

# Making the right choices: Ethical judgments among educational leaders

Ori Eyal, Izhak Berkovich and Talya Schwartz

School of Education, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

## Abstract

**Purpose**— Scholars have adopted a multiple ethical paradigms approach in an attempt to better understand the bases upon which everyday ethical dilemmas are resolved by educational leaders. The aim of this study is to examine the ethical considerations in ethical judgments of aspiring principals.

**Design/methodology/approach**— To examine the ethical considerations involved in school leadership decision making, a specially designed ethical perspective instrument was developed that draws on the multiple ethical paradigms. This exploratory instrument was pre-tested for validity and reliability among school principals and students of educational administration. The research sample consisted of 52 participants in principal training programs in Israel.

**Findings**— Negative correlations were found between choices reflecting values of fairness and those reflecting utilitarianism and care. In addition, negative correlations were found between choices reflecting values of community and those reflecting care, critique, and profession. Critique turned out to be the value most widely adopted by educational leaders to solve ethical dilemmas, followed by care and profession.

**Originality/value** — The common notion in the literature is that the various ethics complement one another. There is, however, little empirical work on ethical judgments of educational practitioners. The importance of this exploratory research is twofold: first, it examines the extent to which multiple ethical considerations can be taken into account simultaneously; and second, it identifies the prevailing values that come into play most often.

**Keywords:** Educational administration, Ethics, Justice, Values, Decision making

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## 1. Introduction

School principals face moral dilemmas and decisions on a daily basis and are often required to make difficult choices between competing ethical demands and values. They are expected to offer solutions tailored to each individual student and community (Epstein, 1995), while simultaneously embracing powerful government regulations and adhering to uniform standards (Watson and Supovitz, 2001). School leaders necessarily maneuver between professional considerations and considerations pertaining to school prestige and image; such maneuvering is unavoidable due to the public discourse concerning competition and markets in education (Oplatka, 2002). Principals consequently have to respond to conflicting demands of various stakeholders while maintaining professional integrity.

The conflicting demands frequently reflect societal or interpersonal interests and take on a political or professional coloring; they may also reflect conflicts within the organization or between the school and the bureaucracy of the educational system (Cranston *et al.*, 2006). In these circumstances, where achieving social consensus regarding the most appropriate solutions is difficult, scholars assert that principals ultimately make a value-based decision (Begley, 1999; Cranston *et al.*, 2003). It has been argued that principals' values influence the decision-making process and its consequences by filtering information and defining the possible alternatives for resolving the dilemmas (Begley, 1999). Sims and Keon (1999) claim that value-based decisions are not purely rational and must therefore contain some ethical component. Ethics, in this context, may be viewed as an individual's personal beliefs regarding right and wrong, good and bad (Davidson and Griffith, 2000).

In an effort to better understand the bases upon which ethical dilemmas are resolved and to train educators to deal with such dilemmas better, both researchers and practitioners have adopted a multiple-ethical paradigms (see, e.g., Furman, 2003; Starratt, 1994; 2003; Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011). In this approach, several values have been identified as common considerations in moral decision-making. These include values reflected in the ethic of care, profession, justice (i.e. fairness and utilitarianism), critique (e.g., Starratt, 2003; Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011), and community (Furman, 2003). It has been argued that school leaders can and should utilize these ethical perspectives simultaneously (e.g., Starratt, 2003; Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011).

The adoption of the multi-ethical paradigms' approach to analyze and confront dilemmas that principals face is in contrast to earlier approaches that assumed that ethical dilemmas are to be solved by adopting a single ethical posture. Although the latter may offer an agenda that may be viewed as a coherent analysis of a situation, it holds the danger of principals' embracing dogmatic or mechanistic models of problem solving (Starratt, 1994). Conversely, the preference of one ethical consideration over the others in a given certain situation, while balancing between these perspectives, as implied by the multi-ethical paradigms, might force principals to offer more complex solutions. These solutions are highly significant in helping principals confront their multitude of challenges and professional commitments, while addressing the needs and demands of a diverse student body and stakeholders (Brazer and Keller, 2006; Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011).

It is asserted that complex solutions are generated, as a response to the necessity to interpret each ethical perspective by the others (Starratt, 1994). This process might lead principals to acknowledge the fact that “each theme implies something of the other themes”; and that “each ethics needs very strong convocations embedded in the other” (Starratt, 1994, p. 53), and thus perceive them as complimenting. At the same time, the differences and contradictions between them might also be identified through this inquiry. It is our assumption that these incompatibilities between the different ethical perspectives are the ones responsible for principals' engaging in self reflection regarding the motivations, goals and process that guide their ethical judgments and thus give precedence for students' best interest over each and any of the various ethical considerations.

However, little empirical work has been done on prevalent ethical judgments among educational leaders when they are faced with concrete scenarios. The aim of the present study, therefore, is twofold: first, to examine the extent to which multiple ethical considerations can be taken into account simultaneously, and second, to determine the prevailing values that come into play most often when school leaders have to choose between two values. To better understand principals' ethical judgments, the present study developed and validated a scenario based instrument. The study of principals' ethical judgments is a multi layered field of research. The current exploratory study attempts to address some of the issues at play.

## **2. The Multiple Ethical Perspectives**

School principals are expected to adopt a moral position and create an ethical school climate in the face of complex problems in an ever-changing, uncertain environment. In this context, the desire to deconstruct the ethical dilemmas of school leadership has led scholars, among them Starratt (1994; 2003) and Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011), to suggest a multiple ethical paradigms approach. This approach assumes that principals can simultaneously examine and utilize different ethical perspectives in their decision-making. These ethical perspectives include the ethic of justice (i.e. fairness and utilitarianism), the ethic of critique, the ethic of care, and the ethic of profession. Furman (2003) recently suggested incorporating an ethic of community into the multiple ethical paradigms.

The ethic of justice can be divided into two sub-categories. The first, is the ethic of fairness, also refers to as the ethics of equity. This ethic is grounded in social contract and focuses on individual rights and equal treatment (Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011; Starratt, 1994). Its aim is to guarantee fair treatment of everyone, based on uniform, universal standards that can be applied beyond a specific person or circumstance (Starratt, 1991). The second is utilitarianism. The emphasis of this ethic is the maximization of the good (Strike, 2005; Strike et al., 2005). Unlike the ethic of fairness, utilitarianism is a perspective that focuses on the total benefit for the majority of students despite any harm to specific individuals (McCray and Beachum, 2006). The ethic of critique stresses principals' obligation to re-examine and confront social norms, institutions, and infrastructure that harm and oppress weaker populations. Its aim is to expose and undermine the accepted power structures so as to advocate an alternative social narrative (Apple, 2003; Giroux, 2003). The ethic of care is based on empathy and responsibility for the well-being of each individual; it focuses on the needs and desires of the individual. When embraced by the decision-maker, the ethic of care reflects principals' intention to respond to individuals' distress and to empower them (Noddings, 2003). The ethic of community implies that principals should take into consideration the values, beliefs, and desires of the community and views the community as essential in decision-making (Furman, 2003). The community is considered essential because it is usually the context within which ethical decisions are made (Stefkovich and O'Brien, 2004). Finally, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) maintain that the ethic of profession encompasses all the ethical perspectives.

Although the ethic of profession is widely used to describe the principal's accumulated obligations to students, school stakeholders, and society, more recently Stefkovich (2006) and Stefkovich and Begley (2007) have argued that the ethic of profession focuses on "students' best interest". Accordingly, decision-makers should recognize children's rights, acknowledge children's diversity, and respect children while making responsible choices. However, the considerations that result in responsible decision-making are not clear. In an attempt to elucidate its meaning, some scholars have identified children's best interest with the ethic of care (Dempster and Berry, 2003; Norberg and Johansson, 2007), but this interpretation does not seem to fully capture the meaning of the ethic of profession. Thus, the distinction between the ethic of profession and the other ethics remains vague. To sharpen the distinction, the ethic of profession is defined in the present study on the basis of the source of the legitimacy of professionals' practices, namely, their comprehensive knowledge (Eraut, 1994). Thus, only when principals' decisions are informed by proven experience, expertise, and cutting-edge knowledge, and when high professional standards are maintained, may their choices count as ethical.

The prevailing notion in the literature is that the various ethics complement one another (McCray and Beachum, 2006; Starratt, 1994). According to this view, the knowledge of and ability to make coherent use of different ethical considerations and perspectives simultaneously contribute to resolving complex educational dilemmas (McCray and Beachum, 2006). Flexibility in applying alternative values, it is argued, is critical for decision-making and effective ethical leadership (Starratt, 1994; 2003). Thus, an important question is what ethical perspectives are reflected in principals' decision-making.

### **3. Principals' Ethical Considerations: The Multiple Ethical Paradigms**

The concept of multiple ethical paradigms is usually applied by scholars to guide principals in their decision-making and to instruct participants in principal training programs. However, much of the research that has been guided by this approach focuses on categorizing dilemmas faced by educators. For instances, Dempster and Berry (2003) categorized the dilemmas they identified among Australian school principals according to their focus: dilemmas concerning students, staff, resources, and external relations. They also sorted the most frequently mentioned ethical dilemmas based on their content: student disciplinary issues and family problems,

supervision of teachers, budgeting of a certain subject or group of students, relations with the superintendent's office and parents, and marketing of the school. In the same vein, Cranston *et al.* (2006) found that Australian principals' ethical dilemmas usually have to do with staff, students, parents, or the community. Analyzing the ethical issues faced by principals, these scholars suggest that value conflicts are the core reason for the difficulty in resolving these dilemmas. They illuminate the potential conflicts between the value of justice (mostly refereeing to fairness rather than to utilitarianism) and the values of profession and care, between the value of care and the values of utilitarianism and community, and between the school community and the wider public interest. Thus, Cranston *et al.* (2006) not only identified the focus and content of principals' dilemmas, but also used the multiple-ethical paradigms to explore contradictions between the accepted ethical categories underlying common dilemmas. However, these studies do not address the tendency of principals to prefer certain values over others when dealing with school dilemmas.

To address this void in the literature, some scholars have conducted studies exploring the dominant ethical considerations of principals. For instance, Begley (2005) found that American and Canadian principals see the "student's best interest" as the main consideration that should guide their decision-making and stressed the possible conflict between this consideration and the interest of the community. In addition, a conflict between the principals' professional autonomy and organizational policy was demonstrated. In the same vein, Dempster and Berry (2003) found that principals ranked the student's best interest as the most important value guiding their decision-making. However, it was followed by fairness, justice, and respect for others, in that order. Norberg and Johansson (2007), studying the ethical dilemmas of Swedish school leaders, also found that principals and aspiring principals in principal training programs reportedly focused on dilemmas that reflected students as their main consideration. School leaders mentioned care, equality, and providing fair developmental opportunities to all children, as well as professional considerations, as their main values. These considerations were closely related to daily school practice rather than to procedural justice (i.e. the ethic of fairness). These dilemmas did not arise among the school board policymakers or politicians.

The aforementioned studies demonstrate the prominence of the "student's best interest", interpreted in the literature as being related to the ethics of care and profession, and the secondary importance of the ethics of fairness and community in

principals' decision-making. Begley (2005) suggests that we should take comfort in the fact that students' best interest, as demonstrated by other researchers as well, is the prominent consideration of principals in the present age of accountability in education. Underlying this assertion is probably the assumption that under accountability policies principals will prefer decisions that they can easily justify. Thus, principals may adopt the ethic of fairness, which, according to the literature, calls for the application of predetermined, uniform ethical standards to all similar situations (Huggins and Scalzi, 1988) irrespective of the specific community, or else the ethic of utilitarianism, which legitimizes meritocratic reasoning (McCray and Beachum, 2006). Nevertheless, some studies suggest that principals may reject external sources of legitimation, reflected for instance in the ethics of fairness and community, in favor of ethical considerations that focus on the individual (e.g., the student's best interest and principals' professional autonomy). This could also explain why community has not been thoroughly studied as a consideration in decision-making, even though some scholars have noted its importance (Dempster and Berry, 2003; Furman, 2003).

Another ethical perspective that has been insufficiently studied despite being described as highly significant for moral leadership is the ethic of critique. This ethic is frequently said to be necessary during times of great ethnic diversity (Norberg and Johansson, 2010) because it may help principals reflect on current power structures and see reality in a more complex manner. This, in turn, may enable decision-makers to take into account the needs of many stakeholders (Teays, 2006). The centrality of the ethic of critique to a multicultural society is recognized through the increased attention to social justice in the educational leadership literature (Starratt, 1991). Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2007) and Brown (2006) relate the embracing of the ethic of critique and social activism by school principals to training programs that emphasize social justice. However, Farber (1991) argues that principals mostly use the critique perspective rhetorically.

Based on the research literature, it can be suggested that different ethical considerations may be mutually exclusive. In addition, it seems that some ethical considerations prevail in school leaders' decision-making. Finally, although studies have tried to discover the dominant ethical perspectives adopted by principals, they have failed to examine which ethical considerations principals ultimately choose for resolving dilemmas. Trevino (1992) defines ethical judgment as the choices that an individual makes based on the belief that a certain action is the desired ethical

alternative. Coughlan (2005) claims that individuals' ethical judgment results from applying a process of elimination to choose one ethical consideration over the rest. The present study uses the notion of ethical judgment to examine school leaders' value-based decisions.

#### **4. Hypotheses**

Based on previous studies, we hypothesized that:

1. Certain ethical considerations will be negatively correlated with each other:
  - a. The ethic of fairness will be negatively correlated with the ethics of profession and care.
  - b. The ethic of community will be negatively correlated with the ethics of care and profession.
  - c. The ethic of care will be negatively correlated with the ethic of utilitarianism.
2. The ethics of care and profession will be significantly more prevalent than the ethics of fairness, utilitarianism, community, or critique.

#### **5. Method**

Studies on ethical perspectives are common in the field of business, particularly in marketing (Reidenbach and Robin, 1988) and finance (Cohen *et al.*, 1996; Cruz *et al.*, 2000). The most common instrument applied in these studies is the "multidimensional ethics scale", originally designed by Reidenbach and Robin (1988). This scale is a self-reporting instrument. Participants are presented with three or four ethical scenarios. Each scenario ends with a specific action and requires the respondent to judge the action according to several ethical perspectives: deontology, utilitarianism, relativism, egoism, and justice. Respondents are asked to rate, on a seven-point Likert scale, to what extent the action conforms to each of the ethics. Recently, items representing the ethic of care were added to the scale (Kujala and Pietilainen, 2007).

Although the multidimensional ethics scale is widely used, its validity is questioned by scholars. First, Skipper and Hyman (1993) claim that it is not clear what the scale measures. Specifically, they wonder whether it measures "the act of judgment itself ... or its causes ... reasons ... consequences ... intensity or sophistication" (p. 543). Another criticism of the tool has to do with its design. Requiring respondents in every scenario to rate the extent to which the action conforms to each ethic can cause a measurement bias because they may consider a



particular perspective irrelevant to a specific scenario (Skipper and Hyman, 1993). Finally, a major criticism of the tool is that it does not address the intent behind each action, which leaves much room for interpretation and creates respondent bias (Skipper and Hyman, 1993). For that reason, a new tool is needed that will measure principals' ethical judgment, i.e., their preference for one ethical consideration over another, in specific scenarios.

In developing the Ethical Perspectives Instrument (EPI), we attempted to overcome the shortcomings of the multidimensional ethics scale. In the scenarios developed for this instrument, respondents are asked to choose between two actions that represent different ethical perspectives; the actions are accompanied by a description of intentions (i.e., the ethical considerations guiding the action). Thus, the new instrument may enable us to identify a respondent's salient perspectives across multiple scenarios. In the next section, we give a detailed explanation of the measurement tool, validation of it, and the reliability testing.

### *5.1 The Instrument*

The Ethical Perspectives Instrument (EPI) was developed in the present study to identify school leaders' ethical considerations. The instrument includes dilemmas that principals may encounter in their daily work with students, teachers, communities, and the educational system. To achieve methodological rigor, we were careful to construct minimalistic scenarios that were clear and underscored its protagonist's characteristics, conduct and the possible outcomes of their behavior (Wason *et al.*, 2002). The respondents were asked to choose and express their moral judgments to these hypothetical vignettes.

As we have stated to respondents in our explanatory cover letter, ethical dilemmas are often far more complex (Doscher, 2006). They often involve a multitude of factors that may frame the decision making process (O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005; Wason *et al.*, 2002) in ways that would inhibit a methodological investigation into their moral choices. Using the EPI we aimed to avoid the problem of immersing in an abundance of information that frames decision makers (also mentioned by Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). The EPI provides a clear tool that captures the core of the ethical dilemma at hand. The constructed scenarios carefully avoided compiling too many details that could predispose the respondents and add noise to their choices or represent confounds that can seriously bias research results. This methodology

might assist in capturing the essence of a phenomenon, while trying to avoid biases associated with peripheral systematic as well as inconsistent effects.

According to the EPI, for each dilemma, a detailed situation is presented, along with two possible actions and the ethical reasoning behind each. Thus, each dilemma presents a choice between two of the six ethical perspectives that the literature describes as being relevant to education: fairness, utilitarianism, care, critique, profession, and community (Furman, 2003; Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2011; Starratt, 1991). All in all, 15 combinations of choices emerged (each perspective with each of the others). Two scenarios were written for each combination, for a total of 30 dilemmas (representative example scenarios are provided in the appendix).

### *5.2 Validity*

The instrument was validated in two stages. In the first stage, the relevance of the 30 scenarios to education was reviewed by six experts with experience as school principals, on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 [not relevant] to 5 [very relevant]). Eighteen dilemmas were rated very relevant (5), and 12 were rated relevant (4). In the second stage, we tested the content validity of the instrument. For this purpose another six experts with experience as school principals were asked to indicate, on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 [not at all] to 5 [very much]), the extent to which the different perspectives are featured in each dilemma. They were provided with definitions of the different perspectives along with the dilemmas. Dilemmas in which there was no consensus regarding the two main ethical perspectives were rewritten and then sent for another round of scoring by six more experts. All in all, three rounds with a total of 18 reviewers were held before a consensus was reached.

### *5.3 Reliability*

The reliability of the Ethical Perspectives Instrument was tested using a test-retest procedure. The instrument was administered to 30 students in a principal training program (10 men, 20 women; mean age = 34.3,  $SD = 6.7$ ); 50% of the participants worked in the education system (mean management experience was 7.38 years,  $SD = 2.1$ ). The instrument was re-administered a week later. Participants were asked to choose between two optional actions presented at the end of each dilemma. To examine the consistency of the responses (choices made by participants) between the two tests (T1 and T2), chi-square tests were performed. The relationship between

participants' choices in T1 and T2 was significant (alpha ranging between 0.00 and 0.05, with 1 degree of freedom) in 27 of the 30 dilemmas. The other three dilemmas—those representing a choice between the ethics of profession and care, profession and community, and critique and fairness were removed from the final version of the instrument because their test-retest reliability scores were not significant. Following the removal of these three dilemmas, the maximum number of times each perspective can be chosen are: fairness, 9; utilitarianism, 10; care, 9; critique, 9; profession, 8; and community, 9.

#### *5.4 Participants and Procedure*

The participants were 52 Israelis (41 women; mean age = 41.6 years,  $SD = 5.60$ ; 83% Jews, 17% Moslems) enrolled in principal training programs in three institutions of higher education. Forty-five of the participants worked in the public educational system (mean seniority = 10.9 years,  $SD = 8.3$ ), including 19 (42%) in primary schools and the rest (58%) in junior high schools and high schools. Forty-three participants served in middle-management roles (e.g., vice-principals, department heads, and grade coordinators) in public schools. Seven participants worked in the nonprofit and private sectors and had no experience in the educational system. One-third of the participants had previously attended an ethics course or seminar. Participation in the study was optional. The authors obtained permission from the program organizers for qualified experimenters to approach the trainees, who completed the questionnaires in their free time. Confidentiality was assured. Data were collected from March to June 2009. Respondents were asked to fill out the Ethical Perspective Instrument and a demographic questionnaire. No significant relationships were found between participants' demographic characteristics and their responses on the Ethical Perspective Instrument.

#### *5.5 Calculations*

Two calculations were made to examine the research hypotheses:

a. *The ethical perspective preference index.* This index measures the rate of preference for a particular ethical perspective over the other five ethical perspectives. We calculated the number of times a participant chooses actions representing a certain ethical perspective as a percentage of the total number of times this perspective is presented as an option. For example, if a respondent chooses an action representing

the ethic of fairness six out of nine possible times, his/her ethical perspective preference index for fairness will be 66 percent. This index was calculated for each of the six ethical perspectives examined in the study.

b. *The personal modal ethical preference.* This measure represents the ethical perspective preferred by a participant across all dilemmas. For example, if a participant's ethical perspective preference index for fairness is higher than any of his/her other ethical perspective preference indices, he/she is said to have a fairness disposition.

## 6. Results

To test the first hypothesis that a negative relationship will be found between certain ethical perspectives, Pearson correlations between the various ethical perspective preference indices were calculated. These correlations are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Pearson correlations between the various ethical perspectives examined in the study

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Fairness						
2. Utilitarianism	-.36**					
3. Care	-.39**	-.22				
4. Critique	-.21	-.17	.06			
5. Profession	.01	-.25	-.10	-.23		
6. Community	-.11	-.01	-.30*	-.28*	-.31*	

**Notes:**  $N = 52$ ; \*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$

As we can see from Table 1, a significant negative correlation was found between choices reflecting the ethics of fairness and care. No significant negative correlation was found between choices reflecting the ethics of fairness and profession. These findings partially support Hypothesis 1a. Although not hypothesized, a significant negative correlation was found between choices reflecting the ethics of fairness and utilitarianism. In support of Hypothesis 1b, significant negative correlations were found between choices reflecting community and those reflecting care and profession. Although not hypothesized, a significant negative correlation was

found between choices reflecting the ethics of community and critique. Hypothesis 1c was not supported. No significant correlation was found between choices reflecting the ethics of care and utilitarianism. These findings support our first hypothesis; it is difficult to make a decision based simultaneously on the perspectives of fairness and utilitarianism, justice and care, community and care, community and critique, and community and profession.

To test the second hypothesis, namely, that the ethics of care and profession will be significantly more prevalent than the ethics of fairness, utilitarianism, community, or critique, we examined whether the distribution of personal modal ethical preferences differs significantly from the expected distribution in the population. A Pearson chi-square exact test of goodness-of-fit was used. The results of the test ( $\chi^2[5, N = 47] = 27.43, p < .001$ ) point to a clear and significant difference between the observed distribution and the expected distribution. This finding partially supports Hypothesis 2. The frequencies of the observed personal modal ethical preferences of the participants are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The observed personal modal ethical preferences of participants

Ethic	Observed N*	Observed percentage**
Fairness	3	6.4
Utilitarianism	2	4.3
Care	12	25.5
Critique	16	34.0
Profession	13	27.7
Community	1	2.1
Total	47	100

**Note:** \* The expected N for each ethic was 7.8; \*\* the expected percentage for each ethic was 16.6%

As can be seen from Table 2, the percentage of participants whose dominant ethical preference is care or profession (25.5% and 27.7%, respectively) was higher than expected (16.6%), thus supporting Hypothesis 2. However, in contrast to Hypothesis 2, the percentage of participants whose dominant ethical preference is critique (34%) was also higher than expected (16.6%). In addition, the percentage of

participants whose dominant ethical preference is fairness, utilitarianism, and community was lower than expected (16.6%). These findings partially support the second hypothesis of the study in that they indicate that the ethics of critique, care, and profession prevail among aspiring principals.

## **7. Discussion**

The present study is an exploratory one that investigates ethical judgments of educational leaders facing administrative dilemmas. In contrast to surveys that have looked at the main values applied by school principals in ethical decision-making without reference to specific scenarios, and in contrast to qualitative studies that have focused on mapping ethical dilemmas frequently faced by principals, our study was based on concrete structured scenarios and specific solutions. For that purpose we developed and validated an instrument that would examine the ethical preferences of principals when they are forced to choose between two ethical considerations.

The first hypothesis that certain ethical considerations will be negatively correlated with each other was partially supported. As hypothesized, the ethic of fairness was negatively correlated with the ethic of care, and the ethic of community was negatively correlated with the ethics of care and profession. Unexpectedly, negative correlations were also found between the ethics of fairness and utilitarianism and between the ethics of community and critique.

The negative correlation found in the present study between utilitarianism and fairness suggests that the underlying principles of these perspectives are grounded in different interpretations of “the public interest”. At the core of the ethic of utilitarianism is the idea of maximizing the aggregated good of individuals (Leung, 2002). In contrast, according to the ethic of fairness the maximization of public good is subordinated to the compliance to equal right and treatment (Lind and Tyler, 1988). Thus, although both ethics are concerned with the public interest, the latter suggests a principle for addressing the unequal distribution of public goods (Bates, 2006), whereas the former only concern with maximization. That might explain why school leaders perceive the two ethical perspectives as contradictory.

While in the case of a contradiction between the ethics of utilitarianism and fairness the conflict is related to different approaches to the “common good”, in the case of a contradiction between the ethic of community and the ethics of profession and critique the dispute is over the existence of a universal principle upon which moral

decisions are based in a diverse society. Whereas the ethic of community advocates ascribing particular values to each community for the management of administrative dilemmas, the ethics of critique and profession suggest the utilization of a universal principle—social justice or cutting-edge knowledge, respectively (Begley *et al.*, 2008; Starratt, 1991). Thus the last two ethics, unlike the first, stress the obligation to base one's choices on a meta-principle loosely related to context. Finally, the negative correlations between the ethic of care and the ethics of fairness and community reflect the contradiction between an ethical consideration that focuses on the individual and considerations that stress benefits to the collective.

The contradictions between certain ethical perspectives discovered in the present study indicate the difficulties school leaders may face when adopting the multiple ethical paradigms to manage administrative and instructional dilemmas. Thus, although raising principals' awareness of the various ethical perspectives seems to be significant, it is important that they acknowledge the need to prioritize some ethical perspectives over others when facing administrative dilemmas. Based on our findings, we speculate that aspiring school principals choose to prioritize those ethical considerations that do not contradict each other. This can be inferred from the fact that our second hypothesis, namely, that the ethics of care and profession will be significantly more prevalent than the ethics of fairness, utilitarianism, community, and critique, was mostly supported, the exception being that the ethic of critique was the most prevalent of all.

The salience of the critique, care, and professional considerations may be attributed to the common perception of the principal's job as primarily a broad social mission that is supposed to be achieved through personal commitment to each and every student while adhering to high professional standards (Sergiovanni, 1992). More specifically, the unexpected salience of the ethic of critique may be ascribed to the fact that students are nested within social groups. Thus, it seems that in order to abolish the relationship between socioeconomic status and success (Skrla *et al.*, 2004), school leaders acknowledge the need to undermine the structures that generate inequality. The need to deconstruct current social structures is strongly represented in the ethic of critique. The findings show that this approach is widespread among aspiring principals.

In contrast to the salience of the ethics of critique, care, and profession in school leaders' ethical judgments, and in line with Sergiovanni (1992), it seems that

decisions based on procedural justice and cost-benefit considerations, as reflected respectively in the ethics of fairness and utilitarianism, are perceived as indicative of lower moral standards. These findings are particularly interesting as they undermine the common logic linking the introduction of competition and standardization into educational systems with a tendency among principals to focus on performance (Wößmann, 2007) and comply with the system's regulations. Based on these findings, and in line with Stefkovich and O'Brien (2004) and Stefkovich and Begley (2007), we can speculate that school leaders accept the notion that principals ought to focus on the student's best interest. Moreover, it seems that this notion guides school leaders' decision-making despite the calls for accountability in education that may result in the flourishing of managerialism among school principals (Cuban, 2004).

Considerations reflecting the ethic of community were the least preferred in the present study. This finding probably reflects the view among Israelis that community-based decision-making in schools is somewhat illegitimate. This view can be ascribed to "melting pot" policies that are still highly present in the Israeli educational system, despite having become less influential in Israeli society in the last three decades (Bekerman, 2000). In addition, the adoption of community considerations to guide principals' decision-making may be seen as less plausible in light of the limited autonomy schools have in the centralized Israeli educational system (Inbar, 1986; Gaziel, 1994). In such circumstances, principals may find it hard to respond to community needs and thus dismiss them as not important enough.

A complementary explanation for the findings of the study, and especially for the rarity of the ethic of community and the salience of the ethics of critique and profession, may be the selective nature of the sample, namely, participants in a principal training course. Perhaps the participants in the training program emphasized professional considerations in their ethical judgments in the belief that these considerations can best guide instruction and learning and influence students and school life. In this case the findings may reflect a process of professional identity formation among those aspiring to be school principals (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003).

Alternatively, at this early stage in their careers, educational practitioners are likely to be more idealistic than they will be later on (O'Mahoney, 2003). Thus, they may tend to focus on considerations relating to social change, as reflected in the ethic of critique. This is not surprising; aspiring principals may choose this career because they believe in their ability to bring about change in the lives of students and promote



social transformation. In addition, they can more easily adopt an idealistic critique position because principal training programs are rather removed from the school environment. These conditions give participants a sense of moratorium that facilitates critical thinking. This can also explain participants' low affinity for adopting community and utilitarian considerations and their preference for considerations reflected in the ethic of care. Because community demands and the needs of students as a group, on the one hand, and pressures of the educational system, on the other hand, are not directly felt within the confines of a training program, aspiring principals have more degrees of freedom in their ethical judgment. Although this subject is beyond the scope of the present study, we speculate that when principals are granted more degrees of freedom in their decision-making, they may choose to promote idealistic rather than pragmatic ethical purposes.

In summary, the data suggest that certain inherent contradictions between specific ethical considerations (i.e., fairness versus utilitarianism and care; community versus profession, critique, and care) make it difficult to take into account more than one dominant preference at a time. At the same time, the data point to a profile of meta-values underlying contemporary educational leadership. The characterization of the ethical school leader that emerges from the study is based on a form of ethical activism that emphasizes high standards in an effort to promote the needs of individual students while taking a critical look at existing school policies (see Stefkovich and Begley, 2007, on the issue of students' best interest).

Although the present study developed and validated an instrument for measuring school leaders' ethical judgment and demonstrating its application to a better understanding of their decision-making in the case of managerial dilemmas, it provides limited information regarding the contextual factors that affect their ethical judgment. In this sense we can see that EPI is an explorative tool that can be supplemented by additional contingencies within the given scenarios or by conducting contextualized research.

Also, further research is needed to determine whether there are differences in ethical judgment between aspiring principals and incumbents. Additionally, future research would do well to explore other factors that shape ethical preferences, such as principals' moral philosophies (e.g., relativism or idealism), school leadership style, training, and the school environment. Complementary research should uncover the effects of principals' ethical judgment on school effectiveness, the well-being and

performance of students and teachers, and other school characteristics such as prestige, competitiveness, and relevance to the community. Finally, this study only looked at school leaders' ethical judgment in the Israeli context. Future studies in this same context should account for contextual, ideological and structural factors (e.g. low). The validity of the instrument for other countries should be examined. A similar study should be carried out in those countries which accounts also for contextualized, ideological and structural factors, to enable a broader scope of generalization.

Despite its shortcomings, as exploratory research the present study provides a preliminary and tentative look at the ethical judgment of school leaders when faced with specific administrative and instructional dilemmas. Based on the findings, this appears to be a fruitful and promising line of research. Furthermore, beyond its theoretical contribution, this study may have significant practical implications for the design of school leadership training programs and for development of school principals. The study highlights the need for a deeper investigation of personal values and ethical perceptions as part of school leadership training programs. In addition, the Ethical Perspectives Instrument developed in the present study can help principals self-assess the ethical considerations that guide their decision-making. This may raise their awareness of their preferences and biases and allow them to better balance different ethical considerations while attending to the needs of students, teachers, stakeholders, and the school. This awareness seems to be fundamental for the development of moral literacy among educators (Tuana, 2007) as well as among policy makers.

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### Appendix: The Ethical Perspective Instrument (Representative Scenarios)

**The following scenarios deal with dilemmas that school principals face in the course of decision-making. For each story, the principal is at the point where he must choose between two alternatives. In the situations described, there is no other alternative and he must decide between the two. It is clear to us that often there are other considerations and options as well as compromises between the two specified alternatives. Nonetheless and for purposes of the uniformity of the research, we ask that you relate only to the options provided.**

**Please read the following stories and answer the questions at the end of each story. There are no right or wrong answers. What interests us is your opinion.**

1. A special needs student was integrated into one of the regular classrooms of a school. The student has been very happy with the change and his parents are satisfied with his improvement. However, since his integration, the class's average achievement scores have gone down. In light of the situation, the principal faces the dilemma of either leaving the student in the regular class and aiding his improvement or removing him from the classroom and increasing the class scores.

Which of the two options would you choose?

To remove the student from the classroom and improve the class's scores



To leave the student in the regular classroom and help him

2. A feminist teacher in a religious community school, who serves both as a homeroom teacher and as a subject area teacher, has insisted on discussing religious topics in addition to her own subject area. In discussions, she has brought up the topic of a women's right over her own body and the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. The teacher regards this topic as highly important. However, the parents in the community consider it problematic and contradictory to their value system. Therefore, the parent representatives would like the teacher's jurisdiction to be limited to her subject area. The principal is debating whether to leave the teacher in her position as a homeroom teacher and allow discussion in the classroom that raises questions about existing social values or to remove the teacher from that aspect of her job out of consideration for the community.

Which of the two options would you choose?

To keep her as a homeroom teacher in order to promote critical discussion of existing social values



To remove the teacher from her position as homeroom teacher out of consideration for the values of the community



3. Getting accepted into the computer academic program in a high school requires passing an entrance exam. 80 students applied for 30 spots. The department head has asked to accept three students who ranked below the top 30 (in 36, 42, 53) in their exam. He argued, that according to his professional experience the solutions offered by the students during the exam, demonstrated that they could succeed as well as anybody else in studying the subject. The principal is debating whether to follow the department head's professional judgment, and accept the three students, or to refuse their admission based on the school's policy.

Which of the two options would you choose?

To follow the professional  
opinion of the department head  
and accept the three students

To reject the students in  
keeping with school  
procedures

Notes:

\* The Dilemmas were classified as follows:

Dilemma 1: The ethic of Utilitarianism vs. the ethic of Care

Dilemma 2: The ethic of Critique versus the ethic of Community

Dilemma 3: The ethic of Profession vs. the ethic of Fairness

\*\* To obtain the full version of the EPI please contact the authors. Correspondence should be addressed to Ori Eyal, PhD, School of Education, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, 91905, Israel. E-mail: [msori@mscc.huji.ac.il](mailto:msori@mscc.huji.ac.il)