

## Extended Abstract

## A Qualitative Study on the Moral Dilemmas of Elementary and High School Principals\*

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### Abstract

This study, designed as a case study, aims to reveal the ethical dilemmas that school principals face during decision-making processes and how they cope with these dilemmas. Eight school principals who work in Istanbul and encounter ethical dilemmas participated in the study and were selected in accordance with the criterion-based sampling method. A semi-structured interview form consisting of open-ended questions has been used in this study, and data has been analyzed through content analysis. The findings have been presented under three themes: the dilemmas principals face between senior management and conscience, between one teacher and other teachers, and between teachers and students. According to the findings of the study, school principals operate from different perspectives such as the ethics of critiquing, the ethics of justice, and the ethics of caring for different ethical dilemmas.

### Keywords

Ethical dilemma • School principal • Ethical perspectives

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Schools are organizations where administrators take the goals of the school and of individuals into consideration in accordance with the social responsibilities that have been established to carry out ethical aims (Starratt, 2004). According to Dewey (1909), an education system that ignores its ethical responsibilities ignores its duties and reason for being. Because administrators' work environments have become more complex since modernization, the need has arisen for adopting moral behaviors (Walker & Shakotko, 1999). Educational organization administrators, who have a crucial role in shaping and maintaining social culture, should base decision-making processes on morals, and these decisions should remain within the moral basis (Daniel, 2001). In a constantly changing and developing school environment, however, school administrators inevitably face moral dilemmas (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2006). Moral dilemmas refer to the tough choices that are made between right and wrong and between fair and unfair (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1998). According to Starratt (1991), administrators should not only carry out their ethical duties but also create an ethical school environment. Starratt (1991) stated that school principals should consider educational management using ethical reasoning. They can achieve this through three ethical perspectives: the ethics of critiquing, the ethics of justice, and the ethics of caring.

According to the ethics of critiquing, school principals critique social life and try to clarify who is in charge of which group and how things are constructed (Starratt, 1991). Critiquing ethics are necessary for difficulties that educators face, such as differences in gender, class, and race. This perspective seeks answers to the questions, "Who determines the rules, policies, and laws; who benefits from these things; who is in charge; and which voices are not being heard?" (Caldwell, Shapiro, & Gross, 2007; Shapiro & Hassinger, 2007). Yet the biggest drawback of this perspective is that it doesn't offer a detailed plan for reconstructing the social order being critiqued. The ethics of justice comes forth at this point. Ethics of justice underline that administrations should act according to what is right (Starratt, 1991). While justice is always prioritized in the field of education (Marshall, 2004; Shields, 2004), studies have not been conducted on how administrators act fairly, what challenges they encounter in the work place, or how they achieve acting equally and fairly (Theoharis, 2007). The ethics of justice answers the questions, "Is there a specific rule, right, or policy for solving a specific ethical dilemma; why is this rule, right, or policy correct for a specific condition; and how should the rule, right, or policy be carried out?" (Caldwell et al., 2007; Shapiro & Hassinger, 2007). The main drawback of this perspective is that it fails to answer what should be done when what is fair for one is unfair to another. Thus, Starratt (1991) underlines the need to consider individuals' philosophies.

In the ethics of caring, individuals consider the outcomes of their decisions and actions. They seek answers to the questions, "Who will benefit from my decision;

who will be hurt by my actions; what are the long-term effects of my decisions; and if I seek help from someone today, what should I do for this person or for society in the future?” (Caldwell et al., 2007; Shapiro & Hassinger, 2007).

Shapiro and Hassinger (2007) added professional ethics to Starratt’s (1991) three ethical perspectives. According to professional ethics, school administrators should strive for the success of all students based on integrity, justice, and ethics (Interstate School Leaders License Consortium [ISLLC], 1996). The following questions should be answered in accordance with the perspective of professional ethics for cases of ethical dilemma: “What is the most useful solution for students, what are educational leaders’ personal and professional code of ethics, which professional ethical codes should be taken into consideration, how does society feel about this, and what is the most appropriate way to act for a specific case?” (Caldwell et al., 2007; Shapiro & Hassinger, 2007).

While theories have been established on ethics, implementers have always been a step behind the theorists (Starratt, 1991). Even though technical facilities are at a desired level in terms of the educational administrations’ current understandings, humanitarian and moral features have been ignored (Hodgkinson, 2004). In this respect, the general purpose of this study is to examine primary school principals’ ethical dilemmas in terms of which issues school principals have encountered an ethical dilemma with most and which paths they have followed in making decisions during these ethical dilemmas.

## Method

### Research Design

This study uses a case study design, a qualitative research approach. A case study refers to a detailed definition, examination, and interpretation of one or more cases (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). According to Creswell (2007) case studies are an approach where a researcher deeply examines one or more cases that are limited in time using multiple data-collection instruments (observations, interviews, audio-visual documents, and reports) and creates themes based on the case(s). The main purpose of the researcher in a case study is to define a specific case or cases (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011). The situation under consideration in this study is the moral dilemmas that school principals face.

### Participants

The study has been conducted over a total of eight school principals who stated having faced moral dilemmas; while four of them are primary school principals, the others are high school principals. As the criterion sampling method has been used

in selecting participants, the criterion here is facing moral dilemmas in the duties of being a principal. Pre-interviews were conducted within this scope, and after participants were informed about moral dilemmas, any remaining dilemmas were noted in their decision-making process. In the next step, principals who had been determined to fulfill the criteria and who wished to participate in the study were then identified as the participants. Because the situation that creates the basis of the study is moral dilemmas in the decision-making process, a sampling method has been used to select participants who can give the researcher the deepest knowledge. Participants' characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Participants' Demographic Features*

School Type	Participants	Department	Educational Level	Experience
Primary Schools	Principal Deniz	Primary	Undergraduate	1 year
	Principal Mehmet	Turkish	Undergraduate	3 years
	Principal Tuncay	Class	Non-thesis Master's degree	3 years
	Principal Korhan	History	Graduate	3 years
High Schools	Principal Aytaç	Biology	Non-thesis Master's degree	36 years
	Principal Cemil	Computer	Master's degree	3 years
	Principal Osman	Literature	Non-thesis Master's degree	3 years
	Principal Metin	Theology	Undergraduate	15 years

**Data Collection Tools**

The interview method is the most appropriate for collecting data to find out how individuals express their unobservable behaviors, emotions, and intentions (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). A semi-structured interview form with open-ended questions has been used in this study to reveal the ethical dilemmas that school principals face while making decisions and how they handle these dilemmas. One of the most effective features of semi-structured interviews is that interviews are carried out as conversations (Yin, 2011). Thus, participants determine their own responses throughout the interview (Creswell, 2007). A rough draft of the semi-structured interview was prepared according to the literature while developing the interview form for the study. Opinions were gathered from related experts and qualitative study experts, after which the necessary revisions were made to the form. A pilot study was carried out over school principals who encounter ethical dilemmas to test the functionality of questions on the semi-structures interview form. The necessary corrections were made after the pilot study, and the form took its final shape.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The interviews, which lasted almost an hour, were carried out in person in the principals' rooms with the thought that they would be more comfortable. The interviews were voice-recorded with the principals' consent, and the researchers

transcribed the voice recordings. After the interviews were itemized, the data obtained from the interviews were analyzed through content analysis. In content analyses, documents are first categorized according to their items' meanings, and similar messages are placed under the same category.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Validity in qualitative studies refers to the consistency of a researcher's explanation for a phenomenon with real life. In other words, it refers to the level that the researcher and participants agree on events and their meanings (McMillan & Schumaer, 2006). Opinions from experts other than the researcher have been gathered throughout the study to enable the study's validity (Creswell, 2007; Denzin, 1970; Merriam, 2009). The voice records were transcribed after the interviews and sent to the interviewed participants to check and confirm their accuracy. Reliability in qualitative studies refers to consistency and robustness (Neuman, 2006). In order to enable study reliability, blinding was used as a method in analyzing the transcribed voice records. Thus, an impartial interpretation was made because who the statements belonged to was unknown (Creswell, 2007).

### **Findings**

Three themes were created in the findings related to subjects where school principals face moral dilemmas: between senior management and their own conscience, between one teacher and the other teachers, and between the teachers and students.

#### **Dilemmas Senior Management Encounters within Their Own Conscience**

Because centralization has been adopted in Turkish schools, senior management plays a key role in how school principals make decisions when encountering ethical dilemmas. According to the study's findings, ethical dilemmas confronted by both primary and high school principals involve issues with the senior management. The majority of participants stated that senior management forces them to accept substitute teachers and that they face ethical dilemmas when making decisions on this issue. Principal Deniz, who faced a dilemma between senior management's orders and his own conscience, expressed how he decided against them despite the pressure senior management exposed him to:

A substitute teacher started working here after a call from the branch manager. The teacher constantly wanted gifts from the students. The teacher asked the students what their fathers do and where their mothers work... The majority of students' fathers work in the textile sector. They brought the teacher clothes and goods... The teacher sometimes didn't like the color and gave it back to be exchanged. Anyway, the students complained. I called the teacher and asked about it. The teacher said, "I didn't know; the students wanted to surprise

me.” I wrote a petition about this and dismissed the teacher. The branch manager called again and asked what I did. I explained the issue. He said okay. What else could he say? But I was in a dilemma over it.

Some school principals stated that they’d caved in to senior management because they had been ordered, even though they felt guilty and the issue was about the students. Principal Korhan expressed his opinion on this issue as:

A substitute teacher arrived at school via the boss of my boss’s boss, however... The students didn’t like the way the teacher dressed, the parents constantly complained about her... She displayed unmentionable behaviors which the parents and students were aware of, but I couldn’t do anything about the teacher because the order came from the top authority. My conscience was not at all at ease, though... She remained at the school until she decided to leave herself, however.

Some participants stated having confronted ethical dilemmas about teachers’ course schedules as a result of pressure from senior management, and that they had to ignore the rights of other teachers and yield to this order because senior management had given it.

For example, a teacher wants a day off on the schedule. But I can’t do it and it doesn’t fit. I tell them I can’t. Then the teacher goes and gets someone from the provincial union to call me. After they call me, this time I nix the schedule and redo it for that teacher. I go against my own word. (Principal Tuncay)

Because attendance is important in high school, school principals stated being under pressure from senior management to delete students’ absences. High school principals don’t want to do this so as to not be unfair toward the other students, but they stated facing an ethical dilemma because they had been forced to obey the order given by their superior. Principals in primary schools stated being under pressure from senior management to change students’ classrooms. Similarly, primary school teachers felt stuck in an ethical dilemma, choosing between students’ rights and their superior’s command. However, they had to obey their superior and ignore the other students’ rights.

According to the study’s findings, the majority of ethical dilemmas that school principals had experienced through pressure from senior management on deciding something resulted with the principals obeying their superiors’ orders. The path that school principals follow when pressured by senior management is to explain the event in detail and try to convince them. Principals generally obey their superiors’ orders when they fail to convince them. However, the thing that disturbs principals is when they have to obey the orders of senior management that goes against a promise they made to the parents, students, or teachers. One participant expressed this as:

One came and tried to delete an absence from 2 months ago. There is no law for this, no rules... You take a firm stand on one side... You explain this to the parent. The parent leaves as if he understands, then tells the district national education directorate who then calls me. They tell me to help out... You say "Okay sir, no problem." The next time that parent comes he is no longer innocent or meek. The parent comes and stands in front of you as if saying "Look, I can handle everything like this." When you experience this... When the same parent displays two different faces to you, you say to yourself, "Why am I here? What am I doing?" (Principal Metin)

### **Moral Dilemmas between One Teacher and the Other Teachers**

Principals should create an environment where teachers can increase their motivation and display high performance. On this point, principals confront ethical dilemmas about what environment they should create for which teacher. School principals stated confronting ethical dilemmas with teachers about giving them a day off, not paying additional course fees, and giving certificates of achievement.

According to the principals, teachers want days off for their master's degree education, spending time with their children, or working at another job. Principals stated that while these demands are limited specifically by law, they stretch the rules to motivate successful teachers and to prevent a decrease in school achievement. However, they confront ethical dilemmas about whether or not they are being unfair to the other teachers.

Some participants expressed encountering an ethical dilemma regarding whether or not to pay the additional course fees for successful teachers. One principal who didn't want to not pay the additional course fee for a successful teacher and also didn't want to be unfair toward the other teachers expressed his opinions as:

If a teacher doesn't attend class on Monday, his or her additional course fees for Tuesday and Wednesday are not paid either. But I know that the teacher is hard working. I'm faced with a dilemma in this case. Should I pay this teacher's additional course fees or not? If I do, then I have to pay Tuesday and Wednesday's fees as well. Yet, if I do pay it and another teacher hears this, I will be in a difficult situation, and I don't want this to happen. I face a dilemma on this issue. (Tuncay Principal)

Another issue principals face ethical dilemmas with is about the achievement certificates given to teachers. Selecting a few teachers from among the more than one who deserve to receive an achievement certificate forces school principals to face ethical dilemmas.

The majority of school principals who face ethical dilemmas with teachers stated that although they don't want to be unfair toward other teachers, they side with

successful teachers. These principals, who stated that the main reason for doing this is to prevent a decrease in teacher performance, strive to keep this behavior secret so as not to draw a reaction from the other teachers. Some principals stated helping every teacher one-by-one so as not to be unfair towards them.

### **Moral Dilemmas between Teacher and Student**

According to the study's findings, primary and high school principals confront ethical dilemmas between students' and teacher's rights while making decisions. The issues they stated facing ethical dilemmas with are violence performed by teachers and the union's understanding of how to dress. The point that pushes principals concerning teachers' and students' rights is on one hand, they wish to impose sanctions on teachers but can't, while on the other, they want to prevent students' educational psychology from becoming negatively affected.

The majority of school principals emphasized that violence is unacceptable and students' rights are defended. While some participants stated pressing charges against the teacher, other participants underlined that although the behavior is unacceptable, they don't always press charges but try to explain to the teacher that their behavior is wrong and try to fix the relationship between the parent and teacher. One principal expressed his opinions on this as:

The other day, our math teacher hit a student in class on the head with a book. The parent came to complain. But I still have to defend the teacher. The teacher is just a novice with only four years of experience. But he's very good at his job. I first calmed the parent down, telling them they're right: "I have a child, too, and if this happened to me, I would also go and complain to the principal... We are always here, we don't go anywhere else. This won't happen again. If it does, I will be here again and we will talk again." The parent calmed down a bit. I called the teacher to my room and talked in person. I said that the parent is like your mother, kiss her hand, apologize, and end this issue. The teacher apologized to the parent and the issue was resolved. (Korhan Principal)

No matter how much violence is prohibited by law, some school principals find the teachers to be right about corporal punishment and stated encountering an ethical dilemma on this decision. Principal Deniz stated, "The teacher is actually a good person. Obviously my child made him angry," which underlined that the reason why the teacher got rough was because of the student.

Another issue that confronts school principals with ethical dilemmas is the union's actions concerning the teachers' dress code. School principals stated that although how teachers dress doesn't comply with appearance regulations, they support the decisions made by their union and dress accordingly, and that the students are influenced by



their teachers' appearance. Principals are confronted with ethical dilemmas on one side by their students' development, and on the other by their wish to impose sanctions on teachers but can't. Some participants stated having complained about teachers who don't dress according to social norms to higher authorities in consideration of the students' development and so as not to draw a reaction from the other teachers. The principals who follow this path stated being aware that no decisions would be made against the teachers they had taken action against and that their (the principals') actions would cause higher authority to develop a negative impression towards them, but they took action for their students. Other participants underlined not having taken action against such teachers because they know it would bring no benefit and that they felt guilty. Two principals expressed their opinions on this as:

...One of our teachers saw a teacher working in the Religious Vocational High School next to us wearing religious dress... The dress-code strike of the unions has reached this point. What can a school principal do now? He can't do anything! Here you have an ethical dilemma. A teacher should be an example for students. They can dress however they like outside but not in school... This actually began with not wearing a tie. Now it is off the rails... But I can't say anything. (Principal Osman)

Teachers are on a dress-code strike... Well, you can't say anything. You may want to, but you can't. The man says a decision was made by the union. There is a slim-fit pants trend among males this year. Our teachers are young. Male students come to school with slim-fit pants. The man is unshaved and has an earring... The students take him as a model. I want to warn him, but I can't. The union gave their decision. (Principal Tuncay)

## Discussion

According to this study, which examines the ethical dilemmas school principals face, ethical dilemmas were observed between senior management and their own conscience, between one teacher and the other teachers, and between teachers and students. Ethical dilemmas resulting from the pressure placed by senior management involve substitute teachers, teachers' course schedules, and deleting students' absences. Administrators are inevitably exposed to various pressures during their decision-making processes (Baloğlu, 2014). School principals, who face pressures from senior management and experience ethical dilemmas, seek answers to the questions, "Who establishes the rules, policies, and laws; who benefits from these rules, laws, and policies; who has the power; and whose voices are not being heard?" (Caldwell et al., 2007; Shapiro & Hassinger, 2007) and consider the ethics of critiquing. Most school principals who are exposed to pressures by senior management do what their superiors tell them to, even if their conscience bothers them. According to Kirby, Paradise, and Protti (1992), administrators make decisions that don't conflict with

the opinions of their superiors. Administrators can make decisions in accordance with their superiors' opinions in order to maintain their administrative titles at any cost and by ignoring their conscience (Özdemir, 2008).

According to another finding of the study, principals experience ethical dilemmas between one teacher and the other teachers. School principals stated facing ethical dilemmas with teachers mostly about giving a day off to one, making extra course payments, and giving certificates of achievement. Walker and Shakotko (1999) stated that school principals experience ethical dilemmas mostly with personnel evaluations and teacher reinforcements. According to their study's findings, principals who face ethical dilemmas between teachers stated bending the rules by taking into consideration Starratt's (1991) ethics of caring so as not to decrease teacher motivation and school achievement while making decisions. Principals keep some implementations hidden to prevent other teachers from feeling walked over. According to Langlois's (2004) study on educational administrators, administrators are worried that the staff will resent them because of a decision they made.

According to another of the study's findings, school principals stated mostly facing ethical dilemma issues such as teachers' use of corporal punishment and their union's understanding of the dress code. On this point, one observes that the majority of principals support the students. School principals who face ethical dilemmas between students and teachers can be said to make decisions according to professional ethics for the success of all students (Caldwell et al., 2007; Shapiro & Hassinger, 2007).

In conclusion, the fact that educational organizations' purposes are based on values (Bursalıoğlu, 2010) and that the work environments have become more complex for administrators due to modernization (Walker & Shakotko, 1999) makes school principals' encountering of ethical dilemmas inevitable. According to the study's findings, school principals practice different approaches for different ethical dilemmas. According to Shapiro and Hassinger (2007), ethical components alone are insufficient; they should be inter-supported and complete their deficiencies this way. In this respect, one can say that crucial responsibilities are given to school principals. School principals should examine power, policy, law, and legislation from a critical perspective; should strive to achieve justice within the school; should consider individuals' personal needs while achieving this; and bear in mind the school's aim.

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