

The Anatomy of a Public School Teacher's Dilemma

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Abstract

This is a case study of a dilemma that a British Columbia school teacher named Paul was involved in 2012 during a heated labor dispute between the government and the teachers' union. In an effort to pressure the government the union asked teachers to halt all extracurricular activities. This directive would not be so problematic in a more affluent community, but Paul teaches in an inner-city neighborhood where extracurricular activities anchor children to the school and provide them with learning opportunities that their parents cannot provide. Paul was plunged into an uncomfortable situation in which he had to balance the needs of the inner-city children that he works with against his professional obligations to the union. This paper utilizes Rushworth Kidders 'Justice-verses-Mercy' paradigm and Robert Greenleaf's 'Servant Leadership' paradigm as filters to understand how Paul resolved this dilemma.

Key words

Dilemma, Ethics, Labor Dispute, Servant Leadership, Inner-city, Teachers Union

Introduction

Rushworth Kidder (2003) describes the complex topic of dilemmas simply and effectively as being a clash of right-versus-right, “where two core moral values come into conflict” and involve an actor (individual or group) having to choose between two alternatives which are both correct and morally defensible (p. 110). The process that an actor must go through in deciding which alternative to choose is not as simple as if the choice involved a decision between a right-versus-wrong choice, or what Kidder (2003) describes as “moral temptations” in which one choice is clearly wrong (p. 5). Dilemmas are complicated multi-dimensional matters that “reach inward to our most profound and central values, setting one against the other in ways that will never be resolved simply by pretending that one is wrong” (Kidder, 2003, p. 5). Dilemmas plunge actors into a period of ethical introspection and internal conflict in which they must critically examine their own core beliefs and values and struggle to arrive at a decision that is both consistent and also at odds with their convictions.

This case study examines the dilemma that British Columbia public school teacher Paul faced in 2012 during a heated labor dispute between the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) and the British Columbia Public Schools Employers Association (BCPSEA). The following discussion outlines the details of this dilemma that pitted Paul’s commitments to the inner-city children where he teaches, against his obligations to the teachers’ union of which he is a member. We will explore the anatomy of Paul’s dilemma by filtering it through the ethical paradigm that informed Paul’s decision, and the leadership paradigm that helped to mobilize his actions. By sifting Paul’s thoughts through these paradigms it is possible to see how this dilemma strained Paul’s ethical and moral convictions, yet enabled him to make a decision he was proud of.

The Background

Maple Elementary (pseudonym) is an inner-city school situated within one of the poorest socio-economic pockets of Metro Vancouver. Maple consistently performs poorly on the standardized Foundation Skills Assessment exam administered yearly to all grade four and seven students. Based on the Fraser Institute’s 2012 rankings of schools it was ranked in the bottom 40% of 860 schools, with an overall rating of less than 4/10. The Fraser Institute is an influential think-tank works to influence government policy. ESL and special needs students account for 44% and 14.5%, respectively, of the student population, and the average family income in this community is \$44,000.00 (Fraser Institute, 2012). Maple is a school in which many of the children are in a constant state of crisis as a result of chronic poverty. Alcoholism, domestic abuse, incarceration, illegal drug sales, and prostitution are everyday occurrences in this neighborhood that predominantly consists of low-rent government housing. Many parents are busy working two or even three low paying part time jobs just to cover the basic necessities of life. They do not have the luxury of being able to spend time with their children, which most middle class parents take for granted. Opportunities for social mobility are sparse for the children in this community.

The staff at Maple is a resilient and committed group of teachers who have chosen to be there in spite of the emotionally draining inner-city challenges they contend with. The staff is an eclectic mix of 28 teachers of various nationalities, ages, and experiences that mirrors the diversity of their students. Most of the staff strongly supports the BCTF and many perform extra-curricular school services.

Paul has taught at Maple for several years, is well respected by the staff and students, and is known to be an effective and caring teacher. Paul is a strong advocate for the BCTF as well as for his students. He has been a union representative in the past and also takes an in-depth role in developing the culture of the school community by sponsoring various extra-curricular activities. Paul is also a religious individual, and often views matters through his faith.

Maple also has a principal and vice principal who for the most part are hands off, but are still strong representatives of the BCPSEA mandates. The administration regularly feels overworked and is constantly putting out fires related to frequent inappropriate student behavior, aggressive parents, and dealing with families in crisis; consequently, the administration does not have the capacity to facilitate extracurricular activities themselves.

The year 2012 was an exceptional year at Maple due to an ongoing labor dispute between the teachers and government. This dispute created a toxic relationship between the teachers and management, and this was very evident at Maple where teachers and the administration were constantly at odds and engaged in frequent episodes of political jousting. The passing of the controversial Educational Improvement Act (Bill 22) by the Clark government cemented the differences between the two camps resulting in a stalemate characterized by animosity and mistrust. In protest to Bill 22, the BCTF ordered all teachers across the province to cease all extra-curricular activities so as to pressure the government to negotiate an end to the dispute. This may not be problematic in a more affluent community where parents can easily provide their children with alternative extra-curricular opportunities on their own; however, parents in this community do not have the resources to provide their children with these opportunities and rely upon the goodwill of teachers to do so. Furthermore, the extracurricular activities conducted by the Maple teachers are an invaluable tool to keep otherwise at risk children connected to their school, providing them with a constructive outlet for their extra time, functioning as an anchor for this community and occupying a central role in the lives of its resident children. The extra-curricular activities at Maple contribute immensely towards developing and sustaining a positive culture amidst a community under constant socio-economic stress (Peguero, 2011).

Paul understands the importance of extra-curricular activities in the fragile lives of the Maple youth. However, the directive of the BCTF forced Paul to halt the athletics and student leadership programs has always sponsored and strongly believes in. Conversely, Paul is also a strong advocate of the BCTF and understands the invaluable service that it provides to him as teacher in terms of securing benefits and rights. This situation resulted in a dilemma for Paul in which his legal and professional obligations to the BCTF were pitted against his sense of moral responsibility to his students.

Duality of the Dilemma

Paul is locked in a complex and uneasy struggle in which it is right to fulfill his legal obligations to the BCTF, but conversely it is also right for him to protect the most vulnerable children in society. On one hand, Paul is legally and professionally responsible to the BCTF, which he recognizes as having played a key role in establishing and preserving the benefits and rights that teachers have in BC. The BCTF has taken a stand against a series of governments who have wanted to adopt a more economic and American style of public education that Paul strongly rejects. Furthermore, at a critical time when the BCTF is engaged in a bitter stalemate with BCPSEA, Paul realized the importance of teachers presenting a united, committed front in order to preserve a public education system that he strongly supports. Consequently, if the BCTF feels it is necessary for teachers to withdraw extra-curricular activities as a tactic to pressure the government into repealing Bill 22, he feels compelled to support that initiative. It was evident to Paul that because of past legislation teachers did not have many legal tools at their disposal to use in negotiations with the government otherwise they would have chosen an alternative that did not impact students. On a political level, it was also clear to Paul that in order for him to maintain constructive and positive professional relationships with his colleagues who were staunchly supporting the BCTF, he had to show the same level of commitment. Furthermore, if Paul violated the BCTF directive he also risked being reprimanded, fined, or expelled from the organization.

On the other hand, Paul also felt a sense of obligation to his students and the school community. Paul was acutely aware that the children who attend Maple were marginalized individuals who suffer the harsh consequences of poverty. It was clear to Paul that extra-curricular opportunities addressed the numerous voids these children had in their lives. Furthermore, extra-curricular activities provide these children with the scarce opportunity of being able to engage in meaningful and constructive activities with caring adults. Paul's conscience told him that he must exercise compassion for those who were less fortunate than himself and do what he could to assist them.

Situating this Dilemma Within an Ethical Paradigm

One effective approach to unpacking this dilemma is by using Kidder's 'Justice-versus-Mercy' ethical paradigm, which pits the virtues of justice against those of compassion required by mercy. On one hand, justice "urges us to stick by our principles, hold to the rules despite the pressures of the moment, and pursue fairness without attention to personalities or situations" (Kidder, 2003, p. 138). On the other hand mercy, "urges us to care for the peculiar needs of individuals case by case and to seek benevolence in every way possible" (Kidder, 2003, p. 138). Justice versus mercy, Kidder (2003) notes, "arrays the powerful claims of those most at risk and least able to care for themselves, against the overarching principles and standards under which the organization has been founded and run" (p. 91). In Paul's case, justice demanded he side with the legal and professional obligations he had to the BCTF and discontinue extracurricular activities. However, mercy demanded that he exercise compassion for the children of his school's community and provide them with extracurricular activities.

These are the two possible choices that were available to Paul, but each had a very different outcome.

Choice 1: Follow the BCTF Directive

If Paul followed the directive put forth by the BCTF, he would have been subscribing to the justice side of this paradigm. Paul felt he had legal and professional obligations to the BCTF that he could not ignore. He was acutely aware of how public education and teachers' job security had been furthered and preserved as a direct result of the BCTF's efforts. Paul acknowledged that the BCTF had spent many decades and many dollars working hard to protect a profession and an education system that he believed had been constantly under siege from different provincial governments who were wrongly attempting to erode and commercialize a public right. With this in mind, Paul could view the BCTF's call to end extracurricular activities as a just way to stand up to a government that he believes is more concerned with financial spreadsheets and political optics than providing a critically needed quality public education system.

If Paul elected to make this particular decision the core ethical principles that he was appealing to were those of responsibility, fairness, fidelity, and preservation of the law. Paul understood that his membership in the BCTF came with certain responsibilities. Responsibility demands Paul faithfully discharge his obligations to the BCTF. Paul derived considerable benefit from the BCTF and is therefore responsible to uphold its directives.

Coupled with the principle of responsibility is that of fairness. It would not be fair to his colleagues, or the BCTF, if Paul were to reject the BCTF's directive. By rejecting the directive Paul may unfairly undermine its credibility and strength.

Furthermore, Paul is a member of what Sandel describes as a "constitutive community" in which "members are connected not simply by self-interest, feelings, and shared aims and values, but also by the fact that their very identities are defined by the community of which they are a part" (cited in Nash, 2002, p. 74). Thus, fidelity demands that Paul be loyal to the BCTF. The BCTF is only as strong as the commitment of its members; therefore, Paul must work to preserve its strength and efficacy by actively displaying his loyalty.

Paul would also likely employ the principle of preserving the law, which along with departure from the law, and departure from moral rectitude, are regarded by Kidder (2003) as being ways an individual who violates them can be morally wrong. By siding with the BCTF Paul could argue that he is preserving the laws of a legitimate professional organization and therefore is on the side of rightness.

Paul's choice in this case also employs the Kantian theory of rules based thinking. From this deontological perspective, Paul has a duty to follow the rules of the BCTF irrespective of the consequences. Deontology demands that Paul strictly adhere to the BCTF rules regardless of how students may suffer because adhering to the rules of the BCTF is a necessary precursor for its advancement, protection, legitimacy, and credibility as a professional organization (Chance, 2013). Moreover, because he expects his colleagues to also follow the union's directives, then he must follow them himself.

He must model behaviors that he would like his colleagues to follow in order to preserve his own personal integrity and professional credibility.

Choice 2: Provide Extra-Curricular Activities

If Paul chooses to reject the BCTF directive he would be subscribing to the mercy component of Kidder's paradigm. Mercy is rooted in compassion and benevolence and compels us to unconditionally love one another in spite of all laws, and occasionally even in contravention of them. Furthermore, according to Niebuhr, "love is the final or highest possibility in a man's relationship to man" (cited in Kidder, 2003, p.139). Hence, from Niebuhr's conception of mercy, love must take precedence and priority over all other considerations. For Paul, the concept of mercy requires him to alleviate the suffering of the children whose parents do not have the resources to provide additional learning and recreational opportunities for their children.

If we apply the umbrella concept of mercy to Paul's decision to provide extra-curricular activities, then the core principles of compassion, fairness, tolerance, and nonmaleficence are brought to the forefront. Compassion and nonmaleficence demand that Paul be mindful that the children he works with, through no fault of their own, exist in dire circumstances and are unable to exercise any agency over their lives. This inability further compels Paul to attend to their needs out of his fundamental concern for them as being amongst the most marginalized individuals of our society. If he does not step up to support them then he believes it is unlikely that anyone else will as these students have limited social networks.

Principles of fairness and tolerance are also at work here. Fairness makes the argument that it is unethical to further marginalize a group of children who have little or no control over the circumstances in which they exist, affording them opportunities in life that are commonly available to others. Fairness also gives Paul the moral courage to exercise what Fletcher refers to as "situation ethics" that permit him to deliberately break the laws of the BCTF because the context warrants it (cited in Kidder, p. 92). Kidder (2003) makes it clear that, "obedience to law, while it is usually a necessary condition for ethical action, is not sufficient to guarantee it" (p.92). Paul may argue that his overarching concern for human suffering gives him the ethical right to disobey directives by the BCTF that are furthering that suffering. However, at the same time Paul must also be aware that by breaking such directives he risks suffering the consequences.

The principle of tolerance (Kidder, 2003) also functions in this argument and advocates for acceptance and inclusion. Tolerance demands that rather than exclude this defenseless sector of our society, it is the duty of others to receive and involve them. It is through acceptance and inclusion that Paul believes he can help improve the human condition of the members of our society who exist on its fringes.

The bedrock belief that is at play in this scenario emerges out of Paul's religious convictions. Paul's faith commands him to exercise the Golden Rule and do for others that which he would want done to him. Paul has empathy for the needy children of his community, and his empathy compels him to act. Furthermore, having children he can

relate to how he would want other adults to treat them if they were to fall upon hard times.

Paul's choice to provide extra-curricular activities to the children of this community is also rooted within Nodding's (2005) ethical resolution theory of 'caring' that emphasizes relationships between actors and argues that at the base of any relationship is the concept of care. Furthermore, as Noddings argues caring also stipulates that when a relationship involves unequal power relations, such as between teacher and student, then there is an inherent obligation on the powerful to care for the powerless. As an adult and a teacher Paul has a relationship of power over the needy children of this community, and that relationship ethically demands that he exercise care.

Paul's Response

Paul chose to resolve this dilemma, by utilizing a 'trilemma', a "third way forward, a middle ground between two seemingly implacable alternatives" (Kidder, 2003, p. 165). The decision that Paul made was to arrange for outside non-profit agencies and community volunteers to come in and provide extracurricular activities for these children. Paul would arrange and organize the outside helpers, but would not directly conduct any of the extracurricular activities. By providing hands-off administrative and organizational support Paul was able to simultaneously honor his professional commitment to the BCTF and his humanistic commitment to his students.

Situating this Dilemma Within an Leadership Paradigm

The last component of understanding this quagmire involves understanding the leadership paradigm that Paul employed in arriving at this decision. A leadership model that effectively explains Paul's decision is that of the 'Servant Leader' as described by Greenleaf (cited in Wren, 1995). This model of leadership can be defined as a transformational model at whose core lies the idea that individuals have an inherent worth that transcends simple monetary or economic valuations. A servant leader such as Paul does not view his colleagues or students as cogs in a machine, but rather regards them as being valued members of their communities who have personal needs for growth and caring that he is working to support.

Greenleaf describes Servant Leadership as commencing "with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (cited in Wren, 1995, p. 22). Under Servant Leadership the threshold for success becomes whether the individual and group "become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous" (cited in Wren, 1995, p. 22). Servant leaders choose to be more subtle in their leadership and operate from a position of selflessness that situates them behind others where they can support and propel from the rear, rather than call from the front. Sergiovanni (1992) argues that by functioning in a supportive role the servant leader is given greater moral authority to lead, because he/she is not acting out of a position of

self-interest, but rather out of a genuine concern for the welfare of other, which French and Raven characterize as ‘referent power’ (cited in Wren, p.341). Servant leaders who utilize moral authority and referent power to accomplish their goals are generally regarded by their followers as being ethical role models, worthy of being followed. In this case, Paul is not looking for recognition from the BCTF or his students, but instead is choosing to support the needs of both groups out of his authentic concern for their cause(s) and is doing so from a quiet position that does not necessarily call attention to himself. He realizes that the strength of his leadership lies in supporting the causes of his students and the BCTF from a bottom-up, grassroots level where he is closest to those who he is serving.

Understanding Servant Leadership

Spear (2004) mines the concept of Servant Leadership further and describes its key characteristics which include: empathy, healing, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. These five characteristics reverberate loudly throughout Paul’s ‘trilemma’ response to his dilemma. The first characteristic that Spear identifies is a sense of empathy: being able to identify with the thoughts, feelings, and viewpoints of others. As a leader, Paul is empathetic to the marginalized condition of the children at Maple, their underprivileged conditions, and the inability of their parents to provide extracurricular activities, and thus understands that they need extracurricular activities.

Similarly, Paul is also empathetic to the BCTF and his sense of compassion centers around his belief that the BCTF is working hard to justly preserve the rights of teachers, and prevent the erosion of a critical public entitlement to a quality education system. Paul views the current provincial government agenda of moving towards a commercialized and competition based education system as being one that will further perpetuate an unequal society of ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ which he cannot ethically accept. In addition, Paul is also very sensitive to the needs of his colleagues who have invested a great deal of time, financial resources, and personal effort in becoming teachers. Paul feels compassion for those who desire to simultaneously derive a living and promote the profession, and therefore feels compelled to honor their commitment to the field and to their own families.

The need for empathy is also stressed by Noddings (2005) in her theory of caring which holds that in relationships that involve unequal power relationships there is an obligatory duty of care that must be exercised by the powerful towards the powerless. And because Paul is in a position of power over the children of his school, he is ethically and morally obligated to address their concerns as he has the capacity and resources to do so. In addition, Noddings (2005) asserts that care can also be exercised for principles or ideas. From this standpoint we can argue that by addressing the needs of both groups Paul is exercising care for the principles of nonmaleficence, fairness, and democracy.

Secondly, Spear identifies the characteristic of healing. Servant leaders are individuals who work to improve the health of others by creating conditions conducive

to their emotional and physical well-being. The healing function that servant leaders provide is also echoed by feminine leadership styles that are thought to be characteristic of most women leaders. Rosener (cited in Wren, 1995) claims that research on female leadership suggests that women by virtue of their socialization are considered to be more nurturing than men. That is, historically women have occupied domestic roles such as raising children and families, which are believed to lend themselves more naturally to positions of caring and nurturing. Consequently, Rosener (cited in Wren, 1995) argues that it is commonly believed that this supportive and developmental trait exhibited by women has transferred over into their leadership styles, as well as being a hallmark of servant leadership. In this quagmire Paul can be seen as a servant leader by working from behind to improve the health of the children at his school, as well as the health of the BCTF as an organization. He is able to diagnose the ills of both groups and respond in corresponding ways that create environments which work to alleviate those ailments.

The third characteristic of a servant leader according to Spear is that of stewardship. Good servant leaders are individuals who according to Block are “holding something in trust for others” (cited in Spear, 2004, p. 9). According to Sergiovanni (1992), stewardship involves “the leader’s personal responsibility to manage her or his life and affairs with proper regard for the rights of other people and for the common welfare” (p. 139). As a servant leader Paul is displaying stewardship for the credibility and integrity of the BCTF’s cause and respect for its rules. By following the BCTF directive Paul is sending a message that he will safeguard the trust that the union and his fellow colleagues have placed in him to uphold the core values of the BCTF. On the other hand, by arranging for others to provide extracurricular activities to children of this underprivileged community Paul is displaying stewardship for his core ethical belief of nonmaleficence and for the societal trust that his position as teacher bestows upon him in looking after the welfare of the children under his charge. As Sergiovanni (1992) argues, parents entrust the welfare of their children to teachers, and that bedrock trust needs to be protected in order to preserve the trustworthiness and integrity of the teaching profession and of the education system as a whole. By meeting the needs of this group of students Paul is exhibiting stewardship of the sacred position that teachers hold in society and its responsibilities.

Commitment to the growth of people is identified by Spear (2004) as being the fourth characteristic of the servant leader, which entails taking those actions that enable individuals to attain their development potential and enhance their sense of self. We can regard this need for growth as being analogous to the five basic motivational needs identified by Maslow (cited in Wren, 1995) that all individuals attempt to fulfill. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs ladder asserts that individuals progress in order from satisfying physiological needs, to security needs, to belongingness needs, to esteem needs, and finally their self-actualization needs. This means that servant leaders, such as Paul, fulfill a nurturing function in which they work to create conditions that will enable individuals to go beyond meeting their lower order needs and progress towards satisfying their higher order needs. Paul is committed to having his students grow and develop more constructive connections with the school and their inner-self, which will aid them in taking the necessary steps required to move away from a position of socio-economic disadvantage.

Comparatively, by following the rules of the BCTF Paul is attempting to meet its needs for security, belongingness, and credibility. Paul is acting to nurture the strength and authority of the BCTF as a legitimate professional organization and fortify its ability to produce positive political and social change. The research done by Rosener on the leadership qualities of women also augments the fourth characteristic of servant leadership by arguing that women leaders “build a feeling of self-worth in co-workers and subordinates” (cited in Wren, 1995, p. 156). In other words, women leaders feel “that people perform best when they feel good about themselves and their work and they try to create situations that contribute to that feeling” (cited in Wren, p. 151). In the case of this particular paradox it can be argued that Paul’s efforts to support his students and fellow colleagues are attempts to enhance their sense of self-worth by producing those environmental conditions that cultivate self-worth. By siding with the members of each group Paul is signaling to them that they matter and that he recognizes and respects the value that they bring to society at large.

The final characteristic of a servant leader identified by Spear is that of working to develop a sense of community. Cultivating community requires servant leaders to build relational bridges among individuals so that they can come to regard themselves as a collective group that has shared beliefs, values and norms. In this case Paul is working to simultaneously develop the social community of children at Maple as well as the professional community that is represented by the BCTF. The importance of community for leadership has also been discussed by Strike (2007) for whom the idea of community is at the heart of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership “is about the shape of human communities in which people can flourish and about the basis for social cooperation in such communities” (Strike, 2007, p. 7). Strike argues that the role of leaders is to create strong communities in which individuals can peacefully coexist and have opportunities to develop in four key areas: human capital, ability to self-examine, citizenship, and human flourishing. Paul’s decision to support the BCTF is an attempt to improve members’ human capital and sense of citizenship. By supporting the BCTF’s plan to oppose the government’s unilateral imposition of the Education Improvement Act Paul is functioning to preserve and enhance the financial strength and democratic political rights of his colleagues. Furthermore, by supporting the children of Maple Paul is acting to develop their sense of human flourishing and ability to self-examine. He believes that extracurricular opportunities assist these underprivileged children in developing their tastes and talents, and give them an opportunity to interact with others and engage in meaningful introspection.

Closing

Dilemmas pitting right against right are difficult to resolve. When two ethically correct and morally defensible options become mutually exclusive, the true inner self of an individual is tested and revealed in its most transparent form. Filtering Paul’s decision through both ethical and leadership paradigms clarifies his decision. However, the challenge for Paul in the future will be how he will resolve a dilemma that has no ‘trilemma’ option. How will he reason a solution to a pure paradox that has no middle

of the road choice, and the options are mutually exclusive? Such a scenario would provide a true test of the strength of his ethical and leadership convictions.

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