

An Approach to Ethical Decision-Making: My Personal Philosophy

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Introduction

Each day we are faced with an overabundance of ethical issues. Ethical issues greet us in the morning at the breakfast table, ring our phones throughout the day at work, follow us to our children's baseball practices, and finally tuck us in for the night on the late evening news. We are constantly bombarded with issues as far-ranging as the morality of abortion, the fairness of our tax system, or the rights of gays and lesbians to legally marry. Often times these ethical issues are complex in nature and leave perplexing questions in the forefront of our minds: What factors should weigh in our considerations? What kinds of questions should be asked? What approach should we take when resolving ethical issues? How an individual approaches an ethical issue will likely determine its outcome and whether or not a credible decision is made. One way to ensure ethical issues are addressed in a fair and consistent manner is to develop a systematic approach to ethical decision-making which will be my goal in the following pages.

The first step in my journey toward a personal approach to ethical decision-making begins with understanding my overarching philosophy on ethical reasoning. In the next few pages I will share my preferred ethical philosophical framework and discuss the strengths and weaknesses in terms of the types of ethical decisions I expect to make personally and professionally. The second step in this journey involves analyzing a typical ethical issue I expect to confront and analyzing it from the four ethical perspectives: justice, critique, care, and profession (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). In the third step, I will select and apply a decision-making model to the case of my typical ethical issue. Lastly, I will evaluate the quality of the decision I reached during my ethical decision-making analysis. The next few paragraphs jump-start my ethical decision-making journey by exploring my preferred philosophical framework.

My Preferred Philosophical Framework

Johnson (2012) presents five recognized ethical frameworks or perspectives that can be applied when approaching ethical issues, they include: Utilitarianism, Kant's Categorical Imperative, Rawls's Justice as Fairness, Communitarianism, and Altruism. Each perspective possesses its own strengths and weakness. When I reflect upon my beliefs and moral values and take into consideration the ethical demands of my personal and professional life, I'm convinced that Kant's Categorical Imperative will serve me best when making ethical decisions. Kant's moral reasoning philosophy, which will be discussed next, closely aligns with my belief system and moral compass.

Kant's Categorical Imperative

Immanuel Kant, a European philosopher, made the argument that "people should do what is morally right no matter the consequences" (Johnson, 2012, p. 158). This argument forms the basis for Kant's Categorical Imperative. Kant maintains that moral reasoning should be based on doing what is right at all times, regardless of the cost, even when it goes against our personal interest. Other key principles emphasized by Kant's imperative include respect for others, persistence and consistency, and promotion of the health of society. Kant's philosophy on ethics has roots in deontology. Deontological ethics takes the position that decisions should be made based on obligation that is measured against a set of standards or rules (Johnson, 2012). What follows next is an analysis of perceived strengths and weaknesses of Kant's imperative in terms of the types of ethical decisions I expect to make personally and professionally.

Strengths and Weakness of Kant's Imperative

The strength of Kant's ethical reasoning system, as it pertains to ethical decisions in my personal life, rests in its close alignment to my personal beliefs and faith-based value system.

Kant's principles of ethics are consistent with biblical principles, including respect for others, exhibiting consistent moral behavior, and always doing what is right even when it conflicts with personal interest. On that level, having respect for others—whether a neighbor or grocery bagger—helps to instill and reinforce family values and represents the behavior I want to model; for my two sons. Second, as a Christian, I strive for moral consistency in my everyday walk, from stopping at a stop sign to paying my taxes. Third, I'm compelled to do what is morally right toward tenants in my rental property, even when it is in my best interest to evict them.

Professionally, Kant's moral reasoning demonstrates strength in most ethical decisions I make as the Director of Testing for Richmond Public Schools (RPS). In this role, ethical decisions I make are generally based upon a standard of rules for implementing test procedures and enforcing test security, which are set by the state. Following test administration procedures and test security protocol not only help maintain the fidelity of the test administration process and the validity of student test results, but more importantly, it is simply the right thing to do.

On the other hand, Kant's imperative has weaknesses when the ethical decisions I have to make are a choice between two competing moral values, and when I have to make decisions in stressful situations. Is it ever good to tell a lie? There are occasions when I may fabricate a story to teach my sons a valuable life lesson. Although a story helps to illuminate my point, telling them lies goes against my moral value to always tell the truth. In the workplace, making ethical decisions in stressful situations make it more difficult to stick to my moral values. Deciding the best course of action to take when a thirty-year veteran teacher helps a student on a test presents a stressful ethical dilemma. The right thing to do is to report the violation to the state department of education; however, there is (subtle) pressure to handle the situation in a manner that does not

bring greater scrutiny to that school or our division's testing process. In the discussion to follow, I will further evaluate a workplace issue using the four basic ethical perspectives.

An Analysis of Four Ethical Paradigms

At this stage, I will analyze a workplace issue from what Shapiro and Gross (2008) consider the four basic ethical paradigms: the ethics of justice, critique, care and profession. The issue to be analyzed is to decide whether or not to allow RPS elementary schools to administer the Grade 3 SOL Reading assessment in one or two days. This situation presents a rare occasion where the state will allow a school division the option to administer an SOL assessment in more than one day. In this instance, the burden of choosing to test in one or two days is placed on the school division. On one side you have elementary school administrators who favor a two day test administration because they say the test is lengthy and too stressful for third graders to take in one day; on the other side is RPS leadership who argue that a two day test administration poses greater security risks due to a prolonged test window. I will now begin the analysis of the third grade assessment issue from the ethical perspective of justice.

The ethic of justice

The ethic of justice takes into consideration the rights of individuals in the decision making process (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). Philosopher John Rawls, best known for his justice-as-fairness approach, argues that we should promote equal rights for each person and give special consideration to the least advantaged (Johnson, 2012). Rawls is a good example of one who advocates the ethic of justice. Rawls introduces the "veil of ignorance" concept, whereby ethical choices should be made without personal bias to guarantee the fairness of rules (Johnson, 2012, p. 162). In stepping behind this veil of ignorance, I choose to side with elementary school

administrators to allow third grade students to be administered the SOL Reading assessment over a two day period because the students, who are the least advantaged, will benefit the most.

The ethic of critique

The second ethical lens to be used in analyzing the Grade 3 SOL Reading assessment issue is the ethic of critique. The ethic of critique challenges the origin of a particular moral decision; it takes a deeper look at the source of its assertion or fundamental basis to avoid making blind decisions (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). A viable solution to the third grade SOL Reading assessment issue from this perspective may result in asking questions that attempt to critique reasonable possibilities: Will parents have a say in whether their child should test over two days? Are parents even aware of this option? How are other school divisions dealing with this issue? So I would continue to ask questions until a clearer picture of all the issues and all possible solutions are revealed.

The ethic of care

The third moral reasoning paradigm to be discussed, the ethic of care, takes an outlook on ethics that focuses on nurturing personal relationships and making moral decisions based upon caring for others (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). Looking through this moral frame, a final decision will be reflective of the personal and professional relationships I have with elementary school administrators. School administrators are at “ground zero” when it comes to understanding what is best for students instructionally and on state assessments. Deciding through this moral frame would suggest that I make a decision based on what’s best for the students.

The ethic of profession

The final ethical perspective used in analyzing the third grade testing assessment issue is the ethic of profession. The ethic of profession, more commonly known as professional code of

ethics, is a set of regulated standards generally shared by an organization (Shapiro & Stefkovic, 2011). As the Director of Testing, I operate within the professional ethics that govern state SOL assessment administration. Test administration procedures are developed by the Virginia Department of Education and are incorporated in state examination manuals. In the case of the third grade testing issue, while peering through the professional ethics lens, I'm more inclined to decide on a single day administration because that is the state's standard protocol for administering SOL assessments. My ethical frame of choice, from the four ethical paradigms presented, is the ethic of care. I believe educators are in the business of caring for students and doing what's best in their interest to be successful.

A Decision-Making Model: Kidder's Ethical Checkpoints

Learning about reputable ethical systems, Johnson (2012) contends, will greatly expand our moral decision-making abilities and better prepare us as leaders to meet every day ethical challenges. The process of applying a consistent model to ethical problem solving is a crucial step toward that end. Johnson (2012) presents four models for ethical decision making: Kidder's ethical checkpoints, the SAD formula, Nash's 12 questions, and the case study method. In my view, Kidder's ethical checkpoints yield a more thorough analysis toward making a decision. Kidder's ethical checkpoints, developed by ethicist Rushworth Kidder, provide nine stages or checkpoints that bring clarity to an ethical issue. In the following pages, I will illustrate the use of Kidder's nine ethical checkpoints and will apply it in the case of the third grade SOL assessment issue to determine the most appropriate decision to make.

Recognize the existence of a problem

The first step in Kidder's ethical checkpoint process is to recognize that a problem exists. The problem with the Grade 3 SOL Reading assessment is that elementary school administrators

are against a single day test window because they believe the test is taxing and students will experience test fatigue. RPS leadership, however, favors a single day test administration because of potential test security risks.

Determine the actor

Deciding who is responsible for making a decision or determining the actor, is the second checkpoint on Kidder's list. As testing director, it is my overall responsibility to implement state SOL testing policies and procedures for RPS. I have to balance state testing protocol with division testing policies. When the state provides explicit provisions for test administration, I have sole authority in my division to implement them; however, when the state gives school divisions more latitude, as in this case, the authority to make decisions then shifts to division leadership. Thus, in this scenario, RPS division leadership becomes the actor in making a final decision.

Gather the relevant facts

Kidder's third checkpoint is gathering all the pertinent facts. This is an important step in the decision-making process. Accurate and relevant information provide a solid foundation with which to build a case in support of a final decision. RPS division leadership has obtained no evidence to support the claim that administering the Grade 3 SOL Reading assessment over two days will increase test security breaches. The lack of information to support division leadership's claim is where their argument falls flat. Additionally, this notion reinforces the idea that division leadership does not trust its teachers, and that teachers might likely cheat in this situation.

Test for right-verses-wrong issues

The fourth step in Kidder's ethical checkpoint is to determine if the choice at hand violates personal morality. Johnson (2012) provides an example by explaining if the choice

“gives you a negative, gut-level reaction (the stench test)” (p. 248) then the decision is a poor one. As leaders in education, we should always do what is in the best interest of the students; to favor an assessment decision that disadvantages students leaves a bad feeling in my gut. The fact that the state allows a two-day option to administer the third grade SOL Reading assessment gives some credence to what elementary school administrators have voiced concerns about, that perhaps the assessment may be too much for students to be administered in a single day.

Test for right-verses-right values

The test for right-verses-right values, Kidder’s fifth checkpoint, is also where RPS leadership’s argument to test third graders in a single day fails. Specifically, the argument fails the values test on the principle of choosing personal preferences (of division leadership) versus the needs of the RPS third grade student community. Division leadership wants to avoid a potential security breach, which could result in greater test administrative oversight by the state. Here, it seems, the need to keep the state out of school division affairs is valued more than considering the needs of third graders.

Apply an ethical standard or perspective

Applying an ethical perspective to the issue is Kidder’s sixth step in his checkpoint process. I believe the ethical principle of Utilitarianism is relevant and can be applied to this third grade assessment issue. The Utilitarian approach says to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Johnson, 2012). The greatest good in this ethical issue is allowing third graders a two-day test administration for the Grade 3 SOL Reading test, and the greatest number of people is the division’s third grade student population.

Look for a third way

Seeking the possibility of a third solution to an issue is Kidder's seventh checkpoint in his nine-step process. What may seem like two irreconcilable values—one held by division leaders and the other by elementary school staff—could perhaps yield a third (intermediate) solution that may pave the call for a more long-term resolution to this issue. By advocating on behalf of elementary schools and working with division leadership, a middle-of-the-road solution could be possible. This short-term solution may take the form of allowing a few elementary schools to pilot the administration of the third grade Reading assessment over two days. This allows an opportunity to gather meaningful data from the piloted schools.

Make the decision

Kidder's eighth checkpoint is to make a decision. A decision in this third grade testing situation is more difficult than not and includes several possible options that can be taken. The first option is to adhere to division leadership's mandate and instruct elementary schools to administer the Grade 3 SOL Reading test in one day. This decision runs contrary to my personal educational values. The second option is to make a unilateral decision and instruct elementary schools to administer the test over two days. This decision takes moral courage because there is a risk of reprimand from leadership. And the third option, a pilot program, is the best path forward for elementary schools in the long run and for me in the immediate term.

Revisit and reflect on the decision

The ninth and final Kidder checkpoint is to revisit and reflect on the decision that was made. Selecting the third option, choosing a few elementary schools to pilot a two day test administration, provides an opportunity to gather relevant information and pertinent data to support making a more credible decision in the future. Did test security violations increase at the

pilot schools? Are third grade Reading test scores higher at the pilot schools, staying the same, or even dropping? Did we select the “right” schools to pilot? Have we provided enough time to collect realistic data points? Only time will reveal answers to these questions that will ultimately form the basis of a long-term decision.

Evaluation of My Decision

I believe the decision I made in this process is a quality one. Selecting a third option immediately addresses the needs of some third grade students, offers an opportunity for dialog with division leadership, but more importantly, provides a path forward to a long-term solution. If results of the pilot option are favorable, to be understood as no increase in test security breaches and better student performance, there is supportive data for an implementation to allow all third graders to reap the benefits of a two-day test window. If results are unfavorable, the division then remains at a status quo (a single day test window) with respect to the administration of the Grade 3 SOL Reading assessment.

Conclusion

In closing, this paper has afforded me an opportunity to develop my personal approach to ethical decision-making. The first step revealed my comprehensive philosophical framework on ethical reasoning. I chose Kant’s Categorical Imperative as my preferred ethical framework because it is closely aligned with my personal values and beliefs. In the second step, I was able to synthesize a typical workplace issue and reframe through the four basic ethical perspectives: the ethics of justice, critique, care, and profession. This process reminds me to consider approaching an ethical decision from more than one ethical lens. In the final and most important step, I selected a decision-making model. The use of a decision-making model helps to organize and streamline the decision-making process to provide consistency in approaching an issue

regardless of the type, or the ethical lens that is chosen to address it. My preferred decision-making model is Kidder's ethical checkpoints because I believe it is thorough and its perceived strengths outweigh its weaknesses.

References

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