



by
Lee Smith

One day in April 2014, I spent nine hours and sixteen minutes in the custody of China's Public Security Bureau.

I was escorted from my office at an accredited BC Offshore school near Shanghai by two plainclothes officers, then driven for more than an hour to a nondescript office building in a nearby city.

Though I was treated well, and spoken to politely, I was disconcerted. In that room, I was given a choice, but I truly felt I had no choice at all.

Moral Distress



As the school Principal, I could order the immediate removal of the Counterpoints textbook we were using, which at the time was the required textbook in a required course towards graduation with the Dogwood diploma. We had used that book for many years in Social Studies 11, but now three graphics inside the book were flagged by an official in the national Ministry of Education as offensive to the state.

If I opted not to order the removal of the textbook, the BC program would have its permission to operate in our Chinese host school cancelled that day, a move with immense consequences for 55 BC-certified teachers and nearly 800 students. Additionally, I would be deported from China within the week.

I did the only thing I felt I could do. But when I agreed to remove that textbook, I assented to a directive that runs counter not only to my own beliefs, but also to the values and principles which imbue the BC curriculum. I was upset and shaken. I was angry. I tried to process and articulate my feelings, but I couldn't find the right words. With time, I felt I settled on a kind of 'ethical consternation', a deep frustration on being forced to act in a way I knew didn't feel right or just.

I left China in July 2019, after a decade in BC Offshore Schools, to work full-time towards my Ph.D. at the University of Alberta. My doctoral supervisor, Dr. Bonnie Stelmach, had recently been commissioned by the Alberta Teachers Association to talk with school leaders across the province about the moral dimension of school leadership. The participants reported issues such as work intensification, increased calls for accountability and public scrutiny, and feelings of being expected to do more with less. These issues sometimes resulted in a kind of tension between the leaders' inner convictions and the actions they felt forced to take to meet external

expectations. And this study was completed before the pandemic even started!

My own issue was with censorship in an international context, with navigating a misalignment in the values which infuse BC's Curriculum in a country which doesn't hold the same values in the same way, with not being able to provide the standard of ethical leadership I feel compelled to provide. When I started my doctoral studies, I learned that what I felt, but couldn't properly articulate, actually already has a name. Moral distress, identified first by Andrew Jameton in 1984, is a phenomenon now well-studied in health care scholarship. Other than Dr. Stelmach's recent work for the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), and now in my own research, moral distress has yet to be considered in education scholarship.

The concept and understanding of moral distress in health care literature has evolved since the mid-80s. I use Alvita Nathaniel's (2006) definition, modified by me to refer to Principals instead of nurses: "...moral distress is a pain affecting the mind, the body, or relationships that results from a situation in which the [Principal] is aware of a moral problem, acknowledges moral responsibility, and makes a moral judgement about the correct action, yet, as a result of real or perceived constraints, participates, either by act or omission, in a manner he or she perceives to be morally wrong" (p. 421).

The real or perceived constraints in Nathaniel's definition mirror a distinction made by Garros, Austin, and Dodek (2020) between external constraints, such as institutional policies or structures, and internal constraints such as lessened autonomy, decreased levels of psychological empowerment, and increased levels of self-doubt. With the continuing uncertainty brought on by the pandemic, as Principals and Vice-Principals in BC are trying to navigate continually

evolving information in unprecedented times, there will be those who feel compelled to act in a way that doesn't sit well or feel right. There will be school leaders who feel mired in morally distressing situations.

There's power to being able to name one's feelings, a kind of comfort or relief in knowing that anger and frustration and feeling disconcerted are natural in reaction to being unable to act in a way that one believes to be morally correct. The cause of the distress and the context in which it was borne may not change, and the capacity to effect change so that the morally distressing situation disappears may never be possible. But being able to recognize that moral distress exists, that the affective and psychological reactions that a school leader may be experiencing are normal and expected, could ease some of the tensions that Principals and Vice-Principals currently and inevitably face.

Lee Smith spent six years as a school leader in BC offshore schools near Shanghai, and was part of the first cohort of BC Offshore Principals to go through the Leadership Development program offered by the BCPVPA. Lee is a PhD candidate whose doctoral research involves understanding how BC Offshore Principals navigate their experiences administering a BC program outside of the province, with a specific focus on the concept of moral distress.

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