Moral Reasoning and Ethics in Educational Leadership

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Abstract

School leaders face difficult decisions regarding discipline matters. Often, such decisions play an important role in determining the moral tone of the school and the health of the school community. Many stakeholders are affected by the outcome of such decisions. Codes of conduct, board and school policies, and discipline meetings are often shrouded under secrecy, making the discipline process mysterious.

In this study I examined the process of moral reasoning. I sought to determine the extent to which school leaders were aware that they were involved in a process of moral reasoning, and furthermore, what kind of moral reasoning they practiced. As well, I investigated the ethical grounds and foundations underlying moral reasoning. Thus, in this study I probed the awareness of the process of moral reasoning and sought to find the ethical grounding of decision making.

This qualitative study featured short field research. The process involved individual interviews with three different participants: school leaders of a public, Catholic, and an independent school. It found that each school leader practiced moral reasoning to varying degrees through the discipline process. It also explored the possible democratization of moral reasoning by linking to concepts such as fairness, due process, public accountability, and greater participation in the administering of discipline.

This study has implications for practice, theory, and future research. The examination of school leaders as the primary focus for discipline matters opens the door to future research that could explore differences between the school systems and possibly other parties affected by moral reasoning in discipline cases.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Some of the most important decisions educators make are related to the area of discipline. The outcome of these decisions can have a serious impact on the lives of those involved – students, teachers, and administrators alike. Invariably, words like morality, ethics, right and wrong, and values are used as anchors to set the tone of the discussion surrounding discipline. This study was intended to explore the ways in which educational leaders made sense of these sorts of ethical issues.

Background to the Problem

As a teacher in my 17th year, I have been party to many of these discussions in both the formal and informal sense. As a housemaster at an independent boarding school, I have witnessed my fair share of discipline matters unfold. Frequently, I have been called upon to serve on discipline committees that have suspended and dismissed students from my school. As well, clemency and mercy have been meted out in fair measure.

Each discipline matter that I have encountered has been as unique as the individuals involved. While obvious patterns of behaviour have been observed, the circumstances and the decisions reached have each been singularly important. I have watched as codes of conduct have been written, broken, and rewritten. My colleagues and I have examined policy documents as though they might somehow hold the keys to the book of wisdom.

Invariably, I have been left wondering whether these decisions have strong foundations. Furthermore, I have wondered if the school leaders making these decisions – myself included – have been aware of the ethical dimension to their deliberations.
That is, were they aware that what they were engaged in is the process of moral reasoning?

As a matter of interest, and with previous background in the area of political philosophy, I felt drawn to this subject as a possible area of research. With over a decade and a half of experience as a housemaster responsible for the pastoral welfare of students, I felt comfortable drawing upon my own experiences to examine the discipline processes carefully. As I reflected upon those experiences, I wondered how other educators in similar situations viewed this important area of school administration. I wondered what their individual responses would be like, and whether they too had examined the process to consider the various ethical dimensions.

After some preliminary discussions with my thesis advisor, it became apparent that this subject has academic value. It also became apparent that the field of study – ethics in education – is a relatively new one. The thought that I could be venturing into a frontier with few pioneers certainly appealed to me. That, and the hope that I will help provide a framework for future discussion on this subject, led me to pursue this issue as a research project.

The Problem Situation

School leaders face difficult decisions each and every day regarding discipline matters. Often, such decisions have an important role in determining the moral tone of the school, the health of the school community, and the future careers of both students and staff. There are many stakeholders in society who are affected by the outcome of such decisions: parents, students, staff, administrators, government officials, and the general population, to name a few of the constituent groups with a vested interest in our schools.
News accounts of the most sensational discipline cases are followed widely. Yet, there are many questions that are left unknown and even unexamined. Codes of conduct, board and school policies, and discipline meetings are often shrouded under cloaks of secrecy. Perceptions of uncertainty, unfairness, and incompetence result when information surrounding discipline matters is not shared with interested parties.

In this study I sought to clear away some of the clouds of uncertainty and to uncover parts of the mystery that surrounds the process of decision making in discipline matters. In essence I tackled two main areas. Primarily in this study I examined the process of moral reasoning. I sought to determine the extent to which school leaders were aware that they were involved in a process of moral reasoning, and furthermore, what kind of moral reasoning was practiced. Secondarily, I investigated the ethical grounds and foundations underlying moral reasoning. I probed on what grounds the school leaders made their decisions to determine what is the ethical basis for school administration.

In essence, in this study I investigated two main problem areas. First, I asked to what degree moral reasoning was taking place, and the extent to which school leaders were aware that it was taking place. Second, I considered the grounds and foundations for moral reasoning. I sought to identify which principles underlie the decisions that were made. Thus, in this study I probed the awareness of the process of moral reasoning and sought to find the ethical grounding of decision making.
Purpose of the Study

This study explored the ways in which educational leaders make sense of moral reasoning and the ethical issues related to discipline. The main empirical question guiding the study was:

What processes of moral reasoning did school leaders go through in making important decisions related to discipline? A secondary area of consideration was: From what ethical basis did school leaders make important decisions related to discipline?

In order to tackle these questions a review of the literature was undertaken to find the related themes associated with this area of study. The preliminary phase of the study examined the following four main related areas: accountability, obligations, vulnerabilities, and values. This yielded data that shaped a different set of themes directed around the following questions: process, purpose, rationale for decision, and perspective. Thus, the main subquestions of an empirical nature are:

What role did process play in the moral reasoning of school leaders?
What role did purpose play in the moral reasoning of school leaders?
What role did the rationale for the decision play in the moral reasoning of school leaders?
What role did perspective play in the moral reasoning of school leaders?

Theoretical Framework

Campbell (1994) provided the foundational basis for questions pertaining to process. The theoretical frameworks for the areas of purpose and rationale for the decision were based upon Walker’s (1998) examination of the theoretical-juridical model and ethic of care. Finally, the underlying principles related to perspective were
found in Ciulla (1998), Bass (1998), and Bhindi and Duignan (1997), who informed the framework of questions related to this study.

Perceptions of right and wrong are as varied as the individuals who may be questioned on this topic; however, that does not mean that the pursuit of such questions is not a noble one. Campbell tackled this issue as it related to teachers and school leaders. Her probing questions sought to get at the heart of personal and professional ethics and hence the process of moral reasoning in discipline matters and the nature of the process of accountability within the context of public and private morality. To quote Campbell (1994), school leaders “while having a moral conscience [of their own], work within a school with its own ethical components” (p. 2). Furthermore, while school leaders have their own personal concepts of values and morality, they are part of a larger enterprise with its own ethical considerations. This makes the distinction between the process of public and private accountability an interesting one, because the one may have to be reconciled against the other. Each is certainly part of the process of moral reasoning in matters relating to discipline. Obviously, this work was of great benefit to the research involved in examining the process of decision making.

Paradigm shifts that cause us to reevaluate traditional ways of thinking about right and wrong were central to the work of Walker (1998). Her critique of the established codes of morality based upon codified, law-like propositions found in a theoretical-juridical model of morality reflects a major paradigm shift. A clarion call for change is made in the name of an ethic of care. This change is obviously radically different from any preceding model, making Walker’s work an invaluable, if not controversial, addition to this research. Walker states: “I prefer the more capacious
language of responsibility as a conceptual framework for ethics; it invites us to follow the trails of people’s diverse responsibilities through different domains” (p. 78). The school leaders in this study were questioned as to dependencies and vulnerabilities that exist in arrangements between students and staff, the webs of connectedness that exist in all school communities, and the ramifications of discipline decisions in terms of their impact upon affected parties. These questions aimed to get to the heart of obligations and vulnerabilities, or in Walker’s words, track responsibilities. Such concepts are closely tied to the process of moral reasoning and decision making related to discipline matters.

Finally, if values play a central role in the modern democratic school, then whose beliefs and codes of behaviour are being taught is a central issue. Several scholars, including Ciulla (1998), Bass (1998), and Bhindi (1997) examine the role of leadership and values in today’s schools. Ciulla states that “ethics is located at the heart of leadership studies” (p. 4), then proceeds to outline the principal areas where we can examine how leaders can make a difference in their institutions. Her study of leadership ethics examines the leader-follower relationship and probes many questions relevant to the research on moral reasoning.

Bass (1998) embarked upon a critical examination of leaders generally. He asserted, “in their efforts to accent the positive, to make inspiring appeals, to maintain the enthusiasm and morale of followers, many leaders may be manipulative” (p. 184). This opened up an avenue of study that questioned the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that school leaders were required to uphold. It also had implications for the examination of the critical incidents related to discipline that the school leaders were
called to recount. Determining which values were reinforced, undermined, or otherwise altered during the process of moral reasoning was as potentially revealing as the notion of tracking responsibilities itself.

Although often combined, conflated, and at times, even confused, the terms morals and values needed to be distinguished from one another. While morals refers to a systematic and overarching view of rights and wrongs, values are the specific behaviours that are used to enforce a moral code. In essence, morals are the theoretical scaffolds that provide the underpinning for the stage upon which values are acted out.

**Importance of the Study**

Providing a moral purpose is one of the fundamental tasks of school leaders. Yet our schools, like many organizations in society, are being challenged as never before to both provide, and account for, moral leadership. This is due to the tremendous shaping power of schools. School leaders obviously have an integral role in this shaping process. However, their “management and leadership are no longer regarded as ‘sacrosanct’ and are subject to increasing criticism” (Bhindi & Duignan, 1997, p. 118). How school leaders function in such an environment is pivotal to understanding ethical leadership. Examining their processes of moral reasoning in discipline matters in this context is most revealing as it places the school values under careful scrutiny.

The challenge to provide leadership through a common set of shared values is a daunting one. Even so, it seems as though all school leaders are called upon to do so. From where are these values drawn, and upon what moral foundation are they built are but two of the pressing questions related to this area of the study. The answers to these
questions will reveal much about the process of moral reasoning and ethical issues school leaders face in matters pertaining to discipline.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study reflected upon the realm of ethics and morality, each term daunting enough on its own. In order to proceed, it was important to get a firm definition of both of these concepts. To begin with, if morality tells us something about how we ought to live, then ethics is a reflective and normative study of morality (Walker, 1998, p. 3). Moral reasoning, by inference, is the process by which we sort competing, and often conflicting, moral claims. Morality, ethics, and moral reasoning can often be muddy waters to wade through. It is important to recognize that the terms are often interchanged, and sometimes confused. The review of the literature that follows is taken from a broad cross-section of the readings on these and related themes.

It has been noted that much of what educators do is related to both ethics and morals. Schools are interested in encouraging students to live good lives and make sound choices in life. As well, there are various codes of conduct to which students are expected to adhere. Teaching values education has been in vogue for some time, yet little attention has been paid to the process of moral reasoning as it relates to discipline. Why is it, then, that so little has been written about this particular field of educational study? Part of the answer lies in the fact that there are tensions between what is essentially a dichotomy of private and public morality.

Process

In her groundbreaking dissertation, Campbell (1994) probed the existence of individual consciousness and the existence of distinct school cultures. She concluded that individual responsibilities and organizational imperatives are not necessarily the same. Teachers and school administrators who have their own moral consciences must
work within a school culture that has its own, perhaps conflicting, ethical dimension (Campbell, p. 1). Invariably, individuals in their daily professional lives encounter issues pertaining to: "integrity, hypocrisy, conscience, and guilt within the realm of moral and ethical behaviour and belief" (Campbell, p. 1). Each case provides a practical element that tests the theoretical element of right and wrong. This leads one to ask, what guides a school leader under such circumstances and how does one proceed to discern right from wrong? These are not easy questions to answer, but grounding in ethics, morality, and moral reasoning is bound to help.

Linked to process is the notion of accountability. Accountability is often at the heart of dispute resolutions. Yet, as noted by various writers, there may exist a different notion of private and public accountability. Furthermore, group accountability is something that professionals in schools have to contend with. As well, blame can be shifted from individuals by appealing to the moral defects of the system (Crittenden, 1984, p. 20). In other words, individuals can both blame and excuse the system for personal mistakes. Both group and institutional dynamics may act as a buffer to the notion of individual accountability. To what extent can an individual school leader turn a blind eye to improper behaviour, condemning the action in private, while not taking any public action?

Campbell (1994) noted that while there are often ethical conflicts in the field of education, teachers seldom resign over matters of principle or personal integrity (p. 2). How then do teachers soothe an injured integrity or come to terms with employment in a culture that seems to run counter to their own personal beliefs? I suspect that the
answers to that question are as varied as the individual respondents. Without question there are underlying tensions that are played out both internally and externally.

The dynamics of the individual teacher’s struggle to do the right thing does not presuppose that the individual is always right, and that the group is always wrong. In fact, it must be stated from the outset, as Campbell (1994) does, that “This study rejects any such assumption; clearly neither the individual nor the collective is always right or always wrong. This is not true only of some individuals and some collectives; it is the nature of each” (p. 2). In other words, the moral or ethical high ground belongs to neither the teacher nor the school, and tracking responsibilities is necessary in order to find out proper action. This often-difficult process is at the heart of moral reasoning.

**Purpose**

One scholar who carefully explored the notion of tracking responsibilities is Walker (1998). She asserted that “(feminist) moral philosophers have found ‘responsibility’ a powerful and sensitive tracking device with rewardingly embarrassing uses in reviewing moral theories and practices” (p. 77). Walker contends that there are many benefits to the process of tracking, or charting, responsibilities. She attacks the problem from a uniquely feminist perspective, but such an exercise yields benefits to anyone studying the field of morality and ethics. For example, one of the central questions she asked was: Which (or whose) moral responsibilities or obligations were featured in discipline cases? Such a question is instructive and revealing, even insofar as following the trail spotlights which (or whose) moral obligations did not show up at all. The process is also helpful in identifying the power structures and intertwining moral claims that inevitably appeared along such a trail.
While Walker (1998) is not the only scholar to espouse this philosophy, she frames her process of charting responsibilities within the context of an ethic of care. A care ethic provides a theoretical framework for the practical aspects of many daily functions in society, one of which is the important field of teaching. Incidentally, teaching has been described as more than just what occurs in the classroom, especially when it is extended to include the many other care functions in a school such as coaching, mentoring, and the pastoral care duties that are performed in the unique setting of an independent boarding school. Charting responsibilities can be seen as part of the ongoing purpose of moral reasoning.

Placing people and their responsibilities in the right place at the right time is at the heart of charting responsibilities. The trail of diverse responsibilities that people have is not an easy one to follow, but Walker (1998) believes that pursuing it is a worthwhile endeavour. Along the way she finds that there are critical assessments of how, and upon whom, responsibilities fall (p. 79). In other words, who is accountable to whom is an important consideration in the purpose of the discipline process.

**Rationale for the Decision**

One of the important foundations of an ethic of care, or care ethics as Walker (1998) describes it, is the notion of vulnerability. Walker refers to what she calls “Goodin’s Vulnerability Model.” Briefly, this responsibility ethic is based on the principle that “we are responsible for protecting those vulnerable to our actions and choices” (p. 80). Consequently, histories of connection, interaction, and agreement form the unique relationships that bond the human experience. While falling a bit short of the notion that such a principle orders the entire moral universe, this model claims that it
provides the best account of a wide range of acknowledged obligations (Walker, p. 80). Specifically the basic principle of the model is that one person’s interests are vulnerable to the actions and choices of another’s, and that the other person has a responsibility to protect the interests of that first individual (Walker, p. 81). In essence, we are bound by our vulnerabilities in a way similar to mutual dependency. Thus, for Walker, vulnerability becomes part of the rationale for the decision. Furthermore, the bond may be increasingly more obligatory depending upon the type of relationship; obviously, familial arrangements increase dependency, responsibility, and connectedness.

This model is not applicable only to those with whom we are most familiar; Goodin extends the model to include responsibility for protecting those vulnerable to our actions and choices such as “promisors, parents, employers, professionals, and friends” as well as strangers (cited in Walker, 1998, p. 83). Such a complex notion of responsibilities is difficult and important to track. It is clear that this model has direct application to the teaching profession, which has literally level upon level of responsibility: in the classroom, on the sports field, off the campus, and in the unique setting of an independent school in the dormitory. As well, it is not difficult to see that the children are deeply vulnerable to the actions and choices of the adults who have been charged with the various responsibilities of caring for them.

It is worth noting that within the vulnerability model there is an explicit and implicit examination of the power structures in society. Walker (1998) was most interested in charting these responsibilities through a feminist lens. Not surprisingly, she arrived at the conclusion that gender plays an important role in distinguishing the assignment of responsibility (p. 78). How and upon whom these responsibilities fall are
interesting questions for many different research questions, but for the purposes of this paper, it is safe to say that teachers, administrators, and other professionals working in the field of care that is school, hold significant control over the students at any particular school at any given time. Indeed, it can be stated that school children are most vulnerable to the adults who are responsible for running the institutions that govern the greatest amount of their time on a daily basis. It is also clear that, in the case of school, Walker offers a useful model to track and chart responsibilities and by extension a rationale for the decision.

Perspective

Individual school leaders play a singularly important role throughout the entire process of moral reasoning in discipline matters. Therefore, their role needs to be placed in perspective in relation to discipline matters. School leaders have an important role in shaping the culture of a school. In fact, it is one of the most significant responsibilities with which they are charged. Certainly, principals, heads of school, deans, and others with title are at the forefront in shaping school culture, meting out discipline, and so on. Much of the literature in this area deals with leadership, in the broad sense. The writings on this particular aspect of the study are complex. This section will describe and analyze the most applicable and pertinent readings on leadership within the school culture.

Leadership is an important component of the educational field. It has been noted that leadership styles are as variable as the individuals who are placed in leadership positions. Yet, there is a field of educational study that examines the various theories of leadership within a school setting. Much has been written about emerging leadership styles generally, and various authors have heralded new management styles for new
ages. Most will recall how Peters and Waterman (1982, p. 32) defined the early 1980s business leadership through their calls for excellence. Others similarly chronicled the variety of styles of succeeding eras. Countless others have devoted their work to examining organizational and institutional leadership across a wide range of fields. As Bhindi and Duignan (1997) state,

In their review of literature on western leadership theory, research and practice, Bass and Stogdill (1990) noted that leadership made the “critical difference” in the success or otherwise of organizations across the whole spectrum of life: education, church, business, military, politics and the government.

(p. 117)

Furthermore, as Sergiovanni (1996) states, “schools are moral communities requiring the development of a distinct leadership based in moral authority” (p. 57).

These are telling words. If leadership provides the critical difference in the success or failure of a school, then school leaders obviously have an important role to play in the moral tone of the school. If they are to have a lasting impression upon the schools they are working within, how are they going to handle the awesome power and responsibility they have been given? The answer for Bass (1998) is that ethical considerations are paramount. Quoting Ciulla (1995), he states that “ethics is at the heart of leadership” (p. 170). In other words, ethical values not only shape the culture of schools, but they also define leadership, which is, itself, the most critical element in the success of a broad range of institutions, including schools.

School leaders, then, play an important role in how values are defined in their particular schools. Consequently, in order to be credible, school leaders must begin with
moral leadership. That is, providing a sense of moral purpose ought to be the first consideration of any school leader because building trust and hope is contingent upon that fundamental basis (Bass 1998, p. 170). Another important task for school leaders is to bring together the school culture around a set of common or shared values. The individual school leader plays an important role in acting as an example of that moral foundation. As Bass (1998) states,

> The leaders themselves, often are seen as the embodiment of such values (McCollough, 1991). And just as when leaders are more competent, those they lead are more effective, so when leaders are more morally mature, those they lead display higher moral reasoning. (Dukerich, Nichols et al., 1990, p. 170)

This is a major responsibility for anyone, but one that principals, heads of school, and other school leaders must assume as a duty of office. With all of these considerations, the role of school leaders needs to be placed in perspective. Indeed, the perspective of school leaders is also an important consideration throughout this study.

Furthermore, the central role that the school leader plays in the discipline process is itself a point of interest. Examining a community perspective of school versus school leadership is an important consideration for several scholars including Bogotch (2002), Furman (2004), and Shields (1999). Furman (2004) calls for an ethic of community to counter-balance “the status quo of hierarchical relationships in schools, assumptions that moral leadership is the purview of “heroic” leaders in administrative positions” (p. 229). Hence, the central role of the individual school leader as the primary locus of moral leadership in discipline matters was of great value to this study.
Summary

A review of the literature demonstrates that the field of ethics and morality provides rich areas for research. If morality tells us something about how we ought to live, and ethics is the study of morality, then the process of moral reasoning – sorting competing and sometimes conflicting moral claims – is a difficult but useful exercise. It is also clear that much of what educators do is related to both ethics and morals.

Teachers work within a framework of both private and public morality. That is, teachers work with their own set of private values, but they are also bound by the constraints of institutional values. Matters of conscience, guilt, ethical behavior, and other dilemmas have both a private and public dimension. At times these considerations can be in agreement, and at times they can be at odds with one another. Since it is not always clear whether the group or the individual has the higher moral ground, tracking responsibilities is necessary in order to find out proper action.

While tracking responsibilities is a powerful and sensitive process, it is a difficult one as well. Whose moral responsibilities or obligations are featured is an important consideration. Identifying the power structures and intertwining the moral claims that inevitably crop up as part of the tracking process is an important step to understanding the scope of the moral dilemma. This is made all the more difficult because teachers perform a variety of roles within the school setting (and even some of them outside of it) so that tracking responsibilities is a complex and involved process. Deciding who is accountable to whom is at the heart of the matter.

Goodin’s Vulnerability Model is instructive as a means of gauging the level of interdependency involved in an ethic of care. It holds that “we are responsible for
protecting those vulnerable to our actions and choices” (Walker, 1998, p. 80). While most of us accept the notion that this model certainly applies to conventional relationships and obligations such as family, the interesting dimension for the purposes of this paper is that it applies to institutional settings such as schools as well. It is based upon histories of connection, interaction, and agreement; therefore, it is not difficult to see that this model would have implications for a school setting that involves layer upon layer of such arrangements.

Central to the model is the notion of mutual dependencies; these dependencies can form hierarchies that are also mirrored in the institutional setting. Teachers and school leaders are invariably involved with students in a variety of capacities: as instructors, coaches, mentors, and disciplinarians. Sifting through the levels of connectedness reveals that there are levels upon levels of responsibility, and that there are layers upon layers of vulnerability.

Finally, it is clear that school leaders shape school cultures. There are a variety of leadership and management styles, many of which have been chronicled and are readily available. However, a relatively new concept is that ethical considerations are paramount to leadership. In order to build trust and hope, providing a moral purpose ought to be the first consideration of any school leader. Thus, the matter of ethical school leadership becomes part of the equation for this study.

The literature provides many avenues, parkways, and boulevards to follow; it also ventures into alleys, side streets, and occasional roadblocks, but invariably it represents a superhighway of research possibilities. Although the four major topics of research (accountability, obligations, vulnerabilities, and values) provided the
theoretical framework at the initial stage, they were replaced by the four new topics (process, purpose, rationale for the decision, and perspective) that guided the next stage of work. The implications outlined in this section provided the pertinent and most important considerations for this study. It was by framing such issues as relevant research questions that the next phase of research proceeded.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted to determine the scope and awareness of moral reasoning on the part of a variety of school leaders involved at different stages of their career and holding varying degrees of administrative responsibility. Furthermore, it examined the patterns and variability in how participants viewed discipline. As well, it attempted to reveal if there was an operational model employed by the school leader in question. Finally, the processes of decision making were tracked in order to determine to what extent moral reasoning was being employed and to determine how school leaders made sense of it.

Approach

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of moral reasoning employed by school leaders in matters pertaining to discipline. A qualitative research methodology was used throughout to tackle questions from the perspective of the participants in the study, and I, as a researcher recognized that there were many possible perspectives. This type of methodology sought to construct a social reality and meaning out of the data collected (Neuman, 2000, p. 16). Its aim was to find authenticity in the participants' account of critical incidents related to school discipline.

This study was guided by a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology seeks to understand the phenomena of information through the individual participant’s perspective (Coffey, 1996). Without presupposing any outcomes or prejudicing any findings, the possibility was great that research into moral reasoning would reveal several unique perspectives. The purpose of the study was to examine the patterns of similarities and the degree of differences in each individual response to note if
generalizations could be made in regard to the process of moral reasoning. Qualitative research dictated that there was no prototype that researchers must follow nor any mold that must be fit into (Peshkin, 1993). This made the process of qualitative research generative and dynamic. Furthermore, a phenomenological perspective "focuses on how people interpret their experiences" (First & Way, 1995, cited in Mindorff, 2000, p. 44). Thus, this approach was well-suited to a study that examined individual participants' perspectives on critical incidents related to discipline.

Qualitative methodology and a phenomenological perspective were linked by the interactive nature of the research process. That is, both were concerned with constructing meaning out of an exchange between participant and researcher. If the critical incidents examined through the interview constituted the process of qualitative methodology, then the unique responses from that interview, which offered a deeper understanding of the problem, constituted part of the phenomenological perspective.

This study featured short field research rather than ethnography (long-term, in-depth immersion in the field). The process involved individual interviews with three participants, each lasting approximately 1 hour in length. Subsequent or follow-up interviews were required for the purposes of clarification. Having 3 different participants to interview helped ensure triangulation of research by collecting data from different sources. The nature of this type of research was suited to the topic at hand inasmuch as moral reasoning was a rather broad and open topic and the nature of qualitative inquiry was also open-ended and opportunistic (Peshkin, 1993). It was expected that qualitative research would unearth the problem of moral reasoning by following the specified rules of research.
Selection of Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select individuals appropriate to the study. The nature of purposive sampling allowed a “researcher to select unique cases that are especially informative” (Neuman, 2000, p. 198). Furthermore, it helped facilitate the exploratory nature of the fieldwork. Three school leaders were interviewed. Variability was achieved through the selection of participants from different school backgrounds: the public, Catholic, and independent school systems were represented. As well, of the sample included both male and female school leaders.

The research was conducted with school leaders willing to participate in the study. That is, school leaders – senior teachers, principals, heads of school – were approached and questioned as to their interest in being a participant. Telephone contact was made to gauge the initial interest of the possible participants. A subsequent meeting was scheduled and the nature of the study was explained. The scope of their involvement was outlined, and following mutually enthusiastic discussion of the topic, participation was agreed upon and confirmed with each individual participant separately.

Prior personal knowledge of the individuals helped in the selection of participants who were at ease with me. Time and location of interview was arranged at mutual convenience to further ensure comfort throughout the interview process. Participants were drawn from public and independent schools in the province of Ontario. Furthermore, for matters of convenience, participants were all from the same city.
Data Collection

A general list of questions was used to guide the interview and to establish consistency from interview to interview (see Appendix A). The interviews started with simple questions of a general nature to establish rapport and communication between participant and researcher. Areas of responsibility, positional experience, and degree of contact with discipline matters constituted the first line of questioning. Following these preliminary questions, each participant was asked to recount a memorable discipline matter (a critical incident) in some detail in order to establish a framework for the rest of the questioning. Participants were asked to describe the incident, their way of handling the incident, and their thought processes throughout the incident. The purpose was to generate data that reflected actual experiences and that shed light on the thought processes of the participants in matters of discipline.

While the first literature review helped to shape an earlier theoretical framework surrounding the four major areas of research (accountability, obligations, vulnerabilities, and values), the final set of questions uncovered four new major areas of research (process, purpose, rationale for the decision, and perspective). This was done in order to discern if a recognizable process of moral reasoning had been followed, but it became clear that there were new emerging themes. By coalescing similar data units and examining them for categorical descriptors, the four themes of process, purpose, rationale for the decision, and perspective emerged as the new theoretical model.

Ethical Guidelines

A degree of flexibility was required in order to ensure the participants’ stories and voices were heard. There were also assurances in place that all comments were valid so
that participants did not feel that there were right and wrong answers expected. All interviews were recorded through an audio tape recorder for which prior permission was obtained from the participants. Recording and transcribing data was done by observing the established rules of privacy agreements. Additionally, participants received a copy of the session transcript prior to the writing of the document in order to make revisions or additional comments. To ensure accurate interpretation and to avoid misrepresentation, participants were given the opportunity to review the interpretive summary of the data they personally provided. This stage of the process was extremely thorough in order to ensure accuracy. An informed consent form was signed by all participants prior to the commencement of any data collection.

Furthermore, in keeping with the voluntary nature of this study, participants had the right to withdraw from the process at any time. All participants remained anonymous throughout the study and pseudonyms were used for the final published report. Only I, along with the thesis advisor, had access to the original tape recordings and data transcripts. In all these ways, the study followed the ethical requirements for research conducted with human participants established by the Brock University Research Ethics Review Board (see Appendix B).

**Data Analysis and Processing**

Following the interview stage, the raw data were reviewed both by listening to the tapes and transcribing the tapes into a written form. Any revisions to the participants' transcripts were evaluated at this time to consider their pertinence to the topic of this research. Common and recurring patterns, categories, and concepts were noted and studied. It was expected that the patterns would emerge from the data, and this was
made manifest when a close examination of the data took place. The need for a new theoretical model consistent with the themes generated from the data started to become apparent.

Coding techniques were used to articulate key words, ideas, or phrases pertinent to the study. At this stage, no precoding was in place. The first step upon collection of the data was the creation of a codebook that reflected the key concepts that emerged from the data, a practice that was consistent with prescribed conventions of qualitative data analysis. A general description of this process involved “condensing the bulk of our data sets into analyzable units by creating categories with and from our data” (Coffey, 1996, p. 26). Coding allowed for the manageable organization of data. Furthermore, it fit with the generative nature of qualitative research by organizing and sorting the concepts that were derived from the data collected. Although a part of data analysis, in essence, coding was a preliminary function prior to the analytical process, providing links of various sorts to the research process. Coding was reflective of my own analytic ideas because it made the link between the data and the theoretical framework of the study (Coffey, p. 27). Thus, coding also represented the first stage of data analysis known as data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Once the data were collected, coded, and prepared, the process of synthesizing took place. A general model of explanation was created from the pattern of themes, concepts, and categories generated from the data. Similarities and differences among participants, along with comparisons between the theoretical framework and the data evidence, were examined closely in order to locate any new areas for the research to
follow. This process of examining categorical descriptors resulted in the need for new research and the creation of a similar, but fresh theoretical framework for the study.

At this stage, the data were organized in such a way as to give meaning to the participants' responses. That is, the events chronicled in the recollection of the critical incidents were examined against the original theoretical framework of the topic, namely the four concepts of inquiry: accountability, obligations, vulnerabilities, and values. A secondary theoretical model centering around process, purpose, rationale for the decision, and perspective became apparent. In essence, the practical answers merged with the theoretical concepts of the study, and divergent stories were placed within the context of the larger picture. That is, evidence was organized into the four new main concepts of the study (process, purpose, rationale for the decision, and perspective) in order to examine trends, patterns, and degrees of variability in the data relative to these concepts.

Critical incidents formed the core of the participants' responses; it was my responsibility to determine if there was a link among the responses that constituted a pattern of moral reasoning. Therefore, a careful reading of the data was undertaken in order to get a clearer view of the emerging picture. These critical incidents provided the supporting evidence for patterns of moral reasoning. The purpose of using the critical incident as a research method was to elicit responses from the participants that had them reconstruct, in their own voices, narratives that shed insight into the process of moral reasoning. It was a reflective way of analyzing practical (realistic) data rather than dealing with the theoretical. Furthermore, it meant that the research was involved with actual case studies in discipline. Thus, the critical incident asked the participant to recall
the details of an actual critical incident, explained why a certain decision was made, and ultimately, analyzed the theoretical framework from which the decision was made. It was hoped that the narratives of the critical incidents would reveal data consistent with the original theoretical framework of the study, but it also necessitated the creation of a new theoretical framework in light of the findings.

In summary, the practice of coding was the first step of reduction in the data analysis and processing stage. It helped to condense the data into analyzable units. Once coded, the analysis of the critical incidents revealed patterns, or the absence of patterns, in moral reasoning among participants. Uniqueness in the narratives was also considered as a means of determining if the theoretical framework still existed. Placing the coded data into the theoretical framework of accountability, obligations, vulnerabilities, and values was the litmus test in assessing whether or not the original model was operational. Through an inductive process, after coalescing similar data units and examining them for categorical descriptors, the four new themes of process, purpose, rationale for the decision, and perspective emerged to take the study in a new direction. Finally, the data analysis and processing stage justified the creation of a new model of a theoretical framework.

**Rationale**

This was an important study for a variety of reasons. First, whether or not the school leaders in question realized it, they were engaged in the process of moral reasoning each and every time they made important discipline decisions. This process was not necessarily immediately apparent to the people involved at the time of the decision-making, but it was shown to be true upon reflection. The distance of time and the degree
of deliberative detachment it imposed after the heat of the moment subsided made for an interesting analysis of the processes known as moral reasoning. By deliberative detachment I am referring to the process by which a school leader is able to step aside from his or her own values, see a larger playing field, include other decision makers, and take a more collaborative approach to decision making. In essence, deliberative detachment describes the degree to which school leaders step outside their own personally idiosyncratic frame of reference and see the broader landscape. Thus, the critical incident played a central role in the uncovering of the theoretical framework behind this study, and the narratives themselves provided a plethora of useful research data.

Second, outlining the range of possible models for decision making was an important step towards realizing that there were choices available and that these choices were grounded in time-honored principles. The examination of the basis of these principles, their origins, and foundations were of great importance to this field of research. Furthermore, the process of tracking responsibilities revealed answers to the important questions of whose moral responsibilities or obligations were most featured. As well, tellingly, this element of the study revealed whose moral obligations or responsibilities did not show up at all. It probed the area of study that questioned whose values were being imposed and helped to examine if discipline matters at school marginalized certain groups or individuals.

Finally, there was an opportunity to gauge the degree to which patterns and differences emerged in the wide scope of decision making across a spectrum of public and independent schools. It was widely known that different schools, and different
school systems, had unique operational models, because each school was uniquely responsible to its own constituent groups. Obviously, public schools have a public accountability, but even within that system there are distinct philosophical differences, with the anomaly of the Catholic board being the most obvious. An examination of the handling of discipline matters in at least one independent school also took place during this study. Thus, both public and independent school models were examined, and school leaders from a variety of backgrounds were interviewed. It was of considerable academic interest to note the patterns of similarities and degrees of uniqueness that existed, especially at an interesting juncture of time in Ontario’s educational system.

Scope and Limitation

Because this study was conducted using qualitative methodology, it revealed only as much as the individuals interviewed were willing to disclose. This project allowed the participants to be recorded in their own words on subjects that were important to them. Participants had the opportunity to review transcripts of their recorded interviews prior to the writing of the document. Any participants not comfortable with the transcriptions may have asked for revision or could have withdrawn from the process altogether. The interviews were intended to provide snapshots of individuals involved in the process of moral reasoning; therefore, broad-based generalizations or conclusions ought not to have been made about this subject. Rather, the project offered a close-up examination of the process of moral reasoning.

Further, the participants were selected from one geographical region, thereby ignoring the possibility that there may have been regional differences. Also, administrators may have paid only lip service to the notion that they used grounded
principles when they made important decisions. In essence, there may have been one face for the public, and another for the private. While the study was important in that it further examined the role of ethics in school leadership, the questions posed and the problems examined can be expected to vary from year to year, and from case to case. Thus it is not helpful to make sweeping generalizations from just one case study.

Nonetheless, this paper offered an examination of school ethics that was both rewarding and fruitful.

**Definition of Terms**

In order to establish consistency and clarity, the following definitions were considered to be in effect for the paper:

*Accountability:* A process by which students and staff alike were held responsible for their actions and choices. There were a variety of means by which individuals are held responsible for their choices, and there were a variety of avenues of accountability (e.g. public vs. private, individual vs. institutional).

*Juridical/Philosophical codes:* A set of binding legal and philosophical truths and principles were established by society or by the school community. All members of the school community--students and staff alike were expected to adhere to these codes.

*Moral authority:* Clear and explicit rules and principles by which behavioral standards are set. A variety of sources provide the basis of moral authority. They included, but were not limited to: juridical/philosophical codes, theoretical/judicial models, religious tenets, and shared community standards. These rules and principles provided the basis for leadership within the school, and provided students and staff alike with distinct boundaries for moral conduct.
Moral reasoning: The process by which teachers and school leaders reached decisions on moral problems by employing forms of moral authority.

Obligations: The moral or legal duties that school leaders owed to students, parents, staff members, and other constituents of the school community. It implied a chain of command in reporting and acting upon such things as: compulsory attendance, record keeping, serious incidents, neglect, etc.

Religious tenets: Beliefs of individual established churches held to be true by way of dogma or doctrine, and subsequently taught in schools.

School leaders: Teachers, administrators, and heads of schools directly involved in matters pertaining to discipline and/or moral education of students.

Shared community standards: A social group working within the same locality (i.e., a school) shared the same guides or models of ethical behaviour. It implied that members of a school community (parents, staff, and students) have contributed to, were aware of, and accepted the consequences of maintaining those standards.

Theoretical/Juridical model: A view of morality and moral reasoning based upon codified, law-like propositions applied to schools. It held that schools can gauge “proper” moral behavior using a set of preestablished beliefs.

Values: A set of beliefs and codes of behaviour that were held by members of the school community and taught to staff and students of a school.

Vulnerabilities: The interdependent nature of relations in a school between students and staff. In a school, students were particularly vulnerable to the actions and choices of the professional staff, and teachers and students were particularly vulnerable to the actions of school leaders.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter reports the findings of a qualitative study undertaken to explore the ways in which educational leaders deal with moral reasoning and ethical issues related to discipline. In particular, critical incidents pertaining to discipline cases were examined through individual interviews with three school leaders. The responses of the school leaders are categorized into four areas: process, purpose, rationale for decision, and perspective, which represent the four major themes that were derived from the analysis of the interview data.

Process

One category of interview questions that had been developed to explore the issue of accountability asked participants to describe the discipline process that existed within their schools. School leaders were asked to recount a critical incident pertaining to discipline, but before doing so, were obliged to recount the steps in the disciplinary process: the actions that took place, the chronology of events, and the decisions reached. Their responses were commonly concerned with questions of process, which can be interpreted as the order of events by which school leaders handled the discipline case. Data analysis indicated that process had four broad elements: codification, discretion, political expediency, and outside agencies. These four results will be presented in detail in this section.

Codification

In general, schools typically have codes of conduct that form the basis for most procedures related to discipline. It is the breach of such codes that often lands students
in the middle of a discipline meeting at the behest of a school leader. To what extent the school leader uses such codes was a matter of great interest in this study.

The element of codification emerged from the participants’ acknowledgement that their decision making process was affected by expected rules, values, and behaviours, some of which were written down and some of which were not. How widely known the codes were, and to what extent they were circulated, were two questions discovered to be important to the notion of process. An interesting observation surrounding this matter is that the participating school leaders seemed to be aware of such codes and their implications, but they believed that students might only be vaguely aware of their existence and content. For example, one school leader described his school’s policy regarding community standards in a way that made it clear that certain values were expected to be upheld even if they are framed in a general way.

I guess the values of our community, the honesty, the value of honesty, the value of community, of personal integrity, all these sorts of things definitely played a key role, that we look upon our students and our institution in a certain light and we ask our students, in fact, to sign at the beginning of the school year. (CB p. 10)

This statement was mentioned in the context of examining the values that were breached in a particular discipline case. The school leader recalled clearly that certain values were compromised, but that even in the case where a student signed a letter committing to a certain code of conduct, such a letter did not specify the type of behaviour that led to the discipline case in question.
In another instance, a school leader recounted a delicate situation in which a student was suspected of drug possession. After describing the series of events that led to the student in question being disciplined, the school leader remarked,

If there are rules you don’t break them. Now I didn’t have a rule: “Thou shalt not bring hashish to school.” Of course there is a rule that there are no drugs or alcohol or cigarettes at school. (FZ)

While school leaders seemed to think that much of what they do is a reinforcement of the existing codes within their institutions, their descriptions depicted a situation that is less than ideal in terms of prior notification and understanding. One school leader described how students often pay only lip service to the awareness of rules until such time as they break them and wind up in the midst of a discipline case.

We definitely publish all of this. The students would have the honour code in their calendars that they receive, in the agenda they receive, and in the handbooks that the parents get on the Web site. The role of values, the expectations are all there. Do the students understand them thoroughly? I don’t think they thoroughly understand them until a situation arises. I think, as with a lot of us, we’ll sign things, you know, without fully reading the fine print. And it is not until something arises that you say, “Oh, yes. I remember signing that!” and then you really take it to mind. (CB)

The school leader went on to describe how such a scenario was played out in discipline cases where a parent or a student questioned the existence of such codes only to find out that the material had been published in several different places. Thus, the situational nature of discipline cases revealed, in more than one instance, that codes might be
published and relied upon by school leaders, but that their existence and/or implications might not be universally known or understood by students.

*Discretion*

The scope and latitude available to school leaders in matters of discipline opens the door to the question of discretion. School leaders have a great deal of latitude when it comes to decision making generally, and to decision making in matters of discipline in particular. In describing the discipline processes in their schools, study participants noted that they had considerable latitude and discretionary power when it came to the decision-making process. They saw themselves as being vested with a great deal of power to uphold and represent the institution for which they worked. In addition, at various stages they have the discretion to handle matters individually or to involve others. This latitude gave them the choice to make the discipline process either broad or narrow in scope. For example, in describing the degree of publicity in a particular discipline case, one school leader commented upon the chain of events that occurred in a case that had several possible ramifications. Starting with the proposition that the case was not straightforward, the school leader portrayed a scene that included many tensions and uncertainties in the unfolding of the discipline case.

It’s such a fine line, discipline, and I just don’t think you can have a set of rules and say, “These are the rules, and this is the consequence of the rules.” You know, it’s not that quite cut and dried... there are all those kind of black and grey areas where it is more detrimental to this child or is it going to help him and that is ultimately what you are trying to do. (FZ)
In the case described above, the school leader, after examining the pertinent facts, decided to keep the investigation limited in scope. Outlining some of the possible permutations, she stated,

Well, as I recall, I didn’t take it above me, to the board level. The parents were very annoyed and said they were going to complain about me for accusing their child. They must have thought differently about that. (FZ)

The two-way potential for escalating a discipline case is clearly evidenced through the above statements; from the perspective of the parents, the possibility of bringing the matter to the attention of the board level could be seen as a threat, while the school leader used discretionary power to keep the focus of the discipline case limited in scope.

The rationale for playing down the situation is further explained by the school leader in the following statements:

Because it wasn’t something blatant that the whole student body knew about, I didn’t make it an issue because that to me would cause problems where there weren’t any. (FZ)

And further along in the same line of questioning:

But I chose not to make a big issue of it, as I usually do. I usually choose not to do that because I think that again, that’s just a grandstanding thing. (FZ)

The element of choice inherent in the school leader’s discretionary power and latitude of action is made clear in the recounting of the narrow scope used to handle this particular discipline case.

By way of contrast, a second discipline case received much more publicity, but was also an example of discretionary power. This case became much more public in
nature, and as a result, placed the school leader under much more scrutiny. According to the participant, the incident, from the point of view of the students, was a prank, but was treated as an assault by the school administration. The school leader recounted his central role in the proceedings.

Well, I think because I made the decision I was probably at the forefront of the dispute. Once the suspensions were issued, I notified my area superintendent, particularly because of the gravity of the situation... (ND)

Further along in the same statement, the school leader remarked,

In terms of the chain of command it would have been the trustees, to the director, to the superintendent, to back down again and they upheld the decision. But if you want to use the terminology, the locus of control initially was with me... and then I became the person that had to defend the decision based on school code.

(ND)

The degree to which arbitrariness plays a role in discipline matters is also of considerable interest in this study. Because school leaders wield a great deal of institutional power, and because they have considerable discretion when determining the scope and latitude of a problem, the question arises as to how much arbitrary power they hold in a given situation. Although each discipline matter is unique and one case does not necessarily demonstrate a trend, the data indicated that at least one school leader was aware of this possibility, as seen in the following comment:

So, quite arbitrarily, and quite off the cuff, I decided on a 4-day suspension, right on the spot, based on the girl’s attitude and her demeanour and as well, I guess, based on the previous latitude we had given her. (CB)
Upon reflection, the school leader later mused about the arbitrary nature of the decision, appeared to have second thoughts, but ultimately upheld the decision.

Perhaps I might not have suspended the student for 4 days off the cuff, although I don’t think that was the wrong decision. Perhaps making the decision on the spot was not the best thing to do. I don’t regret it, but just looking back it may not have been the right thing to do. (CB)

The exchange above demonstrates the delicate nature of the decision making process in relation to discipline, highlights the central role of the school leader, and demonstrates the discretionary power and latitude that is available to the decision maker.

*Expediency*

The presence of discretionary power leads to the question of the extent to which expediency, political or otherwise, plays a role in decision-making surrounding discipline matters. School communities involve a variety of important constituencies. Staff and students are but two of the stakeholders involved in a given discipline matter. Other important stakeholders in this arena are the parents. Their involvement, or lack of it, in discipline matters is critical. The decision to even involve them at all is an important one; once involved, their presence cannot be discounted or diminished. In fact, in at least two of the cases examined in this study, the involvement of parents was central to the outcome, its publicity or lack thereof, and impact. As one school leader noted when commenting upon the impact of the parents in a particular case: “the parent supports the child rather than the teacher...making it immediately confrontational.” This statement implies that parental involvement raises the stakes in any given discipline case, and it is not always certain where their support will rest. As one school leader
remarked, she was surprised at the lack of parental support and the degree of parental hostility that she encountered:

I was surprised; I thought they would support me. I wasn’t making a federal claim; I didn’t call the police, for example, because again, in the end I didn’t have any evidence. I just wanted them to know that so together we could help this child to understand that this is a poor choice. I couldn’t do that because they didn’t back me up. They were very hostile. (FZ)

Clearly, parental involvement has the potential to raise the temperature of a given situation, and school leaders are often dependent upon their support given the interdependent nature of discipline.

Other matters related to expediency include the roles of institutional politics. For example, the question of personal property relative to school property can be an issue if political expediency intervenes over matters such as lockers, changerooms, and other public spaces that are partially private. In at least one instance, a discipline matter that involved a school locker became a source of concern for one school leader, who explained how the locker is not a safe refuge, but in doing so revealed the inherent institutional politics related to locker searches as a ramification of her decision to search for evidence.

It’s a big hullabaloo... about you had no right to go into my locker. Well, hold on, I didn’t go into your locker, you did. I told you to, and yes, I do have a right to go into your locker, but I chose to let you go into your locker, and I did it with another teacher. I wasn’t going to do it on my own. (FZ)
The tensions of institutional politics are unmistakable in the statement above; the school leader in question had to deal with the perceived rights of a student, the notion of choice, and the need for witness corroboration.

*Outside Agencies*

The role of outside agencies relative to process is an interesting one. Over the years, outside agencies such as the police and social services like Family and Children Services have played a more prominent role in schools. Invariably these outside agencies become involved and intertwined with discipline matters. One school leader stated clearly that, if the discipline matter in question had taken place today, rather than when it occurred 10 years ago, the police would have been brought in.

We were very seriously contemplating calling the police and the reason we didn’t was we felt that a couple of the individuals would not benefit from a legal charge, and in my consultation with police officers, there was no doubt that if it went to court that they would be charged, and we didn’t want to have that hanging on their record long-term, when we felt that altering behaviour was the reason we did what we did. (ND)

Tied to discretion and political expediency, the decision by the school leader to exclude rather than include the outside agency of the police revealed again the importance of discretionary power in the process of decision making related to discipline matters.

Similarly, school leaders face other difficult choices in matters of discipline when it comes to agencies and other constituents in the broader community. The school leader involved in the aforementioned discipline case outlined the need for thinking of including, if not outright including, as many parties as required for any possible case. He
described the crisis response program that he helped develop in his board to examine the chain of command of who needs to know and when, given a serious incident of any consequence. As noted in the following excerpt, timing and inclusiveness are central to the question of involving outside agencies and sundry constituencies:

I think that [it is] critical, and the earlier you can do that, to get all the parties involved, the more inclusive you can be, no matter how painful the decision is going to be. (ND)

He further illuminated the process and urgency of such determinations when he stated:

It’s part of the job. You have to do it, and the earlier you do it and the more clearly you can articulate the rationale and the process, the more trust you can create in the decision. (ND)

Considering whether to include or exclude outside agencies is critical to the notion of process related to discipline cases, and it is telling that each of the school leaders participating in this study alluded to the potential or actual involvement of outside agencies in many of the discipline cases they encountered.

**Purpose**

A second category of interview questions asked participants to outline the purpose of discipline within the school setting. School leaders were asked to recall the reason for initiating the discipline case in the first place. Their responses were commonly concerned with upholding standards, codes, and community values. Furthermore, school leaders participating in the study were questioned as to whether or not they were providing a moral purpose through the discipline process. Data analysis indicated that purpose could be subdivided into two main groupings: morals and values.
Morals

Schools invariably strive towards a purpose, and discipline is meted out with a purpose. Therefore, it is not surprising that purpose emerged in this study as a key theme. Because discipline is invariably purposeful, figuring out toward which ends school leaders directed their discipline process was critical to this study. Each school leader interviewed commented, to varying degrees, that schools serve a moral purpose. One school leader in particular stated that the role of education is for “schools to provide a moral purpose” (ND). Another indicated that his school was “not overly moral” (CB), but that providing a sense of moral direction was implicit within the discipline process. A third school leader outlined with practicality that in her discipline case that there was a notion of being “against them having drugs at school or anywhere else” (FZ).

Although the precise nature of a moral purpose was left undefined in the data, at least for some schools and school leaders, the notion of discipline serving some sort of moral purpose was clear.

In fact, in response to a question seeking to determine if a school leader was attempting to provide a moral purpose in a particular discipline case, the following was noted,

I think that was the basis of everything we tried to do. The loss of respect, as a Catholic system we talk about the dignity in every human being, and when someone tries to take that dignity away through their actions, their words, or their inaction at times, it’s certainly part of most of the decisions that we make and discipline means trying to hold students to the right way. (ND)
This school leader demonstrated through his responses that he was clearly engaged in the process of providing a moral purpose through the discipline process. In fact, it appeared that the purpose of discipline in this school leader’s institution was ultimately to ensure that better decisions would be made in the future.

Other school leaders were less certain about the role of moral purpose as it related to the discipline cases they recounted, but they did touch upon the topic broadly. When asked whether or not she was protecting a specific moral purpose in the discipline decision she recounted, one school leader responded, “I think that I didn’t want this student to think that whatever he had done wrong was unforgivable, and something that he couldn’t get past” (FZ). The school leader went on to further underscore her clemency when she stated that it was more critical to have the student understand the importance of making good decisions than to catch the student making a bad choice. In her own words: “That’s important, and in this case, that was probably more important than punishing a child for breaking the school rule” (FZ).

An exchange about moral responsibilities led to data that further underscored the role of morals in discipline cases at one particular school. A school leader remarked, “We have a code of conduct, a code of behaviour, that specifically and not so specifically deals with moral issues, behaviours that we deem appropriate as an institution” (CB). The school leader went on to clarify his position, and the school’s, in response to a question of whether or not he was providing or protecting a moral purpose in decision making by stating, “Yes, a moral purpose, a purpose of values” (CB).
Values

As evidenced from the above quote, linked closely to the topic of morals is the topic of values. Again, some school leaders were more comfortable talking about this topic than others, but each could point to at least one value that was at stake in their narrative. It was clear from the interviews that school leaders were upholding certain values when involved in discipline matters, and that inculcating values was part of the purpose of discipline. One school leader seemed to sum it all up when he remarked, “There is an obligation for administrators to hold on to values” (ND).

An interesting mix of values was referred to in the interviews. School leaders stated clearly the value most prominent in their particular decision making. One school leader remarked that “honesty as a prime value in the community” played a role (CB) in the discipline case he recounted. He further went on to link morals and values when he elaborated upon the purpose of morals as related to discipline:

Ultimately that’s the value and moral of our school: that we are consumed in serving the institution, but ultimately in serving society and serving ourselves to be the best we can be in a positive light, and doing all that we can morally and in a value-conscious way so that ultimately it’s the school that we represent. (CB)

The public role of inculcating values can be noted from the above statement, along with the transparent desire for serving societal needs.

The value of communal standards played an important role in another case as indicated by the remark, “caring people look after one another and society” (ND). In describing the need for shared values within a school community, the same school leader outlined the public benefit of clearly stated values and expectations.
I think this is part of the school mission, part of what we talked to students about in assemblies... and where students identified respectful behaviours and tried to act out those respectful behaviours. We had charts on the wall that year and in my first year that we started the school. I think they were values that were part of the school community that were strongly enforced after the decision was made. (ND)

The school leader went on to explain how the public display of values, and the positive feeling engendered by the discipline decision, reinforced what the school stood for. In the words of the school leader,

I think it not only reinforced, I think it strengthened and set up opportunities for students to debate and recognize appropriate behaviour, and again the following year we did things in the school that identified what is appropriate in the school, what the culture of the school is, and how we enhance the culture of the school. And I think that was a stepping stone for greater dialogue and greater understanding of expectations within the school. (ND)

Thus, the school leader outlined a clear link between morals and values, between pedagogy and purpose within a discipline setting.

Respect as a multilayered value was also evident. School leaders remarked upon respect for others, for self, and for property in the discipline matters they recounted. Instilling the value of self-respect was inherent within the notion of teaching lessons through discipline. Respect for school property was cited in the remark that the property of a school "locker is not a safe refuge" (FZ). Disrespecting oneself, others, and one’s school was clearly a breach of commonly held values and therefore, subject to the
disciplinary code. Other values such as compassion and tolerance were mentioned in the interviews to a lesser extent. Finally, the role of values as related to purpose can be summed up in the words of one school leader: “teachers’ jobs deal fundamentally with values” (ND).

The preceding material is effectively foundational and important for laying the groundwork for what is to come. It underscored the central role of morals and values as the purpose for much of what happened in discipline matters throughout schools. As well, it demonstrated how morals and values are part of the everyday language of school leaders when it comes the matter of discipline. While the preceding work was an integral part of the study, the next section effectively got to the crux of the matter. This section dealt with the rationale for the decision.

**Rationale for the Decision**

A third category of interview questions asked participants to provide a rationale for the decision that they took in the critical incident discipline case that they described. School leaders were asked to recall the main reason or rationale behind the decision that they made in a discipline case. Their responses explored distinctions of personal and professional accountability (private vs. public judgment), vulnerabilities and consequences arising from actions. Data analysis indicated that the rationale for the decision could be grouped into four different themes: accountability, stewardship, vulnerability, and consequences.

**Accountability**

Accountability emerged as the primary response by each of the school leaders to questions related to rationale. One line of questioning explored the possibility of
distinguishing between personal and professional accountability. That is, the questions sought to determine if the primary rationale for a discipline decision rested with individual choice or with adherence to institutional procedure. With almost no variance, the school leaders indicated that there was little or no separation between the two. In response to a question probing any differences between personal opinion and professional responsibility, one school leader remarked,

We can sit back and we can say that we look at things thoroughly and fairly, and that we take everything into account in a strictly professional manner and say that we don’t take into account personal judgments and things like that. I personally believe that who you are is how you administer and how you make your decisions. So definitely, when I look to make a decision I don’t even fight it. I take it into account, and hopefully at the end of the day, no matter what my personal opinion is, hopefully my professional decision or my professional opinion is the best possible one. (CB)

The fine line between personal and professional is both discernable and blurred. According to this school leader, it was impossible to separate the two, but at the same time, he could not see having one without the other. In his words,

I think that’s exactly the way I would have done it if this were a non-educational scenario. From a professional standpoint I think that again my decision was ultimately based on both my personal and professional overview of the situation. (CB).

This school leader indicated that both personal and professional judgment play a role in the decision-making process.
A similar sentiment was expressed by another school leader in recounting the rationale for her decision in a case of school discipline. The familiar theme of personal and professional judgment was explored, and the school leader commented upon the blending of personal and professional accountability.

I think that I allow my personal feelings to come into play. I think that’s what I am saying. Professionally the rule is there; it’s cut and dried, and if you don’t do it then you’re out. Personally you get involved with the student and you start to look at, is this more detrimental to the student or more positive for the student? And you allow that to come into play. (FZ)

While the data did not suggest a clear delineation of personal and professional accountability, they demonstrated a fair degree of overlap.

Finally, in relation to distinguishing between personal and professional accountability, one participating school leader noted, “I operate, in a manner of speaking, on my behalf; that who I am as a person is who I am as a professional” (ND). Continuing to comment upon accountability differences between personal opinions and professional responsibilities, the school leader stated,

There isn’t a great separation between my professional face and my personal face, although there are certain things you have to do in your professional job, that just simply because of the nature of the position, you have to be-- I don’t want to have to say an actor-- but you have to step into the role. I don’t see myself significantly different in one or the other, and I think that what I believe in personally, I try to put into my professional life. (ND)
Public accountability also emerged as a theme inasmuch as the school is a public institution, even when in an independent setting. Public considerations are even more acute within state-funded educational systems, whether public or public/denominational. This was evident in the discussion involving the nature of taking serious action within a discipline matter. One school leader remarked, “any time a student is expelled, the whole school is affected” (CB). The school leader went on to describe the public nature of the discipline case and how serious matters of discipline invariably involve the wider school community, and sometimes beyond.

In this situation I am confident we went to the extreme in all possible areas in order to involve everybody. And everybody’s opinions were heard and certainly afterwards, everybody was positive about the process. I would say everybody was heard and everybody was listened to and everybody was pleased with what happened. (CB)

Examining the chain of events, which became quite public in another instance, the school leader was asked to track responsibilities and obligations in relation to the impact of the decision in a discipline case. The rationale for the decision in this case was clearly public:

I think the responsibility was to try to ensure that students recognize that a line was crossed…and I think the institution was harmed. The school itself was harmed and we had to restore the understanding that the behaviour is not acceptable in the institution. (ND)
In this case, not only was justice served, but also, in a very public way, it was seen to be served.

But even when public suspension or dismissal was not at issue, there appeared to be a sense of collective accountability that could not be overlooked. Referring to the various constituent groups within the school and the broader community affected by a discipline decision, one school leader stated,

There was some concern from the staff, I think, that I didn’t deal with it harshly enough. That there was going to be lots more drugs coming into the school, because they got the message that nothing happens when you bring drugs to school, you don’t even get suspended. But that is irrelevant because it [more drugs coming into the school] didn’t happen. (FZ)

Thus, even in cases where no discipline was meted out in the sense of suspensions or dismissal, there were public considerations, because schools are by nature public institutions, and discipline has public ramifications.

**Stewardship**

Each school leader had her and his concept of personal responsibility to the organization that went beyond simple lines of accountability and that could be described as a sense of stewardship. Stewardship involves one’s own concept of what it means to protect the interests of the organization that the person has been employed to manage and supervise. Therefore, whether the participant had many or only a few years’ experience within educational administration, there was an internal understanding of the job description that guided a part of the decision-making process.
One school leader expressed it well when he recounted with some passion that the discipline case he presided over compromised the institutional values of the school. They can ultimately compromise the institution, I guess. In that when you have values that represent the institution, and they become compromised, that the institution itself, and what you are trying to deliver to the other students becomes compromised. (CB)

Another school leader expressed it in the following manner, “Overall, the culture or ethos of the school had been harmed, and needed to be restored. I think those were the two areas that influenced me most in that decision” (ND). Implicit within these responses is the notion that the school leader was protecting the values of a public institution in a personal way. In short, these school leaders had a personal stake in upholding the stated values of their institution.

**Vulnerability**

One of the central lines of questioning in the interviews dealt specifically with the concept of vulnerability. That is, school leaders were asked to identify the person or persons who were most vulnerable or dependent upon the outcome of their actions or decisions. On this matter, each of the school leaders identified a different primary area of vulnerability or group of people who were affected by a discipline decision.

The interest of the student involved at the heart of the discipline case (that is, the student being disciplined), was cited by two school leaders as deserving the greatest consideration when it came to vulnerability. One school leader recounted the following:

I guess the most vulnerable would be the student [who had caused the incidents leading up to the discipline case in question]. You are dealing with a 14-year-
old, who, no matter how often or how you try to impress upon the student that
this is a potentially life-framing or life-altering behaviour, they’re [sic] the one
that’s most vulnerable. (CB)

The school leader went on to describe the dependent and precarious situation that the
student in question found herself to be in:

As I say, you can impress upon them as much as you would like, you can meet
with them, you can mediate, you can have professionals come in, but you’re
dealing with a 14-year-old who may not see the light at the end of the tunnel, and
realize that getting asked to leave for a brief period of time as in a suspension, or
ultimately being expelled, that they’re putting themselves [sic] in a very
vulnerable position. (CB)

This school leader believed that, after weighing up the consequences and providing a
rationale for the decision, the students were placed in a most vulnerable position.

Another school leader, who presided over a case that did not involve suspension
or expulsion, but nonetheless revealed similar tensions, echoed these sentiments. When
asked the same question, the following response was given:

The student. You see, I felt that the student too had made a mistake, and realized
that he’d made a mistake... I’m still thinking about this child and helping this
child as much as I’m helping the rest, because he’s young, and how I deal with
him, and how I believe him, and so forth, is what he is going to remember. (FZ)

The school leader was concerned with due process and showing compassion towards a
child in a vulnerable position, dependent upon the outcome of the discipline decision.
A third school leader identified a different vulnerable group when he described a case involving a new member of staff, young and female, whose outgoing and fun nature led her to be the unwitting target of a particularly nasty prank. This school leader noted emphatically,

I see it from small to large. Certainly the staff member’s reputation—she was the one that was probably the most hurt by it, because she took it personally. The rest of the staff were angry because in their minds it could have been one of them. (ND)

Expanding upon the above statement, the school leader went on to say,

There are probably several layers of vulnerability. The teacher, I think, felt the physical pain and felt very vulnerable and I know it took her several years to recover; she took it very personally – that “something I did made these kids believe that they could do that to me.” (ND)

The vulnerability of the teacher who was the object of the prank was clear and painful, but not isolated, as the school leader went on to describe:

So we had to deal with that a little bit. I think that there is vulnerability at probably every step of the way. The administration, myself included, felt under attack and questioned certainly the validity of the decision, and whether it was the right decision and we agonized over that. (ND)

This school leader noted that the very rationale of the decision was placed in a vulnerable position, and that it needed to be defended and justified. Given that other, more serious consequences were available, this demonstrated the complex nature of vulnerabilities. As he went on to say by way of summary,
So, I think that even the school was vulnerable in a way; we didn’t pursue it to the full extent of the law, and I don’t want to say that we cut them slack; we tried to minimize the long-term damage. Out of all of it, I think the teacher probably was the one who felt the most vulnerable and the most of long-term repercussions. (ND)

The direct line of questioning regarding vulnerabilities revealed the interconnected nature of being vulnerable, demonstrating that the rationale for the decision in any given discipline case has wide ramifications.

Differing opinions as to the effect on the wider school community were evident in the data, with different school leaders reacting quite differently to similar discipline situations. In one case that involved the dismissal of a student after a series of breaches of misconduct, the school leader in question lamented that there had been a “shared disappointment in reaching the decision [to expel the student]” (CB). The school leader went on to observe,

You expect the advisors and teachers to deal with this to a certain level, and when it comes to a situation where they feel, or perhaps you feel, that it has escalated and you need to become involved, you need to set a tone or to deal with an issue in such a way that their efforts are not compromised, that their integrity is kept in mind, and that the outcome is beneficial, and that it allows them to continue to do their job in an appropriate manner. (CB)

The vulnerability of the entire school community, especially the staff members, was apparent in the statement above and demonstrated that arriving at a decision in the case had an impact that was felt in all quarters.
By way of comparison, a school leader who presided over a discipline case that involved the discovery of drugs had a fairly dismissive comment about the impacts on the community. She indicated that the wider school community was not really affected by the discipline case, which could be attributed to the limited scope of the situation with which she was dealing. As she recounted,

The majority of kids didn’t get on the bandwagon about it because it was kind of a peripheral group. A large percentage of the kids carried on normally and it didn’t affect them. Fortunately it wasn’t a student who was in the midst of the largest group of kids. No, it was his own personal peripheral group. (FZ)

The school leader thus explained the minimal impact upon the wider school community, but she was adamant that proper action was taken, and that the decision had merit. Although the discipline case in question did not have a neat and tidy resolution, action was taken, and the matter was dealt with in a serious manner. She commented:

I wouldn’t pretend that this stopped any kind of his behaviour, but it did let him know that we were not tolerating it (drug use) in the school, and that had to make him stop it. I think this is what we have to do. Whether or not you cure each child, or even if you punish each child appropriately, we dealt with it and the message was: This isn’t going to be tolerated. We are not perfect, we can’t make all the choices perfectly, but we did deal with it. (FZ)

A similar contrast was noted when it came to the discussion of vulnerability of self. School leaders are part of the broader school community and are invariably linked to the outcome, regardless of the nature of the decision. The notion of self-attachment, and hence self-vulnerability was expressed differently by at least two school leaders
who commented on their own attachment to the case. One school leader remarked, “I am personally responsible for the decision” (ND), implying a serious attachment, while a second school leader revealed a more detached tone as she declared, “That’s fine... I don’t have to be right” (FZ).

Consequences

A final rationale for decision making involves consequences. Each of the school leaders interviewed recounted in some detail the various steps that were taken for each individual discipline case, and each leader clearly indicated that there must be consequences for each action. As well, each discipline case had its own outcome as a consequence of the actions taken within the discipline meeting itself. That is, there were certain decisions taken, partly as a result of the actions and statements of the people involved in the case itself. The school leaders appeared to follow a simple logic of, “If A happens, then B must follow.” It was also implied that certain options were not considered as a consequence of actions and statements that occurred during the discipline case itself. While one school leader indicated the need for “immediate consequences” (FZ), she also admitted that certain compromises were reached as well. In fact, the notion of compromise was mentioned by each of the school leaders interviewed. As well, each school leader indicated that there must be consequences for certain actions, and that they must be made clear.

Perspective

One final category of interview questions asked participants to place the discipline case in perspective, to examine what was done, and what would have been done differently today if the school leader had the opportunity to do it all over again.
School leaders were asked to recount the steps in the disciplinary process: the actions that took place, the chronology of events, and the decisions reached, with a critical view toward examining how they handled the particular discipline case in question. Data analysis indicated that perspective had two broad elements: reconstructing the discipline case and hindsight. Up to this point the data suggest a procedure of moral reasoning that begins with the process, runs through the purpose, and ends neatly with the rationale for the decision. However, there is also a current of data that reflects a more agitated state with plenty of information to suggest that, to paraphrase Shakespeare, “the course of true moral reasoning never did run smooth.” The depth of these murky waters can be seen in the following description.

Reconstructing the Discipline Case

At the close of the interviews, school leaders were asked if they would do anything differently given the same set of circumstances. In each case the school leader defended his or her own process, rationale, and decision. Such an occurrence is not particularly surprising, nor even remarkable, yet the words used by the school leaders to defend their positions revealed a number of interesting trends. First, there was an element of self-survival in each school leader’s response, whether or not the discipline case ended up in the manner that the school leader thought it would. When events transpired as anticipated in a relatively smooth and matter-of-fact way, the school leader was able to defend most of what had been done in the case. When “the kid kind of got away with it” (FZ), the response was much more contemplative and philosophical. The same school leader remarked, “We are not perfect, we can’t make all the choices perfectly, but we did deal with it” (FZ). Regardless of the fact that the outcome was not
necessarily what was hoped for, the school leader demonstrated a degree of pragmatism when she remarked,

What I think came out of it for everybody was that we have to stay on top of it. We did have kids who were responsible. I think we needed to appreciate the students who were responsible. And I think that dealing with each incident as it came along was a positive. Whether or not you solved the problem, the fact that you deal with it lets people know, gets the message across, that it’s not something you’re going to tolerate. You don’t give up trying to solve it because it doesn’t come out the way you want. (FZ)

The school leader was able to find a silver lining amidst a discipline case that was clouded by uncertainty. She went on to describe how the critical incident, which occurred relatively early within her leadership tenure, provided a foundation upon which to base future discipline and codes of behaviour within her school.

I think part of it was we had our rules; we had our situation established, and knew what I would tolerate and what I wouldn’t tolerate. I think they found me to be fair and involved with them, so you have to have a relationship with kids to make it work; you just can’t be an absent disciplinarian. (FZ)

Dealing with the problem was something that each of the school leaders was able to claim at the end of the process. Still, elements of self-justification or self-survival were evident in comments made by each of the respondents, especially when the outcome seemed to run true to form. One school leader recalled how he would do things the same way this time around, albeit admitting that he would probably be harsher by enlisting the support of the police. This position is evident in the following remark:
We were very up front, very open, very honest with everyone; we tried to bring in everybody we could. I’d do exactly the same, and in fact, whenever I am involved in a decision now, that’s the first thing we ask: Who do we need to have involved here to help in the understanding of the process? I think other than the police, I don’t think I would do anything differently. (ND)

The school leader was able to justify the process, the rationale, and the outcome of this particular discipline case.

_Hindsight_

It is also clear that hindsight is 20/20, and the natural human tendency to put one’s actions and decisions in the most favourable light was certainly a part of the reconstruction of all three discipline cases. In terms of politicizing the discipline process, it can be noted that human pride plays a part in the proceedings. When describing the events of a discipline case many years past, one school leader put his actions in valiant terms as he defended the decision to see the discipline case through to its natural conclusion.

The only other thing I would suggest is from an administrative perspective, sometimes the hard decisions create a queasiness in your stomach, and when you get that queasy feeling I think that is when you have to ask the question: What do I need to ensure that this is a solid decision and who needs to be involved?

If I could say anything for administrators in education today, it is that they have to have the courage not to back down under pressure. We are under attack in the values, in the moral fabric of what education is trying to provide for students. (ND)
This school leader offered a voice for the type of leadership that he had demonstrated, thereby vindicating both the process and the rationale described in his decision making.

Similarly, one other school leader looked back with approval upon the discipline case he recounted. Asked if he would change or alter anything about the incident, he stated,

I think that this process went very positively. I obviously used it as an example because I think that this was a good example of not only my decision making, but as a school, how we operate. Not all of our scenarios are this clean and certain as I described this one, I am sure. I know for certain that there are some aspects that I’ve glossed over; I’ve neglected to mention some things, I’m sure, but you know, such is life. (CB)

The school leader was honest in admitting that hindsight allows such a perspective, and that the passage of time permits one to be selective in the recounting of details.

Indeed, one of the questions raised in the reconstructive section of this chapter is the tricky issue of accuracy. There may be gaps in detail between the actual event, the memory of the event, and the retelling of the event. This is especially difficult to determine given the past nature of the event, the sensitive nature of the topic, and the need for anonymity in the process. It was clear that each of the 3 participants struggled with these issues, as evidenced through such statements as, “that’s fine, I don’t have to be right” (FZ), and, as she went on to place the discipline case in its perspective,

Hopefully it was a lesson well learned, and maybe it wasn’t anything to start with. Because we didn’t suspend him and deal harshly with him; if he was right and we were wrong, that lasting impression is not going to hurt him. It wasn’t
like he got upset more with the way we dealt with him and he was innocent, you know, and then he might always resent the fact that we didn’t listen to him, that we didn’t believe in him, that we didn’t trust him. The incident was over and gone, and the child went on and was a vibrant part of the school for the rest of his career. (FZ)

The entirety of the situation, its impact, and future implications was summed up with the benefit of hindsight.

In a similar manner, another school leader was able to speak philosophically about the need for administrative courage and leadership to the point that this discipline case was used as a cautionary tale for society as a whole.

The person that graduates from your school is going to hopefully be a valued, responsible citizen of society, and if we don’t put our nose into the values and the proper way kids make decisions, then not only are we not doing our job, but I think society isn’t going to be the kind of place we want our young children to grow up in. (ND)

Finally, a participating school leader concluded his narrative by stating, “Everybody was positive, everybody was doing what was best for the student” (CB). In this case, as in all the others, the outcome of the discipline case was defended, and few, if any, regrets were mentioned.

In the reconstructive phase of the data collection process, discretion became even more pronounced. That is, each school leader revealed that he or she exercised discretion in response to the political pressures and influences of the case. School leaders had wide latitude when it came to making decisions throughout each discipline
case. Whether it was the decision to call in the press to minimize or maximize publicity relative to one case, or whether a decision was changed midstream, each school leader employed some degree of discretion throughout the discipline process. Even the comment, "discretion was required in the sense that the informant needed to remain anonymous" (FZ), reveals the extent to which discretion played an important role in the proceedings.

Finally, political considerations were evident in each of the cases. Indeed, political considerations can never be fully divorced from any discussion of discipline cases because of their sensitive nature. Each school leader was faced with making decisions that would affect the broader school community, and the community at large. Whether these decisions affected constituent groups within the school community or agencies operating outside of the school, the school leaders reached decisions that would have a ripple effect beyond the discipline case in question.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter presents the summary, discussion, and implications for this qualitative research study that was undertaken to explore the ways in which educational leaders deal with moral reasoning and ethical issues related to discipline. The first section of the chapter presents a summary of the research process, examines the critical incidents pertaining to discipline cases that were discussed through individual interviews with school leaders, and organizes the findings from the interviews into four areas: process, purpose, rationale for decision, and perspective. The second section provides a discussion of the main findings in relation to relevant literature. The third section outlines how these results inform current practice, theory, and research. The chapter concludes with a commentary on the major implications of this study in the field of moral reasoning.

Summary

Some of the most important decisions educators make are related to the area of discipline. The outcome of these decisions can have a serious impact upon the lives of those involved - students, teachers, and administrators alike. Invariably, words like morality, ethics, right and wrong, and values are used as anchors to set the tone of the discussion surrounding discipline. This study intended to explore the ways in which school leaders make sense of ethical issues. Specifically, were school leaders aware of the ethical dimension to their deliberations, and were they aware that they were engaged in the process of moral reasoning? These two questions were at the heart of the matter in this study.
A review of the literature found that there were four initial related themes associated with the study that were changed later because the data yielded results of a different nature. The related areas of: accountability, obligations, vulnerabilities, and values were supplanted with: process, purpose, rationale for the decision, and perspective, once the data were analyzed. Thus, the main subquestions became:

What role does process play in the moral reasoning of school leaders?
What role does purpose play in the moral reasoning of school leaders?
What role does rationale for the decision play in the moral reasoning of school leaders?
What role does perspective play in the moral reasoning of school leaders?

Similarly, the theoretical framework in place for this study changed accordingly, but remained consistent with the themes of the literature which underpinned the framework itself. Thus, ethical considerations of public and private accountability, codes of morality, responsibility, along with dependencies and vulnerabilities become the familiar language of the study and subsequent review of the literature. The role of leadership and the importance of perspective round out the major issues in a robust discussion that revolves around the processes of moral reasoning.

Approach

Qualitative methodology and a phenomenological perspective were used to guide the research process because both are concerned with constructing meaning out of an exchange between participant and researcher. If the critical incidents to be examined through the interview constitute the process of qualitative methodology, then the unique responses from that interview, which provide a deeper understanding of the problem, constitute part of the phenomenological perspective.
This study was conducted through interviews with a variety of school leaders involved at different stages of their career and holding varying degrees of administrative responsibility to determine the scope and awareness of moral reasoning. Furthermore, it examined the patterns and variability in how participants viewed discipline. As well, these interviews attempted to reveal if there was an operational model employed by the school leader in question. Finally, data collection procedures tracked the processes of decision making in order to determine to what extent moral reasoning was being employed and to determine how school leaders made sense of it.

Process

One of the interesting findings in the area of process was the discussion about the matter of posting. That is, codes of conduct, rules, etc. were discussed in terms of how aware or unaware individuals were of them. Formalization of these codes and rules was a key issue here. Furthermore, it was noted that school leaders have a great deal of discretion and latitude when it comes to the enforcement of such codes specifically, and in the role of discipline generally. These school leaders believed that they had tremendous discretionary power at their disposal, and the presence of discretionary power led to the question of the extent to which political expediency was a factor in the discipline process. Similarly, parental involvement and the role of outside agencies were two other elements of process that were deemed to be important.

Purpose

A second category of interview questions asked participants to outline the purpose of discipline within the school setting. School leaders were asked to recall the reason for initiating the discipline case in the first place. Their responses were commonly
concerned with upholding standards, codes, and community values. Furthermore, school leaders clearly were providing a moral purpose through the discipline process. Data analysis indicated that purpose could be subdivided into two main groupings: morals and values. Each school leader observed that discipline is invariably purposeful, and that their schools, to varying degrees, serve a moral purpose. Closely linked to the topic of morals are values. In discipline matters, school leaders uphold values and inculcate values as part of the purpose of the discipline process.

Rationale for the Decision

Data for this section were grouped around four different themes: accountability, stewardship, vulnerability, and consequences. The most significant findings focused on the overlap between public and private accountability. With almost no variance, the school leaders indicated that there was little or no separation between the two, underscoring the finding that school leaders take their stewardship responsibilities into account when making discipline decisions. Interconnected vulnerabilities of students, staff, school leaders, and the larger community were explored in this portion of the data. As well, school leaders emphasized the seemingly obvious aphorism that there must be consequences for certain actions.

Perspective

Finally, the most interesting data were grouped under the category of perspective. In essence, the school leaders were asked to take a retrospective view and place their discipline cases into some kind of perspective. The responses here were interesting inasmuch as school leaders demonstrated a uniform set of opinions that cast their actions in a favourable light. At the close of interviews, when asked if they would
do anything differently given the same set of circumstances, the school leaders defended their own process, purpose, and rationale for the decision. Elements of self-survival, self-justification, and vindication were all evident in the data as school leaders placed their actions in hindsight.

**Discussion**

Looking back to the second empirical question: From what ethical basis do school leaders make important decisions related to discipline? it is clear that codification plays a significant role. The findings demonstrated the startling fact that school leaders in some instances applied expectations that were unknown. That is, even in situations where codes of conduct were unknown, or perhaps forgotten, the codes were applied anyway. Discipline was meted out without the full knowledge of the parties involved. This hardly seems a fair or ethical basis from which to ground a decision, yet it was applied in at least two critical incidents that were examined in the study.

It is conceivable that school leaders themselves are unaware of the nuances of certain codes until such time as they are presented with a situation to resolve. In fact, one school leader declared, “understanding is only situational” when asked about the codification of rules and processes in relation to matters of discipline. While not every circumstance can be covered by a specific rule, general statements ought to address behaviours broadly and, in a community like a school, they should be widely known. School leaders seemed to think that much of what they do is a reinforcement of the existing codes within their institutions. Yet, their descriptions depicted a situation that is less than ideal in terms of prior notification and understanding. Such a finding was somewhat surprising inasmuch as I had expected to find a greater degree of posting and
notification of codes. It was especially surprising that such codes were not apparently evident in public schools, but neither were they very much in evidence in the independent school that was part of the study. Conversely, it was discovered that students and parents have questioned discipline decisions of school leaders even in cases where codes had been published, posted, and even signed in several different places.

In the literature on moral leadership, theorists such as Bass (1998) have commented upon the important task for school leaders to bring together the school culture around a set of common or shared values. Without the knowledge or posting of codes of expectation, it is difficult to bring any community together. It is especially difficult in a community such as a school, whereby educating students on desired expectations ought to be a primary educational objective. The findings demonstrate a discrepancy in this regard insofar as some school cultures did not seem to have a set of common or shared values.

This study, therefore, reveals the situational nature of at least some discipline cases. In fact, there could be a significant gap between theory and practice, between what is thought to be understood, and what is actually understood. In general laws, codes and rules ought to be widely known, agreed upon, and posted in order for members of a community or society to adhere to them. The study, not surprisingly, pointed out that school leaders have wide scope and latitude when it comes to discipline. To paraphrase The Right Honourable Winston Churchill, school leaders “have powers at their disposal with which prime ministers have never yet been invested.” While Churchill was referring to a distinctly British model in a jesting manner, the same
principle applies across the spectrum to all schools and all school leaders in terms of the nature of arbitrary power at their disposal.

The degree to which arbitrariness played a role in the discipline matters of this study was a finding that was also shocking to me, as a teacher. The tremendous institutional power with which school leaders are vested is not entirely surprising, but what the study revealed as noteworthy is that in each of the discipline cases discussed in this study, school leaders did not have to follow a set protocol in deciding disciplinary matters. No school leader outlined anything like a set procedure for dealing with the cases they handled. Instead, the school leader was vested with tremendous power, and it must be said, tremendous responsibility for carrying a case forward or not. One case that involved a school leader making an on-the-spot decision resulted in suspension of the student in question, whereby an arbitrary decision by a school leader had an enormous impact upon a student’s life. In my experience with discipline matters over the years I believe that such scenarios are not uncommon. This finding depicts the delicate nature of the decision-making process in relation to discipline, highlights the central role of the school leader, and demonstrates the discretionary power and latitude that is available to the decision maker.

To answer the first main theoretical question about the processes of moral reasoning that school leaders go through in making important decisions related to discipline, it is instructive to examine the case of the suspected use of drugs. In this matter the school leader had two available choices. On one hand the school leader could have opened up the entire process to include others (superintendents, board of trustees, etc.), but decided against such a route and kept the matter localized and ultimately low-
key. As it was, the school leader exercised the discretion to keep the focus narrow and not involve others. Whether this was the correct course of action or not is irrelevant for this discussion; however, the case makes clear the scope and latitude for discretion. These school leaders definitely saw themselves as being vested with a great deal of power to uphold and represent the institution for which they worked. Thus, discretion can be linked to the extent to which school leaders saw themselves as being obliged to uphold institutional values and policies. In other words, whether the school leader made a big or small deal out of the matter at hand depended in some measure upon the degree to which he or she felt the institutional or greater community values were being threatened.

This finding speaks most cogently to the area of accountability. Scholars such as Crittenden (1984) have noted that there can often be a distinction between public and private accountability and that blame can be shifted from the individual to the institution by appealing to the moral defects of the system. Such a phenomenon did not appear in this study; the individual and the institutional interests seemed to be in harmony. There was a surprisingly uniform consensus that such interests are inseparable and this appeared not to be simply a case of toeing the company line. The process of moral reasoning in this case appeared to have been harmonious. There appeared to be little distinction between work and self in this regard, again underscoring the notion that school leaders, while entrusted with considerable powers, are also asked to shoulder considerable responsibility, and they take that responsibility quite seriously. The line between personal and professional is indeed fine.
The choice of whether to widen or narrow a discipline investigation further underscores the role of discretion and the latitude that school leaders have. The chain of command within institutions exists, regardless of how far the school leader decides to take the case. That is, it is the school leader who makes the judgment call of whether to take matters further or not. In itself such a choice is a powerful thing, and the process by which disciplinary matters are handled speaks to the power of the school leader. The decision to include or exclude others higher up or lower down the supervisory ladder is really up to the school leader in question. This is a clear use of discretionary power. So, the decision to broaden or narrow a particular discipline matter is of considerable significance to all parties concerned.

This finding reinforces the perception that school leaders play a disproportionately significant role in the disciplinary process, and, de facto, in the moral reasoning process. Leithwood and Duke (1998) state, “Much of the writing about moral leadership... adopts the perspective of those in formal administrative roles” (p. 36). Very little regard is given for communal processes and, as Furman (2004) states,

Thus, these ethical frames do little to pull our thinking beyond the mindset, so entrenched in our Western society, our schools, and our field of study, of the individual as “leader” and moral agent. (p. 220)

Closely related to the issue of discretion is expediency. School communities involve a variety of important constituencies, extending far beyond the physical confines of the school buildings. Staff and students are but two constituent groups in a discipline matter; parents are other important stakeholders in the process. Their involvement, or lack thereof, is critical. Thus, if and when school leaders involve other constituent
groups such as parents can be a matter of expediency, political or otherwise. Parental involvement has the potential to raise the temperature in discipline matters that can often be described as heated already. Of course this varies from case to case, from school to school, and from parent to parent, but the findings of this study revealed that discipline has an interdependent nature. Without criticizing any school leader or any decision in particular, the question must be asked: Is doing what is politically expedient necessarily the same as doing what is right? Such questions reveal an underlying tension that exists in virtually all discipline cases.

Taking for example the case in which school lockers were arbitrarily searched for drugs, we can see that even when school leaders are making what seem to be the correct choices, expediency is part of the equation and it is linked to other elements of the process of moral reasoning. Regardless of the inherent defensibility of the action taken by the school leader, especially when the locker in question harboured drugs and other contraband, expediency plays a role. Linked to codification, the matter of whether or not locker searches are permitted is central. Even if a court of law would uphold locker searches to be admissible, there are other considerations to be taken into account such as posted procedures. As well, the degree to which political expediency is involved in how and when a locker is searched is uncertain. There is no question that such considerations are fraught with political overtones, again raising the specter of expediency. These findings confirmed the assumptions going into the study that politics play an important role in the process of disciplinary matters.

This finding brings to mind Walker’s (1998) consideration of the notion of tracking responsibilities. Expediency, political or otherwise, opens up the discussion that
Walker probed when she asked which (or whose) moral responsibilities or obligations were featured in discipline cases. Following this trail in the critical incidents of this study is rewarding because it reveals which (or whose) moral obligations did not show up at all. This was particularly apparent in cases whereby innocent third parties were exposed to harm by the reckless actions of students involved in behaviour that was clearly unacceptable. Yet, the process seemed to favour the rights of these students at the potential expense of the larger community—teachers, students, and others placed in harm’s way as a result of these actions and, ultimately, decisions. Identifying the power structures and intertwining moral claims that cropped up as part of the tracking process is an important step towards understanding the scope of the moral reasoning process.

On the theme of purpose the study revealed significant findings surrounding the often-interrelated areas of morals and values. School leaders, in recounting what the reasons were for initiating the discipline case in the first place, were questioned as to whether or not they were providing a moral purpose through the discipline process. Figuring out towards which end school leaders directed their discipline process was critical to this study.

While all school leaders clearly indicated that their schools serve a moral purpose, there was considerable variance as to how much of a part it played in the normal functions of a school. All 3 participants interviewed noted that discipline served some sort of moral purpose. In the absence of any reference to any sort of code or mission statement, this finding was both surprising and not surprising at all. The absence of codification was the surprising part, but given the absence of such a reference, it is hardly surprising that there would be variance in how much school leaders felt that they
were serving some sort of moral purpose in their discipline process. Since the school leaders represented three different types of schools, public, Catholic, and independent, it is difficult to draw any broad conclusions from such a small sampling. But it is noteworthy to point out that the school leader who stated that it is the role of education for “schools to provide a moral purpose” represented the only religious-based school in the study.

Closely linked to the notion of morals is the topic of values. Again, some school leaders were more comfortable talking about this concept than others, but each participant indicated that values were being upheld through the discipline process. Although there was a wide range of values referred to in the interviews, school leaders indicated that inculcating values was definitely part of the purpose of discipline. As well, it was noted that inculcating values serves a public purpose, including a transparent desire to serve the needs of the school community and society at large. Not surprisingly, the data revealed that respect was the value that was stressed the most through discipline. The unique part about this finding is that respect was identified as a multilayered value. School leaders broke it down into respect for self, others, and property. Breaches of the discipline code invariably fell into these three categories, and this fact perhaps helps to explain why school leaders felt comfortable operating in the discipline process without reference to a code, knowing full well that the purpose of discipline invariably serves to underscore an all-encompassing value such as respect.

One school leader expressed it well when he recounted with some passion that the discipline case he presided over compromised the institutional values of the school. Another school leader expressed it similarly. Implicit within these responses was the
notion that the school leader was protecting the values of a public institution in a personal way. In short, these school leaders had a personal stake in upholding the stated values of their institution.

Bass (1998), Sergiovanni (1996), and Ciulla (1995), among others, have examined the critical role of school leaders in inculcating values and morals within schools. Moral leadership is a major part of their remit, whether or not they are aware that they are practicing it. If school leaders are to be successful in bringing together the school culture around a set of common or shared values, then providing a sense of moral purpose ought to be a primary consideration for school leaders. An uneven application of shared values has been noted in this study, but providing a sense of moral purpose was clearly in evidence in each of the school leaders who participated in this study.

One of the central lines of questioning dealt specifically with the concept of vulnerability. School leaders were asked to recount the person or persons who were most vulnerable or dependent upon the outcome of their actions or decisions. Not surprisingly, it was found in each critical incident that the student is vulnerable and can be said to be in a precarious position. Other obvious parties included staff members and the school community at large. It is fairly obvious that affected parties would be placed in the most vulnerable of situations. Less obvious, and most interesting about the findings on this section, is the interconnected nature of issues and the layering of vulnerabilities. Discipline situations were shown to be interconnected and involved parties could not be isolated from one another. One school leader stated specifically that there are "probably several layers of vulnerability." Such a statement is in keeping with Goodin’s Vulnerability Model (cited in Walker, 1998, p. 80). Walker expanded this
model to include an ethic of care and the seeds of this plant can be seen in the manner by which school leaders took great care to shield the vulnerable in each of the discipline matters considered. In fact, it can be said that vulnerability was one of the main ethical bases upon which school leaders made important decisions related to discipline.

The complex nature of vulnerabilities demonstrated the interconnected nature of many parties being dependent upon the outcome of any discipline situation. Thus, even the rationale for the decision in some instances was placed under scrutiny, and can be said to have been vulnerable, demonstrating that discipline cases have wide ramifications. The results also demonstrate that discipline matters do not always have neat and tidy resolutions and that different school leaders hold differing opinions on how much of an impact their decisions make on the wider school community. Some of the participants, for example, were adamant that considering the wider school community was paramount in their thinking, while another was quite dismissive when taking into account the impact upon the general school population. This finding further underscores the interrelated nature of discipline and the fact that there are many vulnerable parties affected by the outcome of moral reasoning in discipline matters.

When participants were asked to place the discipline case in perspective, to examine what was done with the benefit of hindsight, and what would have been done differently if the school leader had the opportunity to do it all over again, the responses revealed some interesting trends. In recounting their stories, the school leaders made reference to a linear and often seamless process that reached a satisfactory outcome. The findings, however, hint at a more agitated state and more turbulent processes.
It is perhaps the norm for school leaders to see things through a particular lens, one that is rosy and optimistic even in the most trying of circumstances. It is also perhaps true that hindsight is 20/20. It seems to be the natural human tendency to place one’s actions and decisions in the most favourable light. This again raises the tricky issue of accuracy and whether there are gaps in memory between the actual event, the recollection of the event, and the retelling of the story. The data suggest that such gaps exist. This study featured three committed professionals with impeccable track records in the field of educational leadership, each an articulate spokesperson for his or her institution, yet it was especially hard for them to remain neutral and detached when describing their own actions in something to which they were so personally attached, such as a discipline case. Their descriptions portrayed their actions as being at turns courageous, philosophical, and correct. Few, if any, regrets were mentioned. Instead, the school leaders provided lessons in administrative courage, and cautionary warnings for society as a whole. This section reinforces the notion of discretionary powers and suggests that political considerations can never be fully divorced from any discussion of discipline cases because of their sensitive nature.

Such a finding is in keeping with the work of Furman (2004) and others, who question the lack of a democratic and communal approach to moral leadership within schools. In examining a particular issue within a school setting Furman laments the status quo of hierarchical relationships in schools, and Furman and Shields (2003) complain about the assumption that moral leadership is the purview of “heroic” leaders in administrative positions, and about the dearth of opportunities for “full participation and open inquiry” (p. 229). This statement sums up nicely the dilemma that school
leaders face. They operate in a hierarchical environment and are expected to lead in a quasi-heroic fashion, making it difficult for them to be self-critical and deliberatively detached when examining their own processes of moral reasoning. In essence, they are the sole moral agents in matters that have wider implications and ramifications for the greater school community.

**Implications for Practice**

This study has a number of implications for practice. First, there are obvious connections to how school leaders practice moral reasoning in discipline cases. The absence of codifications and protocols for dealing with discipline situations speaks to the need for greater formalization in these two important areas. In order to build school communities that have a common purpose and shared values, such purposes need to be front and centre in the consciousness of all members of that community, and the values need to be known in order to be understood and followed. Thus, school leaders are advised to post, publish, review, and refresh both codes of conduct and protocols for dealing with the process of discipline cases. Furthermore, school leaders are encouraged to move towards a more communal or shared ethical basis upon which to ground their decisions. This is necessary in order to mitigate the potential damages of political expediency, arbitrariness, and situational decision making.

The variable role of morals and values in a school has important and wider ramifications. Some might contend that in a modern, pluralistic, and multicultural society such as Canada, it is unwise to have schools impose anything like a common set of values that apply to each and every member of the school community. Yet, this study has demonstrated that whether or not they were aware of it, each school leader to some
degree is involved in the process of moral reasoning when deciding discipline cases. Thus, it is advised that school leaders and school communities adopt an open and democratic approach towards building a common set of shared values that can be understood and embraced by the entire school community. Such documents should be neither lengthy nor all-encompassing. In fact, brevity is called for in producing a mission and a vision that all stakeholders can support. It is important to avoid being rule-bound, but in the interests of fairness to all constituencies, the document should be value-bound.

The study demonstrated the importance for school leaders to have discretion and latitude when making important decisions related to discipline. Such measures support the capacity for institutional decisions to be made at all; however, it must be stated as well that the study revealed the school leader to be the primary moral agent and arbiter, empowered with discretion and latitude beyond what some may consider healthy. Thus, institutional regulators such as superintendents, trustees, and others in a governing capacity are advised in the interests of self-preservation and communal welfare to curb such discretionary powers. While somewhat unwieldy, the striking of discipline committees serves the twin goals of streamlining the process of moral reasoning in discipline cases, and sharing the burden of responsibility when reaching decisions. Including teachers, peers, and perhaps outside agents as part of a prospective discipline committee has the potential to ensure fair and due process as a desired outcome.

Finally, related to this recommendation is a commentary on the influence of parents and their acceptance of discipline decisions. As one of the constituent groups within a school community with the power to either support or challenge a discipline
decision, parents play a key role in the process. If parents are aware of published codes, are part of fair and transparent discipline processes and protocols, then they will be less likely to try to exert their own political pressure and more apt to support a discipline decision that is grounded and principled. In this fashion, they, along with students, teachers, and school leaders have a shared obligation of working toward a common purpose of moral leadership.

**Implications for Theory**

While this study does not offer up any new models or theoretical frameworks, the implications for theory are numerous. This study fits nicely into the various literature and theoretical frameworks that exist in the area of moral reasoning without being a proponent of any one model. In fact, the study reveals the overlapping and often multilayered dimensions of the theoretical bases of moral and ethical studies. In particular, the interconnected nature of accountability, stewardship, vulnerability, and consequences linked closely to the most current literature in the field that examines the contexts of moral reasoning. The study follows the lineage of justice (Kohlberg, 1976), critique (Starratt, 2003), care (Gilligan, 1982), and community (Furman, 2004). As well, the study linked to theorists such as Bass (1998), who called for the bringing together of school cultures around a set of common or shared values described previously.

Conversely, the study findings were at odds with Crittenden (1984) who distinguished between private and public accountability. The three leaders who participated in this study each pointed out that personal and professional interests were one and the same. Such findings point to the need for greater theoretical knowledge in
the area of stewardship – the notion that school leaders are entrusted with the care and responsibility of entire institutions. There appears to be a paucity of literature in this area, and the study opens greater possibility for pursuing such links.

Goodin's Vulnerability Model (as cited in Walker, 1998, p. 80) proved to be a valuable tool for tracking responsibilities and demonstrating the interconnected nature of discipline cases. Thus, the study reinforced rather than reinvented a model that was in keeping with major themes in the area of moral reasoning. This in turn led to an examination of an ethic of community as described by Furman (2004). Emphasizing the communal over the individual in terms of moral leadership, Furman's contention underscores the tensions found in this study around the central role of school leaders in discipline matters. While the study upheld Sergiovanni's (1996) argument "that schools are 'moral communities' requiring the development of a distinct leadership based in 'moral authority'" (p. 57), it suggests that there is a lack of consensus that such a scenario is a healthy thing. Specifically the study demonstrated the need for increased theoretical study around the question of whether or not school leaders should be the sole arbiters and agents of moral authority. The emergence of more literature to explore such considerations could be a positive contribution of this study to the theoretical field.

Another exciting aspect of this study in relation to theory is that it explores the possible democratization of moral reasoning. That is, by linking to concepts such as fairness, due process, public accountability, and greater participation in the administering of discipline, the process of moral reasoning becomes more democratic and inclusive. In an age when school communities, and society in general, increasingly question decisions made by any leaders, let alone school leaders, a democratic model
could be the way forward. This study helps to broaden that discussion and to bring it into sharper focus. Examining the ways in which school leaders go through the process of moral reasoning and use various bases to ground their decisions in discipline matters, is an instructive exercise that yields many possibilities for theory and future research.

**Implications for Research**

While one must be careful to avoid overgeneralization, especially in a study that featured a limited number of participants, there are several interesting and useful implications for further research in the field of ethics and moral reasoning. To begin with, the study demonstrated that school leaders, in deciding matters of discipline, do follow a process of moral reasoning. The degree to which the three school leaders differed or were similar to one another was not the primary focus of this study, but the fact that they all perceived that they were engaged in a process of moral reasoning begs an obvious question for future research: To what extent do public, Catholic, and independent schools differ/agree in their approaches to moral reasoning? Such a study would necessarily be comparative in nature, and certainly worthy of future study.

In its examination of the notion of tracking responsibilities, this study only scratched the surface of an important element in the process of moral reasoning. While the research developed a clear picture of vulnerabilities by showing that school leaders felt an obligation to protect the most vulnerable parties in a discipline case, a more clouded vista was revealed surrounding the notion of which (or whose) moral obligations did not show up at all. The nature of the methodology in this study made it difficult to probe for whose interests were excluded, forgotten, or otherwise ignored throughout the discipline process. Thus, it is recommended that future researchers
include not only school leaders in the study, but also other parties affected by the critical incident. Such a study would necessitate a timeline closer to the actual occurrence of the critical incident, and in order to speak to the necessary parties, it would have to take place while the event was fresh in their minds and other participants available.

By limiting the study to a recounting of the critical incident by the school leader, this study revealed the important question of whether the interviewee can remain entirely accurate, especially when relating his or her own actions in relation to moral reasoning, aided by hindsight. As Bogotch (2002) stated,

> Heroic individuals often have a single-mindedness to pursue their own vision tenaciously and apart from others who may not share their particular vision. Such visions... begin and end as a discrete, yet coherent belief system that separates nonbelievers from true believers. (p. 148)

This quote frames the researcher’s limitations quite nicely. One can expect that participants are likely to present subjective perspectives rather than objective data on an issue to which he or she has strong attachments. One would also assume that participants cannot remain dispassionate about these perspectives that deal with topics such as moral reasoning, ethics, and discipline. As well, perhaps future researchers will want to interview, question, and examine the role of others beyond merely the school leader. It is conceivable that future researchers will want to be closer in time and action to the critical incident, to follow the process more critically as a dispassionate observer. Such a method would undoubtedly yield answers to several of the questions that this study started to uncover, build on the data that it generated, and extend further the study of this interesting, but as of yet under-harvested field.
Final Thoughts

Throughout the writing of this paper I was engaged professionally in the meting out of discipline as a housemaster at an independent school. Thus, I was integrally involved in the process of discipline, and by extension, a party to the end result of the process of moral reasoning of others. I always found it to be an intriguing and insightful aspect of my work. Ironically as this paper draws to a close, so too does my tenure of housemastering. For 16 years, hardly a week went by without some involvement with discipline. As a result of my involvement with this research, I have come to a greater understanding of ethics and the process of moral reasoning as it relates to discipline cases. Furthermore, I have gained insight into how school leaders have grappled with the tremendous responsibility of having to make the final decision using the resources available to them.

If there is a recurring theme to be learned from my experience and this study, it is that you don’t have to go it alone. The burden of discipline can be eased with the knowledge that a common and shared set of values, codified and published, can make the process of moral reasoning more ethically grounded. Furthermore, protecting the vulnerable can be a useful guide when examining the often convoluted and tricky paths that discipline cases wind along. While at times a messy process, democratization and decentralization of decision making can be a safeguard to both the individuals involved in the discipline process, and the institution itself.
References


Selected Bibliography


Appendix A

Questionnaire

General (Background)

1. Please state your position, years in current position, numbers of years in education.

2. Do discipline matters play a significant role in your job description (role)?

3. Is discipline an area you feel comfortable with or is it a responsibility you would rather avoid?

4. Please recount a critical incident pertaining to discipline that is memorable. Cite, without revealing any names, the people involved, their roles, how and when it happened.

5. Before starting, indicate why the critical incident was such a memorable one.

6. Recount the steps involved in the disciplinary process: the actions that took place, the chronology of events, decisions reached, etc.

Accountability

7. To whom did you feel most accountable to in this matter?

8. Was there a difference in accountability between your personal opinions and professional responsibilities?

9. Was there any public action taken (suspension, dismissal, apology, etc.) as a result of the incident? Describe the chain of command of accountability involved.
Obligations

10. Did you follow a course of action that effectively tracked responsibilities... to an injured party, school community, parents, etc.?

11. Whose moral responsibilities or obligations were most featured?

12. Were there any parties who may have been affected by the decision whose interests were discarded or dismissed? (Whose moral obligations did not show up at all?)

Vulnerabilities

13. In your mind, who was most vulnerable (dependent) upon the outcome of your actions or decisions?

14. Were there any webs of connection/interaction that played a role in your decision-making process?

15. Were the ramifications of your decisions felt in various parts of the school, i.e., classroom, staff room, sports teams, activities, dorms, etc.? To what extent were others affected by your decisions?

Values

16. What values were the top priorities in your decision making?

17. Was there a sense of providing/protecting a moral purpose in your decision making? If so, what was that purpose?

18. Were the values enforced known and shared by the school community? Did the decision reinforce, undermine, or otherwise alter the value system of your school?
Reconstructive

19. Looking back upon the situation (disciplinary matter), what, if anything, would you have done differently?

20. Do you think that the process, the foundation behind the decision, and the decision itself were correct given the circumstances?

21. Is there anything else you would like to add or alter regarding this critical incident?
The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the research proposal:

Moral Reasoning and Ethics in Educational Leadership

The Subcommittee finds that your proposal conforms to the Brock University guidelines set out for ethical research. Your research proposal has been approved through the expedited review process for the period of March 04, 2002 to January 01, 2003.

** Accepted as clarified.

Expedited Review of a research proposal (by 2 members of the Research Ethics Board and review by the Chair of the REB) is equivalent to approval provided by the full REB (i.e., it does not mean conditional approval). However, the Chair of the REB must report to the full REB on a monthly basis about any expedited reviews that they have conducted. At such meetings, the full REB could ask for additional changes to the research protocols being used in a particular study. If this were to occur, the decision of the full REB will always over-ride the earlier decision of the two REB members and the Chair.

Please note:
Changes or Modifications to this approved research must be reviewed and approved by the committee. Please complete form **REB-03(2001) Request for Clearance of a Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application to Conduct Research with Human Participants** and submit it to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board.

The Tri-Council. Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit **REB-02(2001) Continuing Review/Final Report** annually and at the completion of the project. The Office of Research Services will contact...