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Qualitative Case Study on Virtual Simulations Engaging Educational Leadership Candidates in Ethical Scenarios that Positively Impacted Leadership Skills

Dr. Aneta Walker, Dr. Julie Gray, and Dr. Karen Evans

University of West Florida

Abstract

In this paper, the authors describe one leadership preparation program's approach to enhancing ethics and ethical decision-making by embedding high-impact practices and experiential learning opportunities for leadership candidates. The conceptual framework for this research was based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Kuh's High-Impact Practices (HIPs) to connect theory and practice through practical feedback and leadership coaching. Using experiential virtual simulation experiences provided opportunities for Educational Leadership candidates to apply instructional and ethical leadership practices to authentic, problem-based situations in an innovative online educational leadership program. This approach allowed faculty to offer specific growth areas to strengthen and improve aspiring school leaders' ethical decision-making practices. Furthermore, the paper discusses how virtual simulation enhanced candidates' transformation learning process and bridge theory to practice in a virtual reality environment.

Keywords: *experiential learning, high-impact practices, leadership coaching, ethics, ethical decision-making*

Introduction

Educational leaders must provide ethical role modeling and decision-making in today's volatile and divisive environment. School leaders face numerous moral and ethical dilemmas in their schools and communities. Ethical failures within organizations have led to much discussion about ethics in leadership behavior and its impact on decision-making. Theories developed to address ethical behavior often need to include strategies for application to complex issues dealing with ethical dilemmas. Many authors have focused on the ethical dimensions of leaders' educational decision-making process (Langlois & Lapointe, 2010; Lapointe et al., 2016).

This concept is critical as a school leader's decisions and actions impact the school community. Research shows educational leaders tend to fall below average in moral reasoning assessments (Greer, 2015). Since there is a logical correlation between moral reasoning and higher education degrees (Rest, 1999, this presents a challenge to educational leadership preparation programs. To address this growing concern, many universities have embraced various educational strategies to satisfy rising demand, including immersive simulations (Gaskell & Mills, 2014; Hartley et al., 2015).

Using immersive simulations allows aspiring leaders to practice developing decision-making skills in a non-threatening environment. These opportunities allow candidates to strengthen the leadership qualities and ethical principles necessary to succeed in the current educational landscape. While having access to and using immersive simulations or other collaborative learning technologies does not ensure that participants will master a particular skill, these opportunities and strategies do advance essential knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices for adult learners (Killion & Treacy, 2014).

Simulations provide real-life scenarios for educational leaders to think critically and use practical wisdom to solve ethical dilemmas. Through simulations, aspiring leaders can exercise critical thinking and draw on real-world experience to resolve moral quandaries. With avatars that can modify their responses in reaction to the candidates' input, instructors can offer these lifelike experiences in real time. This study focused on an educational leadership program at one southern regional university where candidates in a high-impact practice (HIP) practicum were divided into a control and an experimental group to investigate the effectiveness of virtual reality simulation experiences on moral judgment development in educational leaders. This paper will describe the integration of ethical decision-making using Mursion, an interactive, avatar-based program with students in a practicum course.

Statement of Purpose

This paper describes how an educational leadership program integrated high-impact practices (HIPs) and used immersive simulations to strengthen candidates' repertoire of skills and deepen and refine their understanding of leadership, ethics, and ethical decision-making practices via Mursion, an interactive, avatar-based program. Providing meaningful experiential learning opportunities for candidates in a fully online program has presented challenges and become a focus for continuous improvement. As a fully online program, a challenge and focus for program improvement efforts have been increasing experiential learning opportunities for candidates. The program

faculty sought to develop and strategically integrate HIPs for leadership candidates to provide opportunities to practice and hone their craft through structured, scaffolded experiences. This challenge initiated an exploration of virtual and mixed-reality simulation in research and teaching.

The Principalship course is the culminating practicum in the educational leadership master's program, designed to prepare administrators and instructional leaders for K-12 schools. Using virtual simulations as an innovative HIP solution provided a safe space to foster candidates' learning, prepare them for the challenges they may face in the K-12 environment, and strengthen their understanding of the role of ethics and ethical decision-making. For this study, the control group comprised students who had completed the traditional written assignment on ethics and virtues. The experimental group consisted of the students who participated in virtual reality simulations and discussion groups.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as the foundation for transforming a leadership preparation program to integrate high-impact practices and embed the concepts of ethics, virtues, and ethical decision-making practices. In Figure 1, the ELT provided the structure when considering the progression of an adult's cognitive processes through the four modes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The model was based on the idea that learning takes place as a result of an experience, allowing the learner to become an active participant, not just a receiver of information, in the learning process.

During the first stage of the learning process, candidates discussed ethical concepts and issues school leaders face as concrete experiences to begin the learning process. Next, reflective observations and shadowing of their administrators were integrated so that the learners considered the new experience in light of their own experiences. In the third stage, abstract conceptualization, leadership candidates had the opportunity to apply theory and learning in participation in communities of learning where they applied the ethical concepts and principles to school-based problems. This process allowed them to analyze their experiences and draw general conclusions from the initial learning and experiences to evaluate changes in their thought processes. In the final stage, active experimentation, leadership candidates experimented with the ideas they learned through Practicum experiences and immersive simulations.

Kuh's high-impact practices were intertwined in the model to represent the faculty's engagement practices strategically embedded throughout the redesign of program content and courses. Kuh's (2013) eight conditions to improve high-impact practices of setting high student expectations, significant time dedication by students, substantive student-faculty interactions, experiences with diversity, consistent feedback, the opportunity to reflect and integrate learning, apply learning to real-world scenarios, and allowing the student to demonstrate their learning publicly was considered as the faculty embedded new content, curricular changes, and critical assignments within each course and across the program.

Literature Review

In educational leadership, the role of a school principal is a pivotal force that shapes the trajectory of schools, teachers, students, and the broader community. Preparing effective principals becomes critical as schools evolve to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. Numerous studies examining the effectiveness of preparation programs for educational leaders exist in the literature, including a growing body of empirically grounded research focusing on specific elements of professional learning deficits or needs (Dodson, 2014; Dunlap et al., 2015). However, questions surrounding the right balance between practical and theoretical preparation remain a topic of discussion among scholars and practitioners alike (Davis et al., 2013).

While the literature supports a strong link between principal effectiveness and student achievement close examination of how educational leadership programs help prepare leaders for their role has risen to importance only recently in the wake of a national focus on standards-based instruction (Davis et al., 2013; Dodson, 2014; Grissom et al., 2021; Lowrey, 2014), Traditional approaches to principal preparation often fall short in providing future educational leaders with the diverse skill set required to navigate complex challenges. Traditional leadership preparation programs, once rooted heavily in the theoretical, are no longer the norm in most higher education institutions (Dodson, 2014). According to Davis et al. (2013) and Lynch (2012), higher education programs have long debated best practices for designing principal preparation programs. Integrating high-impact practices (HIPs) and experiential learning emerges as a transformative paradigm that promises to elevate principal preparation to new heights.

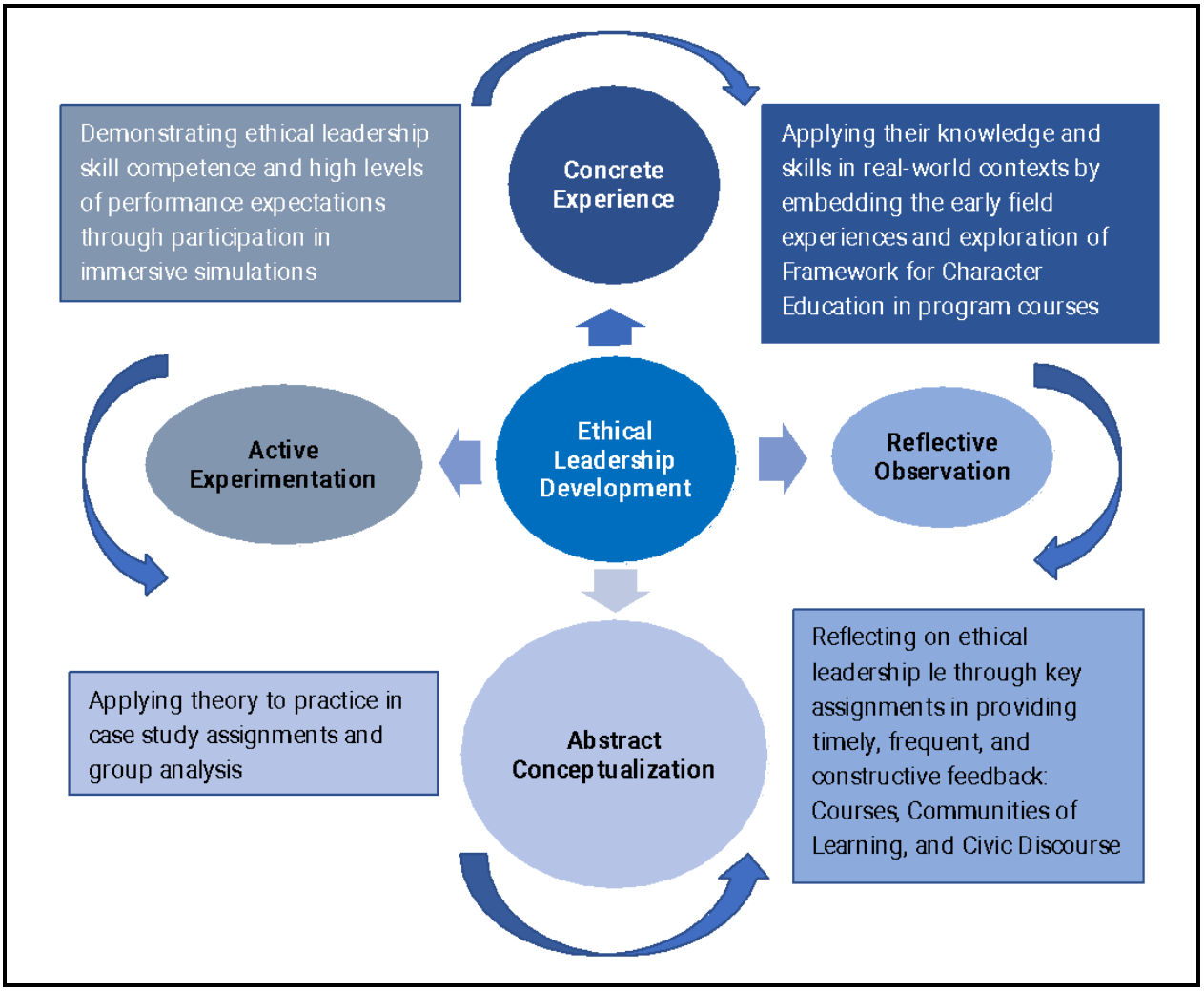

Figure 1. Ethical Leadership Development Process

Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning theory (ELT) is the progression of learning by experience (Kolb, 1984, 2015). However, ELT is much deeper than the initial understanding. He argues that the theory evolved from experiential learning, where individuals learn directly (i.e., hands-on) from stimuli/involvements in their lives. Kolb (2015) contends that the theory involves much more of a holistic approach to learning by incorporating "experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (p. 31) into a service, action, and problem-based learning cycle. However, a few critics declare that ELT is disorganized, undependable, and confusing and requires the manipulation of academia (Kolb, 2015). Nonetheless, the theory has evolved and is well known throughout academia as a reliable and valid learning theory.

ELT comes from a constructivist perspective of the world and derives from knowledge being learned and relearned through experience (Kolb, 1984, 2015). The experiential learning process is portrayed as a lifelong pursuit when considered from a holistic approach. Knowledge involves a different understanding and originates through the individual's objective and subjective experiences. Thus, Piaget (1972) and Kolb (1984, 2015) claim that the progression of the experiential process begins with epistemology, the process of learning and knowledge, which by and large originate in the psychology of the individual (i.e., concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, and reflective observation). Kolb (1984, 2015) contends that learning is grasping and transforming knowledge. Kolb (1984, 2015) realized that humans were unique and able to adapt to their environments.

Kolb saw the increase in the need for internships and work/study programs and rationalized how education could be enhanced through an experiential design, which was vital for continued success in academia and the world. He comprehended that his concept of experiential learning would provide students with a lifelong foundation of intellectual knowledge. Kolb's (2015) experiential learning model offered a "framework for examining and strengthening the critical linkages among education, work, and personal development" (Kolb, 2015, pp. 3-4). Through the experiential model, he realized that individuals would gain knowledge, skills, and abilities (i.e., effectiveness) to reach their full potential in society and academia (Kolb, 1984, 2015).

Kolb (2015) asserts that learning is a process in which each person may be at different points along the learning continuum. ELT takes on various formats, including internships, service-learning, community-based learning, and study abroad. Kolb views internships and real-world experiences in education through an experiential design, which can lead to continued success in academia and the world. Kolb's (1984, 2015) experiential learning model offers a "framework for examining and strengthening the critical linkages among education, work, and personal development" (Kolb, 2015, pp. 3-4). The four constructs or central tenets of the theory consist of concrete experience (engaging the senses), abstract conceptualization (decision making), reflective observation (using specific resource material), and active experimentation (testing the resources), work in collaboration with one another (Kolb, 1984, 2015). While the stages are sequential, the learning cycle can be entered at any point, and learners may cycle through the process multiple times (Akella, 2010).

High-Impact Practices

There is increasing pressure for higher education entities to seek new ways to support student success in real-world situations (AACU, 2002; Kuh & Umbach, 2004). Leadership preparation programs can address this issue by providing an in-depth, hands-on approach to leadership development. Experiential learning opportunities, like VR simulations, are an effective way to develop and train decision-making abilities, protecting participants from the real-world consequences of their decisions and performance (Staub & Bravender, 2014). It is crucial that the content of the simulations is valid and offers realistic challenges the participant might face. To acquire new skills, participants must get wholly involved and immersed in the simulation world (Bernstein et al., 2016). Therefore, the goal of the simulation is "to recreate the essence of real situations to design authentic learning experiences for students" (Herrington et al., 2003, p. 2115)

The high-impact practices identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) are (1) Service and Community-Based Learning, (2) Common Intellectual Experiences, (3) Capstone Courses and Projects, (4) Undergraduate Research, (5) First-year Seminars and Experiences, (6) Study Abroad, (7) Diversity and Global Learning, (8) Learning Communities, (9) Writing-Intensive Courses, and (10) Internships. Gonyea et al.'s (2008) research suggests that all students participate in at least two high-impact practices while in college.

Capstone Courses and Projects

Capstone courses allow students to apply theory to practice and integrate program learning. These courses or projects are seen in various forms, such as a research paper, an ePortfolio, or a culminating project (AACU, 2008). Instructors can use this type of HIP to assess growth, cumulative abilities, presentation, and content knowledge and skills (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2009). Dunlap (2005) found that capstone courses improved students' sense of self-efficacy while preparing students for success in their specialized fields.

Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning allows students to investigate and solve discipline-related problems. Data-driven research projects and developing solutions to problems related to their field of expertise are a couple of examples (AACU, 2008; Pecore, 2013). A collaborative learning style allows students to design solutions for authentic questions and real-world issues (Holmes & Hwang, 2016). Throughout an individual project, the instructor becomes the facilitator, guiding the process and allowing the students to take the lead in the learning process (Holmes & Hwang, 2016). The reflection process embedded in project-based learning has transformed students' overall success and experience in project-based courses (AACU, 2008; Pecore, 2013).

Internships or Practicums

Internships or Practicums provide a field-based form of experiential learning, pairing students with their community partners to provide hands-on experiences with relevant field-related issues (AACU, 2007). During the internship, students can analyze and solve problems (Kuh et al., 2008). These experiences require students to apply what they have learned throughout their program and critically reflect on the following outcomes. Students benefit from the supervision and feedback of professionals with similar interests and gain experience with problems that arise in their specific field (AACU, 2013).

Overview of Simulations

Immersive simulation teaching tools are one way higher education is further developing an integrated approach to fusing theory and practice. With this technology, leaders can use real-world applications of theory. Simulation has been used extensively as a teaching and learning tool in various disciplines. McGaghie & Issenberg (1999) defined simulation as "a person, device, or set of conditions which attempts to present evaluation problems authentically where the student or trainee is required to respond to the problems as he or she would under natural circumstances (McGaghie & Issenberg, 1999, p.9)." Simulations have evolved from simple role-playing to immersive and technologically driven ones as technology has grown increasingly ingrained in our daily lives. The general public is now more exposed to immersive simulation and interactions with avatars due to the pace of breakthroughs and the availability of a wide range of technology. According to Gilbert et al. (2018), this type of technology, widely utilized in industries like health, aviation, and the military, can be a potent teaching tool, especially in higher education. Mursion is one platform that makes use of this technology.

Educational researchers sought to develop an augmented reality platform or immersive simulation capable of providing a risk-free environment to prepare teachers and leaders better. Simulations help to navigate difficulties in adequately preparing educators to face the demands of schools (Dieker et al., 2007). In order to do this, they developed avatars for use in immersive simulations that would not only offer a risk-free environment but also provide a practical means of expanding access to learning opportunities, enhancing the advantages of non-technological simulation, and enabling personalized learning. Immersive simulation is being investigated by several educational leadership programs in higher education as a way to educate educational leaders better. It has been recognized as an effective tool, mainly where skills transfer is crucial (Christensen et al., 2011; Gilbert et al., 2018).

Simulations Geared for Problem-Based Learning

Using VR simulations, leadership candidates can use critical thinking and knowledge-based judgments in decision-making. Using VR, learning is simulated through identified challenges relative to what might be experienced at the school level, where the candidates must formulate a solution based on the application of skills learned. Hallinger and Bridges (2017) assert that problem-based learning aids in "acquiring new knowledge and learning how to apply it; developing skills in self-directed learning; developing skills in resolving conflicts and using group problem-solving and decision tools and acquiring insight into the emotional aspects of leadership" (p.135).

Implementation of Immersive Simulations

The background and context for the initial launch of Mursion immersive simulations occurred during the pandemic, and programmatic changes became evident for educational leadership candidates trying to complete Practicum experiences required for program completion. It quickly became apparent that supplemental experiences were needed for field-based opportunities for candidates. Educational leadership faculty worked together to assemble a range of options where they could work with their supervising administrators to complete leadership tasks as schools began to shut down virtually. In 2020, Mursion immersive simulations were implemented in the Practicum course. Faculty worked closely with the simulation specialist to plan and align specific content and curriculum to program and candidate needs.

The rationale for using immersive simulations was to provide leadership candidates with High Impact Practices and experiential learning opportunities. ELT is the most used learning theory to justify immersive simulations for learning (Luo et al., 2021; Radianti et al., 2020). As stated earlier, ELT defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41), which places experiences at the center of the learning process. According to ELT, there are two modes of experience: concrete experience and abstract conceptualization (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2012). Accordingly, reflective observation and active experimentation are two related modes of transforming experiences. Research has also shown that candidates benefit from practice in simulated situations where the complexity and variation of critical challenges are carefully designed to provide them with multiple opportunities for practice and constructive feedback (Dieker et al., 2014).

Although not without some controversy, simulations have long been an accepted best practice in educational settings (Cherryholmes, 1966). Simulations are experiences that allow students to practice both skills and behaviors in real-world settings to prepare themselves to put theory into practice (Dexter, 2020). Numerous meta-studies pointed out that simulations are similar to other instructional strategies in conveying conceptual knowledge. Simulations have shown greater student motivation and retention (Ebner & Druckman, 2012, p. 5). These findings are supported by the researcher's experiences in both K-12 and higher education classrooms. However, to address critiques of the use of simulations and maximize the effectiveness of simulations, they needed to be driven by the learning outcome and not as a fun activity to break up the day.

Conceptional background knowledge and appropriate preparation before engaging in the simulation were essential for the simulation to be effective (Ebner & Druckman, 2012). The most critical component in any simulation took place after the simulation. The students must have time to reflect and receive feedback to connect "participants' experience back to theory and ahead to future practice" (Ebner & Druckman, 2012, p.14). Suppose the goal was to provide space for students to be immersed in real-world situations where they were required to think critically about how they would apply what they know in their decisions and actions. In that case, simulations have been proven to be very effective. It was also imperative that the details of the experience were planned and presented carefully to provide a safe, effective learning environment for all students. Finally, the opportunity to receive timely, transparent, specific feedback from a mentor or teacher and directed time for self-reflection was essential to the long-term impact of any simulation experience (Cruickshank, 1980).

Considering the application of simulation in education and training, reflection has been considered the most essential component in the learning process (Luo et al., 2021). Studies revealed that reflection is essential for learners to re-evaluate an experience (Gaba et al., 2001), identify strengths and areas for improvement (Gardner, 2013; Sabei & Lasater, 2016), and generate meanings or resolutions from experiences (Decker et al., 2013; Gardner, 2013). Meanwhile, guided reflection allowed learners to receive feedback from more knowledgeable others, which supported their meaning-making and knowledge construction (Grossman, 2009; Sanders, 2009). One of the most used strategies of reflection in simulation-based learning was debriefing (Gaba et al., 2001; Tannenbaum & Cerasoli, 2013). As a post-simulation activity, debriefing asked learners to recall, re-evaluate, and analyze their actions and decision-making in actual or simulated situations, thereby promoting purposeful reflection (Decker et al., 2013). Accordingly, instructors evaluated candidates' understanding and provided specific constructive feedback (Gaba et al., 2001; Gardner, 2013).

Simulations were pivotal in the educational leadership program as a means for students to apply their theoretical understanding of leadership in practical settings. Applying theory to practice has been a core element of quality educational leadership programs. Educational leaders must be allowed to "construct content-sensitive responses to a dilemma" to be prepared to make virtuous decisions and corresponding actions in various settings (Dexter et al., 2020, p. 174).

In the current landscape of educational leadership, it has become apparent that problem-solving and decision-making are some of the most critical aspects in preparing school leaders. Ethical leaders motivate others by making decisions with integrity, holding others accountable for ethical standards, and modeling ethical behavior (Derr, 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011). Often, leaders face ethical and moral dilemmas due to these responsibilities. Aspiring school leaders must learn, understand, and apply principles of effective leadership, ethics, and ethical decision-making skills.

Based upon the success of using immersive simulations in educational leadership to develop instructional leadership, the program faculty believed simulations showed promise as a teaching and learning tool to support the transfer of content knowledge, skill acquisition, and maintenance of knowledge; heighten decision-making skills; and promote practice in and mastery of sequencing procedures (Hay et al., 2001; McGaghie & Issenberg et al., 2010). It also allowed instructors to provide feedback with deliberate practice (Hay et al., 2001; McGaghie & Issenberg et al., 2010).

Virtue Development in Educational Leadership Programs

Leadership is relational and must foster a sense of trust for others to be encouraged to follow (Donaldson, 2009; Fullan, 2002). Wherever a robust environment is found, it is built around strong values. Many will find examples of individuals living those values (Kouzes & Posner, 1999). According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), leaders must understand themselves and others in decision-making. They asserted that administrators must reflect on their perceptions of right and wrong, what they stand for personally and professionally, and how and why they make decisions. Sergiovanni (1992) declared, "The heart of leadership has to do with what a person believes, values, dreams about, and is committed to" (p. 7). He also noted that the foundation for a person's reality comes from their inner world.

Most state and professional entities for school leaders assert expectations of acceptable ethical behavior and professional codes on the part of administrators. According to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), leaders are called to act ethically and with professional integrity to ensure student success and well-being. Specifically, in Standard 2, Ethics and Professional Norms, an effective leader must act ethically based on professional norms that ensure students' success and well-being. Standard One in the newly adopted Florida Educational Leadership Standards (FELS) addresses Professional and Ethical Norms that directly align with the national PSEL. More than ethical standards are required to create effective leadership and decision-making skills. An essential component of educational leadership programs is to provide experiences for candidates that help them understand

the concept of self. This understanding enables the individual to assess and clarify their personal ethical beliefs and establish the expectations for others to follow. Leadership practices must align with the words and actions of the leader.

In recent years, more attention has been given to character development and moral reasoning in higher education. Educators and employers have developed numerous frameworks identifying the skills and knowledge needed to contribute to society in the 21st century. These frameworks include creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, flexibility, initiative, self-monitoring, respect, civic engagement, and collaboration, to name a few (Batelle, 2019). It has become apparent that more than concept knowledge is needed to prepare leaders for the challenges of school-based dilemmas. The mission of higher education institutions and, more specifically, educational leadership programs is to prepare graduates to be influential leaders, and character concepts must be central components (Jubilee, 2020). The various components of character education integrated into educational leadership programs should include intellectual, moral, civic, and performance virtues as outlined by the Jubilee Center's Framework for Character Education in Schools (Arthur, 2023). Perhaps, even more importantly, there is an emphasis on phronesis, "the integrative virtue, developed through experience and critical reflection, which enables us to perceive, know, desire and act with good sense" (Arthur, 2023, p. 9).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach to investigate the impact of Mursion immersive simulation experiences on students' intellectual and moral judgment in an Educational Leadership program. Candidate participation was voluntary, and eleven students consented to be in the experiential group. Each of the four sessions was an hour long and had no more than 4 participants in each group. Three faculty members were the facilitators of the session and discussion groups where constructive feedback was provided. The study sought to answer the following questions: The overarching research questions were:

1. How do educational leaders critically reflect on their behaviors when faced with an ethical dilemma?
2. What were the perceptions of students on the impact that the immersive simulations had on the development of intellectual and moral judgment when confronted with ethical dilemmas?

Participants

Participants for the study were candidates in the Principalship course in the educational leadership master's program at the southeastern university. There were approximately 40 students enrolled in two-course sections. The course was delivered online and included students from around the state and country. Participation was voluntary. Eleven leadership candidates consented to participate in the Mursion immersive simulations. Four males and seven females made the experiential group. The course instructors were well-versed in virtual reality technology. They were critical designers in the School of Education's character education framework and aligned with the Jubilee Center Framework for Character Education in Schools (Arthur, 2022).

Procedures

The graduate students in the Principalship course were asked to select one of the two assignments they wanted to complete, which determined their assignment in either the control or experimental groups. The control group completed the written assignment on traditional ethics. The traditional assignment required students to complete a written critical reflection on virtues and ethical decision-making by responding to a case study of a school-based ethical dilemma. This assignment required students to provide responses and rationales for the decisions made in each phase of the decision-making process. The experimental group had the opportunity to apply their learning of virtues and ethical decision-making skills to a real-world, problem-based scenario. The simulation was followed by structured peer group discussion and self-reflection through an open-ended questionnaire. They were also provided timely, constructive feedback from faculty and group peers.

The immersive virtue simulations were offered through a partnership with Mursion (2023), an immersive learning simulations software company. Candidates experienced a 10-15 minute facilitated simulation scenario where they interacted with a live avatar. The ethical dilemma centered around a parent conference with the principal concerning a student fight and suspension based on a zero-tolerance policy. The interactions focused on a specific ethical dilemma that required applying phronesis when virtues conflict. The actors portraying the avatars had appropriate

scripts that represented a school-based problem and conflict that arise in educational leadership settings, as well as responses to various strategies employed by the candidates.

These simulations engaged candidates in challenging discussions, such as an irate parent calling the school to discuss their student's involvement in a fight, where a zero-tolerance policy requires school suspension. The scenario allowed candidates to struggle with situations where intellectual and moral values such as compassion, justice, and critical thinking could conflict. Candidates reflected on their performance and received peer feedback and feedback from the instructor. The next step was an open-ended questionnaire that encouraged candidates to analyze their ethical responses and behavior when values and ethical principles conflicted.

Findings

The authors reviewed and analyzed open-ended responses from leadership candidates. The qualitative questionnaire sought to gain the leadership candidates' perceptions of the simulations' impact on intellectual and moral judgment development. The prompts in the questionnaire were designed so the students identified which virtues they felt came into conflict and how they determined the best course of action. The instructors reviewed the content to determine a set unit of analysis for each prompt (Cohen, 2018, p. 669). The coding focused on virtue concepts, ethical behaviors, and intellectual and moral decision-making. The instructors individually read through each question using this preset coding system. The codes reviewed determined the frequency of various code words. The codes developed overarching categories and emerging themes.

The instructors identified patterns and relationships that helped determine the level of understanding virtues play in ethical decision-making and the overall impact of simulations (Cohen, 2018, p.679). These relationships become emergent themes. Analyzing the data to address research question 1, the researchers highlighted the emergent themes according to the virtues addressed in the simulation.

The themes identified under the Intellectual virtue were judgment, resourcefulness, and reflection. Judgment and reflection were critical values in statements from several students. One stated, "I'll admit that I can have tunnel vision about rules, infractions, and discipline. Sometimes, I forget to question who benefits (or does not) from these established laws, rules, or policies." Another discussed the importance of reflection and resourcefulness in their feedback, explicitly indicating that "Understanding the student's lack of disciplinary history, the reason for his involvement in the altercation, learning about the parent's role in the student's thought process, and the ability to reflect on alternative solutions to the problem allowed for emotions to stay calm and respect to be held." Further reinforcing the need for leaders to be resourceful when dealing with a dilemma was evidenced in one sharing: "My resourcefulness allowed me to address Ethan's academic needs while he was out for his suspension and ensure that he was supported by the counselor and participated in restorative practices upon his return."

When analyzing moral virtue, compassion, integrity, Honesty, and humility emerged as the themes. Many of the participant's responses centered around compassion, Honesty, and integrity. One student believed compassion allowed them to empathize with the father and understand his concern about missing three days of work to babysit Ethan while he was suspended. Because of my compassion, we were able to agree on an outcome." Honesty and integrity were highlighted in many responses. One stated, "Honesty and integrity allowed me to ensure that all the communication was accurate and that I was forthright with the details of the situation. Another participant believed that integrity allowed them to conduct themselves respectfully and gracefully throughout the meeting.

Overwhelmingly, humility emerged as a necessary virtue in dealing with an ethical dilemma. This was apparent in several responses. Statements such as "I expressed humility as I do realize that I will never have all of the answers. I will continue to navigate these situations with a strong sense of collaboration of all necessary stakeholders." Another notable quote was, "Humility allowed me to appreciate Landon's perspective while listening to his concerns and outbursts without becoming defensive." A final quote highlighted was, "Humility gave me the ability to listen and put Mr. Landon's feelings and concerns as the priority."

Addressing the impact that the simulations had on growth in ethical decision-making and increasing the understanding of the role of virtues in the process, several key points were noted from students' responses. One participant shared, "This simulation afforded me an opportunity to learn about the ethics of justice, critique, care, and profession. These paradigms will remain cognizant as I make future leadership and professional decisions." Similarly, another student acknowledged that "This was a fantastic activity. I was able to apply ethical principles and paradigms within the simulation. It was enlightening to see Landon's responses to my input or the input of my peers and to see the "back and forth" that was a direct result of the input or communication attempts. Additionally, it was helpful to observe the interactions and reflections of my peers. I recommend this type of activity throughout the Ed—leadership program. “ A final key quote indicating that the simulations had a positive impact on developing ethical decision-making was noted in this quote, "This exercise was a great way to apply the ethical concepts learned during

the educational leadership preparation program and journey. The simulation was a real-life situation that prepared me to respond effectively to similar situations in the future."

Lastly, some participants stated that the practice of giving constructive feedback and having difficult conversations in a safe environment has a positive impact on their leadership growth. In terms of impacting decision-making processes, overall, candidates stated it was an exercise of quick thinking and navigating potentially hostile situations professionally. Overwhelmingly, candidates perceived they would carry the knowledge and skills gained through the simulation experiences into leadership positions.

Scholarly Significance

Ethics is the core of successful leadership, providing the fundamental framework to build trust, integrity, and accountability in schools. Ethical leadership impacts employee engagement and fosters a culture of trust, fairness, commitment, and empowerment. An ethical dilemma occurs when two values conflict. To adeptly navigate the ethical challenges of leading schools, educational leaders must possess solid virtues and decision-making skills when facing ethical dilemmas. Ethical leadership must be conscious and open to understanding the circumstances and responding in ways that honor collective needs, values, and goals. When students discuss situations where virtues conflict, the natural reaction is to become upset and argumentative based on their ethical lens and emotional perspectives.

It has been noted that universities need help to provide experiences that adequately support the necessary knowledge acquisition and skill development of aspiring principals to meet the daunting tasks that demand a complex set of skills (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Grissom et al., 2021) To strengthen candidates' knowledge, skills, and abilities to employ ethical decision-making, integrating immersive simulations as a HIP has proven to be highly engaging and provides experiential learning opportunities in a safe environment. Simulations allow leadership candidates to engage in real-life scenarios and build their confidence to manage complex situations in the field. Lastly, the simulations support leadership coaching, providing strategic feedback to aspiring leaders to navigate complex problem-solving skills, ethics, ethical decision-making, effective communication, and collaboration.

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