, May 24). *SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines*. Retrieved from <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/ppandg.htm>
- Kidder, Rushworth, M. *How Good People Make Tough Choices: resolving the dilemmas of everyday living*. (2004) Fireside, New York, Pub; ISBN 0-688-1344-4
- Nash, Robert J. (1996). "Real World" Ethics: Frameworks for Educators and Human Service Providers. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
- Stefkovich, J. A., O'Brien, M. G., (2004). "Best interests of the student: an ethical model", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 42 (2) 197 – 214