

Connecting School Leaders in an Ethic of Care Community

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The role of school administrators continues to expand and intensify leading to decreased dissatisfaction and reported moral distress. There is a need to explore professional learning opportunities for school leaders that allow for trusting, open conversations that build an ‘ethic of care’ (Noddings, 1982). Utilizing narrative inquiry, participant’s stories on their experiences navigating moral distress and the impact of being part of an online ‘ethic of care’ community was analyzed. This study informs those seeking to develop an ‘ethic of care’ community focused on personal leadership development to support school leaders to flourish within a rising context of moral distress.

Keywords: school leadership, ethic of care, moral distress, personal development

INTRODUCTION

“The truth about stories is that’s all we are” (King, 2003).

As educators with varied experiences in teaching and learning in K-12 and postsecondary teacher education programs, we recognize the important role of leadership and its impact on student learning. We have also noticed that opportunities for professional learning for leaders are often focused on evaluative measures with limited focus on ongoing personal development and growth (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). There is a need for informal spaces where school leaders connect with their peers without a supervisory gaze and consider how they might grow in their leadership practices. This is especially true as leaders are emerging from the pandemic and experiencing moral distress and showing signs of compassion fatigue. We see a way to support these school leaders by connecting them in an ‘ethic of care’ community that emphasizes personal leadership development.

Ethic of care is defined by Noddings (2013) as a state of being in relation which consists of three facets: receptivity, relatedness, and engrossment. While there is literature around an ‘ethic of care’ in education, the focus is on teaching and learning and not on leadership. We chose to draw on the work of Noddings (2013), Wheatley (2002, 2017), Palmer (2017), and Schat (2018) to understand how the creation and participation in an ‘ethic of care’ community supports personal leadership development and growth. More specifically, we were interested in creating professional learning opportunities for school leaders that would allow for the trusting, open conversations to build an ‘ethic of care’ as described by Noddings (2013).

We knew that at Ambrose University we had the opportunity to serve school leaders by offering informal, online “Coffee and Conversation” sessions throughout the school year to connect leaders in an ethic of care community. Initially, these sessions were an optional part of the two-course leadership certification program we offered asynchronously focused on transformational leadership. These weekly online sessions were an informal space where leaders could deconstruct and share their personal stories and issues related to leadership.

Following the course, we recognized the value of these informal conversations as indicated by the participants from their feedback about their experiences in the course. They commented on the course evaluations that they looked forward to meeting each week without an agenda or assignment, with the sole purpose of talking with one another about their leadership experiences. They felt supported by and listened to by their classmates, whom they only interacted with through the discussion posts and zoom sessions. We considered their feedback and decided to continue to offer them even though the course had ended to potentially meet a need to connect that they were not finding in other avenues. These “Coffee and Conversation” sessions were important to us because we knew the role of school leaders was expanding and many were experiencing moral distress (Alberta Education, 2019).

We also knew these school leaders had limited opportunities to engage in professional learning related to their own growth and wellness and often attended the typical leadership professional development days focused on performance-based outcomes related to teaching and learning (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013). Noddings tells us, “In situations where we act on behalf of the other because we want to do so, we are acting in accord with natural caring” (Noddings, 2013, p. 79). This article seeks to highlight the research we conducted to explore how connecting leaders through this ‘ethic of care’ community, the “Coffee and Conversation” sessions, was supporting them in their personal leadership development and growth.

UNDERSTANDING LIVED EXPERIENCES THROUGH STORY

“In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted- knowingly or unknowingly- in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate its meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (Okri, 1997, p. 46).

We were witnesses to and participants in conversations with our school leaders about their lived experiences in leadership. We listened to each other as events, issues, and ideas were unpacked, reflected upon and oftentimes, surfaced other stories long-since buried. Because of the power of the stories and what they can show us, it was clear that narrative inquiry as a research methodology might allow us to understand the lived experiences through the stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of the school leaders engaging in “Coffee and Conversation” sessions.

We wondered if we might come to understand more deeply how they had navigated and processed the difficult situations they encountered as school leaders and more importantly, if being a part of a community of care focused on more than just, “good intentions or warm regard but coming to know about the other” (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 19) would provide a space to unpack those stories and grow personally, as a result. After obtaining ethics, we invited aspiring or new school leaders who had completed our two-course certification program and had found value in the optional “Coffee and Conversation” sessions to participate in our study to explore how such an opportunity contributed to their ability to navigate moral distress. Of those who provided consent, there were seven who completed the survey (n=7) and three who agreed to be interviewed (n=3).

The interviews revealed participant’s stories about their experiences navigating moral distress and the impact of being part of an online ‘ethic of care’ community. Some of the questions explored during the narrative inquiry included: *How do you as a school leader navigate moral distress in your leadership role? How/what are opportunities for you to grow personally through professional development? How does a*

transformational leadership model allow you to build capacity as a person and a leader? Where are you flourishing in your leadership? What areas do you need support or development? The participant's narratives allowed us to explore how participating in an ethic of care community is contributing to how they are navigating moral distress and their own personal leadership development and growth. We highlight three stories that emerged from our interviews with school leaders around their lived experiences while connecting in an 'ethic of care' community. Pseudonyms are used throughout for the participants' anonymity.

PERSONALLY CONNECTING IN A RELAXED ENVIRONMENT

"Sitting and talking" (Aria)

"Coffee and Conversation" sessions often took place on Saturday mornings and offered an informal place to connect with other school leaders from other contexts. Aria shared that these sessions provided a relaxed atmosphere where one could personally connect in the online space. Aria pointed out that leaders and teachers are struggling and opportunities such as "Coffee and Conversation" sessions to personally connect through "sitting and talking" were needed. School leaders are faced with heavy workloads and are seeking more ways to connect with other leaders (McCrae, 2019) and this is especially true for new principals who experience isolation in their roles (Slater et al., 2018). Aria noted school leaders were able to share the struggles they are faced with and listen to how others are working through these challenges. This was seen as valuable and needed. This connects to Noddings (2013) description of an 'ethic of care' as a state of *being in relation* and how this is cultivated when leaders get together to have these conversations.

HOPE EMERGING FROM CONVERSATIONS

"it could give them hope; they could hear about things that are happening from other people good things and that could be a way to give them some hope" (Sam)

Sam shared about the value of "Coffee and Conversation" sessions in fostering hope for school leaders. Hope emerged as different perspectives and ideas were shared around the struggles people faced during these informal gatherings illustrating an 'ethic of care':

"I think it's very valuable because I think it gives people the opportunity to look at things in different perspectives or if there's something that they're struggling with maybe they don't want to talk to somebody at work about it and or maybe they can't maybe they try to talk to people and they can't come up with a solution that seems to work for them so they can get other ideas from other people who may have had a similar situation or maybe just read about something or just has a different idea for something that they think could happen word could work."

Sam also spoke of how these conversations were ones that might not have been started at their workplace but at these informal gatherings they were possible; possible because "maybe they don't want to talk to somebody at work about it". These conversations brought hope in these situations because now there was someone to talk to about struggles and ways to get ideas for how a problem could be solved. Stelmach, as one of the principal investigators in a study commissioned by the Alberta Teachers Association (2019), argues school leaders need hope, belonging, acceptance and humor to combat the challenges they face. This leader's story highlights Noddings (2013) definition of 'ethic of care' and reference to the state of *being in relation*. School leaders related to each other's struggles which fostered hope.

FINDING EMPATHY AMONG STRANGERS

“created a place of empathy really among strangers” (Jerome)

Jerome shared his experiences with the “Coffee Conversation” sessions and how this was an uplifting and comfortable environment where one could debrief with others in a place that was free from regulation, supervision, and evaluation. This was a place where he could be open and honest about struggles: “I knew that this was a place where there was no judgments; people were going through a variety of different challenges, regardless of their context as an administrator”. Jerome used the word “uplifting” to describe these conversations and said that the “most uplifting part is that I could speak openly and honestly and say some things that I felt needed to be said, without the cloak of maybe a supervisor or something along those lines”. He noted further that this “created a place of empathy really among strangers” and “we knew we were going through similar experiences” and “the joy and laughter and humor in things that was very comforting for me”. This story further illustrates the impact of school leaders connecting through an ‘ethic of care’ community in the way that Noddings (2013) suggested is characterized by relatedness, receptivity, and engrossment.

STAYING CONNECTED IN AN ‘ETHIC OF CARE’ COMMUNITY

“This is a book of stories and reflections strung together to suggest a style of learning from experience. Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or a private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another a potential translation in which narrative becomes parable and the once upon a time comes to stand for some nascent truth” (Bateson, 1994, p. 11).

As we reflect on the stories of these aspiring and new school leaders, we are compelled to continue to find ways to support these leaders in staying connected in a ‘ethic of care’ community. We see the need to provide sustained ways of connecting and to foster these informal networks for school leaders to support each other. Service and Thornton (2021) suggest these types of networks and professional learning communities can help combat loneliness which is common for new principals (Slater et al., 2018). We know that school leaders play a key role in supporting teacher well-being, however, it is essential they are “supported and resourced by the district to ensure they notice and nurture their own well-being” (Kutsyuruba et al., 2021, p. 4). In Adams et al. (2021) recent study, leaders participated in a bi-monthly professional learning network where they engaged in collaborative inquiry. A key aspect supporting their personal leadership growth was generative dialogue and this is something we found beneficial in the “Coffee and Conversation” sessions we offered school leaders and imperative moving forward as a way in which they might thrive and not merely survive.

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