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Features

Ethical Decisions in Turbulent Times

A rational navigation route for school leaders through the choppiest of seas

By Joan Poliner Shapiro, Steven Jay Gross and Susan H. Shapiro

It was a Tuesday morning, Sept. 11, 2001. Aida Rodriguez was the director of a private preschool in lower Manhattan. It was a new teacher's first day. The staff was having a welcome breakfast for her. They ordered bagels and coffee and invited the parents to join them. Though it was a beautiful day, only a few parents had shown up. Rodriguez and the staff joked that no one wanted to welcome the new teacher because they wanted to soak up the sunshine instead.

That's when it began. Two teachers ran into the room crying. They said a plane had hit the World Trade Center, about 20 blocks away. At first, Rodriguez figured it was an accident. She even felt a little annoyed these teachers were being so unprofessional. It was obviously some terrible accident, but nothing that required such emotional behavior.

Rodriguez turned on the radio and the announcer said another plane had hit the World Trade Center. By then, everyone realized this was no accident. Several parents in the room decided to go out and see. Rodriguez said they should go ahead because she knew she needed to stay in the school as she was in charge. Rodriguez tried to keep things as normal as possible.

Then the first of the parents started coming in covered in soot. One parent appeared at the door and looked like he was in shock. He walked into the classroom and silently took his child away.



Temple University faculty members Joan Poliner Shapiro and Steven Jay Gross are co-authors of *Ethical Educational Leadership in Turbulent Times*.

One of the parents suggested Rodriguez see what was going on outside. She saw the two large buildings on fire. It dawned on her they were under attack. While she watched the buildings burn, she could see things, small shapes pouring down from the top floors. Those on the street said they were people falling. At that point, Rodriguez knew it was not business as usual. She felt she had to get back into the school and protect the children.

Simple and Truthful

When Rodriguez returned, it was chaos. Parents were crying and lining up to use the phones. Children were hysterical. Rodriguez then walked into the baby room where they were all listening anxiously to the radio. There were unconfirmed reports the White House was hit, as well as the Pentagon. She suddenly thought, "Oh my God, we are all going to die." At that time, she made a decision that if she was going to die, she was going to make it as calm as she could for the children and her staff. She knew it was essential to reassure everyone it was going to be OK.

Rodriguez got back to work. She called one representative from each classroom into her office. She told them to turn off all radios, except for the one in the baby room. She promised to keep them informed as she found out information. She told them to tell the children they were safe and something bad was happening, but it was a grown-up problem. She said if the children asked questions, they should make the answers as simple and as truthful as possible.

Rodriguez also let the teachers know if they had to cry, they should leave the room and come into her office or the kitchen. Armed with new directives, the teachers went back to their rooms.

Throughout the day, decisions were made and carried out by Rodriguez and her staff. Together they managed to reach almost all the parents by phone or cell phone and let them know they should pick up their children as the school and the city were closing.

A New Approach

Education leaders make difficult ethical decisions each day. Although few deal with a situation of the magnitude Rodriguez faced, they still must navigate rationally through challenging and complex circumstances while under considerable emotional stress. One approach we think can help educational leaders make decisions is through the combined use of multiple ethical paradigms and turbulence theory.

In *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas*, co-authors Joan Poliner Shapiro and Jacqueline A. Stefkovich develop the concept of multiple ethical paradigms. Three of these paradigms or perspectives, the ethics of justice, critique and care, were first discussed by Robert J. Starratt in his book *Building an Ethical School*. The fourth paradigm, the ethic of the profession, was introduced in detail by Shapiro and Stefkovich.

The ethic of justice can be used to solve or resolve an ethical dilemma by asking questions such as the following: Are there any laws, rules, procedures or contracts that would help a leader make a decision in this situation? Are there any legal impediments that might hinder a leader in making a decision?

Turning to the ethic of critique, these questions could be raised: Are the laws, rules, procedures or contracts appropriate in this case? Who made them? When were they made? Above all,

should they be followed in this situation?

Moving to the ethic of care, ignoring the rules and procedures, a leader might ask: Who will be helped by my decision? Who will be hurt? How can I make certain that the long-term consequences of my determination are good? What about the unintended consequences of my decision? Who might they help and who might they hurt?

Finally, turning to the ethic of the profession, the education leader should consider first and foremost what is in the best interests of the student, then determine what is in the best interest of all the staff. What is in the best interests of the local community? And will the decision blend in well with the personal and professional ethical beliefs of the education leader?

Multiple Paradigms

Returning to the case of the preschool leader on Sept. 11, the multiple ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care and the profession can be useful. Taking into account the ethic of justice as it affects this ethical dilemma, Rodriguez was well aware of the laws regarding her childcare facility. However, under the unusual circumstances of that day, she put in new directives and did not follow normal procedure.

On this occasion, Rodriguez turned to the ethic of critique, not the ethic of justice, for guidance. For example, despite the law that required she hand over children to their parents immediately, she felt on this day it was important for parents to calm down before having their children released into their custody. She realized she could not give parents their children until they had visited her office, vented for a little while and quieted down. Above all, she was determined that no child would be dropped on her watch.

Throughout the day, Rodriguez and her staff created new ways to cope, often ignoring laws, rules and procedures, to keep the children safe and the childcare center as calm as possible, while still making progress toward returning all children to their families.

The ethic of care was particularly complex on this day. The director constantly thought of the children in the center. However, she also had to consider the requests of her staff, some of whom had families of their own who needed care. Additionally, she had to consider the needs of the parents, who were acting in very emotional and unstable ways.

Throughout the dilemma, the director was the one who had to care about her entire school community. The requirements were varied, and she had to be ready to meet them, if at all possible. In some cases, she had to put one group's needs above another. This was especially true when members of her staff requested to leave to look after their own children.

Throughout the situation, the director tried to maintain her professionalism. She also focused on the bottom line — the physical and emotional safety of the children. She tried to do the same for her staff and for the parents. For example, toward the end of this harrowing day, when only a few children and staff remained, while worrying that some parents would not arrive to pick up their children, particularly as a number worked in the World Trade Center, she put all of the staff and children in one room and showed a movie. Interestingly enough, the one new teacher waited it out for the last two parents to arrive — one of whom worked in a blood bank and the other who was an emergency room nurse. Only after they appeared did the director, with the new teacher, leave the building knowing at last that all of the children had someone to care for them.

Turbulence Theory

Steven Jay Gross comes from a family of pilots; his dad flew in World War II and his father-in-law served as a pilot in the Chinese Air Force. Gross, on the other hand, favors railroads. He has some family background in this mode of transport as his grandfather worked as an engineer on the railroads.

Gross' preference for rail travel stemmed from a difficult flight in which food flew about the cabin. During that flight, Gross turned on the pilot's radio station and heard that the turbulence level was severe. Harkening back to that distressing experience, the levels of turbulence became a metaphor for explaining some of his work on school reform. He designed a gauge to illustrate the emotional climate in schools undergoing change using the pilot's levels of light, moderate, severe and extreme.

In his book *Staying Centered: Curriculum Leadership in a Turbulent Era*, Gross found sites that had developed curriculum, instructional and assessment innovations for several years all experienced some degree of turbulence or volatile conditions. Further, he discovered the degree of turbulence at the 10 schools and districts he studied could be divided into the four levels, used by pilots, that he later refined in a follow-up book, *Promises Kept: Sustaining School District Leadership in a Turbulent Era*. (The generic turbulence gauge that Gross created appears on page 20.)

Under turbulence theory, individuals have an enhanced ability to calibrate the severity of the issue at hand. It further aids them in their attempt to contextualize a given problem as they construct strategies to move to less-troubled waters.

Managing Turbulence

In the case involving the preschool, the overall level of turbulence was severe, bordering at times on extreme. However, as the day progressed, the childcare director issued mandates that lowered the turbulence level. Turning off the news in all but one room decreased the level of anxiety for the youngsters as did the rule for teachers to leave the room to cry and not do so in front of the children.

Despite these new mandates, for Rodriguez, the parents and the staff, this was indeed a time of severe-to-extreme turbulence. As for the children, the turbulence level was questionable. Those in charge tried to maintain it at a moderate level to keep the children calm. In particular, quieting down the parents proved to be essential for lowering the turbulence level.

In this case, there was positionality, which meant that feelings were different depending upon one's position in the school. The intent, however, was to manage the turbulence level so the children not only would be safe physically but also would suffer from as little emotional harm as possible.

Even with the help of turbulence theory and the multiple ethical paradigms, Aida Rodriguez was still faced with many unanswered questions. One major question for her was this: Being a director is a job, isn't it? Just because this job involves leadership, does it mean you must remain a leader even in the face of death?

Rodriguez also was introspective when she asked: Was I correct in keeping the teachers on duty even when some of them felt they needed to be with their families during an attack? Were

the needs of the school community more important than the needs of the teachers and their children?

Future Decisions

The multiple ethical paradigms of justice, critique, care and the profession provide rational ways to work through ethical dilemmas. Turbulence theory offers another dimension in dealing with cases. It takes into account the emotional context of the ethical dilemma and provides ways to calm it down or even sometimes, in the case of complacency or silence, move it to a higher level of turbulence for action to occur.

Gross has continued to develop turbulence theory to include the underlying concepts of cascading and stability as well as positionality. Merging turbulence theory and the multiple ethical paradigms, in an effort to make wise ethical decisions, seems to make perfect sense.

By presenting authentic teaching cases combined with theory to work through ethical dilemmas, educational administration programs can encourage thoughtful and intelligent moral decision making among school leaders for this era and the future.

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