Tears at the Heart of Things:

Moral Distress Among Principals of Canadian-Accredited Schools in China

by

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Abstract

Moral distress arises when a person is aware of a moral problem, acknowledges a moral responsibility to act, yet is constrained from following a course of action congruent with their own moral judgement (Nathaniel, 2006; Jameton, 1984). Being hindered from doing what one believes to be morally right has psychological, affective, and relational implications. In this doctoral study, I interviewed 15 principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China to understand how they navigated morally distressing situations and balanced disparate cultural and political values and expectations when leading their schools.

I employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a research methodology because it has the central focus of "understanding people's lived experiences and the meanings they attach to their experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 2). I derived 14 Personal Experiential Themes, which were the constituent pieces of the principals' own unique sense-making through the complexities of administering a Canadian school in a context with a sometimes vastly different ideological climate. I sorted these Personal Experiential Themes into four Group Experiential Themes, which I named *finding one's place*, *finding one's footing*, *finding one's route through*, and *finding one's perspective*.

I then created a four-part framework in which to situate the principals as they contended with morally distressing situations within their professional identities. I named this *moral fidelity*, as the principals' processes of making meaning of their experiences was indicative of and faithful to the central belief which, in any given moment, anchored their own moral positionality. In their own meaning-making and to assuage the moral distress they experienced, the principals oriented themselves towards an obligation they felt to their adopted home (*to context*), to the tenets which underlie the Canadian curriculum they administered (*to curriculum*),

to the employment contract they had signed (*to contract*), or to their own personal and professional growth (*to self*). Then, I proposed *moral fluidity* as the mechanism of movement between those four parts, in which I recognized that the principals shifted the locus of their moral reasoning to constantly align their sense of duty with their own moral judgement, to move between the obligations they oriented towards, to do what they needed to do in the place where they were doing it to make sense of morally distressing situations. The principals' moral fluidity allowed them the intellectual and affective nimbleness they themselves required to find a measure of consonance within their own professional identities.

Preface

This dissertation is an original work by Lee Smith. The research project received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Moral Distress Among Principals of Canadian-Accredited Schools Abroad," No. Pro00101358, March 15, 2021, with renewal granted on February 22, 2022 and January 26, 2023.

For Deanna, the other fly on this wind

On Gratitude

This document would not exist without the abundant support of a great many people.

To my parents, Marian and Tom, your courage and willingness to jump into a place unknown started everything. You taught me the beauty of curiosity, the value of learning, and the power of appreciating perspectives different than my own.

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To Deanna, it is here where my own words just would never be quite enough. So I turn to some of the lyrics from the soundtrack of our lives, for they are essential: *You are here with me / You are here with me / You have been here and you are everything*.

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So yeah, obviously in my heart, this is absolutely wrong… I definitely knew it was wrong, and I tried my best to voice my concerns, my disagreement, tried to find solutions, and you know, you just kind of hit a wall. And it seems like they kind of listened, but they're just, "yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." And in the end, it's just, well, 'This is China'. And I've heard that many times over the years, like "you're in China, this is China." And my understanding from that is this is where the limit is, and if you don't like it, you know where the door is. Because this is where your opinion, or freedom, kind of ends.

- Kelly,
Principal of a Canadian-accredited school in China

Sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi;
sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.

Here too, the praiseworthy has its rewards;
there are tears at the heart of things, and
our life that passes touches their hearts.

- Virgil, *Aeneid, 1.461 ff*

Chapter One: Setting the Scene

Cram them full of noncombustible data, chock them so damned full of 'facts' they feel stuffed, but absolutely 'brilliant' with information. Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving. And they'll be happy, because facts of that sort don't change. Don't give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy.

- Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

Nine Hours and Sixteen Minutes

After spending a significant portion of my professional life working in Asia, I considered myself adept at understanding the complexities and challenges of delivering a Canadian curriculum in an international context. I believed myself to be both respectful and knowledgeable of the intercultural dynamics at play being a Canadian educator abroad. I used my own best judgement to act in a way that was both mindful and respectful of the cultural and political realities of the country where I was working. I also acted in a manner faithful to my own beliefs and those which undergird the curriculum I was responsible for delivering.

One day in April 2014, however, I was shaken to my core. On that day, I spent nine hours and sixteen minutes in the custody of China's Public Security Bureau. I was escorted from my office at a British Columbia (BC) accredited Offshore school near Shanghai by two plainclothes officers and driven over an hour to a nondescript office building in a nearby city. Though I was treated well and spoken to in a calm manner, I was disconcerted when presented with a choice. Actually, 'disconcerted' is perhaps the most objective and diplomatic way of describing how I felt that day. I was terrified.

The officers put me into a small, unadorned conference room, entering for short periods throughout the day to speak to me, then leaving me alone for long stretches to consider what I had been told. My options were explained to me plainly. First, as school principal, I could order the immediate removal of the Social Studies 11 textbook we were using, a required textbook in a required course towards graduation with a BC Dogwood diploma. Though the same textbook had been used in that course for years, three graphics inside the book were now flagged by an official in the national Ministry of Education in Beijing as offensive to the Chinese state.

If I opted not to order the removal of the textbook, the Canadian program would have its license to operate cancelled that day, a move with immense consequences for 55 Canadian teachers and more than 800 students. Additionally, I would be deported from China within the week. I was given a choice, but I truly felt I had no choice at all.

I was mandated into a morally untenable position. Before assuming school leadership positions, I had spent my career as a teacher of literature and poetry. I espoused the power of words, the importance of narrative, the essentialness of the fulsome expression of ideas. I was, and am, a card-carrying member of groups that advocate for those whose intellectual and personal freedoms have been muffled or taken away by political regimes. I have always championed those who follow their conscience regardless of what that may cost them. I called to students incessantly to use their voices compassionately to advance pluralism and thought.

In that office on that warm spring day, I agreed to remove the textbooks, assenting to a directive antithetical to my own beliefs and the tenets of freedom of expression and freedom to dissent which are intrinsic to the Canadian curriculum I felt obligated to administer. I was shaken to my core.

Context

Seven Canadian provinces currently offer their programs of study in an international setting, employing provincially certified teachers and administrators to deliver curricula identical to those found in the provinces themselves. No collated data exist to capture the numbers across all Canadian-accredited schools abroad; yet according to the current Director of International Education for the province of British Columbia (BC), in the 2022-2023 academic year, BC offshore schools enrolled 5581 students and employed 363 BC-accredited educators in ten international jurisdictions (Schroeder, personal communication, January 19, 2023). Though they are working within a school system familiar to them, Canadian educators working abroad sometimes find themselves far removed from the cultural mores to which they are accustomed. Principals of these Canadian-accredited schools abroad may work within a cultural milieu informed by social and political values ranging from slightly incongruent to antithetical to their own, which has significant implications for how they administer their programs and lead their schools. The principals must navigate tensions that can exist between the convictions they hold and the political realities which underlie the tenets of the host culture. In a Canadian-accredited school abroad, the principal must manage these disparate values and mediate any resultant discord publicly and pragmatically, as well as work through this dissonance at a deeply personal level to reconcile external policy constraints with their own ethical convictions.

It is a reality that all public discourse is crafted deliberately and monitored closely in China. In his 2021 book entitled *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir*, the Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei described this awareness as recognizing that everything was “shrouded in the thick fog of the dominant political narrative” (p. 3). This fog seeps in and suffuses all aspects of how the Chinese citizenry act and think. Within schools, everything that students learn is controlled tightly by the national Ministry of Education in Beijing. Chinese principals work closely in their schools with functionaries of the ruling Communist Party to ensure that only topics and pedagogical methods deemed appropriate by the state are engaged. While both the Chinese and the British Columbian Ministries of Education have agreed to terms by which the BC Offshore schools are allowed to operate within Chinese host schools (as have the respective provincial Ministries of Education of other Canadian-accredited schools), there are continuous negotiations, always infused with political shifting and nuance, regarding the actual administration of the programs. Memoranda of understanding between China and Canada are words on paper; the realities of mitigating how the Chinese state periodically seeks to insert itself into the delivery of the Canadian curriculum is a necessary component of the Canadian-accredited school principal's role.

All foreign nationals employed in schools in China must procure a work visa, a Foreign Expert Certificate, and a residence permit. One of the requirements of employment is signing a contract declaring that certain topics deemed off-limits by Beijing will not be broached. These topics are usually referred to colloquially by foreign educators in China as *the Three Ts* (Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen Square), though the practical intent of the restrictions extend more broadly to issues regarding human rights, religious freedoms, and matters designated by the central government as a potential incursion into national security and harmony. Foreign teachers and administrators, out of necessity and a kind of political expedience, tend to become adept at working with or around these contractual restrictions. I believed that I had become artful in addressing these prescribed topics when necessary, and the more broadly associated issues to which they pertained, without explicitly doing so. In this way, I was able to find a balance between faithfully administering the BC curriculum and not raising the attention of local authorities.

My belief that we were doing enough to not fall afoul of the authorities in Beijing, perhaps my complacency in how adroit I was at balancing disparate political beliefs, was demolished by the reaction of an unknown Ministry of Education official to a few small graphics in one of our textbooks. The three photos flagged in the Social Studies 11 textbook included a photo from June 1989 of the large crowd in Tiananmen Square, a headshot of the Dalai Lama, and a map in which Taiwan was coloured differently than mainland China, essentially identifying it as an autonomous country. The existence of these three small graphics in a 250-page textbook became something of great metaphorical significance. To the Chinese official, the pictures represented an affront to the harmony and security of Chinese society; to me, the pictures became the fulcrum point between my own convictions and my professional obligation to ensure that the school would continue to operate, with me providing instructional, organizational, and ethical leadership.

I was frustrated and angered by this explicit mandate of censorship given to me by the Chinese authorities, while some of my peers at other BC Offshore Schools appeared unaffected, even indifferent, treating it as just another moment in another day leading a Canadian school abroad. I wondered to myself how they could react with relative nonchalance to edicts which I perceived to be dilemmatic, directives which caused me much consternation. What angered and frustrated me greatly, being forced to remove textbooks from the school and repeatedly disallowing certain topics from discussion because these were deemed objectionable by the state controllers, was sometimes shrugged off by my peers as just another part of working and living where we did. They were able to envision the situation as being about pragmatism, while I was focusing, stubbornly and resolutely as I look back now, on maintaining fidelity in the expression of my own ethical beliefs.

To me, this incident seemed like a deep cut after the proverbial thousand smaller cuts, on issues ranging from the seemingly mundane to the systemic: being complicit with policing students' hair length and colour, the need to constantly enforce aggressive school policies on the use of computers and cell phones, the primacy of business concerns over pedagogical considerations, of optics and the bottom line over learning and student development, a pronounced lack of support for students with mental health struggles or exceptional learning needs, the use of corporal punishment, tacit racism in hiring practices. I felt that a now insurmountable chasm had developed, and I was becoming increasingly less able to contend with my own feelings of frustration and powerlessness. It is in understanding the meaning of these divergent reactions that I found a personal rationale for this study. I knew that my reaction seemed right and authentic and proportional to me. I also believed that my peers were equally as committed to their schools, their students, and their Canadian curriculum as I believed myself to be, and so what I initially saw as their insouciance made me wonder about how each of us was mooring or centering our notions of obligation to the tenets of the roles we held.

Purpose

The purpose of my study was to gain insight into how principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China made sense of their experiences when they found themselves affected by external mandates incongruous with their own convictions. I used the phenomenon of *moral distress*, borne of understanding how nurses contend with being constrained from acting in accordance with their own ethical convictions (Nathaniel, 2006; Jameton, 1984), as my conceptual launch point. Because I endeavoured to understand what the respondents experienced and how they made sense of being compelled to balance disparate cultural imperatives, I explored the research questions through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2021). The principals' rich, descriptive accounts led me to a series of insights to illuminate the processes by which they created meaning from their experiences. These themes, the components of their meaning-making processes that I arrived at through my interpretation of their words, are explicated in chapters six through nine.

Research Questions

Two questions guided this study:

1. How do the principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad navigate morally distressing situations that can arise when their own beliefs and/or cultural values are in tension with locally prescribed mandates?
2. How do these principals make sense of morally distressing situations within the context of their professional identity?

Definitions

In this section, I define *moral distress* and *professional identity*, both of which are central to the research questions which guided this study. Stelmach et al. (2021) asserted that "the moral imperative of school leadership is afflicted in the contemporary professional context" (p. 2), with principals' very identities affected by the constraints they are impelled to navigate based on external demands and pressures; therefore, an understanding of these two concepts from the outset is crucial. I then define *bridling*, a process fundamental to data interpretation in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the qualitative methodology I employed in this study.

Lastly, I define *intercultural competence*, a construct germane to understanding how Canadian educators working abroad interact with those around them.

Moral Distress

First proposed by Andrew Jameton in 1984 in application to nurses, *moral distress* is "(a) the psychological distress of (b) being in a situation in which one is constrained from acting (c) on what one knows to be right" (Jameton, 2017, p. 617). Moral distress occurs when a person is hindered from following a course of action consistent with their own moral judgement because of external, institutional constraints (Morley et al., 2019) or internal constraints (Garros et al., 2020). When nurses' abilities to act in accordance with their own moral reasoning and judgement were hindered, there were concomitant feelings of frustration, powerlessness, anxiety, and sometimes depression (Oh & Gastmans, 2015; Hamric, 2012). These feelings became iterative and compounded over time.

The original definition of moral distress has been, and continues to be, refined as scholarship evolves (Jameton, 2017; Jameton, 2013) and the scope of its application broadens. Jameton coined the term *moral distress* after listening to senior nursing clinicians' discussions of bioethical dilemmas from their professional practice (Jameton, 2017). In particular, the nurses felt an ethical constriction when they were required by doctors or mandated by policy to perform procedures or follow courses of treatment with patients which the nurses themselves believed would not be curative. Similarly, Epstein and Delgado (2010) recounted a situation in which the wife of a patient with dementia refused to allow staff to sedate him to lessen their chance of being harmed by his violent outbursts. The nursing staff were obligated to provide care for the patient but feared for their own physical safety. They knew that caring for the patient safely required that he received the medication, but they were compelled to proceed in a manner that was not consistent with their own professional agency and moral judgement. Jameton noted that nurses' level of ethical concern affected their moral reasoning, which compelled him to "address the emotional side of moral problems" (Jameton, 2017, p. 617).

Within the health care literature there is general conceptual agreement between scholars on what moral distress is, though Hamric (2012) noted that a "lack of consistency and consensus on the definition of moral distress considerably complicates efforts to study it" (p. 39). Morley et al. (2019) concurred, writing that "without a coherent and consistent conceptual understanding, empirical studies of [moral distress]'s prevalence, effects, and possible responses are likely to be confused and contradictory" (p. 647). Though the reality of this phenomenon is well established, its definition is constructed by components that are inherently difficult to define, such as moral reasoning and moral judgement. Difficulty in quantifying such subjective components had allowed for a range of working definitions (Hamric, 2012). Jameton (2017) himself noted that there continued to be ambiguity about the concept and its similarity to other constructs.

In their narrative synthesis of the health care literature, Morley et al. (2019) charted twenty definitions of moral distress chronologically, beginning with Jameton's (1984) original conception. They asserted that "the language of necessary and sufficient conditions is commonly used in philosophy to define and explain connections between concepts and causality," and recognized that "the presence of 'constrained moral judgement' is both a necessary and sufficient condition of moral distress" (Morley et al., 2019, p. 647). They wrote that though different definitions may rely on semantic differences, this does not affect the "conceptual clarity that is required for us to increase our understanding of moral distress and shape our responses to it" (Morley et al., 2019, p. 660). They concluded that a common-sense understanding would dictate that negative embodied and affective reactions to events which those involved conceptualize as borne from moral concerns were tantamount to moral distress.

For the purposes of my study, I employed Nathaniel's (2006) definition of moral distress, 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 this definition mirror the distinction made by Garros et al. (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.

Professional Identity

Professional identity is a dynamic and changeable construct consisting of the "internalized meanings of a role that individuals apply to themselves" (Whiteman et al., 2015, p. 578). It is a way of understanding one's role and professional obligations that is reliant on one's own values, beliefs, dispositions, and professional experience (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021). A principal's professional identity is "socially negotiated, contextual, and developmental" (Whiteman et al., 2015, p. 579). A principal's professional identity is informed by their own ways of making sense of themselves in their role, by their relationships with others, and by their reflections on their own actions, motivations, and growth. Professional identity is complex and multifaceted, involving more than undertaking the actions required in one's role; rather, it is a holistic conception that encompasses a "way of 'being' and 'doing'" (Nordholm et al., 2023, p. 2). That is, in a dynamic and evolving interplay between the principal's understanding of the functions of their role, their perception of themself, and “the image of themsel[f] that they reflect to others” (Nordholm et al., 2023, p. 4), professional identity is continually constructed through both inward consideration and through social and contextual negotiation.

Bridling

Dahlberg (2022) described bridling in qualitative research as a kind of open awareness, a “balancing at the beginning of words” (p. 1019). Bridling is an open and reflective attitude through data analysis and interpretation in which a researcher restrains their own beliefs and assumptions, so that these will not “mislead the understanding of meaning and thus limit the research openness” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 129). Bridling requires a researcher to excavate their own ideas and values in a deliberate and iterative process of questioning and reflecting. Typically, a researcher maintains a bridling journal from the outset of their research, committing to an interrogation of their own assumptions and positionality before any data is even collected. The practice of constant self-questioning ensures that a researcher practices “a disciplined kind of interaction and communication with their phenomena and informants, and ‘bridle’ the event of understanding so that they do not understand too quickly, too carelessly or slovenly” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 130). Dahlberg (2022) maintained that “by practicing bridling with open awareness and attention, we have tools that enable us to question the taken-for-granted attitude of routine acceptance of truth” (p. 1023). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis requires a researcher to make interrogative, interpretative claims (Guihen, 2020). Bridling demands ceaseless, perhaps even ruthless, candour by the researcher “to grasp the meanings as they are revealed, always with the aim of understanding the phenomenon in a new way” (Dahlberg, 2022, p. 1023). As Dahlberg characterized it, bridling is an act of balance, of restraint, of openness.

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence, or intercultural awareness, a term sometimes used interchangeably, refers to "how people manage intercultural interactions," with an understanding that people from different cultures manifest "divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world" (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7). Bartosh (2020) stated that intercultural competence is "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p. 149). High levels of intercultural competence involve the awareness of subtle differences between one's own cultural perspectives and those with whom one interacts, as well as the sensitivity and "willingness to understand and appreciate cultural differences in intercultural communication" (Hinner, 2020, p. 41). The word *competence* implies an action orientation, in which the "values, knowledge, attitudes, and skills that favour an effective and appropriate interaction within intercultural contexts" are "deployed through behaviour" (Sarli & Phillimore, 2022, p. 13) to allow a person to adapt well in new cultural contexts.

Audience

This document follows normal conventions of style and content in terms of how a doctoral dissertation would typically appear. There are clearly marked chapters on methodology, methods, and a synthesis of relevant scholarship with which to ground the study itself, for example. I emphasized throughout the original contribution to knowledge and scholarship which I believe this study made. I have not strayed far from how I know dissertations should look.

And yet, I did compose this document with two audiences in mind, not writing solely to satisfy the requirements of a degree. I hope that I have also struck a tone and offered a document that is accessible for those currently in the practice of leading schools abroad. It was by no means written for professionals as a practical ‘how to contend with moral distress when you are working outside your home country’ guide; rather, I hope that this work provides a conceptual grounding for school principals, both offshore and in their home countries, to understand how others made sense of morally distressing situations in the context of their own professional identities. Perhaps a recognition of how others found meaning through the navigation of constraints on their moral judgement will be useful for those readers, ideally cultivating or guiding their own insights if these school principals then experience their own morally distressing situations.

While I have imposed a structure so that this document may find purchase with two distinct audiences, the entire process itself and this resultant product were by no means highly structured, and I recognize that there are sometimes overlaps and interconnections, within and between sections, just as there were in the data themselves. The participants’ accounts of their own experiences were not always linear or neatly compartmentalized; neither were my interpretations of them. We did not always move sequentially from question to question. Answers were sometimes affected by the emotions that arose in the retelling of incidents in which the principals navigated imperatives that sat in tension with their own convictions. In my analysis, I looked to grasp, then follow, then amplify throughlines as they emerged, hopefully towards something of resonance for both the academy and practicing educational leaders.

Significance of This Study

Moral distress has primarily been associated with health care literature in regard to nurses’ increased feelings of frustration, anxiety, feelings of powerlessness, and withdrawing from the emotional core of their roles (Simonovich et al., 2022; Oh & Gastmans, 2015; Hamric, 2012). Though this study is not the first to identify that moral distress may arise when school principals contend with external constraints on their professional judgement and autonomy and may result in affective and embodied reactions similar to those felt by nurses (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019; Stelmach et al., 2021), it appears to be the first to consider how principals make sense of these experiences. Ideally then, this study may first inform practice for current and future principals of Canadian-accredited schools in international settings, as this group may find immediate resonance in this research. School leadership in Canadian-accredited schools abroad calls for a level of intercultural competence, as principals may need to contend with political and cultural realities different from those which inform education in Canada (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2016). Principals who are hindered from following courses of action they believe to be aligned with their professional agency and personal beliefs may feel frustration, stress, and despair. To see how others have navigated morally distressing situations in an international context may offer current or aspiring principals an avenue to consider how they might find their own morally tenable positionality. Indeed, experiences of moral distress may serve to illuminate for principals the limits of their own intercultural competency; working through these morally distressing situations may result in increasingly nuanced understandings of themselves and themselves in context.

Insights garnered from the lived experiences of principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad may contribute to an understanding of how principals in Canada contend with moral distress. The high level of diversity and increasing complexity in schools is difficult to navigate and is likely magnified for those who feel a misalignment of values with the community or school culture in which they work. Principals who move from a rural to an urban setting, or those from Canada's geographical south who move to leadership positions in northern Canada, or vice versa, for example, may feel confounded or constrained within a school culture informed by understandings or values not entirely attuned to their own.

Additionally, an understanding of how principals contend with moral distress may provide a basis to consider how classroom teachers are similarly affected. Though their roles in a school are different from a principal's, teachers are also increasingly exposed to complex classroom environments enriched by great cultural diversity. According to Statistics Canada's (2016) census results, children with an immigrant background (either born outside of Canada themselves or having at least one foreign-born parent) represent 37.5% of the total population of children under the age of 15 in Canadian schools (Statistics Canada, 2017). As principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad require intercultural competence to balance different value and belief systems, teachers in Canadian classrooms increasingly do as well. The insights garnered from the principals in this study could provide a conceptual starting point for understanding how teachers in Canadian classrooms navigate similar challenges.

Lastly, beyond the conceptual significance of this study, there is also a methodological contribution to the field of education. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative methodology that is borne from social psychology and the work of Jonathan Smith. IPA is employed by him in areas of study where he considers how people were able to make sense of a specific phenomenon. For example, in a recent publication he explored the experiences of participants who had suffered chronic depression over a period of many years (Rhodes et al., 2019); in another, he interviewed patients suffering from Parkinson's Disease about how they had modified their own identities and perceptions of control as they underwent deep brain stimulation treatments (Shahmoon et al., 2019).

When employed by other researchers, IPA tended to be utilized in studies related to health-related literature, such as Haylett et al.'s (2021) engagement with mothers and fathers parenting their surviving children after the loss of a child to cancer. It has also been used as a methodology in issues related to identity, such as Wersig and Wilson-Smith's (2021) exploration of the transformation in understanding notions of belonging when humanitarian aid workers returned to their home country after spending substantial time working abroad. For her own recently published doctoral dissertation, Guihen (2020) utilized IPA in her exploration of the experiences of female deputy headteachers in state-funded secondary schools in England. Other than Guihen's work, my use of IPA as a qualitative methodology in the field of education appears to be novel. When combined with the conceptual contribution of considering moral distress as a phenomenon affecting Canadian school principals leading schools in international contexts, this study represents a new strand of inquiry in educational scholarship.

Situating Myself

I want to make two bedrock assertions from the outset of this dissertation: first, though sometimes very vocal about and highly critical of the way things are done there, I have a strong and abiding positive regard for China. It is a place and a culture that has shaped me in many ways, overwhelmingly for the better. I have travelled widely in that beautiful country, through bamboo forests, scorching deserts, high mountain passes, and rolling tea hills that are even more impressive in actuality than they appear on the pages of magazines. I have seen the country open and develop and prosper so much since the first time I lived there in 1996. Cities that a quarter century ago felt like incredibly densely populated small towns are now cosmopolitan by any standards. I have made many wonderful friends, relationships I cherish and that extend far beyond my time actually living in the Middle Kingdom. I have encountered great kindness and boundless generosity from people who expected nothing in return.

In some ways, however, my relationship with China is exceedingly more complicated than that. I have many fundamental ideological differences with governmental policies and directives. I struggle as much today as I did in my first year there with how much control the state exerts over its people. I rarely land on the same end of the philosophical spectrum between individual rights and collective expectations, between freedom and security, as the central government in Beijing would mandate. I see many of these strictures and policies as wrongheaded and dangerous. I hold beliefs and ideas that are not remotely in accord with Chinese state doctrine. I am sometimes saddened and appalled by the things I have seen and many of the things I know from my time there. And yet, for me, there is still much to admire about China, which I have done for literally half my life.

The second bedrock statement I make from the beginning of this dissertation is that I am everywhere in this research and in this document. I did not enter this process as a rank outsider, nor did I choose to engage this topic purely out of academic interest. Owing to my own experiences as the principal of two different Canadian-accredited schools in China between 2013 and 2019, I know that the challenges I faced in that role changed me both personally and professionally. Searching for meaning in episodes that moved me, looking for balance between moral authenticity while simultaneously contending with constraints on my professional autonomy, finding any congruence; this colours the reflexive screens through which I look now.

I cannot make any claims, even after sitting with the data for over a year as I write this section, toward affecting complete intellectual or emotional detachment from the stories I heard from the 15 principals who participated in this study. It is rather the opposite, actually. I was moved by many things I heard. Some of the participants' comments brought me to a full stop when I reread the transcripts or rewatched the session videos months later. I was taken back to my own sometimes difficult times, and feelings I thought I had left behind and processed managed to rise again. I empathized with what the participants were saying. I felt what they felt.

I spent eight years working in British Columbia (BC) Offshore schools in China. According to the BC Ministry of Education and Child Care, the Offshore school program is supported by Memoranda of Understanding between the province and the national governments of eight countries in Asia, Europe, and South America to "provide opportunities for all students to develop global understanding and intercultural competencies" (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2021). The program aims to smooth the transition into Canadian post-secondary institutions for international students, with the belief that exposure to Western pedagogical methods at the high school level will translate into fewer challenges for the students when they move to Canada to enrol in college or university. It is a stated mission that resonates for me, one that I find constructive and laudable.

In my time in BC Offshore schools, I was a classroom teacher for two years, a vice-principal for one and a half years, and the principal for four and a half years. As principal, I was responsible for the delivery of a curriculum underpinned by the democratic tenet of freedom of expression and charged with ensuring that students were fostered as thoughtful and critical citizens. I often encountered barriers, both tacit and overt in policy and expectation, based on the prevailing political and cultural beliefs of the local government. Though censorship was only one of many areas in which I sometimes felt moral discord, it was likely the issue that rankled me most deeply. I was obligated by the local Ministry of Education, which is itself directed by the national Ministry of Education in Beijing, to disallow topics of conversation and to withhold course resources from the students. These directives and this opposition caused me repeated and deeply felt frustration.

Since leaving my principalship in July 2019 to begin doctoral studies, I have acted as the Offshore School Representative for five different BC offshore schools in China. In that capacity, I am the liaison between the host school's Chinese Owner/Operator and the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care. Among other duties such as staffing, principal supervision, and program development, I am responsible for the compliance and regulatory pieces to ensure that the school is operating in accord with expectations from Victoria. In my current role, I am removed, both geographically and by dint of the scope of my responsibility, from the kinds of morally distressing situations and conversations that the participants in this study experienced in their principalships. In total, as of May 2023 I am nearly through my 12th year affiliated with the BC offshore school program in China.

It is most certainly from my own experiences, from my own beliefs and values, that the research questions guiding this study emerged. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research. Because of my own time as a Canadian school leader in China, I approached the data as an interested observer, as one who knows what it feels like to have to balance contending cultural and political imperatives, as one who understands the toll that this can take within one's own professional identity.

My status as a former principal and insider allowed me an emic perspective into how specific experiences garnered from leading a Canadian school in an international context shape knowledge and meaning. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis calls for a researcher to demarcate their own preconceptions during interviews to "enable participants to express their concerns and make their claims on their own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 42). Through the process of bridling, I kept an awareness of my own values and assumptions at the forefront, a continuous and iterative prerequisite for my chosen methodology. Bridling encompasses a researcher's imperative to continually interrogate their own positionality to "detangle themselves" from the phenomenon and the research process to "systematically and carefully scrutinize the road to the decision of understanding" (Soule & Freeman, 2019, p. 869). This required both holding back and interrogating my own beliefs and assumptions (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Vagle, 2009; Stutey et al., 2020), to allow myself to be present with the insights and anecdotes that constituted the extraordinarily rich data I collected. I constantly monitored my interpretations to ensure that they were faithful to what the participants said, so that I would avoid conflating their lived experiences with my own. My bridling required attention to who I am and what I knew and felt from my own time working as a Canadian principal in China, as well as a deliberate consideration of my own assumptions and feelings that arose due to the responsibilities of my ongoing role with Canadian-accredited schools. I recognize that I am not fully outside the system and have not cleanly broken free from the situations that directly affect the Canadian principals I continue to work with; this awareness both infused my continuous bridling process, which I detail further in chapter four.

Ultimately then, I conceive of myself as wholly occupying neither an insider nor an outsider perspective in this study. That is a binary that does not reflect the reality of where I have situated myself nor my engagement with the data. I worked purposefully and consciously to occupy a liminal space on the spectrum between those two polarities. These are not my stories, but it is my own lived experience that brought me to this engagement with them, to my interpretations of the insights held within them. The time I spent navigating morally distressing situations in China acted like a flashlight's beam, helping me understand where to look in the data I collected. My experiences were signposts on a journey, part of it, but neither the journey itself nor the destination.

Organization

Moving forward, chapter two is a review of the academic scholarship most pertinent to my research direction. Chapter three includes a discussion of the qualitative methodology I engaged, including its philosophical underpinnings and a presentation of the conceptual framework which acted as a lens or filter on how I analyzed the data I collected. Chapter four details the research methods involved in the study. These include discussions of my sampling procedures and how the data were collected. An explication of my own data analysis and interpretation process, including the measures I undertook to ensure that the data were speaking for themselves, and a consideration of the trustworthiness of my study conclude chapter four.

The stories recounted by the participants provide the grist with which I sought to understand how these principals made sense of the morally distressing situations they encountered while leading Canadian-accredited schools in China. Chapters five through nine are the findings of this study. These chapters are my distillation of what the 15 principals said about leading their schools abroad and how this informed their own sense-making processes, filtered through my engagement with their experiences. Chapter five contains details of the kinds of morally distressing situations with which these principals contended. Chapters six through nine are each organized around a Group Experiential Theme, which I explain more fully in the Data Analysis and Interpretation section of chapter four. The sections in each of those chapters are Personal Experiential Themes, constituent pieces of the participants' meaning-making processes. These themes are like the elements of the recipe of the principals' personal and professional lives, their identities, the structures that bound their experiences, the understandings of their selves in the context of how things do and need to work in order to faithfully administer a Canadian-accredited school abroad.

In chapter 10 I offer my own four-part framework named *moral fidelity* to understand how the principals were orienting or mooring themselves, anchoring their own sense of morality and rightness in the face of mandates that were not always consonant with their beliefs. I then present *moral fluidity*, the process by which I saw these principals able to constantly calibrate or true their own moral compasses, to move between the obligations they oriented towards when they needed to. Moral fluidity is not one of the four parts of the moral fidelity framework; rather, it is the mechanism that allowed the principals to flow within their convictions to find a moral bearing that was, in that moment, palatable enough for them.

In the final chapter, I summarize my own learning, revisit those nine hours and sixteen minutes in light of the framework I created, and consider the implications of my study for future scholarship and for the practice of educational leadership.

Chapter Two: Review of Scholarship

There is a range of scholarship pertinent to the unfurling of how the principals in this study navigated and made sense of the morally distressing situations they contended with in their Canadian-accredited schools abroad. I have organized this review of related literature in sections entitled *Moral Distress in Health Care Scholarship*, *Moral Distress in Educational Scholarship*, *A Principal's Professional Identity,* and *Intercultural Awareness*. This study took as its foundation the conceptual convergence of these domains of scholarship.

Moral Distress in Health Care Scholarship

Moral distress is not an abstract concept. Within the health care literature, there has been much written on the identification of moral distress and its affective and relational consequences. Consideration is given at the individual level, such as how moral distress manifested for those unable to follow the courses of action they held to be morally right, as well as looking to the implications more holistically for the health care professions themselves. In the nearly four decades since moral distress was named, scholarship in this field has attended to the sources, measurement, and coping responses of (primarily) nurses who experienced moral distress in the course of their professional duties (Hamric, 2012; Morley et al., 2019; Oh & Gastmans, 2015; Salari et al., 2022). Whitehead et al.'s (2015) institution-wide survey of a large health care system in the United States supported the expansion of scope in considering moral distress across health care disciplines. With surveys returned by 754 respondents and using the Moral Distress Scale-Revised instrument with "questions slightly modified to address practice differences between clinicians" (Whitehead et al., 2015, p. 119), the researchers found that health care providers from all sectors of the system experienced moral distress. Besides nurses, participants in this study included doctors, pharmacists, speech therapists, respiratory therapists, physical therapists, social workers, dieticians, and chaplains. Though the level of moral distress varied and "there were differences in perspectives and experiences" (Whitehead et al., 2015, p.124), people in each of these disciplines were affected.

While other health care disciplines have been more recently considered, a preponderance of the moral distress literature remains centered on an understanding of the outcomes of moral distress for nurses. In their review and analysis of existing literature targeting "the aged care environment" (p. 313), Burston and Tuckett (2012) found that moral distress "predisposes the nurse to stress and risks exacerbating underlying illnesses" (p. 318). The authors listed guilt, remorse, demoralization, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and professional disillusionment as likely manifestations of moral distress in nurses. Anger intermingled with exasperation and "the nurse risks becoming callous and bitter" (Burston & Tuckett, 2012, p. 319). These feelings affected the nurses, their places of work, and the profession itself, as moral distress sometimes compelled the nurses to change contexts in an attempt to remedy what they felt had affected them so viscerally and totally.

In Oh and Gastmans' (2015) review of "the available quantitative evidence in the literature on moral distress experienced by nurses" (p. 15), the authors synthesized thirty years of scholarship to find that nearly all studies considered the frequency and intensity of moral distress. This was testament to the ubiquity of both nurses' moral reasoning in decision-making and the incidence of institutional or policy constraints on their right action. In response to their moral distress, there was a wide range of psychological, physiological, and affective reactions attributed to nurses in the literature. These reactions included higher levels of stress and agitation, emotional exhaustion, feelings of powerlessness and self-doubt, and generalized anxiety (Oh & Gastmans, 2015; Hamric, 2012; Dodek et al., 2019; Morley at al., 2019; Bressler et al., 2017). Oh and Gastmans (2015) reported that “as nurses experienced moral distress more frequently, they experienced higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization towards patients” (p. 24). Hamric (2012) asserted that repeated incidents resulting in moral distress over time “can erode care providers’ moral integrity, resulting in desensitization to the moral aspects of care” (p. 42). Whitehead et al. (2015) found that the caregivers in the large health care system they surveyed reported an increased emotional withdrawal from patients.

Within the added complexities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, Lemmo et al. (2022) conducted a study with 33 nurses from different regions of Italy, 27 of whom reported a total of 36 unique events which resulted in their moral distress while performing their duties since the onset of the pandemic. In their analysis of the narrative interviews they conducted, Lemmo et al. found that nurses contending with moral distress reported feelings of powerlessness, worthlessness, sadness, guilt, and helplessness. All of these reactions affected the nurses adversely, both at a personal level and in the commission of their professional duties. These results aligned with an American study of moral distress experienced by nurses on the frontlines during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Simonovich et al., 2022). Conducting 100 individual semi-structured interviews between May and September of 2020, Simonovich et al. (2022) found that due to the morally distressing situations nurses faced at the height of uncertainty and during seemingly endless shifts in policy and institutional directives, respondents reported feeling fear, frustration, powerlessness, and guilt. The authors concluded that their results justified an increase in health care infrastructure and knowledge mobilization around moral distress and its effects on individuals and the profession itself, so that retention may be improved in the nursing workforce.

According to the Canadian Medical Association (2021), moral distress has been shown to be related to the experiences of burnout, depression, desensitization, decreased job satisfaction, and leaving one's position or profession. Further, moral distress "can affect a physician's ability to act as an advocate for patients," as it can manifest as a challenge to "one's view of one's professional integrity" when there was a disruption in the alignment between a physician's best intentions and their actions (Canadian Medical Association, 2021, p. 2). Interestingly, as well as noting the harmful and possible "devastating impact on physicians," the Canadian Medical Association (2021) also offered that "the experience of moral distress reminds us that compassion, honesty, humility, integrity, and prudence – foundational values of medicine – can sustain physicians in difficult, at times impossible, situations" (p. 1). With this assertion, they have underscored the domains within a physician's professional identity, their foundational values, which may be at risk due to the moral distress they encountered.

Much is known about the identification, measurement, and impact of moral distress, yet there seems to be a scarcity in health care scholarship of qualitative inquiry into how individuals made sense of their morally distressing situations. Though my study involved educators, not health care workers, these are not categorically dissimilar professions. They are both helping professions with an ethos of service and moral purpose at their cores. Education, like medicine, is held to be a fundamentally moral enterprise (Cranston et al., 2006; Walker et al., 2007; Reingold & Baratz, 2020). The concentration in health care scholarship remains on what moral distress does to people and the profession, how it affects them, not on what it means for people to navigate and find meaning through their moral distress within the context of their own professional identities.

Moral Distress in Educational Scholarship

While education, like health care, is held to be an enterprise informed and driven by values, an understanding of the effects on those within the profession whose values are contested and moral judgement assailed is nascent. Health care has a forty-year head start on education in recognizing and understanding moral distress. Though limited, there is a burgeoning awareness in educational scholarship of moral distress and why a consideration of this phenomenon is important, both for those who must contend with its effects and for the profession itself.

In a 2019 article in which she detailed her own development of a questionnaire for assessing moral distress among teachers in Czech public schools, Vachova drew upon health care scholarship published in the Czech Republic three years earlier to ground her motivation. Vachova referred to Mares's (2016) work with nurses, in which Mares had concluded that the effects of moral distress were cumulative and compounded over time to affect the emotional wellbeing of those whose moral reasoning was hindered by institutional constraints. Because Mares "compare[d] the medical and teaching environments and mentions similarities with respect to the substance of goals in both professions" (p. 506), Vachova (2019) argued that moral distress should be considered in education, even though it had not yet been considered in that domain. Vachova (2019) "decided to identify and measure moral distress among teachers by using a questionnaire that I created" (p. 507). Concluding that the measurement questionnaire developed by Hamric was too specific to the medical professions, Vachova developed, then administered, her own version with questions tailored specifically to teachers in Czech schools.

Vachova (2019) found that the twenty teachers who participated in her study recognized being involved in "morally dilemmatic situations" (p. 509) involving school policies and mandates issued by school management, in disputes with colleagues, in disagreements with students' parents, and with "the conditions of his [sic] work" (p. 511). While Vachova herself recognized the exploratory nature of her study and the need to refine the questionnaire with subsequent usage, she concluded that addressing moral distress "is a very sensitive and not very well-known area in the teaching profession" (p. 513). Vachova's work recognized moral distress and focused on developing an instrument to understand the scope of this phenomenon as pertinent to the experiences of Czech teachers, but she did not address the effects of moral distress beyond identifying teachers' feelings of stress, dissatisfaction, and anxiety.

In a study entitled *Alberta School Leadership Within the Teaching Profession*, the Alberta Teachers Association (2019) declared that school leaders "at times feel constrained by policies, protocols, funding decisions, and values that are misaligned with the needs of the school and/or their personal leadership philosophy and values" (p. 11). Consequently, these school leaders felt conflicted when their loyalties were split and they were unable to act in a manner that they believed to be right, resulting in moral distress. Survey data from 954 respondents (out of approximately 2200 school leaders across the province who were invited to participate) were "examined for trends, patterns, and contradictions" (Alberta Teachers Association, 2019, p. 28). Further insights were shared in focus groups by 14 school leaders "representing public, Catholic and alternative schools, and unique leadership positions from urban, suburban, and rural contexts" (Alberta Teachers Association, 2019, p. 27). These school leaders reported sources of constraint such as district expectations and policy requirements, funding and infrastructure concerns, and relational challenges with parents and teachers; consequently, the school leaders felt pinched, frustrated, and separated from their own professional autonomy (Alberta Teachers Association, 2019).

In an article I had the opportunity to co-author with the principal investigator and author of the Alberta Teacher Association study and report, Stelmach et al. (2021) asserted that "moral distress, a feeling resulting from being constrained from doing what one knows to be right (Jameton, 1984), is increasingly apt for describing experiences in the teaching profession, particularly the plight of school leaders who are central decision makers" (p. 2). They continued, declaring that "at the heart of this inquiry was a question of whether and/or how the moral imperative of school leadership is afflicted in the contemporary professional context" (Stelmach et al., 2021, p. 2). For the authors, an understanding of the scope and effects of moral distress contributed to "the dialogue on the sustainability of the profession as a whole" (Stelmach et al., 2021, p. 3) and had implications for both educational scholarship and practice.

Moral distress has been identified in the experiences of Alberta school leaders (Alberta Teachers Association, 2019; Stelmach et al., 2021). In response to the survey at the heart of the Alberta Teachers Association study and completed by over 40% (954 of 2200) of the school leaders in the province, 51% of the respondents agreed with the statement *I feel constrained in my ability to do what I know is the right thing to do because of factors outside my control* (Stelmach et al., 2021). The authors stated:

> for all those who reported experiencing moral distress, 45% experienced it several times a week and month, and 41% claimed this was experienced several times a year. Overall, 95% experienced constraints several times, whether that is within a year, a month, a week, a day, or an hour. Relatedly, in response to the statement, *I feel emotionally exhausted when I think about going to my job*, 49% agreed. (Stelmach et al., 2021, p. 7)

Though Stelmach et al. (2021) synthesized the responses to identify three primary sources of moral distress (issues arising from ever increasing complexity in classroom composition, a constant deterioration in working relationships with parents, and disparity between district-level mandates and expectations and what on-site school leaders believed to be best for the school), it was not the particulars of the sources of the respondents' moral distress that rang as loudly as the ubiquity of the phenomenon itself. That is, to understand that moral distress had a profound impact on "what school leaders do and affects who leaders are" (Stelmach et al., 2021, p. 14) was to recognize that there were significant implications for the profession as a whole. With this assertion, Stelmach et al. (2021) inserted moral distress squarely into the educational discourse, recognizing that further inquiry into how school leaders were affected when their moral reasoning was constrained was crucial.

Kindred Constructs in Education: Demoralization and Burnout

The Alberta Teachers Association (2019) study asserted that many school leaders felt burdened by overwork to the point they felt they could not keep up with the demands of their role, felt emotionally exhausted, and lived "in a constant state of diversion and overwhelm" (p. 10). Significantly, that study was completed and published before the pandemic, the onset and duration of which surely amplified these feelings and reactions (Babb et al., 2022; Arastaman & Cetinkaya, 2022; Lin et al., 2022; Lücker et al., 2022; Vargas Rubilar & Beatriz Oros, 2021) as teachers and school leaders navigated policies and directives that seemed everchanging and sometimes perplexing or confounding in a time of global uncertainty. Arastaman and Cetinkaya (2022) wrote that "the pandemic quadrupled the difficulties school principals face while leading their schools' day-to-day issues with added needs called for by students, staff, and families" (p. 1274). Feeling demoralized or burnt out by the demands of their roles resulted in these educators feeling greater helplessness and having lower perceived self-efficacy, with a consequent increase in "the likelihood of thoughts of leaving the profession" (Lücker et al., 2022, p. 11). Though burnout and demoralization are not exactly the same as moral distress, all three concepts are rooted in the educators' holding of a deeply moral commitment to their profession, and the embodied reactions to each state were similar enough to warrant a consideration of these as kindred constructs in a grounding for this study.

Though the concept of demoralization was considered in regard to teachers, and "teachers do not have the level of responsibilities of school leaders" (Stelmach et al., 2021, p. 6), it is centered on the notion that teachers' moral motivations and sensibilities were affected when they were compelled to comply with mandates that compromised their personal values and sense of professional ethics (Santoro, 2018). It is not a stretch, in my mind, to hold that as teachers can be demoralized, so too can school principals be affected, further justifying a consideration of this similar construct in this section. Santoro and Acosta Price (2021) asserted that "when teachers feel unable to access the intrinsic rewards of their work, believe they are complicit in wrongdoing, or find that they are incapable of meeting their ethical obligations" (p. 2), they became mired in a kind of professional dissatisfaction that moved them away from a morally tenable terrain within their own identity. I maintain that I felt complicit in a grand injustice and was unable to meet my ethical obligations when I acceded to censorship demands in April 2014. Santoro (2018) contended that demoralization may lead to feelings of depression and exhaustion which affected not only how the teachers fulfilled their roles, but also how they felt about the prospects of their continued tenures in the profession. Santoro (2018) also maintained that demoralization was a process with compounding negative effects on the teachers' own conceptions of their moral purpose. I understand this assertion viscerally; my own experiences through moral distress demoralized me, shook me to my core, and had me questioning deeply-held convictions and a purpose I had always proffered so resolutely.

Demoralization and burnout are themselves related constructs; Santoro and Acosta Price (2021) wrote that they are "meaningfully different forms of work dissatisfaction that each affect teachers' ability to do their jobs and influence decisions to remain in the profession" (p. 2). In an examination of Canadian teachers' experiences during the pandemic, Babb et al. (2022) defined burnout "in three dimensions: (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) depersonalization (or cynicism), and (3) reduced personal accomplishment" (p. 557). Again, to assert the inner cohesion of this literature review across the domains of health care and education and to justify a consideration of burnout as a kindred construct to moral distress, these three dimensions are categorically similar to the embodied reactions of moral distress in nurses (Burston & Tuckett, 2012; Oh & Gastmans, 2015). An increasing emotional toll in "demanding school environments that lack appropriate organizational supports or limits" (Santoro & Acosta Price, 2021, p. 2) affected teachers greatly. Imbalance and incongruity between what teachers felt themselves expected to do structurally or organizationally and what they believed was the right thing to do exacerbated burnout, increasingly debilitating their capacity to fulfill what they saw as their professional duty.

There is robust scholarship in educational literature on the causes and effects of stress, exhaustion, and burnout on educators both before and now that we are emerging from the pandemic. On the heels of Santoro's (2018) well-received book, demoralization is an accepted phenomenon in educational scholarship. An awareness of moral distress as an area of concern for educators, both at an individual level and for the profession itself, is still in its figurative infancy, but has now begun in earnest. I argue that my study is positioned at the beginning of a logical next avenue of inquiry in educational scholarship, one which moves beyond acceptance and identification of moral distress to an exploration of how those affected make sense of their experiences contending with it. I maintain that my study will advance understanding because it examined the experiences of participants from a unique conceptual vantage point.

A Principal's Professional Identity

As one of the questions which guided this study invoked the term *professional identity* directly, it was necessary to synthesize some of the professional identity literature to provide a grounding for this research. The conception of professional identity acted to both encapsulate and shape the principals' processes of making sense of the morally distressing situations they faced. There is consensus in this domain of literature (Nordholm et al., 2023; Notman, 2016; Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021) that a school leader's professional identity is not bound completely by an understanding of the technical competencies required for a specific role, nor solely of that role in relation to the function of other stakeholders in a learning community. While those are important considerations, they are complemented by a principal's own dispositions, values, and ways of understanding the scope of their role based on their own experiences (Notman, 2016). A principal's professional identity is also infused with the ethos of the moral enterprise of education. For example, along with instructional leadership, relational leadership, and organizational leadership, the British Columbia Principals and Vice-Principals' Association (2019) called for principals to provide ethical leadership and moral stewardship in their schools. For a principal, professional identity calls for and relies on a clear and consistent alignment between their own ethical authenticity and their actions.

Notman (2016) further stated that the notion of identity itself was "multiple rather than single and has multiple meanings" (p. 760), with the expression of any part of a multifaceted identity dependent on both context and audience. Cruz-Gonzalez et al. (2021) recognized that identity is predicated on one's own notion of 'self', and "the 'self' is ambiguous and composed of a constant flow of multiple identities" (p. 33). They continued, noting the difficulty of conceptualizing a uniform definition of professional identity, "as it is not an objective reality and is developed based on self-perception, which is in turn based on values, impulses, beliefs, traits, and experiences with others" (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021, p. 33). The notion of a principal's professional identity is dynamic, changing and changeable depending on one's values and interactions within and across contexts.

Notman (2016) maintained that the mechanism for the development and refinement of a principal's professional identity is a capacity to adapt to a situation as it is unfolding. For the two principals Notman interviewed from New Zealand, they noted that the principals were able to put aside their dominant leadership tendencies to attend to incidents when their own predilections may not have best served them. For one of the principals, through much prior consideration and concerted reflection after a human resource issue in the school, "it was essential, he believed, to focus on the 'professional' rather than the 'personal' in order to secure an optimal outcome for quality teaching and learning" (Notman, 2016, p. 769). For Notman (2016), the capacity to engage an appropriate mode of leadership, be that "facilitative, collaborative, or directional" (p. 764), to best suit a situation or the larger politically or socially informed context highlighted the dynamic nature of professional identity.

To Ryan (2007), identity is fluid and informed by social context; the expression of professional identity is an act of purposive and constant improvisation. Ryan (2007) asserted that "people are forced to constantly improvise because the circumstances in which they find themselves are continually changing; rarely is anyone presented with identical situations, even in interactions with the same people over time" (p. 347). In schools, principals manifested their identities as mediators, sometimes explaining, sometimes clarifying, sometimes interpreting, and sometimes amplifying ideas and dialogue. This mediator role was sometimes literal, with the principal acting to "diffuse open conflict" (Ryan, 2007, p. 356) and to anticipate and solve problems within the school. Mediation was sometimes symbolic, and for Ryan (2007), perhaps a greater challenge within the principal's own professional identity, as the act of interpretation was one of making meaning. That is, school leaders "find themselves positioned between different groups and recognize that they and others must interpret the knowledge that they encounter" (Ryan, 2007, p. 361). This mediative facet of a principal's professional identity "involves making meaning for others, making sense, and help others make sense out of chaos" (Ryan, 2007, p. 361). The principals in Ryan's study found that there was sometimes great difficulty in mediating between the values and perspectives of diverse communities.

Robertson (2017) maintained that professional identity can be challenged as principals negotiated their own beliefs and values while considering the demands of external influences, whether curricular, policy-based, or in regard to the influence of educational and community stakeholders. In her case study of Niall, an experienced principal from a high performing New Zealand school, Robertson (2017) stated that "principals draw on values and beliefs to provide some constancy to balance the flux inherent in the multiple identities that constitute the self" (p. 776). I found this study particularly useful in grounding my own work, as Robertson's interest in the evolution over time of a principal's professional identity led her to delineate "four aspects of self [that] interrelate to consciously or unconsciously influence professional identity" (Robertson, 2017, p. 784): the thinking self, the feeling self, the acting self, and the believing self. These four aspects sometimes acted in concert and sometimes each acted as moderating influences on the others.

Using the thinking self to “moderate perceptions and maintain perspective” (Robertson, 2017, p. 781), Niall acted strategically to influence and inform his own practice and the actions of those around him. He reflected often and deeply on both his actions and the thought processes which led him to particular courses of action. For Niall, positioning himself within this thinking aspect was a function of his own high autonomy, as the capacity to navigate through situations he may have found untenable while maintaining fidelity to his own values was crucial. Robertson (2017) contended that “negotiating a ‘space within’ to balance policy demands with personal values allowed Niall to reshape a perceived threat into a creative challenge. Challenge then provided opportunity to innovate” (p. 780). The capacity to see challenges as opportunities for one’s own growth is consistent with Jerdborg’s (2022) contention that an important part of a school leader’s professional identity was the ability, “through imagination, [for] the principals to locate themselves, explore alternatives, and envision possible futures” (p. 296).

Through the feeling self, a principal engaged in emotional management through instances of anger, stress, and frustration. Using his own moral purpose as a touchstone to ground himself when his “personal beliefs and values come into conflict with the expectations and perceptions of others” (Robertson, 2017, p. 781), Niall relied on a clarity of purpose and a clear articulation of his own values to mitigate negative feelings and reactions to the challenges he felt from those around him.

The part of a principal’s professional identity that impelled them to be both adaptive and proactive in their actions was conceived of as the acting self. Robertson (2017) noted that Niall’s commitment to continuous personal and professional growth was highly evident in his actions. Again, constant reflection on one’s own practice and motivations paved a way toward future action. Each of the thinking, feeling, and acting selves of Robertson’s (2017) notion of professional identity was girded by the believing self, the moral sense a principal had that their work was more than ensuring quality teaching and learning in the building. For Niall, this entailed being a vocal advocate of the process of education itself. He stated that "a person can know a lot about curriculum, a lot about how things should work in theory, but if they don't actually have deep in their heart a real belief about the way it should work and the way organizations should work in a healthy, positive, open, embracing sort of way, then I just don't think it flies" (Robertson, 2017, p. 784). Robertson (2017) concluded by recognizing that a principal's professional identity was a continually evolving conception, one derived and transformed by both action and reflection.

In their systematic review of scholarship spanning a quarter century, Cruz-Gonzalez et al. (2021) concluded that understanding school leadership required an awareness of how professional identity developed and was cultivated. They asserted that this was a complex process, and "professional identity is influenced by numerous factors, which shape the way of 'being' and 'doing' of each professional" (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021, p. 45; Boje and Frederiksen, 2021). Professional experience was an important consideration, as the time engaged in the role of school leader provided fertile ground for "the constant evolution as [principals] adapt to the different barriers, challenges, and experiences they face" (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021, p. 34). Recognizing the multiplicity of dimensions which informed professional identity was to understand the notion of a principal's professional identity holistically, to consider the leader's own processes of change and growth as fundamental not just to how they performed their roles, but to who they believed themselves to be.

An awareness of the dynamic nature and multifaceted composition of principals' professional identities (Ryan, 2007; Robertson, 2017; Jerdborg, 2022) grounded my analysis and interpretation of the participants' insights and infused the notions of *moral fidelity* and *moral fluidity* I offer in chapter ten. I argue that understanding their professional identities as the moveable terrain in which the principals in this study contended with dissonant imperatives and moral distress further underscored the complexity of what they navigated.

Intercultural Competence

Because Canadian-accredited schools abroad are by definition located outside of Canada, and principals of these schools interact daily with students, parents, teachers, and administrative counterparts whose ways of engaging the world may be informed by wholly different social and political dynamics, I grounded my research in relevant international education and intercultural studies literature. With regard to the nature of my study, the recognition that there were some marked differences between Western and Eastern educational cultures (Hammad & Shah, 2018; Wilhelm & Gunawong, 2015; Keller, 2015; Bottery et al., 2013) for example, or between various Western cultures, pointed to the importance for educators to cultivate within themselves intercultural awareness and competence. Deardorff (2011) asserted that intercultural awareness entailed not only the capacity to understand what people from different cultures held true and why they believed what they did, but also required one to recognize their own cultural biases, assumptions, and expectations. Hinner (2022) referred to a kind of intercultural effectiveness or intercultural adroitness required to understand and respond appropriately to culturally informed differences in perspectives and behaviour.

The research consensus (Hinner, 2020; Sarli & Phillimore, 2022; Parent & Vernhagen, 2013; Hiratsuka et al., 2016; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013; Elosúa, 2015) overwhelmingly supported the notion that having educators develop an intercultural communicative competence was "effective in ameliorating cultural discontinuities" (Poole, 2016, p. 1). This was important no matter where a principal was geographically located and regardless of the curriculum they were administering. There are certainly differences in the social context and political realities for a Canadian principal working in Canada or working in a Canadian-accredited school abroad, though the program of studies they administer is identical in both settings. In many ways, being attuned to cultural conditions added a need for increased nuance in the principal's role. Hammad and Shah (2018) referred to the inconsistencies that arose from a dissonance between cultures, then affirmed the importance of engaging a negotiation of values in a deliberate manner.

Though Walton et al. (2013) wrote specifically of the deepening of teachers' intercultural awareness, I felt that their observations were equally relevant for school principals. They asserted that teachers should purposefully and critically reflect on their own cultural assumptions. As well, they maintained that teachers should actively cultivate an empathic and reflexive perspective to best understand students' emerging realities (Walton et al., 2013). Similarly, in their working definition of intercultural competence, DeJaeghere and Cao (2009) wrote of "the capability to shift cultural perspective and adapt behaviour to cultural commonalities and differences" (p. 438). Importantly, theorists in this field seemed to concur that intercultural competence was not an event or a product; instead, it was a robust and recursive process refined by critical reflection (Deardorff, 2011; Deardorff, 2015). Engagement in this process allowed for a mediation of seemingly disparate values and cultural expectations, further underscoring the inclusion of this strand of scholarship in which to situate my study.

Walker et al. (2007) stated that "intercultural schools can be conceptualized in relation to the extent to which different value sets 'fit' together in a school" (p. 382). In examining how cultural values shaped the perceptions of both Hong Kong and British administrators working in Hong Kong primary schools, Bottery et al. (2013) concluded that both groups reported pressure and frustration in dealing with educational legislation and policy implementation. The authors found notable differences in how the 10 Hong Kong and the 10 British administrators responded to frustration, as “the attitude of the Hong Kong principals was much less confrontational” (Bottery et al., 2013, p. 53), while the British educators “were more likely to mediate or oppose external demands” (Bottery et al., 2013, p. 54). This kind of culturally shaped response underscored the importance of intercultural considerations in understanding the administrators’ interpretations of their working conditions. It is within these culturally informed and diverse responses that this study contributes to a furthering of scholarship. That is, it is simple to assert objectively that the principal of a Canadian-accredited school abroad should be interculturally aware. This assertion does not capture the reality of the practical difficulties and the emotional effort required to balance disparate sets of values while leading a Canadian school outside of Canada.

Walker et al. (2007) stated that in intercultural settings, there was an imperative to “focus on openly addressing, and indeed exposing” (p. 379) the cultural values and perceptions which shaped school leadership. Similarly, Demerath (2018) maintained that school leadership involved conditions charged or laden with culturally informed meaning, the consideration of which required an understanding of the mechanisms of power and inherent political realities which permeated the process of school leadership itself. Gill et al. (2014) asserted that ethical leadership in schools required the negotiation of conditions with purposeful political action and concerted political skill. Similarly, Fransson and Grannäs (2013) held that teachers are involved in “micro-political manoeuvres in their everyday practices” (p. 9). Though not every interaction or relationship was a negotiation per se, there was an underlying awareness that a balance needed be struck between the values and assumptions of all parties affected by a school leader's decision-making.

Political considerations and the need to constantly read the prevailing ideological landscape informed much of an educator's experience working internationally. Acting within expected structural frameworks, or at least being adept and expedient enough to conform at a level palatable to those who enforced the policies, can lessen possible friction (Reingold & Baratz, 2020; Sugrue, 2020). In their examination of university professors in Turkey contending with strict government mandates regarding censorship, Aktas et al. (2019) asserted that restrictive and authoritarian government policies placed educators in "a very precarious position" (p. 184). Though Turkish university professors and principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad do not serve the same function or have the same responsibilities, there is direct relevance, through the consonance in the challenges they faced, to incorporate their insights into the foundational literature of my study. Aktas et al. (2019) described the social exclusion of educators who refused to comply with government mandates which they believed would constrain their expression and academic freedom. This social exclusion resulted in personal emotional turmoil and had relational implications that affected the professors in their academic communities. The authors detailed the plight of educators who acquiesced to policies that ran counter to their own personal convictions, reporting "a pervasive sense of resignation and lack of motivation" (Aktas et al., 2019, p. 184). Though Aktas is himself a Turkish national, he found his own ethical convictions misaligned with the prevailing ethos of increasingly repressive government strictures and policy constraints. Again, a difference in the "underlying educational philosophy" (Benson, 2011, p. 88) between the educator and the policies to which they were expected to conform led to a dissonance with great effect on the individual.

A study that was particularly informative for my research was conducted by Hammad and Shah (2018), in which they considered the challenges facing international school leaders located in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Based on semi-structured interview responses from ten senior leaders in five international curriculum schools in "a conservative country which has distinct sets of beliefs, social values, and cultural traditions" (p. 749), Hammad and Shah (2018) identified the lack of ideological cohesion between the schools and the host country as the source of tension and "major challenges" (p. 762) for the school leaders. They maintained that the values which informed the curriculum in an international school "can be problematic in such a conservative country" (Hammad & Shah, 2018, p. 749). The authors drew from cultural studies scholarship to frame their examination as one of *cultural dissonance*, which referred to "confusion and conflict experienced by people when experiencing a cultural environment that conflicts with their values and beliefs" (Hammad & Shah, 2018, p. 751). In these settings, the school leader was situated in the challenging position of providing leadership which encompassed the expectations of different value systems (Wilhelm & Guanwong, 2016; Reingold & Baratz, 2020). Barakat and Brooks (2016) stated that international school leaders were "in a unique position to influence cultural dynamics and establish expectations for cohesive or divisive behaviour" (p. 4), ending with a consideration of culturally capable leadership in international schools, characterized for them as a leader being attuned to both professional duty and political context (Barakat & Brooks, 2016).

Similarly, Wilhelm and Gunawong (2015) asserted that the very nature of moral reasoning in intercultural contexts was itself informed by cultural considerations and the prevailing social beliefs of a country. The authors employed the Defining Issues Test and Values Survey Measure instruments to measure differences in moral reasoning among 111 Thai and 185

American undergraduate students. Based on their results, Wilhelm and Gunawong (2015) declared that a person with high levels of intercultural awareness, regardless of their own cultural background, would be able to recognize that there were a multitude of factors which informed cultures. These people would then be able to act with high levels of cultural sensitivity when navigating situations which arose in the space between different cultural understandings and cultural identities.

I argue that my study can be positioned in a gap in this strand of scholarship. It seemed evident to me that principals working outside of the country in which they themselves were likely raised and educated, whose professional obligations involved administering a program and leading a Canadian school outside of Canada, would require intercultural facility as a fundamental component of their role. The scholarship I reviewed identified both a conceptual awareness of cultural incongruity and dissonance and the practical realities of these on those involved. There is space within this scholarship for a study like mine, in which I recognize the participants' need for and working conceptions of intercultural awareness, and then move beyond identification of these considerations to understand how these people made sense of experiences borne of or constantly informed by intercultural incongruity.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

In this chapter I present Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the qualitative research methodology to which I ascribed and a consideration of its appropriateness in this study. I offer a brief grounding of IPA as it is borne from the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Lastly, I discuss *dilemmatic space*, the sensitizing concept, and *ethico-political space*, the conceptual framework, I used as insight cultivators to engage and interpret the data I collected to consider how principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China made sense of morally distressing situations within the context of their professional identities.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

My purpose in conducting this study was to generate themes to illumine how the participants made sense of the moral distress they encountered while leading Canadian-accredited schools abroad. I chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a research methodology because it has the central focus of "understanding people's lived experiences and the meanings they attach to their experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 2). From the moment I read about IPA, the methodology and its associated methods seemed intuitively appropriate to me; the epistemological and ontological assumptions which undergird IPA are aligned with my own understanding of how people make sense of and create meaning from their experiences. IPA draws from two major schools of philosophical thought: phenomenology and hermeneutics. In this section I consider IPA's philosophical grounding.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Edmund Husserl is acknowledged as the father of phenomenology (Zahavi, 2019), but his original conceptions have been developed and refined by others. Consequently, it is not simple to capture phenomenology with a straightforward definition. Heidegger noted that "there is no such thing as the one phenomenology" (Engvard & Goldspink, 2020, p. 46). Phenomenology is "the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 2). Zahavi (2019) asserted that phenomenology presents "a detailed account of human existence, where the subject is understood as an embodied and socially and culturally embedded being-in-the-world" (p. 1). Phenomenology is the means by which we evidence the way things are, and "when we do so, we discover objects, but we also discover ourselves, precisely as datives of disclosure, as those to whom things appear" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 4). The belief that one must be attuned to the lens through which one experiences the world is central to phenomenology.

The *things* in phenomenology are *phenomena*. From the Greek word meaning appearance (Zahavi, 2019), phenomena are the objects or events or experiences that appear or are perceived in the human consciousness. When one refers to *things*, one is "in fact providing a name to 'things' constructed and named in the mind, without which they could not be thought" (Willis, 2001, p. 3). These phenomena include thoughts, emotions, actions, and imagination (Zahavi, 2019; Sokolowski, 2000). In order to be able to describe these things, one must develop a phenomenological attitude, which is fundamentally different from a natural attitude. The natural attitude is the usual, common-sense perspective with which a person encounters the world in normal life. This natural attitude "takes for granted that the world we encounter in experience also exists independently of us" (Zahavi, 2019, p. 36), as if each person holds themself to be a subject in a world of objects.

Referred to as the transcendent attitude by Husserl, the phenomenological attitude is a suspension of presumptions and biases to recognize the natural attitude for what it is, a set of beliefs, in order to examine how people categorize and make sense of things. To engage this attitude, one becomes an onlooker, like a "detached observer of the passive scene" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 47). In this way, Sokolowski (2000) wrote that "we are no longer simply participants in the world; we contemplate what it is to be a participant in the world" (p. 48). One enters the phenomenological attitude to focus on the essence of perception, so that one may "look *at* what we normally look *through*" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 50). In my study this entailed considering the structure of how meaning is made and navigated when principals experience moral distress.

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009), and the ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer inform IPA. Heidegger felt that Husserl was correct in that phenomena are mostly hidden, concealed in a default natural attitude. But Heidegger felt that Husserl did not go deeply enough. Husserl did consider the objects of experience, but for Heidegger the truly essential question was "what underlies the ability to be able to study the structures of human thought at all?" (West, 2017). This is a question of existence, of what it means to be a human being. This is an ontological question, a question about the nature of being itself, and is fundamentally about interpretation.

Heidegger's central notion is *Dasein,* a German word which means existence. Heidegger parsed the word into its two parts, *da* and *sein*, which mean *there* and *being*. Being-there or being-in-the world is Heidegger's conception that people are not merely subjects navigating objects in the world. Instead, people are in a kind of union with the world. Each person is a Being (noun) who is being (verb) there in the world (Zahavi, 2019). The concept of being and the concept of the world are fundamentally and essentially inseparable. For Heidegger, being there, in the world, is something that people are engaged in, so that when being in the world is looked at with a phenomenological attitude, the hiddenness and concealment of phenomena and consciousness dissolve. People are "the ones to whom things can be disclosed in their truthfulness. We evidence things. We let them appear" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 160). Letting the structures by which the principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad make sense of moral distress appear was the essence of this study.

According to McLeod (2001), hermeneutics relies on the conception that "to be human is to live in an 'interpreted world', a world in which experience is constructed in terms of language" (p. 58). Context is important because it informs the perspective by which interpretations are made. These interpretations are achieved by "unravelling the meaning of the words the inquirer has at his or her disposal for understanding and questioning" (McLeod, 2001, p. 62). For Smith et al. (2009) then, the meaning making process of IPA draws firmly on the hermeneutic tradition, as "the analyst is implicated in facilitating and making sense" (p. 28) of the appearance of a phenomenon.

The philosophical underpinnings of IPA manifest practically in this study in terms of reflexivity. IPA draws from hermeneutics the core concept of a hermeneutic circle. Smith et al. (2009) described the hermeneutic circle as "being concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, at a series of levels. To understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts" (p. 27). In IPA, the researcher, the respondents, and the data analysis process itself are all parts of a whole. That is, IPA is hermeneutic because it is about interpretation, in that "the participants are trying to make sense of their world, while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 53). Consequently, while I was always cognizant of the bridling process demanded by this methodology, I am aware that my own position as a former insider invariably infused my interpretations of the data I collected.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a Qualitative Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) draws upon phenomenology and hermeneutics for its theoretical underpinnings but is not a purely philosophical pursuit; instead, it is a qualitative research methodology that is "concerned with the human predicament" (Alase, 2017, p. 10). Its central concerns are as much psychological as they are existential; in fact, IPA is premised on the belief that "people are physical and psychological entities. They do things in the world, they reflect on what they do, and those actions have meaningful, existential consequences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34). Drawing from its philosophical roots, IPA has melded with social psychology through the work of Jonathan Smith, a psychologist currently based at the University of London. IPA calls upon researchers to "advance and apply their interpersonal and subjectivity skills to their research exploratory processes" (Alase, 2017, p. 9). The approach is fundamentally participant-oriented, requiring engagement between researcher and participant, so that the dialogue between the two produces fertile ground for rich interpretation.

IPA is phenomenological because understanding the structures by which people make meaning of phenomena evokes "an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21). The sense-making process is central to this qualitative methodology.

IPA is also idiographic. Coming as he did from the field of social psychology, Jonathan Smith moved to distance himself from a milieu more likely informed by quantitative and mixed methods approaches concerned with making statements at a group, population, or global level. In contrast, idiography is "concerned with the particular" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29) and Smith and his colleagues relied heavily on this idiographic emphasis to differentiate IPA from approaches that their usual audiences may have been more familiar with. As I embarked on this study, I was already aware that all qualitative methodologies were indeed idiographic, not just IPA, and understood that Smith emphasized a concern with the particular in order to differentiate the way his field had traditionally approached research from the direction he had now moved.

Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) contended that this emphasis on idiography bolstered IPA's epistemological stance, "whereby, through careful and explicit interpretative methodology, it becomes possible to access an individual's cognitive inner world" (pp. 4-5). In this study, I gained insight into the particularities of the sense-making process in people with common lived experiences leading Canadian-accredited schools abroad. Both the commonalities and the differences in how people have engaged and perceived the phenomena of their own experiences arose in the resultant themes and insights I present in this dissertation.

It is both important and responsible to note that there are criticisms of IPA as a research methodology. Tuffour (2017) asserted that a lack of standardization in data analysis methods is a practical limitation of the approach. From my exploration of multiple IPA theorists and studies however, these differences may be more semantic than practical. For example, Alase (2017) called for three generic cycles of data reduction, while Smith et al. (2009) presented a six-step process. Though they are presented differently, both of these processes are informed of the same intent and call for the same general procedures. Smith and Nizza (2021) repeatedly underscored the lack of rigidity and prescription in *how to do* IPA. My own data analysis became, essentially, a synthesis of Smith's and Alase's approaches, and I contend that my own process benefitted from IPA's non-standardized engagement with the data.

Another practical limitation could have been the requisite communication skills (Tuffour, 2017) of both researcher and participant to ensure that experiences may be expressed in a rich and nuanced manner. If the depth of analysis was dependent upon the eloquence of the speaker or the flow of the interview process, there may have been lost opportunities for interpretation if dialogue was stilted. Smith et al. (2009) addressed this criticism by acknowledging the possibility that limited communication skills may affect data collection and its subsequent analysis. They called for concerted attention and care to ensure that rich and exhaustive data are collected. Holding a second interview with each participant lessened the possibility of not securing enough data with which to work.

Tuffour also raised a conceptual limitation of IPA. The fact that IPA "is fundamentally a subjective research approach" (Tuffour, 2017, n.p.) meant that any two researchers analyzing the same data may arrive at different interpretations. Though I agree with an assertion that there is little chance of two researchers interpreting a person's experiences in the same way, this is not necessarily a limitation of the methodology. Rather, if an IPA researcher is explicit about the reflexive screens and the conceptual framework they used to interpret the data, the findings can be appropriately judged on their own merits. Constantly checking one's own assumptions, as I did fastidiously in my reflexive journal (Smith & Osborn, 2015), and being faithful to the interpretative process intrinsic to IPA mitigated this conceptual concern. This is in alignment with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) assertion that the social world could not be understood from the standpoint of one individual. Instead, the interactions between a researcher and participants were themselves inevitable components of the interpretivist paradigm, with the researcher acting as a participant observer in an interactive process of making meaning.

A Sensitizing Concept and a Conceptual Framework

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, like other phenomenological methodologies, requires a researcher to be conscious of how their preconceptions and prior experiences may prevent them from understanding the phenomenon under study in a full and robust way. It is for this reason that I was intentional and fastidious in my own bridling process, which I detail further in the next chapter. I was aware from the outset that I should approach the data without my own assumptions already leading me in any particular direction. It was crucial that I not beg my own questions to find what I had set myself up to look for. In my analysis, I did employ a sensitizing concept, *dilemmatic space*, and a conceptual framework, *ethico-political space*, to understand the data I gathered. Importantly, I used these as reference points, not as sifting tools. It was within my analysis that I benefitted from these insight cultivators (Adams & van Manen, 2017; Healey-Benson, 2022) to bring a more abundant and deeper understanding of how the principals made meaning of the morally distressing situations they encountered. Firstly, a sensitizing concept served to "lay the foundation for the analysis of research data" (Bowen, 2006, p. 3), providing me with direction on how my data may have contributed to an understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Bowen (2006) reiterated Charmaz's (2003) contention that "sensitizing concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience" (p. 3). That is, a sensitizing concept alerts a researcher to possible avenues of interpretation, by "stimulat[ing] further creative insights and understandings" (Healey-Benson, 2022, p. 88). In this study, where the principals' own conceptions of moral reasoning were sometimes derived differently than their host country counterparts', where dissonance often resided in a subjective divide between culturally informed values, the sensitizing concept of a *dilemmatic space* amplified my understanding.

Imenda (2014) stated that a conceptual framework arises from the synthesis of "existing views in the literature concerning a given situation, both theoretical and from empirical findings" (p. 189). This synthesis provides the researcher with an "integrated way of looking at a problem" (Imenda, 2014, p. 189). Imenda (2014) likened the process of selecting a conceptual framework to joining together smaller pieces of a puzzle to create a larger map of possible interpretations. This metaphor aligns with my understanding of a conceptual framework as a kind of lens or filter through which data are processed. The framework acted as a structure to guide me, the researcher, in analysis and interpretation of lived experiences. I did not impose the framework on the data; rather, the framework acted as an external text to illuminate meaning making that was occurring, both in the participants' understandings, which began when they were first encountering and navigating morally distressing situations within the context of their own professional identities, as well as the interpretative process which began for me upon hearing their stories. From my own experiences and from interviewing four other principals in the pilot study which preceded this study, I recognized immediately that there were aspects of this conceptual framework that were resonant for me. As I engaged the data analysis process for the 15 participants in this study, it cemented for me the aptness of interacting with what I heard through the confluence of this particular sensitizing concept and this conceptual framework; not just in terms of hearing and sorting their actual words, but as a blueprint for understanding how these principals continuously made sense of their experiences abroad.

Dilemmatic Space

Honig's (1996) notion of a *dilemmatic space* is a reconceptualization of the nature of dilemmas, moving them from unique events to a wider understanding that the conditions which bound dilemmas are themselves subject to the interpretations of those involved. Fransson and Grannäs (2013) stated that "new ideological, political, or administrative ways of governing the educational system have consequences for the educational system and for teachers' work" (p. 5). They further asserted that policy decisions driven by different political or ideological tenets "alter norms, values, task, guidelines, obligations, and relations and (may) also change the very notion of dilemmas" (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013, p. 5). Consequently, the "constitution of (dilemmatic) spaces usually entails positioning and the negotiation of power" which also has "implications for how individuals intersubjectively construct their individual and professional identities" (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013, p. 8). Dilemmatic space, with its implied mandate to consider the inherent nature of one's own beliefs, provided terrain for the examination and expression of dilemmas as "an ongoing dialectic process" (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013, p. 8). This ongoing process also aligns with the assumptions that suffuse methods of data analysis in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, in which the sense-making process is also subjective, continuous, and iterative.

This sensitizing concept was appropriate in my study because it provided grounding to understand how principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China must constantly negotiate between disparate sets of values. I used dilemmatic space to deepen my interpretation of respondents' experiences when ethical or moral dilemmas were not bound by a unified perspective. Some of the countries which host Canadian-accredited schools have political and ideological underpinnings easily discernible from those which inform Canada's liberal, democratic ideals; China certainly does. Principals of Canadian schools abroad need to be aware of these differences so that they can conceptualize difficult situations and still fulfill their professional obligations to faithfully administer their curricula. Specifically, I employed the conceptual core of dilemmatic space as part of the interpretative process to consider both my own and the participants' ethical positioning with regard to the challenges they faced working in an international context.

Ethico-political Space

I employed Alakavuklar and Alamgir's (2018) framework of an *ethico-political space* to ground my understanding, to cultivate and deepen my insights, into how the principals made sense of their experiences balancing their personal convictions with their professional obligations. An ethico-political space is a conceptual terrain in which one's beliefs are the drivers of action through processes of both compliance with and resistance to inherently political mandates. The political nature of simply being engaged in a dialectic struggle "is the conduit through which ethical subjectivity arises" (Alakavuklar & Alamgir, 2018, p. 31). That is, one's own moral convictions and positionality are dependent on the cultural and social conditions in which they were fostered. Chinese society and education, for example, may be suffused by a different conception of cheating and academic honesty than that which underlies Canadian education. In a collectivist society that does not hold individual academic honesty as a paramount consideration in education, there are different cultural and philosophical nuances at play than what would be assumed in Canadian schools. For example, in their examination of perceptions and attitudes towards academic honesty in China, Jian et al. (2020) asserted that some students believed it to be a moral function of the collective to ensure that each member "survive heavy course work and final exams" (p. 548); consequently, such students were not dissuaded from engaging in means that they knew intellectually to be academically dishonest. Informed by these respective cultural notions, there is sometimes very little objective common ground in conversations between Chinese and Canadian principals about how to contend with Chinese students caught cheating in Canadian-accredited schools in China, as there exists a subjective divide between the notions of rightness which frame the context. In the ethico-political framework, one must constantly question assumptions about the very nature of ideology and power; insights garnered can serve to drive action through a conceptual terrain where one finds consonance with their own convictions and way of making sense of the world. It is this need to constantly dig for and examine that which is hidden that made ethico-political space an appropriate framework to use in this study.

Though I had encountered neither *dilemmatic space* nor *ethico-political space* prior to beginning doctoral coursework, both are consistent with my own epistemological and ontological assumptions and are resonant in my own processes of making meaning from school leadership experiences outside Canada. Fransson and Grannäs (2013) declared that educators are involved in "micro-political manoeuvres in their everyday practices" (p. 9) while Alakavuklar and Alamgir (2018) maintained that resistance to the legitimacy of what are believed to be unjust mandates requires "rational and political action" (p. 31). While this sensitizing concept and this conceptual framework have not been utilized together in existing research to the best of my knowledge, I realized into my analysis that they would be complementary in how they require a consideration of the dynamics of positioning one's self in an ideological terrain. I deepened my understanding of the data I collected through the conceptual intersection of these two notions.

Education can be inherently political by its nature, and principals are constantly engaged in charting what they believe to be a best course for the schools they lead (Starr, 2011). Alakavuklar and Alamgir (2018) asserted that "organizations are places where continuous political reconstructions/co-constructions and struggles occur along with the dialectics of power and resistance" (p. 34). Like dilemmatic space, an ethico-political space is neither an event nor a product, but a process which allows for compliance with and resistance to authority to be situated. I incorporated both *dilemmatic space* and *ethico-political space* into how I interpreted the data I collected. These notions are in alignment with my own conceptions of how meaning is created from experience; they served to filter and amplify my understanding of the principals' lived experiences in the data and provided an architecture for my interpretations.

Chapter Four: Research Methods

In this chapter I describe the pilot study I conducted one year before beginning this study. I then describe the delimitations and limitations of this study and the sampling process I undertook to recruit the participants. I detail the bridling process I undertook so that the participants' words shone through and rang loudly in my interpretations of them, to indicate that there was deliberation and intent in ensuring that my own positionality did not detract from or unduly colour their experiences. I describe the data collection which occurred from late spring to mid-summer 2021. Lastly, I consider the trustworthiness of my own process, my engagement with methodology, and this study itself: its truth value, its applicability, its dependability, its confirmability, and its adherence to the markers of excellence in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research.

I also detail my data analysis and interpretation process in this chapter. Even as I write this and perhaps to a reader looking from the outside, this is a process that could appear to have come to fruition. That is not at all how I feel. Over the course of the last year, I continued to read studies which employed IPA as a means of deepening my own understanding of the rigour required to adhere to the demands of this methodology. This was not solely an intellectual exercise though; in some ways, it was my attempt to understand why my engagement with these participants moved me as it did. I tried to evince an objective viewpoint onto an undertaking that very much sat, and still sits, within me. The iterative nature of my own data analysis is not something I feel I have moved past. I hear the words of the participants in my mind more than a year and a half after I first heard them; I feel what they said in a way that continues to impel me to understand their experiences more deeply and with increased nuance.

Contending with Censorship in a Canadian-Accredited School Abroad: A Pilot Study

The pilot study I conducted in spring 2020, in which four other principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China spoke of their experiences and affective reactions while dealing with censorship mandated by local education authorities, provided me with a grounding in research design and a first pass at the process of data analysis and interpretation. For that study, I had followed Alase's (2017) method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) data reduction through "three generic cycles" (p. 16). I was, at that point, still reading widely to understand the styles, rigour, and steps of IPA data analysis, and Alase's method seemed intuitively right for my first time as a solo researcher. By 'intuitively right', I admit freely that I mean less daunting than the six-step process I had also read about.

Following Alase's guidelines, after transcribing an interview and reading through the transcription multiple times, I first looked for "meaningful chunky statements or sentences" (Alase, 2017, p. 12). In the second cycle, I sought condensation of those larger chunks into smaller phrases, attempting what Alase (2017) characterized as an "opportunity to extrapolate in very few tangible words the true 'gist' (or 'core essence') of what the research subject-matter has meant to the 'lived experiences' of the participants" (p. 12). Lastly, in what Alase (2017) termed "the category phrase" (p. 12), I sought to further reduce the smaller phrases of the second cycle to one or two words. These small units were not necessarily words that literally appeared in the transcriptions; rather, they were my interpretations of the essence of the participants' responses.

As Alase (2017) described this process, it allowed the researcher to be both methodical and meticulous in breaking down the participants' responses "without diminishing or misrepresenting the core meaning of their responses or 'lived experiences'" (p. 12). From my interpretations of the participants' responses in the pilot study, I generated five categories:

disillusionment, distress, a struggle, a game, and subversion. Each of the respondents reported being disillusioned when they were compelled to censor course materials and disallow topics of conversation deemed off-limits by local authorities. Disheartenment led to frustration, anger, and distress, in which one participant felt that these instances “eroded my values a little bit.” Feelings of distress resulted in the principals seeing themselves mired in a constant ideological struggle between two vastly different educational systems and political paradigms. In order to navigate these situations, each of the principals envisioned their role as one in which they had to “play the game” in order to fulfill their professional duties. All four of the principals recounted times when they actively (yet secretly) subverted local policies and expectations in order to follow courses of action they believed to be a fundamental part of their role. That is, the principals engaged in dialogue with students who were questioning official state narratives, feeling that fostering a student’s capacity to seek information, dissent, and criticize were principles inherent to a faithful and authentic expression of the curriculum. The principals weighed the consequences of engaging in private conversations with students curious about banned topics, each deciding that those conversations were important enough to risk their own tenures.

The scope of my dissertation research is different than my pilot study; it is both broader, in that I did not focus only on the experience of censorship, and more focused, as I listened to each principal to understand how they made sense of morally distressing situations within the context of their professional identity. Though I opted to pursue what was a much more involved IPA data analysis process here, the themes from the earlier, simpler engagement were certainly resonant in what I heard from the 15 principals in this study.

Delimitations and Limitations

Addressing the delimitations of a study is an integral part of the research design process so that the researcher can justify how the study is bounded in scope (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It also allows a reader to make a more robust evaluation of the transferability or applicability of the findings, which I address further in the final section of this chapter.

I made decisions regarding the delimitations of this study for specific reasons, beginning with the literature I reviewed and synthesized to ground both my thinking and my research design. As nursing scholarship offers the most robust corpus of knowledge regarding moral distress, I read widely there. Because my aim was to bring sense-making through morally distressing situations into the realm of education, with school principals instead of nurses, I centered myself primarily in nursing and education literature (though the volume of education scholarship on moral distress is relatively scant). I did survey other domains of health care literature that consider moral distress but chose purposefully to ground this study in education and nursing scholarship, two categorically similar professions and moral enterprises.

I interviewed current, not former, principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad because I needed to understand how these school leaders actively and continually reconciled the tensions which may have arisen while working in an international setting. By employing this delimitation, I was able to ask the participants directly if cultural incongruities and resultant tensions were causative or acted as catalysts for the moral distress they felt. Now more than three years removed from my own principalship of a Canadian-accredited school in China, I recognize that my perspective has shifted, and continues to shift, with the passage of time. Issues or challenges that occupied me wholly while I was working in a principalship abroad are no longer at the forefront of my mind. The practical realities of contending with a Chinese political milieu have faded in importance. Others issues however, especially those related to what I conceive as ethical incongruities, seemed to deepen with continued reflection. This is consistent with research into the effects of emotional valence on memory. Kensinger and Ford (2020) stated that while negative events and experiences tend to be preserved better in memory than positive or neutral ones, emotional memories are subject to distortion over time. Because I wanted to be as close as possible to the principals' immediate meaning-making processes, and I hoped the insights garnered and generated from the data in this study would inform practice for current principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad, I believed it would be more salient to interview those who were presently in their overseas positions.

While I had originally hoped for participation from principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad located in a number of jurisdictions, ultimately all respondents in this study were leading schools in China when I spoke with them. This can be seen as a limitation of the study in terms of the broadness of its applicability, as the particular details of these principals' experiences or the China-centric conceptions which structure their sense-making processes might not find purchase in another context. While this may be the case, the awareness that these principals did contend with and made sense of morally distressing situations affirms the contribution of this study to a burgeoning and necessary area of educational scholarship.

I interviewed principals but not vice-principals of Canadian-accredited schools because of the nature of the practical difference in these roles in an international context. From conversations outside of this research with principals of Canadian-accredited schools in Thailand, France, Macau, Egypt, Qatar, Japan, and Colombia, I knew that it was typically only the Canadian principals who were involved in meetings with local country and school authorities. This resonated with my own experience in China, in which the two Canadian vice principals I worked with were sometimes exempted from meeting with local Chinese authorities. The immediacy of those meetings, and the expectation from the Chinese government that the Canadian principal be held solely responsible for the implementation of local mandates, justified the delimitation of vice-principals from this study. Though they are undoubtedly part of the decision-making processes in the schools themselves, especially in the machinations of the Canadian programs of study, vice-principals are not held to be primarily responsible by local authorities for making final decisions.

I made explicit the criterion that I sought to interview principals who had spent more than one full year in their principalships abroad. That is, I excluded participants who were in their first year working abroad, regardless of how much administrative experience they may have accrued in Canada or elsewhere. While researchers are reticent to ascribe a universal timeline, consensus appears in the literature that movement by expatriates through the phases of acculturation into their new cultural milieus tended to take no fewer than six months to a year (Naeem et al., 2015; Sims & Schraeder, 2004). By employing this delimitation, I believed that there would be a decreased likelihood that the effects of culture shock were conflated with the affective, psychological, or physiological reactions related to moral distress.

In recruiting I aimed for maximum variation in gender. While I was unable to find or collate information about gender variation in principals from each of the Canadian provinces with accredited offshore programs, I was aware that in March 2021 when I began recruiting participants widely, only six of 47 BC Offshore school principals were female. I could not hope for gender parity. In the end, I was able to interview five female principals and 10 male principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China, with representation from the provinces of BC, Alberta, and Ontario.

I intended to limit the sample size of this study in alignment with research design suggested by key IPA practitioners (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2015; Alase, 2017), who suggested, but did not prescribe, a sample of up to 10 participants. This sample size may be perceived by those less familiar with this methodology as being small or limited. However, IPA as a methodology recognizes that analysis is "inevitably a complex process. It may be an experience which is collaborative, personal, intuitive, difficult, creative, intense, and conceptually demanding" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 80). It is "an approach that benefits from a small sample" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). In the end, I was fortunate to have a higher response rate than I had hoped for, ending up with more participants than what is typically suggested in IPA studies. The opportunity to speak with more people than I had originally intended is something I consider now to be a positive and rewarding turn of events, as each participant deepened my understanding of how these school leaders make sense of morally distressing situations within the context of their professional identities.

I recognize that a small sample size of 15, in the minds of some, may affect the transferability of these research findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). But as I aimed for a rich and deep understanding of how the participants made meaning from their experiences in ways unique to each of them, universal findings were not an aim of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather, it was the recognizability of the potential human experience that I aimed to unfurl. I maintain that those working in schools in international contexts will find value in the conceptual throughlines I constructed in this dissertation.

While the sample size may be seen as small by other qualitative researchers, large by IPA researchers, and an ideal amount by me, a further limitation did arise from the number of participants involved in the study and the volume of data I collected. I have joked with my doctoral supervisor that each of the participants could rightly be a dissertation unto themself. Owing to restrictions of space, I was limited in the amount of individual voice that I could amplify of any one participant, perhaps giving a reader the sense that my findings were borne more heavily of cross-case analyses than an honouring of the idiographic. I address this limitation by asserting that I have, in accordance with the tenets of data analysis of IPA, met the methodological requirements to honour and present the themes that emerged from the voices of both the individual principals and from them as a collective.

Lastly, I recognize a potential limitation based on the difficulty in any language to capture the ineffability of certain concepts in words, as there is a fullness of some cultural constructs that sometimes must be felt as much as they can be known. In chapter six, I present the China-centric notions of *guanxi* and *mianzi* as parts of the principals' own sense-making processes. These are highly nuanced linguistic and social constructs likely understood differently by native Chinese speakers than non-native speakers. I address this limitation on three fronts: firstly, by asserting that the scholarship I have used to describe these constructs was itself written by native Chinese speakers in English. While any translation may present a limitation in wholly accurate expression, my understanding of *guanxi* and *mianzi* has the authentic grounding of being offered by perfectly bilingual writers. Secondly, I did live in China for a long time and achieved a level of conversational capacity that inclines me to feel confident in my interpretations of these notions. Thirdly, my understanding is also supported by countless conversations and interactions with Chinese colleagues and friends over many years. In fact, while working through earlier drafts of this document, I purposefully engaged former Chinese colleagues in conversation about the interpretations of these constructs I have offered in this dissertation, receiving unanimous approval.

Sampling

With an aim of "producing an in-depth examination of certain phenomena, and not generating a theory to be generalized over the whole population" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 9), a small sample size is seen as appropriate in IPA. Smith et al. (2009) declared that IPA is "an approach which benefits from detailed engagement with a small sample, from accessing the chosen phenomenon from more than one perspective, or at more than one time-point, and from the creative and reflective efforts of participants" (p. 56). As I wrote in the preceding section, while a suggested sample size up to 10 respondents is seen as suitable for a doctoral dissertation (Noon, 2018), I ultimately recruited 15 participants. This sample was selected purposefully, confined to a group that offered particular and "meaningful experiences of the phenomenon being investigated" (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015, p. 9). Though I ended up with a fuller slate of participants than what is often suggested for IPA studies, I viewed this as an overwhelmingly positive outcome. It certainly necessitated a longer period for data collection and data analysis than I had plotted on my original timeline, and yet I feel having more participants contributed to a more abundant understanding of how these educational leaders navigated morally distressing situations while administering their Canadian-accredited programs in China.

From the experience of interviewing from my immediate network for the pilot study I conducted in spring 2020, I saw that there were limitations in drawing from a pool of people with whom I had an existing relationship. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) recognized that backyard research elicited dynamics which must be considered carefully by the researcher. While our common experiences in China were pertinent to the research question in that study, the familiarity we shared contributed to a dynamic that was neither wholly personal nor wholly professional. As I reflected on that process, I recognized that neither the participants nor I were used to interacting with one another so formally, causing the dynamic to be somewhat stilted. While I do not believe that the findings were adversely affected, I recognized that it would be better to proceed in this study with participants I knew only on a professional level, if at all.

I used convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to recruit participants. Owing to the years I spent leading BC Offshore schools and the four years I acted as Co-Chair of the BC Offshore Administrators annual conference, I developed a large network of current principals I could email to invite to participate in my study. These were people who I may have communicated with in the past or may have met at an annual conference. I had worked with one directly on an organizing committee for a professional conference. In this initial recruiting period, I also emailed principals from non-British Columbia accredited schools in China and four other international jurisdictions, using publicly available contact information through the respective provincial Ministries of Education and individual school websites.

I had anticipated a substantial rejection rate, as I know how busy the final months of a school year tended to be for principals. In March 2021, I sent out an Invitation to Participate email [Appendix A] to 22 principals representing the Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Ontario, expecting at least half of them to either not respond or to outright decline. I received 15 affirmative responses within two weeks. I was elated and remember thinking that perhaps the topic struck an immediate chord for these respondents. I then sent each of these 15 respondents the Information Letter and Consent Form [Appendix B], which were returned to me signed before I began data collection in April 2021.

Bridling

As it must in any methodology when bridling is used, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis researcher's own process of bridling begins before any data is collected (Dahlberg, 2022; Dahlberg, 2006); consequently (and symbolically), I place this section before the Data Collection and Data Analysis and Interpretation sections in this chapter. Attending to one's own understandings and preconceptions purposively so that any interpretations a researcher might make are aligned with what the data allow the researcher to claim is essential. The constant cultivation, and interplay, of a kind of both openness and restraint is required when engaging data. Bridling ensures a researcher is not constrained in their consideration of a phenomenon by their own prior experiences, that they do not impose limits on the fullness of the participants' own meaning-making because of their own expectations (Stutey et al., 2020). Bridling is not a process wherein a researcher eliminates or recuses themselves from their own preunderstandings of a phenomenon; rather, as Stutey et al. (2020) cited Dahlberg (2006), it is a "reflective stance where the researcher should loosen understandings from prior experiences 'in order to give us the elbow room that we need to see what is happening when we understand phenomena and their meanings'" (p. 146). Like the constant slackening and tightening of the reins while riding a horse, the figurative source of Dahlberg's conception of bridling, a researcher balances a process whereby they are both "patient and attentive" (Vagle et al., 2009, p. 351) when exploring intersubjective relationships, where they actively wait to both seek meaning and remain open to receive it.

Starting days after my candidacy defense in January 2021, months before I would begin speaking with the participants in this study, I wrote my initial bridling statements in a notebook to "get as much as much as [I could] about [my] pre-understandings of the phenomenon out on paper" (Vagle, 2010, p. 17). I wrote of my own experiences as the principal of Canadian-accredited schools in China. I asked myself the questions I had prepared for the participants. I questioned how I felt, both years before and in the moment I was then writing. I questioned myself vigorously and rigorously, interrogating my own assumptions and values to understand not only what I felt, but why. This was a deeply personal exercise, in a process that, as Vagle (2010) asserted, "gives you a better chance of taking hold of your assumptions, rather than the assumptions taking hold of you and in turn the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 17).

Once I began to collect data, I added more bridling statements in my own continuous engagement with what I had heard. I made annotations on whether I needed room to contemplate an emerging insight or whether it came to me (mostly) fully formed, sometimes even noting the actual duration of time I had spent on a particular portion of a transcript. It was not the quantity of time that pointed to the fact that I was continuously bridling, but the conscious attention to whether and when I was positioning myself within or alongside the data themselves.

Stutey et al. (2020) continued, asserting that the process of bridling was rooted in a commitment to meditative thinking, where one "fosters dwelling, listening, gathering meaning, and maintaining openness to the mystery of being human" (p. 146). Wiklund Gustin (2018) similarly contended that the process of bridling allowed one to fully apprehend what was behind phenomena as they were presented, as well as providing an avenue to grasp fully the larger essence of meaning. There is an element of ensuring that a researcher not ascribe meaning too firmly or too quickly, of "holding back the influence of preunderstanding in order to slow down the process of understanding in a way that allows the phenomenon to be visible" (Wiklund Gustin, 2018, p. 274). That is, it is necessary for a researcher to bridle before, during, and after data analysis to revel in their continuous openness to their engagement with the phenomenon, to partake fully in the meaning making of the participants as they engaged the world. Dahlberg (2022) likened bridling to the open and focused improvisation of a professional tennis player, where she is "attentive to different perspectives on where the ball may land, and she is positioned in a particular place in the tennis court but isn't without movement; she must expect the unexpected" (p. 1022). The researcher is open, alert, and attentive, enacting processes in which they can be ready to pitch themselves fully into the process of interpretation.

For me, these processes involved my bridling journals, though I use the word 'journal' as a collective term that extended beyond literal writing in a notebook. Vagle (2010) stated that the bridling journal should be a forum in which a researcher might "wonder, question, think, contradict oneself, agree with oneself, vent, scream, laugh, and celebrate" (p. 403). In notebooks, on sheets of loose paper I happened to have at hand, on the more than 700 notes that filled the walls of my home office, in voice memos, in text messages to myself, and as annotations on Word documents containing the interview transcripts, I certainly felt I experienced all of what Vagle asserted bridling journals might be. My questions and musings sat within and among my wonderings about both the things I heard others say and about myself as the interpretive functionary in this process itself. My moments of insight where I felt I grasped the structure of a participant's own sense-making were nestled next to, and sometimes burst forth from, my exasperations with not seeing or understanding more readily. My journals then were more than work product to me. They were sometimes mundane, records of my own step by step engagement with the data; but they were also sometimes intensely personal, as I made a conscious effort to lay bare my own vulnerabilities and evolving understandings in words. I knew that I was sometimes having an emotional response to what I heard or read, and so I dedicated part of my notebooks to attend to these reactions, to interrogate why I was reacting as I was. I hold that maintaining a separate ledger to attend to my own purposeful detachment from the data was analogous to Dahlberg's tightening and loosening of the figurative reins.

In Appendix F, I have included photographs as illustrative of what I conceive now as the four functions of the bridling journal in my continuous and iterative data analysis and interpretation process. Firstly, the journal served as a forum in which I constantly interrogated my own understandings and positionality. Making explicit in writing my own feelings, memories, frustrations, and successes from my own time as a principal in a Canadian-accredited school in China served to bring to the fore my own preunderstandings of the phenomenon of moral distress in that international context. Stutey et al. (2020) asserted that in these bridling statements, a researcher is "encouraged to be honest and transparent in their writing in order to wait with the phenomenon" (p. 147). As I attested in chapter 1, coming to terms with my own ethical consternation and situating myself in a productive and reflective terrain has been, perhaps even continues to be, a process. Though I had spent much time over a number of years wondering about my affective and relational reactions to incidents in which I felt unable to follow a course of action I held to be morally correct, this journal was the first place in which I had committed these thoughts to paper. As Stutey et al. (2020) recommended, my own bridling statements sometimes reflected not just my own positioning but also contained musings, as they formed, about what I expected I might learn. This iterativeness underscored the notion that bridling must be purposive and recursive.

Secondly, my bridling recorded my notes and reflections on each participant's words, both as a method of clarifying their meaning and intentions and as a way for me to unfurl any burgeoning insights. Thirdly, the journal served as a repository of questions: questions that I might ask in subsequent interactions, questions for myself about why I might be considering what I had heard in a particular way, and questions deliberately removed from the particulars of a participant's words as a way to further understand my role as a vessel of interpretation in this qualitative research. As Vagle et al. (2009) contended, this kind of "dogged questioning" (p. 351) allowed for the constant interrogation of a researcher's own motivations and understandings so that the bridling journal is infused with a required reflexivity.

The fourth function of my bridling journal, as I conceive it now, was to organize and reorganize, to track my own interpretive process over time. It was to impose some semblance of structure on a multilayered process informed by evolving insights and sometimes dynamic affective reactions to the data. I surrounded myself, literally, with the data, a tidy metaphor to complement how fully the data sat within me. I arranged the notes on my office walls, moving and clustering them as I cottoned on to emerging motifs or themes. My movement of them and amidst them became part of my own meditative thinking on the participants' words written on the small pieces of paper themselves. Indeed, regardless of whether I was writing on paper or recording digitally, whether I was creating records or collocating them, I committed to being open to where the data may have led. I believe I was respectful of both the participants' words and the process of interpretation itself.

Data Collection

Given the logistical difficulties of travel due to pandemic restrictions and quarantine requirements, it was not feasible to travel to China to meet with the participants in-person, which had been my intention before COVID shut the world down. The research site then became Zoom, a secure virtual platform. From the beginning of April 2021 until mid-July 2021, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews (see Appendices C and D), two with each participant, from my home office in Edmonton. I wanted to ensure privacy during the conversation and encouraged the participants to choose a place best suited to their privacy and comfort.

Approximately half of the participants spoke with me from their homes in China, while the rest spoke from their office in their schools during their workday.

The principals received an introductory email (see Appendix A) in the correspondence leading up to the initial interview. After securing a principal's interest in participating, I sent each of them the Information Letter and Adult Participant Consent Form (see Appendix B) via email. I indicated that I would be seeking permission from the participant to record the interview. With this consent granted by each participant, then affirmed at the beginning of each session, I made a video recording of each interview through Zoom, as well as an audio backup using the Voice Memo function on my iPhone. Video recordings offer a researcher an increased amount of information to work from in the transcription process, as there are more than verbal cues to inform the transcription (Davidson, 2009). Analyzing body language was not part of my process per se, as I have no specific training in that area. I did hope, however, to simulate as authentic a conversation as possible given the necessity of using Zoom as opposed to meeting in-person. Being able to watch a person speak while I transcribed their words provided cues for interpretation (Davidson, 2009) such as when they chuckled, when they paused, or when they changed facial expressions. I hold that these cues bolstered my capacity to draw accurate interpretations of their words.

Smith and Osborn (2015) contended that the best form of data collection in IPA was the semi-structured interview, as this allowed for "a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in light of the participants' responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise" (p. 57). After a brief introductory chat with the participant, I utilized an Interview Schedule (see Appendix C) which was crafted in light of questions suitable for an IPA study. These kinds of questions sought to elicit and explore the respondent's thoughts, memories, and individual interpretations of their particular experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The actual interview questions I used were finessed in consultation from my doctoral supervisor and a member of my supervisory committee to ensure that they were aligned both methodologically and in terms of my research purpose and questions. In IPA, the interview schedule is not prescriptive however (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Smith & Nizza, 2021); deviations from the script depending on the nature of answers already given may provide unexpected insights into how the respondent and researcher were making meaning during the dialogic process. With the benefit of hindsight and reflection, I see now that there was indeed much insight to garner from the deviations and asides.

On average, initial interviews lasted just over one hour. To ensure that I collected the rich data required for analysis in IPA (Smith et al., 2009) and that I achieved a level of data saturation required for this doctoral dissertation, I conducted a subsequent interview with each participant to deepen my understanding of how the principals have made sense of their experiences (see Appendix D). On average, the second interview with each participant lasted approximately an hour and a half. These subsequent interviews were scheduled at a mutually convenient time, within three weeks of the first engagement. I aimed to minimize the time between interviews so that any conversational momentum that had developed would not be lost. My assumption was that it would be easier to maintain rapport and we would be more likely to engage in meaningful and pointed conversation if a large amount of time had not transpired between interviews. Again, with reflection on the whole process, I believe that this assumption was borne out.

Following the best practices of IPA data collection, I made notes in my research journal as I was interviewing each participant. Immediately after each interview session ended, I crafted a summary of my own interpretations, a process that is consistent with the expectations of the full IPA data analysis process (Alase, 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2015). After completing all 30 interviews in mid-July 2021, I had a period of six weeks when I rewatched each video and made more notes in my journal. This period coincided with the time I left Canada to move to Vietnam, following my wife as she assumed a new role as a librarian in an international school. The resulting five weeks of quarantine upon arrival in Hanoi gave me ample time to sit with the video and audio recordings and nearly complete the transcription process.

I completed all transcription myself instead of outsourcing it to a transcription service. Davidson (2009) asserted that the process of transcription was one in which a researcher made choices that “are integrally related to theoretical positions and how researchers locate themselves and others in the research process” (p. 38). IPA calls for an intimate engagement with the data; in my mind, transcribing the interviews myself was a fundamental part of this engagement.

Member checks are an important part of the qualitative research process (Guba, 1981; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), both at the data collection and data analysis phases. After each interview, I sent a copy of my summary and any questions or points of clarification I may have had to the participant. As I completed the transcription of each session, I also sent that verbatim record to the participant. Birt et al. (2016) contended that member checking should not be viewed as an item on a researcher’s checklist; rather, “it is an intellectual process which presents distinct epistemological, ethical, and resource challenges” (p. 1810). Ensuring that I had captured both the literal words and the essence of what each participant meant at this final stage of data collection was crucial before I moved to data analysis and interpretation in earnest.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this section, I describe the data analysis and interpretation approach I undertook in this study. Engward and Goldspink (2020) referred to the interpretative experience of IPA data analysis as akin to having lodgers in "your 'house of being', a shared analytic space that researchers and participants inhabit" (p. 41). Similarly, Smith et al. (2009) asserted that IPA analysis is "time-consuming, labour-intensive, and both imaginatively and emotionally demanding" (p. 42), as one must go far beyond reading and re-reading the participant's words. Instead, the researcher must be deeply reflexive in an interpretative process that requires a "fluid and continuous" (Engward & Goldspink, 2020, p. 43) engagement with the data. The six-step data analysis process elucidated by Smith and Osborn (2015) requires a researcher to be systematic, demanding, reflective, playful, imaginative, and critical (Engward & Goldspink, 2020) in a sustained relationship with the transcript. Fortunately for me, Smith and Osborn (2015) were explicit in asserting that their six stages were not prescriptive, that there was space for adaptation depending on the researcher. While I remained open to anything I may have heard from the participants and to any insights I may have derived, my process hinged on the constant turn towards the notions of dilemmatic and ethico-political space, the filters through which I engaged the data. The continuous orientation to and through these conceptions ensured that I never strayed from the intentionality required in the data analysis and interpretation processes called for by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Like Dahlberg's (2022) tennis player, I expected the unexpected.

As I look back upon, and into, my own analysis of this larger set of data, I am unsure as to exactly how many 'steps' there were. I certainly did not 'do this, then do that, then do the next thing'. My process was not nearly as clean or elegant as that, nor did I adhere exactly to what I said I would do in the lead-up to this study. Throughout the writing of my candidacy proposal and then its defense, and in the process of obtaining approval from the Research Ethics Office, I stated that I intended to follow Smith and Osborn's (2015) six-step process as closely as possible. According to Smith and Osborn (2015), once the data are collected, that process begins by first reading through each transcript a number of times to establish familiarity with the participant's literal words. Secondly, the researcher should read through the transcript more deliberately, taking the time to create annotations about interesting observations or poignant phrases. The researcher may also start to craft notes, usually in the form of questions, to record initial wonderings and tentative avenues of exploration for their impending interpretations (Smith & Nizza, 2021). The length and depth of these annotations are dependent upon the nature of the discussion, as the researcher looks beyond the actual words spoken in an attempt to comment on the mood, atmosphere, and feeling of each moment (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This step leads to a running commentary on "the similarities and differences, echoes, amplifications, and contradictions in what a person is saying" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 67) that becomes integral to the next steps of the process.

In the third step, the researcher fashions another margin on the transcript document to create "experiential statements," which "capture in a succinct form what we have learned about the meaning of the experience to the participant in this portion of text" (Smith & Nizza, 2021, p. 38). Prior to the adoption of new terminology in IPA in late 2021, experiential statements were known as emergent themes (Smith & Nizza, 2021) or emerging theme titles (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Smith and Osborn (2015) stated that the purpose of this stage is to move to an elevated level of abstraction to find expressions "which are high level enough to allow theoretical connections within and across cases, but which are still grounded in the particularity of the specific thing said" (p. 68). Engward and Goldspink (2020) referred to this step as the creation of prototype themes.

The fourth stage of this process calls for the researcher to look for connections between experiential statements. At this stage, a researcher aims to make sense of the connections they have drawn between what a participant has said in various portions of the transcript. Smith and Nizza (2021) contended that during this stage, some experiential statements would cluster together, creating what they called a Personal Experiential Theme. In this clustering, the researcher must ensure that connections drawn find resonance in the actual words of the respondent. Characteristic of the double hermeneutic in IPA, this step enables the researcher to draw "on one's interpretative resources to make sense of what the person is saying, but at the same time one is constantly checking one's own sense-making against what the person actually said" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 71). In Appendix E, I have included an example of how I parsed a participant's response to come to experiential statements, and then how I identified that those statements from various parts of a transcript would be sorted into a Personal Experiential Theme.

The fifth step in Smith and Osborn's (2015) process is to undertake the first four steps with the transcript from the next participant. Here, they suggested that the themes which have been generated from the first transcript may either be used as a guide for the second transcript or may be put aside. Whichever method was chosen at this stage, a researcher must take care to both "discern repeating patterns but also acknowledge new issues emerging as one works through the transcripts" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 73). In my process, I approached each new transcript as if it were the first datum I had seen.

The sixth step in the process involves looking for patterns across cases to create Group Experiential Themes. Group Experiential Themes "bring together similarities in participants' accounts of their experience and so point to high-level connectivity between them" (Smith & Nizza, 2021, p. 55). Prior to the new IPA terminology in 2021, Group Experiential Themes were known as Master Themes (Smith & Osborn, 2015). I sorted the 14 Personal Experiential Themes I had derived into four Group Experiential themes, as seen in Figure 1 below. I named these Group Experiential Themes *finding one's place*, *finding one's footing*, *finding one's route through*, and *finding one's perspective*. Being collated together into a Group Experiential Theme did not imply convergence or similarity between what individual participants said in the Personal Experiential Themes which comprised it; rather, the Group Experiential Themes were conceptions derived by me to represent the group as a whole and did contain sometimes disparate individual understandings.

The reality of my process was decidedly less graceful and elegant than my original intention. Though, I contend, it was no less exhaustive, systematic, imaginative, or critical. Ultimately, I believe I mashed Alase's three cycles together with Smith and Osborn's six steps. There were sometimes multiple passes through the same 'step', and the iterative nature of the process itself confounds my ability to look back now and declare exactly when I 'did' each step or clearly demarcate where one step ended and the next began. I certainly read and reread the transcripts. I rewatched the videos and repeatedly listened to the interviews while out on my daily runs. I paused to ponder often.

I filled notebooks, recorded voice memos when I would find myself awake long after I should have fallen asleep, sent myself text messages when an idea revealed itself outside of "office hours". I distilled longer sentences into shorter phrases before again reducing them to a key word or two. I filled my home office walls with Post-It notes that included both a participant's actual words and my thoughts on what they had said. I moved those notes around as

I clustered them into themes, sometimes connecting groups of notes with string to indicate an interpretative flow. I continuously turned towards *dilemmatic space* and the *ethico-political* framework, so that my understanding of the data was deepened in interaction with those lenses. I grounded my questioning and my annotations on each transcript in an attempt to understand how the principals were making sense of their own balance between moral tenability and what they felt they must do. I was diligent in maintaining my bridling journal, so that, as Vagle (2009) asserted, this served to become "a kind of verification, the insistence you want for yourself that what you are arguing as you write is robustly persuasive…and not just something you made up out of whole cloth or private concerns" (p. 593). I continuously interrogated my own motivation and my understanding of the interpretative process, a sort of meta-positioning as I lived in the words of the principals themselves. I deliberately attended to a conscious cultivation of objectivity. For example, in the bridling journal section that aligns with the work I did to derive experiential statements and Personal Experiential Themes on the portion of transcript seen in Appendix E, I have three separate entries about the participant's phrase "this weird sort of freedom." Firstly, I defined that phrase in light of my own time as a principal in China, challenging myself to apply those words to incidents I had experienced, either in resonance or as a sort of counterargument. Next, I interrogated the emotional reaction I was experiencing as I answered my own question. Thirdly, I asked myself how the notion of a strange freedom plays into or comes out of my understanding of the participant's own balance between what they felt they must be doing and how this aligned with their own ethical positioning.

Early in my data analysis process, I shared an anonymized interview transcript with my doctoral supervisor, who took the time to engage the data through her own lens and process. We met virtually to compare notes on our interpretations. This guidance from Dr. Stelmach served as peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I needed to ensure that I was not starting, or continuing, down a track in which I could be allowing my own biases or assumptions to go unexcavated in the interpretation process. My data analysis and interpretation included overlaps, leaps forward and back, shuffles forward and back, and much time spent in a kind of liminal holding space in my own mind, sitting with the participants' words, allowing those words to find their own place.

My process, I discovered, proved to be far more time consuming than the timeline to completion I had envisioned at the outset of this doctoral journey. With hindsight I can now see the wild optimism of allotting three to four months to data analysis and interpretation, partly owing to the amount of raw data I collected across 30 interviews, with 39 hours of total interview time resulting in 440 single-spaced pages of transcripts, and partly owing to the evolution of my own facility with this interpretative process. It is not possible to quantify exactly how much time I spent with the data, but expect that it is conservative to estimate three times as long as I had originally planned. This analysis also proved to be far more emotionally involving and exhausting than I had ever anticipated, which I discuss in the final chapter.

In IPA, as in all qualitative methodologies, the data analysis phase and the writing up phase are not clearly demarcated; rather, this is more a continuum than one distinct phase after another. For Smith and Osborn (2015), the writing up phase is expansive and illustrative. The table of themes became "the basis for the account of the participants' responses, which takes the form of the narrative argument interspersed with verbatim extracts" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 76). In my study, the data were exceedingly rich. I have endeavoured throughout the writing of this dissertation to incorporate the participants' own words into my synthesis of their sensemaking processes. This document is an imbrication of their experiences, their insights, and my conceptualization of their words to understand how these principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China created meaning from the morally distressing situations which both informed and stretched their professional identities.

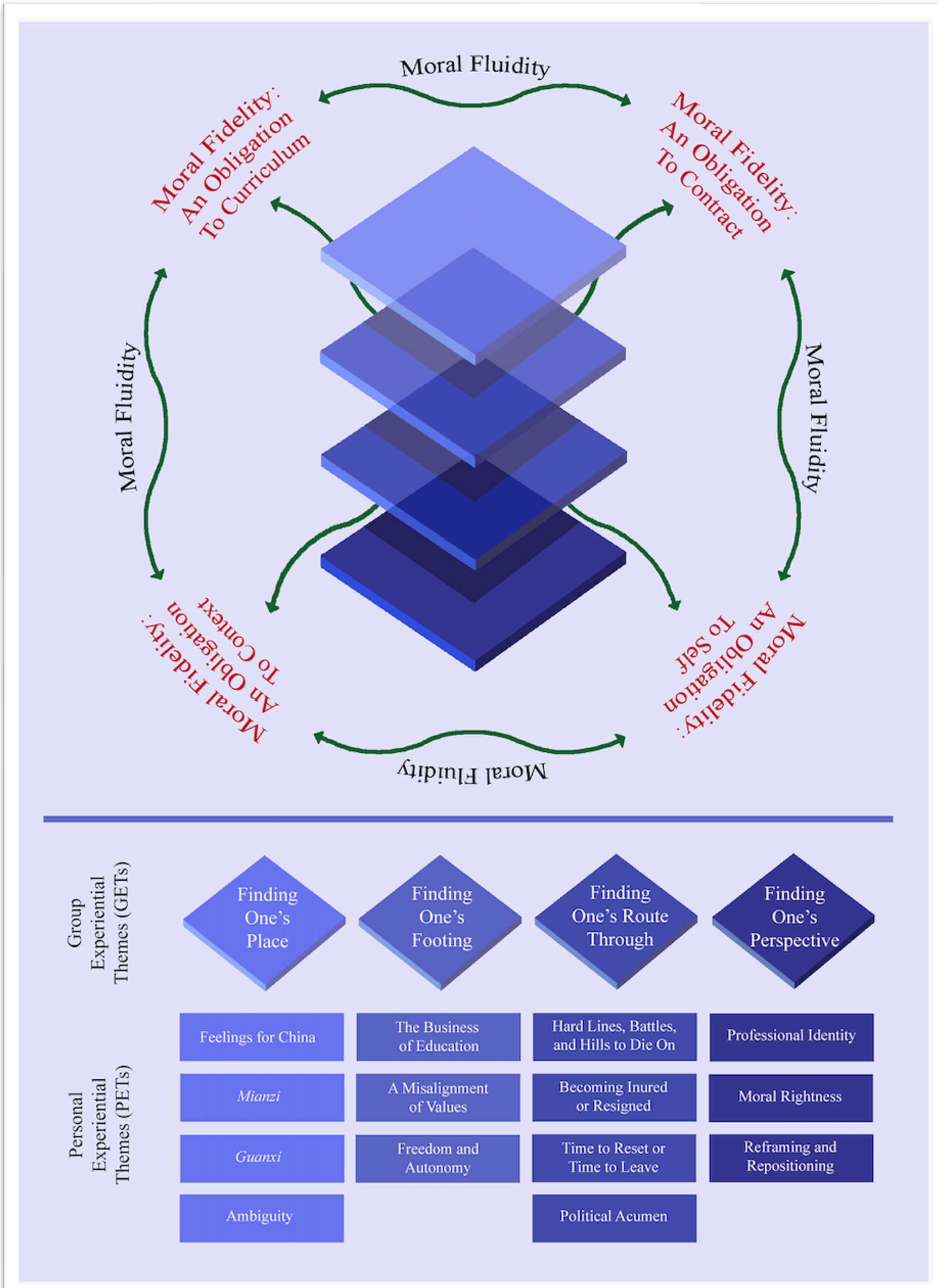
Naming and Grouping Themes

The Personal Experiential Themes are patterns of meaning that occurred throughout the data and represent something of concern or importance towards an understanding of how each principal was able to make sense of morally distressing situations within the context of their own professional identities. They are like the individual pieces of a single jigsaw puzzle. I sorted three or four Personal Experiential Themes together into their own Group Experiential Theme; each of those Group Experiential Themes became its own chapter in this dissertation. The Group Experiential Themes are like a larger mosaic of individual puzzles.

In naming these Group Experiential Themes, I imagined the principals traversing a metaphorical route through their own experiences. The four Personal Experiential Themes that I group as *finding one's place* are the figurative first few moments, those first tentative steps, on the principals' journeys in China. The principals orient themselves and begin to understand the conditions and machinations of the context they are in. In *finding one's footing*, the principals comprehend the realities of leading a Canadian school so far from Canada more deeply. They become more adept in knowing where to stride and when to pause in a landscape still somewhat unfamiliar to them. Then with experience and time comes more familiarity, allowing the principals to *find their route through* more expeditiously, more confidently. In my final grouping of a set of Personal Experiential Themes, which I named *finding one's perspective*, I imagine the principals taking time within their journeys to come to terms with the more conceptual understandings of their roles and their obligations while leading a Canadian-accredited school abroad. In each part of their journey, perhaps in any figurative moment, the principals rely on a nimbleness in their own moral positionalities to navigate the morally distressing situations they may face. In Figure 1, the Group and Personal Experiential Themes are shown in their conceptual relation to the moral fidelity framework and moral fluidity mechanism I constructed, which I explicate in chapter ten.

Figure 1

Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), Group Experiential Themes (GETs), Moral Fidelity, and Moral Fluidity


Moral Fluidity
Moral Fidelity: An Obligation To Curriculum
Moral Fidelity: An Obligation To Contract
Moral Fluidity
Moral Fluidity
Moral Fidelity: An Obligation To Context
Moral Fidelity: An Obligation To Self
Moral Fluidity
Group Experiential Themes (GETs)
Finding One's Place
Finding One's Footing
Finding One's Route Through
Finding One's Perspective
Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)
Feelings for China
The Business of Education
Hard Lines, Battles, and Hills to Die On
Professional Identity
Mianzi
A Misalignment of Values
Becoming Inured or Resigned
Moral Rightness
Guanxi
Freedom and Autonomy
Time to Reset or Time to Leave
Reframing and Repositioning
Ambiguity
Political Acumen

Trustworthiness and Excellent IPA

While there have been many refinements to and examinations of Guba's (1981) and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notions of what constituted trustworthiness in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004; Adler, 2022; Collingridge & Gantt, 2019; Morse, 2015), it is their work that remains both foundational and seminal. Guba (1981) maintained that there were four "criteria for judging the trustworthiness of inquiries conducted within the naturalistic inquiry paradigm" (p. 75), the paradigm in which IPA is situated. One must consider the truth value, that is, how one establishes confidence in the credibility of the findings. To effect this, I organized my own summary notes immediately after each interview had ended. This allowed me to capture both my initial reactions and the feeling or atmosphere of the session, which then served to inform my interpretations of the participant's responses at a level removed from literal transcription. I shared both my summary of the interview and the interview transcript with the respondent. I then invited the respondent to make comments on these documents, as well as checking my own understanding by posing any clarification questions via email shortly after each interview. I repeated the process after the second interview with each participant. These member checks were an important mechanism (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019; Guba, 1981), as substantiating my interpretations of the respondents' own processes of sense-making was crucial in establishing confidence in the analysis I generated.

Guba (1981) also asserted the importance of considering the applicability, or transferability, of research findings from one context to another. In the naturalistic paradigm, one "does not attempt to form generalizations that will hold in all times and all places" (Guba, 1981, p. 81); rather, one considers the degree of alignment between contexts. As a methodological framework that is "interpretative, interpersonal, and interactive in nature, IPA is endowed with a lot of features that can help equip its studies (and researchers) with rich abundance of data insight and holistic flavour to the stories that are being explored" (Alase, 2017, p. 13). Purposive sampling and the collection of highly descriptive data of the context of the study (Smith & Nizza, 2021; Shenton, 2004; Guba, 1981; Collingridge & Gantt, 2019) bolstered the transferability of my findings.

Dependability is the third criterion of trustworthiness. This refers to the degree to which the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). An external audit by a researcher outside of the study to evaluate the accuracy of the findings is typical of some qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With interpretive methodologies such as IPA, however, the findings of a study cannot be compared to an objective reality. Instead, ensuring that I was on track throughout the research process was achieved by frequent interactions with a more knowledgeable and experienced researcher. As a doctoral student then candidate, I had the benefit of being guided by a doctoral supervisor who always made herself available to talk about the process I was undertaking. Her insights and guidance provided a structure by which I could ensure that I was not straying from the rigour required by this qualitative methodology. Though these frequent interactions were not an audit to ensure dependability per se, this supervision was a function wherein I received feedback, on both content and form, to ensure that I achieved consistency throughout the research process.

Guba's (1981) fourth criterion of trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability is the degree of confidence one may have that the findings of a study are derived from the data and are free from the researcher's own biases and assumptions. IPA requires a deeply considered reflexivity, with methodologists calling for those engaged in IPA analysis to keep a reflexive journal (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also advocated that a qualitative researcher maintain reflexive notes, essentially crafting one's own meta-narrative. I followed this practice from the outset of this study, filling notebooks with notes, questions, and musings. Throughout the data analysis process, I questioned myself vigorously, hoping to ensure that I was not making inferences that could not be substantiated by anyone who might read the pseudonymized transcripts. For Shenton (2004), creating these notes generated a "theoretical audit trail" (p. 72), in which the researcher maintained an ongoing reflective commentary. In my notebook, I interrogated my own memories and emotions as they naturally arose, sometimes walking away from rewatching the videos when I felt that my own assumptions or feelings were encroaching into the space I created in my mind to sit with the participants' responses. It is my belief that I was rigorous and reflexive throughout this process, and that the themes I was able to generate in regard to the principals' lived experiences can be confirmed with a high degree of confidence.

As well as considering these four criteria of trustworthiness, I was also guided by Nizza et al.'s (2021) markers of excellence in an IPA study. In a review of articles in which IPA was employed over a twelve-year period, Nizza et al. (2021) identified a range of qualities that "contribute to overall trustworthiness, including whether the paper subscribes to the theoretical principles of IPA, the degree of transparency, coherence, plausibility and interest, the sufficiency of sampling, and the density of evidence" (p. 370). They concluded that a paper achieved "high quality IPA" (Nizza et al., 2021, p. 369) if an author constructed a compelling and unfolding narrative, essentially crafting a coherent arc that is buttressed by quotations from the participants to "contribute to the narrative of the overall findings in an interconnected manner" (p. 371). Secondly, the authors contended that effective IPA invoked strong experiential or existential themes to capture the significance of a participant's meaning-making process. This involved a deep exploration by the researcher of the significance attached by the participants to their experiences. It was not just the components or the details of participants' sense-making processes that the IPA researcher must consider, but also how these constituent pieces coalesced into something of existential importance to the participants.

Thirdly, Nizza et al. (2021) called for a close reading of the participant's words, one which required fulsome interpretation so that the author's engagement with the quotes focused "on both what is going on in the immediate quote and also thinking of it in the context of the wider transcript" (p. 374). Both a granular reading of each line and a broader reading to understand words and ideas as part of a larger picture were required. Lastly, an effective IPA paper celebrated convergence and divergence in the data in order to find "a balance between commonality and individuality; they show how participants share higher order qualities, without losing sight of participants' unique idiosyncratic characteristics" (p. 375). I ensured that I included, even amplified, divergent perspectives among the 15 principals; by doing so, I maintain that complementary voices resonated even more loudly, allowing a reader to evaluate the truth value, applicability, dependability, and confirmability of my interpretations of the participants' words more ably. It is my belief that taken in concert with Guba's criteria of trustworthiness, this dissertation attends to the inherent calls of Nizza et al.'s (2021) markers of effective IPA, allowing me to assert that I met both my own ethical obligation to honour the participants' unique processes of making meaning of their experiences and the ethical imperative to do so which is embedded in IPA itself.

Chapter Five: The (Near) Ubiquity of Moral Distress

Chapters five through nine are the findings of this study, my interpretations of the components of the participants' navigation through morally distressing situations and sense-making within the context of their own professional identities. As I wrote in the preceding chapter, I generated four Group Experiential Themes in my analysis of the participants' words; consequently, both for narrative flow and to construct the conceptual throughline I envisioned from *finding one's place* to *finding one's perspective*, I offer more data chapters than may typically be found in a dissertation. In this chapter, I first provide demographic information about the participants. I present a table detailing the causes and frequency of moral distress that these principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad encountered in their tenures in China. I also include my justification for the inclusion in my interpretations of two participants who had declared themselves free of moral distress while leading their Canadian schools outside of Canada. It bears asserting again that in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis's two-stage interpretation process, the researcher collects data, in which "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 1). Therefore, the contents of chapters five through nine are both the presentation of the findings and an immediate dive into interpretation.

The Participants

Presented pseudonymously in Table 1 below, the participants constituted a seasoned group of educators, with an average of over sixteen years spent working in schools at the time of their participation in this study. The final two columns of the table taken together show an average of more than eight years spent working in Canadian-accredited schools in China. At the ends of that range, three of the 15 participants had spent four years working in China, while seven of 15 had spent a decade or longer in the Middle Kingdom. Five of the participants had also spent time living and working in another international context.

The final column shows an average of more than four years spent as the principal of a Canadian-accredited school in China. Five of the participants were in their second year as a school principal in China, while six of them had served at least five years in that school leadership role. Interestingly, on average the participants had spent 51% of their professional careers working in China.

Table 1

Participants' Years of Experience

Participant	Total years in education	Years as teacher in Canada	Years as principal in Canada	Years as teacher (not Canada or China)	Years as teacher in China	Years as principal of a Canadian-accredited school in China
Alex	5	1	-	-	2	**2**
Andy	16	10	-	-	4	**2**
Ari	40	21	15	-	-	**4**
Blake	13	1	-	2	2	**8**
Charlie	14	4	-	-	5	**5**
Chris	7	-	-	-	5	**2**
Kelly	11	1	-	-	7	**3**
Leslie	13	9	-	-	2	**2**
Nick	9	-	-	-	5	**4**
Pat	25	10	10	-	-	**5**
Sam	25	14	5	-	-	**6**
Shannon	17	-	-	4	7	**6**
Terry	20	-	-	4	6	**10**
Toby	12	1	-	1	8	**2**
Vic	20	-	-	8	9	**3**
Average	**16.47**				**4.13**	**4.27**

Morally Distressing Situations

I wrote in the first chapter that I composed this dissertation with two audiences in mind, both academics and practicing principals. While enumerating the actual sources and frequency of the morally distressing situations faced by this group of Canadian principals in China remains outside the essential core of my Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis work, it is information I believe will be of great interest to any international school leaders who might read this document. What caused their moral distress, and how often, is additional or peripheral to my analysis of the principals' processes of making meaning through these instances, yet identifying these causes may provide a moment of resonance or recognition for other principals. In Table 2 below, I have sorted the participants' causes of moral distress and counted the number of incidents raised in our interviews together.

Before presenting Table 2, it is important to assert that all but two of the principals recounted experiences in China that they conceptualized as morally distressing while leading their Canadian-accredited schools there, yet in my interpretation of the data, I have included all 15 participants. Alex, in their fourth year working in a Canadian school abroad, was one of the outliers in this regard. While they enumerated many difficulties and challenges in China, they reported feeling more constricted or constrained while working in their home Canadian province. As someone who was "a pretty straight shooter," navigating the sensibilities of a Canadian workplace and political climate tended to be more problematic than working in China, where "at least you always know where you stand." For Alex, the process of making meaning of their time in China consisted of an explicit weighing of their experiences against their feelings for what they recall as being compelled to deal with significant "community issues" in their home province. When compared to many of the issues they dealt with in their home province, Alex characterized China as a place in which meeting standards and navigating expectations tended to be less shrouded in ideological posturing than Canada; consequently, there did not exist, in their mind, the conditions necessary for a difficult or complex situation to be understood as morally distressing.

When Blake responded to the invitation to participate in this study, they expressed a willingness to join, but cautioned me that they might not be an ideal candidate. When we talked in spring 2021, Blake had already served eight years as the principal of their Canadian-accredited school abroad. Despite spending many years in China and understanding well that their Canadian provincial Ministry of Education expected school leaders to champion certain democratic values, Blake did not conceive of any of the situations that had arisen in their school as morally distressing. I assured Blake that I would love for them to participate, even if, perhaps especially if, their insights served as a source of divergence in the data. I believed that this more fulsome range of experiences and perspectives served to amplify the possible value for future leaders of Canadian-accredited schools abroad. Though these principals ostensibly had the same jobs across China, the manner in which they engaged, then reflected to make meaning and grow from their experiences, was unique to each of them.

Blake recognized numerous challenging situations which had arisen, and many times when their own intercultural competence might have been stretched farther than where they felt comfortable, causing stress, frustration and anxiety. But for Blake, whose school leadership experience was entirely in China, there was a recognition that their navigation of these situations was premised on understandings gleaned from being nurtured from within the offshore school system itself. They remarked:

> For someone who comes in and here thinks, okay, I was a [Canadian] principal onshore and I have control over all of these different aspects of an organization, I'm now inserting myself into this system, and I'm used to having the keys to the whole building. So then with that mindset, that expectation, then things would appear to be lost because your ideology from onshore doesn't really fit offshore. Fortunately for me, I was sort of raised within the system, and I had learned okay, here's the narrow scope of focus. And even though you can't control everything, you can control what's given to you and put in front of you, which is the [Canadian] program.

To Blake, like Alex, the conditions required for a situation to be morally distressing, that one was hindered from acting in a way that one believed to be morally authentic and correct, were absent. In Blake's case, this stemmed from a perspective they characterized as being fostered from the inside, from having all of their school leadership experience come from within their time in China. For Alex, this understanding was premised on a comparison with what they had experienced in Canada. Though they arrived at similar characterizations of their experiences in China, none of which they conceptualized or felt as morally distressing, it was from differing approaches.

For Alex and Blake, challenges they encountered or frustrations they felt were practical issues, not derived from moral dissonance. I have honoured their positions and taken their declarations that they had not encountered moral distress at face value. At the same time, I have interpreted some of their anecdotes differently than they did, finding discrepant statements within their transcripts and then consonance between their processes of making meaning of their experiences when feeling constrained and those of the other participants. Consequently, while on one level they represented a divergence in the data as they did not identify with the term *moral* *distress*, I feel justified in their inclusion throughout this dissertation. A deference to both their positions and my own interpretations resulted in the parenthetical qualifier included in the title of this chapter: *The (Near) Ubiquity of Moral Distress*.

The remaining 13 principals did recount experiences in which they were constrained from acting in a manner consonant with their best moral judgement. While the exact nature and details of the morally distressing situations were fundamentally less important in understanding their sense-making processes than the fact that each of them affirmed feeling moral distress, it was telling that many of the instances and causes recurred across the anecdotes they shared. These situations ranged from those that appeared at first to be trivial, practical differences in approaches to management, to issues in which deeply held beliefs about child welfare, social justice, and personal and professional values were assailed.

Table 2

Causes and Frequency of Participants' Moral Distress

Cause of Moral Distress	**Number of principals who raised this cause**	**Number of separate incidents raised**
Managerial/business concerns		
Issues regarding the enforcement of dress codes and students' personal appearance	3	5
Pressure to admit or retain students with little or no chance of success in the Canadian program	7	11
Pressure to inflate grades	6	6
The principal's lack of autonomy and agency regarding program budget and resource allocation	8	10
The principal's lack of autonomy and agency regarding the overall direction and management of the Canadian program within the Chinese school	9	11
Student welfare concerns		
Pressure to accede to parent and Chinese school demands regarding what would be best for a student's learning	6	10

Lack of learning support for students	8	10
Lack of social and emotional counselling resources and mental health support structures for students	7	9
Chinese school's use of corporal punishment and/or reliance on punitive consequences	3	4
Chinese school's emotional mistreatment of students, including instances of public shaming and systemically supported social isolation	5	7
Philosophical differences/ideological concerns		
Being compelled to engage in the removal or alteration of course materials and limit topics of discussion to align with local mandates	9	13
Being compelled to engage in self-censorship, thereby being prevented from engaging students fully on issues regarding human rights and social justice concerns	10	14
Being compelled to discipline Canadian teachers who stepped afoul of local mandates	3	3

Nearly all of the Canadian principals reported feeling moral distress while leading their schools in China and navigating situations in which their own beliefs were in tension with locally prescribed mandates. The particularities of their experiences, the actual details, were less important than the near ubiquity of these principals understanding that there were constraints which affected them, their emotional states, and their relationships within the school. "Misaligned values", "misplaced priorities", "roadblocks", "impediments", and "flaming hoops" coalesced to create conditions in which the principals needed to constantly shift and reconstruct their own conceptions of themselves in their roles as Canadian school leaders in China.

Affirming that the principals felt moral distress, I move in the next four chapters to the pieces, perhaps layers, of their sense-making processes. Through my analysis and interpretation of the data, I generated fourteen Personal Experiential Themes. These Personal Experiential Themes are the components, as I have made sense of them, of the principals' sense-making when contending with morally distressing situations within the context of their professional identities.

Each section in chapters six through nine is a separate Personal Experiential Theme, a building block of each principal's unique balancing act to navigate constraints on their moral judgement, find and hold their own tenable moral positionality, and assuage the moral distress they felt.

Chapter Six: Finding One's Place

The novelist and essayist Adam Gopnik (2001) contended that "the loneliness of the expatriate is of an odd and complicated kind, for it is inseparable from the feeling of being free, of having escaped" (p. 88). Leaving one's home country to live and work abroad requires both a literal and a figurative leap into unknown terrain. Navigating this new terrain is not simply identifying the cultural characteristics of new surroundings, but immediately engages a person, by necessity and with some urgency, in different modes of cultural competence and ways of being in a world that is new to them. A sense of fitting in or belonging to a new culture is important in ameliorating cultural discomfort or dissonance (Reingold & Baratz, 2020); this needs to be actively cultivated and tended with a careful consideration of the ways of being and understanding the world which permeate one's adopted home. In this chapter, under the Group Experiential Theme of *finding one's place*, I consider the principals' conceptions of cultural characteristics they found to be particular to China, as these informed how the principals structured their sense-making processes as they led Canadian curriculum schools in a place very far, geographically and ideologically, from Canada. In an analysis filtered through the lens of ethico-political space, an understanding of how the principals found their place vis-à-vis the "status quo, well-established and solidified norms [which] expect individuals to adjust themselves to the existing societal structure" (Alakavuklar & Alamgir, 2018), was essential in knowing how they balanced dissonant imperatives and were able to contend with moral distress.

Feelings for China

I wanted to get a sense of each participant's feelings for their adopted home country, so I asked each of them directly as our conversations began to flow. I thought that hearing how a principal contextualized their feelings for their adopted home would act almost like a baseline; if a principal seemed jaded or overjoyed, for example, I believed that understanding this from the outset would provide a more robust sense of context. Interestingly, 13 of the 15 principals took care to speak first about their favourable feelings for China before addressing any challenges or struggles which affected them. These principals affirmed their positive regard for China, with most almost immediately focusing on the friends they had made, their Chinese colleagues in their schools, and the fascination they held with Chinese culture. Almost immediately thereafter, most of the principals spoke of the underlying tensions and ongoing frustrations of working and living in a country informed by political and social expectations often radically different than what they knew from Canada. From the outset, I recognized that the principals' own sense-making processes while contending with morally distressing situations were multilayered; part of the foundation of how they made meaning within their professional identities derived from their conceptions of themselves fitting in to the place they all had chosen to live and work.

For some of the principals, their feelings for China were entwined with their positive personal relationships. Blake, for example, spoke of their Chinese partner, declaring that "I think the number one advantage for me, why I've been here for so long, has been my [spouse], who has supported me…because [they] can help me navigate the nuances of the cultural differences, not only the day to day, but you know, the 30000-foot view as well." Terry, in their 16th year in China and 10th as school principal, also cited their Chinese spouse as a source of support, allowing Terry to more easily find ways to appreciate and navigate the complexities of China on both personal and professional fronts.

Leslie also offered personal considerations when asked about their general feelings for China, a country they had called home for four years. Living in China provided an excellent forum for Leslie to model an expansive global perspective to their children. They said, "we came to China because we wanted our children to be global citizens. We want them to view the world in a different way. We felt that if we want them to respect diversity and celebrate pluralism, then we needed to model that behaviour ourselves by going out and doing it." Leslie framed living in China as a way for their children to embody a larger conception of positive social behaviour and responsibility, one informed by a multiplicity of cultural perspectives.

For others, a generally positive regard for China itself was affixed to a sense of belonging, of building something or being a meaningful part of something important. Vic, who had spent 12 years in China and three as the principal of their Canadian-accredited school, felt that they had "built a family here with the colleagues I have. I've seen them grow, I've seen them learn from each other, learn from me." There was an obvious pride in Vic's manner, a sense that they had been an integral part of the fostering of relationships and the cultivation of feelings that extended beyond professional satisfaction. Blake's sentiments echoed Vic's, as they spoke to a sense of becoming part of something different from what they knew from Canada. Blake said, "yeah, it's diverse, it's a cultural experience, you get to immerse yourself into a very different culture and figure out the nuances of that." Nick, in their ninth year in China and fourth year as the principal of a Canadian-accredited school, expressed their feelings for China within the context of the opportunity they found "very rewarding, being able to work with such different people from such different cultures and have it be such a positive and rewarding experience." This was a common refrain from the principals of Canadian-accredited schools in this study, with both Sam and Shannon having spoken of loving their interactions with their Chinese school counterparts, often in spite of some of the challenges that were present in those working relationships.

Shannon had spent 13 years in China, serving the last six as principal of their Canadian-accredited school. They expanded on their positive feelings for China by considering the cultural dynamics of contemporary China itself, saying:

> I've often used the word 'edge' to the society here, where people have overcome, very recently, some very difficult situations…So I don't know if culturally that's part of it, like just being part of a massive revolution that's happening before our eyes with the transformation of this country. With half a billion people moving to the cities and all the change, I don't know if there's an excitement to that, like deep down, but for me, I've also just had a really good time. I love my job and I love travelling and so many aspects of life that I'm able to have here. I think that's very attractive to me.

Shannon considered themself to be in China at an important, and exciting, time in history, finding contentment both personally and professionally as their adopted home country evolves. Shannon was keenly aware of the friction and ambiguity which often accompany times of social change, recognizing that sometimes the same forces of change which appealed to them could also be a source of frustration.

The principals affirmed feelings of admiration for what China is and appreciation for what living in China had afforded them. They spoke directly on the changeability, sometimes unexpected and without discernible reason, of the effect of external political climate on their own feelings. Turmoil or disputes between the two countries sometimes resulted in mandates and restrictions issued from Beijing that coloured the atmosphere of being a Canadian expatriate in China. Sam, in their sixth year as principal of a Canadian-accredited school, recognized that their own feelings for China were sometimes affected by those shifting political winds, stating "I really hope I don't have any issues or anything that come along. When you live in China, you're always sort of wondering where those things might go. It's not too rosy right now." The principals' own feelings for China, each informed by both personal and professional considerations, were an integral facet of their sense-making processes while leading Canadian-accredited schools there.

Mianzi

A working understanding of *mianzi*, or face, is an essential component of the processes by which these Canadian principals made sense of their experiences leading their schools in China. Nearly all of the principals in my study invoked the notion of face, whether in terms of saving it, losing it, or granting it, as they described their experiences working with their Chinese school counterparts. The notion of face is highly nuanced in China, encompassing a vast range of abstract concepts, such as honour, dignity, self-pride, and social prestige (Hong & Yu, 2018). *Mianzi* is also foundational to highly culturally defined expectations of social behaviour and comportment (Hong & Yu, 2018; Buckley et al, 2006), such as where one is seated at a dinner table or the order in which a meeting agenda must proceed. It is, as the 20th-century Chinese writer Lu Xun asserted, a guiding principle of the Chinese sensibility (Song, 2018).

To these Canadian principals, an academic understanding of the notion of *mianzi*, such as its Confucian roots or its evolution over centuries to reflect interpretations of contemporary social discourse (Song, 2018), was less germane to their sense-making than the practical experience of navigating conceptions of face they had each garnered from their time in China. Understandings of face animated by the countless interactions they had with Chinese colleagues, on matters ranging from the seemingly trivial (to the Canadian principals, at least) to greater discussions around pedagogical contretemps, shaped the principals' expectations around reaching any intercultural alignment. Lu Xun referred to the formalized and expected modes of

"Chinese social interaction as a spectacle, which has a front stage and a backstage, with differences of face of the individual in the front stage and the backstage" (Song, 2018, p. 5); Leslie used similarly theatrical language. They said:

> We have to put things quite deliberately in many ways. In western standards, we're used to being very frank and upfront and we get to the point. There's much more of a song and dance that has to happen in Asian culture. A lot of times we have to find ways of saying things without saying things, because the whole 'reading between the lines' thing is an important part of face.

The importance of widening one's own considerations to actively consider both context and subtext was crucial for these Canadian principals in China. This was not only an intellectual exercise, however, as behaving in ways which align with Chinese cultural expectations was categorically significant.

Terry operationalized their understanding of face to guide their interactions with their Chinese counterparts. For Terry, there was a practical importance in knowing when, and how, to push, and this awareness was an active component of Terry's own sense of professional agency. They maintained that:

> Sometimes here, with concepts of losing face, once you get a 'no' out of your headmaster on something, it's going to be very difficult to change that no to a yes. So, if you see yourself approaching 'no', maybe say, 'oh, I think I need to go away and think more about it,' before he or she gives an answer of no. Because a no is sort of like you've slid down a Snakes and Ladders back to the beginning. You've got to climb again.

Getting face wrong, causing a Chinese colleague to lose face or acting in a way in which the principal themself lost face, was an impediment to the smooth operation of the Canadian-accredited school.

These were delicate understandings not always evident to the Canadian principals. *Mianzi* is deeply engrained in how Chinese people both express themselves individually and comport themselves collectively (Hong & Yu, 2018; Buckley et al., 2006). The Canadian principals, less familiar with the mores of their adopted homeland, learned as they went. Pat, who came to this study with 10 years of principalship experience in their home Canadian province and five years in China, recognized the importance of navigating within notions of face early in their time in China, learning that if “you back someone into the corner, you’re done. You’re never going to get them out of that corner.” They continued, noting that sometimes they would need to modify what they believed to be the best course of action in addressing misunderstandings or issues, as “it is very harmful, I think, to do much in the way of pointing out whose problem it might be, or what you think is causing the problem.” Much of what these principals might have considered to be the straightforward and direct addressing of issues would be perceived as an affront to the face of their Chinese colleagues.

A robust and multilayered understanding of face, one specifically in tune with the Chinese sensibility, sometimes compelled the Canadian principal to alter their own way of leading their school. Pat believed that:

> Admitting a mistake, or admitting that you could have done something differently, is a huge loss of face. Whereas in the west, quite often we’ll do something, and then we analyze it, and we say we could have done something differently and I think it would have worked better…So that loss of face, or the idea of face, is extremely important in

> Chinese culture. And that's a cultural rub, I think, when it comes to working east to west, because sometimes the things we say or do make it seem like we're losing our own face.

Similarly, Nick recognized that being attuned to how social dynamics shift around conceptions of face was fundamental to ensuring that the Canadian school was as aligned as possible with the expectations of its Chinese host. For Nick, this was about tailoring their own interactions to more seamlessly fit in to a larger picture. They noted that sometimes "I have to take a step back and allow them to save face if that's going to help me move forward with whatever it is that we're trying to communicate and sort out." These intercultural considerations sometimes resulted in compromise. Yet for the principals in this study, entwining a practical understanding of face with their own professional judgement was fundamental in contending with situations which may have involved constraints on their agency.

For these principals, the notion of face bounded their own sense-making processes while leading Canadian-accredited schools in China. It called for the principals to be deliberate in their speech and their actions, to be aware of how they express their frustrations, and to be attuned to cultural dynamics that they may not have even considered before living in China. The imperative to develop one's own cultural competence around unwritten understandings of social conduct and comportment became foundational as the principals began to find their place in a context very different than the one they knew in Canada. Buckley at al. (2006) contended that "the need for *mianzi* is intrinsic to various aspects of personal and interpersonal relationship development in China" (p. 276); the principals in this study have internalized their own understanding of face and it informed both their actions and their professional identities as they led their Canadian schools in an international context.

Guanxi

G*uanxi* refers to the personal connections or social networks every Chinese person cultivates and relies on (Ji, 2019; Buckley et al., 2006; Chong et al., 2015). The importance of having good *guanxi* is felt at and within every facet of Chinese society, from the interpersonal to the familial, from spheres of business to the political. Ren and Chadee (2017) contended that *guanxi* is foundational to "the social fabric of the Chinese" and is "rooted in Chinese traditions of relational orientation" (p. 373). That is, *guanxi* acts as a mechanism for social cohesion and progress, encompassing the "informal connections bound by implicit psychological contracts to exchange reciprocity, nurture mutual commitment, and aim for long-term relationships" (Ren & Chadee, 2017, p. 373). One's *guanxi* is like the key to a locked door that, if opened due to reciprocated understandings of commitment, serves as entry into a collective. Conversely, with little or no *guanxi*, one is refused entry through the figurative gate, making it nearly impossible to be included or considered and greatly diminishing the chances of getting anything done.

As with *mianzi*, a practical understanding of *guanxi,* of how important it is to consciously attend to the nuances of cultivating relationships in a manner that is locally expected, was a fundamental part of these principals' meaning making as they led their Canadian-accredited schools in China. Every participant in this study, and the four principals who participated in the 2020 pilot study which preceded this one, remarked on the importance of strong relationships and treading deliberately to build and maintain *guanxi* with their Chinese counterparts. For Pat, it took time and "a lot of relationship work" to be accepted into the role of a school leader in China. That is, one was made welcome not because of assuming the position itself; instead, the Canadian principal was only granted legitimacy in their Chinese counterparts' minds if they had successfully cultivated relationships and fostered *guanxi*.

To Charlie, in their fifth year as principal and 10th year overall in China, an assertion like Pat's would be indicative of both the role of *guanxi* and the notion of leadership itself as mutually inclusive considerations. Charlie felt that leadership in China was "more relational than anything else, and everything is based on the relationship you have with the person above you." One's competence as a school leader as it might be defined in Canadian terms was superseded by the machinations dictated by a sense of obligation or indebtedness (Ji, 2019) that flowed from one's own social network. As Charlie noted, "even if you are technically terrible at the job, you're the right person for it because of the relationships you have." Calibrating their own conceptions of the forces which infuse and drive the schools was an integral part of the principals' sense-making processes while leading Canadian-accredited programs in China. That is, little or poor *guanxi* with their Chinese counterparts limited the capacity to persuade their local colleague to accept a course of action that the Canadian principal found to be morally correct. A thorough practical understanding of guanxi then featured prominently in the principals' sensemaking processes through the morally distressing situations they faced.

This calibration or shifting was not always readily apparent to a Canadian principal. Some of the principals were guided in their understanding of *guanxi* by their Chinese partners. Another asserted that a Chinese colleague "moved me quite a way on how it works and what it did." Prior to the four years in a principalship in China, Ari had been a principal in their home Canadian province for 15 years. With 40 years in education, they were the most seasoned participant in this study. Frustrated with being embroiled in a kind of constant and "inevitable give and take, the 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch your back,'" Ari sought guidance from their Chinese counterpart, who "tried to explain to me how first of all, there's nothing wrong with it. It's how the culture works." An explicit exchange of money or implicit promise of future favour required to get something done was far outside what the Canadian principals had experienced in Canada. To Ari, there was a clear recognition that embodying a more locally informed standpoint mitigated the frustration of operating within an environment driven by *guanxi*. They stated:

> And it's another case of us, looking at the Chinese side and what they've been doing for thousands of years, as we put our lens on in North America and say, 'well, that's pretty close to bribery for me. That crosses the line for me.'

Making sense of *guanxi* through an understanding informed by local guidance eased the dissonance the principals felt from grappling with the intricacies of *guanxi*.

In their sixth year in China and second as principal, Andy had a strong awareness that *guanxi* must be consciously attended to; this became part of the foundation of their efforts to align the Canadian and Chinese notions of how the school should operate. They noted that "historically it has been the Chinese side do their thing and the Canadian side do their thing and nary the two shall meet. But I've made a really conscious effort to try and bring those two together." Ari spoke of a similar motivation, one in which issues around the timely procurement of resources were addressed by operating within a system that was co-created by the Canadian principal and their Chinese school counterpart. It was the exercise of *guanxi* on both sides that allowed Ari and their colleague to establish procedures and policies that provided Ari a forum to work "within that system and work with all parties involved to make everything work."

For Pat, concerted deliberation on when to push an issue or step back from one was a constant calculation. They were reticent to hold as many lines as they had done in Canada, doing so strategically. They remarked that sometimes they needed to say no and stand firm, "but again, that has to be very judicious because you can't be seen as being uncooperative and unhelpful."

This kind of judiciousness was borne of experience for Pat, as it was for Chris in their school. Chris had worked in a Canadian-accredited school in China for seven years and was into their second year as principal. They understood that maintaining strong *guanxi* was instrumental in both their own future decision-making and in the school's operation. They said:

> You just sort of live and learn, right? You're not going to win every battle, but just learning and taking from the experience. Like I said, *guanxi* and relationships, uh, sometimes I know that if I've gotten something but I've hurt that, that's going to affect my future decisions. I'm going to have to walk away a couple of times. And that's just sort of simply how I view it here. It's sort of a sad reality. It's sort of a 'give a favour, owe a favour' sort of mentality, but that's how it works.

Knowing when, and how, to push or to pull back was an active component of the principals' sense-making processes as they navigated the tensions that arose between sometimes conflicting ways of conceptualizing education. Developing a strong network and cultivating good *guanxi* within that was a complex but necessary consideration for these Canadian principals as they navigated the morally distressing situations they faced. The principals acted within parameters somewhat formed by their own working conceptions of *guanxi*, even when doing so meant that they were not always acting in a manner consonant with their own best moral judgement.

Ambiguity

In a May 2022 article in *The New Yorker* entitled "A Teacher in China Learns the Limits of Free Expression", writer and long-time China resident Peter Hessler recounted the circumstances in which he ended up losing his university teaching position in China. He contended that ambiguity and uncertainty were built into the education system, indeed, into society itself, so that having a highly developed sense of nuance in reading constantly shifting interpersonal and political dynamics was a necessary condition for expatriates navigating living, working, and belonging in China. Hessler (2022) wrote:

> the professors also told me that nobody at the top had issued a direct command not to renew my contract, because the system created enough nervousness that people were likely to err on the side of caution. "*Tianwei bukece*,' one professor explained, using a phrase that means that the highest authority remains unclear. 'You have to guess what the exact order is.' (p. 37)

While the highest authority may remain unclear, its scope and reach were typically absolute and unassailable. This situated the principals in a dilemmatic space where unspoken or hidden ideological tenets and machinations (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013) affected their actions and their relationships. That is, the source of that highest authority in China, or the manner in which it shaped the conditions that suffused the system, was nebulous to Hessler and many of the principals in this study, but the capacity or facility to operate within the nervousness and ambiguity was assuredly a component of their sense-making processes. The principals needed to recognize that there may be the additional frustration of not being able to clearly ascertain where the constraints on their moral reasoning emanated from. For some of the principals, as it did for Hessler, an inability to know whence constraints on their best moral judgement originated amplified the affective reactions that arose.

Part of this ambiguity for the principals stemmed from how the Canadian-accredited schools were nested into their Chinese host schools. That is, these programs were created outside of the Chinese education system, yet in many ways, were expected to fit in to those schools in the same way that Chinese programs did. There was often a tension between the provincial or municipal bureaus of education, the Chinese school administration, and the Canadian program based on the expectations of how the schools should function. More fundamentally, there were also differences in the very notions of what constituted education at all, causing some of the principals to question their own roles and purpose when they felt their agency curtailed by local policies and expectations. This liminal space between the ideological expectations and different conceptions of sound educational practice in Canada and China was fertile ground for ambiguity to bloom, and a complex terrain for the Canadian principals to navigate.

Roles and responsibilities that were difficult to discern in the Chinese school's administrative structure accounted for a great deal of frustration and "a lot of the moral ambiguity and the conflict" there. To someone familiar with how things would typically work onshore in Canada, an understanding of who is accountable or responsible for decisions was often a murkier proposition in China. It was maddening for Chris to "basically beg for" the resources that have been nominally allocated to their program, while their Chinese counterpart appeared to draw from seemingly endless and readily available coffers. As Alex remarked, "there's just so much haze to it." Listening to the principals speak about being constrained from following the course of action they believed to be right while leading their schools, it was not the refrain of being compelled to do more with less that rang most loudly. Rather, it was the haze and ambiguity that they saw as infusing the system itself that was the larger consideration in their own sense-making processes. The haze itself was not morally distressing, but the inability to understand how best to act to mitigate the moral distress they felt because of an inherent, and perhaps purposefully cultivated, ambiguity affected the principals directly.

Some of that unknowing came from not being fully informed about issues that occurred within the school. Pat recognized that partly because of language and translation, but mostly because of what their Chinese counterparts chose to share and chose to withhold, they would never have as full an understanding of what was happening with students or in the school as they were accustomed to having in Canada. For Pat, that "whole picture" was crucial in their consideration of what constituted effective leadership and ethical stewardship, yet contending with, and accepting, ambiguity had become important to how they led their school in China. While they felt ongoing discomfort, they recognized that "I've come to terms with I don't always know everything about, in fact I rarely know everything about, a situation." This limited scope of understanding and consequent lessening of control had an effect on the principal's own professional identity, deepening their frustration as finding their way through morally distressing situations became less apparent in the haze of ambiguity.

Ari echoed Pat's assertion that often the Canadian principal must operate in an atmosphere informed by less than complete information. To Ari, this was more a function of the difference in typical styles of communication between the Chinese host administration and the Canadian principal. Rather than a more linear approach to communicating, in which one might ask a question directly and expect a direct answer, "it's just not like that here. They don't want to tell you 'no' right up front. They like to circle and circle and circle and circle." For Ari and a few others who mentioned similar communication differences with their Chinese counterparts, this was a source of frustration, especially as it seemed to the Canadian principals that issues that could readily be attended to or solved tended to recur as a result of how both sides approached one another. Becoming attuned to a way of communicating that seemed less natural or less efficient was an important consideration for these principals as they endeavoured to lead their schools well in China.

As Chris stated, "you have to be comfortable with understanding what it is and how it works here. And what it is here can be fuzzy, but you have to be comfortable with that." Terry broadened the consideration of dealing constructively with ambiguity. They stated:

> Well, sometimes life is just blurry. You don't know whether you are in the light or the dark. And sometimes, I think as principals here, maybe that is part of the distress is that oftentimes we are just there in the grey. And you don't know whether we are in the light or the dark. If you can have that comfort of being in that unknown, that just being okay with being in that unknown, maybe that's it. I don't know exactly where I am, but I'm like sort of in this greyish area, not light and not dark.

The facility to situate themselves in the nervousness, in the grey area, with their own degree of ease was an important piece of the principals' sense-making processes as they contended with morally distressing situations. Regardless of the source or nature of the ambiguity, the principals needed to contend with the discomfiting haze which sometimes seeped into their roles and affected how they were able to navigate the tensions that arose when they were hindered from following and asserting their own moral judgement.

For these principals, accessing a sense of belonging to find their place in a country so far from removed from the one they understood more fully was sometimes an odd and complicated process indeed. The principals' unique processes of developing an awareness of the cultural competence required to navigate the nuances of their adopted home, of recognizing and reconciling moments of dissonance, situated them on their own journeys of knowing how to be in this world as the principal of a Canadian-accredited school in China.

Chapter Seven: Finding One's Footing

In Nathaniel's (2006) definition of moral distress, a person recognizes a moral problem, acknowledges a moral responsibility to engage, and decides on a course of action consonant with their own moral reasoning. Constraints on this right action, either external, such as those derived from institutional policies or structures, or internally derived, such as feelings of lessened autonomy, lowered notions of empowerment, or heightened levels of self-doubt (Garros et al., 2020), compel the person to act in a manner not aligned with their own convictions. The principals in this study regularly contended with structural constraints and practices, as well as hindrances borne of a misalignment of values between the curricula they were obligated by their Canadian provinces to deliver and the expectations of their Chinese host schools and organizations. In this chapter, I describe the elements of their sense-making processes through moral distress as the principals found their metaphorical footing on three fronts: in contending with the primacy of their schools' business concerns, in seeing and reconciling misaligned cultural values, and in coming to terms with the limits of their own professional autonomy.

Maintaining a tenable balance within one's own ethical positionality when working under constraints is itself a political act. In filtering my own interpretations of the principals' insights, I relied on Alakavuklar and Alamgir's (2018) assertion that "'politics' involves mobilizing resources (material and symbolic) to establish, maintain, or transform realities, whereas 'ethics' concerns the practice of engagement in this 'political' process" (p. 33). As Chris proclaimed:

> Last year was my first year as principal, and like I said, the educational, pedagogical side, I loved it. It was easy, it was great. What really burned me out, and what really just mentally, physically, emotionally exhausted me was everything else. I had to jump through flaming hoops, or I hit roadblocks. It was absolutely exhausting. And I told our

> Head Office the same thing. I said, 'listen, it's just absolutely wearing me down.' The actual principalling [sic] was easy. But just going through these hoops was painful. And that's kinda sad, and it brings up that moral conflict, right, of 'I wish we could do it, and I wish we had the autonomy to put this in,' but I just can't.

Once the principals had come to understand and reconcile the particularities of China to find their place and some semblance of belonging, the next layer in their sense-making was to start their movement within and through the local expectations and realities of leading Canadian-accredited schools there. Each section in this chapter represents a further component of the principals' own sense-making processes as they navigated restrictions on their moral judgement and as their professional identities were constructed and reconstructed when they began to find their footing within their new reality.

The Business of Education

Charlie was unequivocal in their assertion that these Canadian-accredited schools should be characterized for exactly what they were. They stated, "we're not a Canadian school. We're a Chinese private school delivering a Canadian curriculum. And again, this is a business, and the business is education." For many of these principals, diluting their attention and energy from instructional leadership and quality teaching and learning in order to consider, sometimes even feeling pushed to prioritize, the Chinese schools' fiscal bottom lines was a source of moral disquietude and distress. Charlie noted that "this is the thing I've struggled the most with, that balance of doing what's best for the students and teachers, then trying to weigh that with the demands of the organization." Charlie's time was routinely eaten up in meetings with the school's recruiting and marketing departments, where Charlie often struggled to convey and "reinforce what [those departments] can and cannot communicate to parents." Having to adjust their own decision-making processes and even having to reconceptualize their own notions of their role to reflect this reality was a source of frustration and distress for Charlie.

As Charlie had done, Leslie also remarked that they were frequently required to “make some adjustments to accommodate our client base.” Andy felt that it was the unrelenting constancy of the “pressure from the upper level and the recruitment level of the school to be keeping parents happy” that affected how they led their school. As others did to reflect their daily realities, Chris broadened their own conceptions of the actual purpose and function of these Canadian-accredited schools in China. From small irritations around budget and resources to larger philosophical differences about the nature of education itself, the structures by which Chris made meaning of their experiences leading a Canadian-accredited were often bound within a space where pedagogical concerns misaligned with business realities. Chris said, “a lot of it is, well, we’re a private school. It’s always going to be the money versus education argument, and there’s also that sort of short-term thinking here that often conflicts with what I feel would be best. These are the things you have to learn to navigate.” This short-term thinking, to Chris, involved any machinations within the Chinese school that worked towards prizing higher enrolment over concerns of quality teaching and learning. These principals sometimes felt that they were shifted too far in that direction because of pressure, sometimes implicit but often very explicit, exerted by their Chinese counterparts.

That the Chinese school prioritized business concerns over education, that the ends (in this case, company profits) mattered far more than quality of the programs or the well-being of those within them, was reflective of Chinese political and cultural realities to Sam. They noted that:

> I've got a sense that [the Chinese school's] structural model is structured very much on the Chinese political system. You have an emperor at the top, and everything trickles down from there. I came to the conclusion that every step of the way, if you wanted to make an initiative or something like that, every step of the way there were roadblocks in place. And so every time, it was just a constant battle for everything.

When the issue at hand was about procuring resources or allocating money towards programs which the principals believed would enhance the quality of the experience their students received, the impediments in the schools' systems forced the principals to reconsider even petitioning for them. In Sam's estimation, this was less about securing money to spend in support of the program than it was indicative of a kind of exercise of power and control. They said, "again, it's the emperor at the top who basically dictates to everyone below him, and then it just trickles down. As it is written, so shall it be done, you know? Basically, 'if I ask you to do this, you should do this.'"

Terry framed their understanding of the organization's business concerns as an examination of a more holistic and comprehensive authorizing environment. Speaking of both practical issues around resources and budgeting, as well as reconciling sometimes competing standpoints between what might constitute priorities for their Canadian program located in China, they noted:

> Sometimes things take longer. And definitely within a complex environment, you better allow for a little extra time and some iterative pieces. But also, first, take some time to understand the authorizing environment. And so here, it's what [the boss] wants. If the boss wants it, we try to make it happen the best we can.

That extra time to secure the things one may have requested or to receive approval on a course of action, rather than being a source of frustration as it was for some of the other principals, was a time for Terry to consider how two very different conceptions of education might find consonance.

Grappling with knowing that decisions the principals would make according to their own moral positionality would sometimes cause a rift between them and their Chinese colleagues compelled the principals to truncate their best moral reasoning. Faced with a student in need of "full time intervention support and a gradual entry program that helps him develop socially," Leslie recognized that admitting that student would have an immediate effect on whole school enrolment. They remarked that:

> We just don't have the resources to help the kid. Additionally, it was made clear to me in no uncertain terms that accepting a student like this would greatly impact the satisfaction of our existing client base and parents would pull their children out of the school…I feel like I have abandoned a student in need. We try to create an inclusive environment, but at the end of the day we are running a business. My decisions affect the bottom line...If my Chinese staff saw that I was accepting a student that was going to cause a drop in enrolment, I would not be viewed favorably by my Chinese colleagues.

This kind of constant consideration of the organization's business concerns and the Chinese school's expectations affected the Canadian principals' courses of moral decision-making, thereby amplifying conditions in which their moral action may be constrained. To Pat, there was a clear correlation between their capacity to follow their own convictions and the Chinese school's lack of willingness to provide enough of the necessary resources and support. Pat remarked that "if I were going to identify one internal discomfort or belief, that would be how I can get teachers what they need to be successful, and to be comfortable, in the situations where the headmaster is balking at spending any money." As Shannon opined, "we kind of have those two different sides pulling the rope." These principals of Canadian-accredited schools constantly adjusted for the tensions they felt, externally and internally, on the ropes which bounded their experiences leading their programs in China.

A Misalignment of Values

While Beijing frequently issues updates to national educational policy that affect both local and international curricula schools, the "draconian education reform policies" (Hou, 2022) of July 2021 rippled deeply. These new policies further limited the type and amount of foreign instruction students may receive. The summer 2021 tightening came not long after guidelines were published by the state to ban the use of foreign textbooks, teaching materials, and some instructional methods in Chinese schools, so that the education the students received aligned with the tenets of Xi Jinping Thought. According to AsiaNews (2020):

> New regulations, dated 19 December [2019], were posted on the official website of the Ministry of Education. 'Teaching materials in primary and secondary schools must reflect the will of the party and the state,' they read. The guidelines stipulate that all texts must be subject to political review by experts in Marxism, traditional Chinese culture, and revolutionary values. Textbooks and other classroom materials will be discontinued if there are 'problems with the political direction and value orientation of the textbook content.'

While these national policies, as of early 2023, were still mostly directed at Chinese elementary, junior, and secondary schools, there was a widespread belief among the principals in this study that restrictions on their Canadian-accredited schools would also continue to tighten. The principals expected the level of oversight and interdiction by the Chinese state to increase. The values which undergird the hardening policy lines were reflective of an already existing chasm widening between Chinese doctrine and the principles which suffuse the curricula of the Canadian schools located there. As Nick opined, ‘you're responding to two different authorities. That can definitely be challenging sometimes, especially when there's just a fundamental difference in worldview.”

These differences in worldview, culturally diverse understandings of how the world does and should work, were underscored by sometimes incompatible expectations of how to achieve results. Pat maintained that the expectation in their school that any edicts issued from above be followed without question was premised on acceptance without the capacity to question. They stated:

> You can't ask the question ‘why’. That's not a question you can ask in China. You can look for information, you can have conversations, you can ask for clarification, some of which you'll get and some of which you won't. But if you actually ask ‘why’, that's not a question that will be answered.

Compliance is expected in Chinese schools, much as it is in Chinese society, a refrain echoed by a number of principals in my study. This kind of wholescale acceptance of mandates and policies without the capacity, or right, to question, disagree, or dissent is fundamentally different than what the principals brought from their democratically informed standpoint. Consequently, the principals' own sense-making processes rubbed against this blind compliance, causing conflict and frustration.

In their discussions with their Chinese counterpart, Ari recounted working through a disagreement, saying “well, you as a principal can do these things with your staff because compliance is built in and nobody complains. In my culture, it's consensus, it's fair notice, it's discussion, and then decision." Similarly, Charlie's discussions with their host school administration always required "careful maneuvering and the planning of very careful conversations and wording" to try and bridge the divide between expected compliance and a more palatable route, in their mind, towards action and result.

An expectation of conformity in thought and action in how the students comport themselves formed the basis of another philosophical divide for the Canadian principals in China. A teenager's tendency to express themselves and to push boundaries as they negotiate their own identity and sense of self in a larger context, and the rightness of them even doing so, sometimes manifested in disagreements between the Canadian principals and their Chinese counterparts. The details of such conversations, of how the adolescents might be asserting their own identities, ranged across a number of anecdotes shared by the participants in this study, but the recognition that these differences of opinion are rooted much more deeply in dissonant cultural values was ubiquitous. For Shannon, this difference in worldview framed their role and affected their own sense-making broadly. They remarked:

> I would say that with traditional leadership culture here, and the way that I would like to lead the school, the biggest gap is that I don't believe that conformity is necessarily the best way to inspire kids to be the best they can be. And that's a philosophical thing here that I will never believe, and if I'm expected to uphold that, which I am, that becomes a very big challenge for me in this context.

The diverse expectations were a source of ongoing discord and frustration for Shannon.

Recognizing that there were fundamental differences in cultural values and how these were expressed was integral for the principals to be able to reconcile these into their role as a

Canadian school leader in China. Leslie contended that “you’ve got to try work with them, or they’re going to find ways to work against you. And this is just something that you have to come to accept when you work here that you wouldn’t accept, obviously, back in Canada.” Andy felt that some of their engagements with their Chinese counterparts took on the tone of “a scare tactic to try and control me back into what they want.” This, again, was borne of differences in comfort with expected compliance held between Chinese and Canadian principals in their school. Andy knew that navigating this divide deliberately, sometimes bending into a kind of moral discomfort, was necessary in order to fulfill the obligations of their role. As Chris declared, when I asked him how he managed sometimes antithetical imperatives, “very difficultly, and the reality is that some [beliefs] have to be put aside. You simply have to, and there is just no way around it.” Each of these principals recognized that the misalignment in culturally affirmed and rooted values between China and Canada were an active consideration as they made sense of their experiences navigating the tensions that arose in their roles. This misalignment also affected the principals’ own professional identities as they grappled with both how to meet what was expected of them in their role while also honouring their own values and convictions.

Blake enumerated further confounding variables in what Canadian principals must consider in their school leadership roles in China:

> So, we’ve got the guidelines from the [Canadian] Ministry of Education, we’ve got the guidelines from the Chinese education bureau, we’ve got the guidelines from the parent school, we’ve got the guidelines from the parents about their expectations, and then we have to help students navigate through that. And then here you are, and what do you do with that dynamic? You’re in this vortex, this swirling vortex of all these forces, and how would you sort things out?

For some of the principals, a consideration of their daily interactions in transactional language seeped into their sense-making. Whether as the "quid pro quo approach" named by Blake, "the whole give and take thing" Leslie spoke of, or as the "risk/reward, kind of a cost/benefit analysis" that Chris detailed, some of the principals, perhaps out of a sense of expedience, sometimes framed their interactions and experiences instrumentally. That is, while they each declared that this was something discomfiting to them, the principals sometimes moved closer to the edge of their own moral comfort zones for the sake of forward movement in their schools. They retreated from a course of action based on their best moral judgement in order to seek a more harmonious common ground with their Chinese counterparts. This sometimes involved an explicit weighing of giving and taking, of costs and rewards.

To be able to attend to sometimes opposing worldviews, to find consonance in culturally bound discord, to balance the vortex of forces through the haze is complicated. The values which undergird the Canadian curricula cannot be put aside or muffled, as they were foundational to the Canadian principals' role and sense of professional identity. The political, cultural, and social values which constitute and inform Chinese culture cannot be disregarded, for to do so would be both interculturally obtuse and perilous to the future operation of the Canadian-accredited schools there. As Terry characterized a Canadian principal's challenge, it was:

> Cognitively demanding, absolutely. Emotionally demanding, psychologically demanding, physically demanding, absolutely. And I add in that it's cross-culturally demanding, because I feel that needs to be validated, that needs to be articulated, in our context. We live and we work in a complex environment, and part of the complexity is the cultural discontinuities that might exist between the learning cultures and the cultures of

> schooling and that type of thing. Yeah, the stuff that's happening in the school has, uh, there is dissonance that sits there.

The dissonance was fertile ground for the principals to find themselves in morally distressing situations as they led their schools in China.

Freedom and Autonomy

A core component of the principals' processes of making sense of morally distressing situations within their own professional identities was their conception of professional autonomy and their understanding of where limits lay as they led Canadian schools outside of Canada. When listening to the participants invoke their notions of professional autonomy and discuss its limits, Fransson and Grannäs's (2013) concept of dilemmatic space rang loudly. I understood the principals' movement through a terrain in which power and relationships were being constantly negotiated as a process which altered the principals' own understanding of their professional obligations. To the principals, their autonomy was a measure of their ability to enact courses of action which aligned with both their feelings of obligation to their curricula and to their own dynamic notions of ethical leadership and moral stewardship. In many ways, these seasoned international educators manifested deep intercultural awareness and felt impelled to honour the cultural values of their adopted home country. This swirl of considerations required the principals to be nimble, not staid, within their own conceptualizations of professional autonomy in order to continuously navigate and make meaning of the morally distressing situations they found themselves in.

In China, the principals recognized that the boundaries of their freedom to follow what they held to be right was structured in great part by policy mandates imposed upon them. That these policy mandates were informed by cultural tenets and imperatives that sat in opposition to what the principals held as personal convictions both muddied and hardened the lines that the principals navigated. In their framework, Alakavuklar and Alamgir (2018) asserted that one facet of inhabiting the ethico-political space, of achieving balance between convictions and political action, was to understand the nature of resistance and the limits of one's freedom within a system. The limits of their professional autonomy were sometimes murky for these leaders of Canadian-accredited schools in China; searching for a place of comfort within those boundaries was an active part of their process of making sense of morally distressing situations within their professional identities, especially when these constraints impeded the principals' conception of moral responsibility towards a right course of action.

Understanding when and where to assert their autonomy was what the principals had come to expect in their time in China. Nick said:

> I have this weird sort of freedom to pick and choose how to structure and make decisions based on what I know are hard lines from the Chinese side, what I know are hard lines from the [Canadian] side, and know where the freedom is, where the wiggle room is, to adjust those decisions.

They were able to position themself within expectations imposed by contending systems, conceiving of the situation almost playfully. It was almost like a game of multidimensional chess, in which Nick constantly evaluated strategy based on a calculus in which their own autonomy could be asserted. The limits on action were recognized, and for Nick, even granted as necessary so that the Canadian curriculum could nest as seamlessly as possible within the Chinese milieu.

Recognizing the margins of their professional autonomy while leading a Canadian school in China was an important and continuous function of the principals' sense-making processes.

Managing their own actions, finding wiggle room when necessary if they were feeling too stretched by local policy expectations, Ari noted that "I never felt that I didn't have the autonomy I wanted. I just knew that I needed to be mindful of what I say and how I do it." Ari recognized that the limits of their autonomy were dictated by policy and expectations derived from a source not always consonant with the beliefs they held about education learned in Canada or what they knew from their own experience in Canada. By focusing on their own agency and the ramifications of actions they chose, with careful deliberation, to pursue, Ari understood well that the very notion of professional autonomy was dependent on factors they may not have always have an avenue to address or change. This awareness featured strongly in Ari's process of making sense of morally distressing situations. They understood that some ideological boundaries were unassailable in China, and their own mindful discourse and self-talk could serve to alleviate tensions that arose within them.

Charlie saw that limits on their autonomy and their capacity to act in alignment with their own convictions was a balancing act. Aside from a strong understanding of self and one's own professional obligations, this careful maneuvering required a deeply nuanced read of local context. In our discussion around mandated censorship, Charlie felt that a principal must tilt towards Chinese expectations, even when this movement did not sit perfectly in the principal's own mind. They said:

> So, I think just being aware of [Chinese censorship policies] and being delicate with it. Again, you're a guest in a country that's not your own. Yes, there's policies from the [Canadian] Ministry of Education and that kind of thing. But your default position is to whatever local policy says if it contradicts something that the [Canadian] curriculum says.

Setting local expectations as their baseline moderated Charlie's understanding of the boundaries of their own professional autonomy while leading their Canadian program in China.

Nick constantly adjusted their own expectations of professional autonomy, relying on relationships they had built with Chinese counterparts to allow them some discretion in pursuing courses of action that may not have sat well with their local counterparts. Nick noted:

> I have a fair bit of freedom and autonomy to make decisions, regarding the [Canadian] side of things anyway. It's interesting, actually, because you'd think having these two conflicting, sometimes, cultures of Canada and China, and having requirements from both, would be even more restricting than normal. And I guess in some ways it could be.
>
> But I think because I have built trust on both sides, sometimes I can fly under the radar.

By leaning into the relationships they had cultivated, and by ensuring that they consistently delivered results within the Canadian program that were viewed favourably by the larger Chinese school, Nick was sometimes able to approach right up to hard lines. This near encroachment over dangerous ground was part of Nick's conception of testing the boundaries of their own autonomy. As Nick characterized it, this was a careful and deliberate navigation within the conditions which gave rise to morally distressing situations. The focus was on "doing what you can to make a difference within your wheelhouse, within the confines of your wheelhouse."

Kelly, in their 10th year in a Canadian-accredited school in China, invoked a similar metaphor, substituting the wheelhouse for a box. They said, "in terms of the Chinese administrators, it's kind of like we'll give you all of this freedom to deal with your program, to lead your program, but don't go outside this box." Limits were set, and the expectation that the Canadian principal did not contravene those limits was undeniable. While the limits were made explicit and the bounds of their professional autonomy were clearly demarcated, and though the

Canadian principal was given a measure of freedom within their own program, tensions still arose when Kelly was prevented from acting in accordance with their best moral judgement. Kelly declared that "yeah, you get an environment that is just, um, under pressure. And everybody is stressed." To be granted limited freedom to lead their Canadian-accredited programs was no less problematic than being outright ordered to act in a morally distressing way. Once again, a haze of ambiguity made the principals' navigation of disparate worldviews a murky proposition, one in which the limits of professional autonomy were not easily discerned. For Kelly, this precipitated a purposeful repositioning of their own sense of professional identity, one that assigned some primacy to the Chinese school's expectations.

Shannon framed their conception of professional autonomy in organizational terms while recognizing that dissonance occurred. They said:

> Because we are part of a larger entity, where you have your autonomy, but you're still expected to maintain and toe the line set by the big school. I think having the patience and flexibility to accept that kind of decision-making, that's a huge challenge of being an administrator over here.

They continued, noting that "it's a tough thing, because there is that balance where you are more free in some ways. But you're also limited in some ways. So, it's a tough thing." Limitations on the Canadian principal's autonomy existed because of the structure and expectations imposed by the larger school, which Shannon recognized as being the root of their own moral discomfort. As the other principals did, Shannon actively cultivated a balance in conceptualizing how best to navigate these conditions, a balance in how one contended with the limits imposed by very explicit expectations and policies.

The hard outlines of a Canadian principal's professional autonomy in China were, for Toby, an expected byproduct of context, of leading their school in the international context where they chose to live. At the time of our interview in their tenth year in China, they said:

> Yeah, well, I think there's a large gap that exists when it comes to my autonomy, just because of the fact that ultimately it comes down to the fact that I'm in a different country, and that country has rules and regulations that I need to follow. And I know that my autonomy stretches, but there are limits.

Toby understood that they were obligated to honour the mandates issued by the state, and this became foundational in their ability to accept limits on actions that might otherwise be taken. Still, recognizing these limits intellectually was not the same as being able to reconcile them fully. Toby felt that:

> there is that gate that we can't go inside of, like that house we can't enter. And maybe that's an example of how it would be morally a little bit more challenging and difficult sometimes to think about it. And maybe that's where it gets a little bit shady.

The facility to act fully in accordance with one's own moral reasoning was not something found in the metaphorical houses these principals inhabited. As they were finding their footing, the principals knew there were limits, informed and imposed by the values and expectations of where they had chosen to live and work, on their capacity to act in the way which aligned with the most fulsome expression of their conceptions of moral stewardship and ethical leadership. Having these limits on their professional autonomy affected the principals and became an important component of their capacity to navigate the embodied reactions that arose from contending with morally distressing situations.

Chapter Eight: Finding One's Route Through

Maintaining one's own ethical positionality while navigating dissonance calls for "a continuous dynamic relationship of ongoing struggle" (Alakavuklar & Alamgir, 2018, p. 34). For the principals, finding meaning through the morally distressing situations they faced began long before they shared their experiences with me. In my own process of making meaning of the incredibly rich data, and in an attempt to impose a conceptual linearity for the sake of narrative flow, I first envisioned the principals situating themselves within a context and climate new to them (chapter six), then taking those first figurative steps to understand the complexity of their roles and their positions within a system sometimes unknown and unknowable to them (chapter seven). I now move to more components of their sense-making processes to understand how the principals were able to find their route through a sometimes-fraught terrain. In this chapter, I consider how the principals framed their interactions with their Chinese school counterparts and how they envisioned their place within an ideological climate much different than what they knew best. I then consider how they examined their own comfort, or the limits of that comfort, in being in China and dealing with constraints on their moral judgement, as well as the function of their own political canniness in constantly negotiating a balance between what they knew they must do and what they believed to be morally right. These considerations are further layers to unfurl in an understanding of how these principals structured their own sense-making processes when contending with moral distress while leading Canadian schools half a world away from their homes.

Hard Lines, Battles, and Hills to Die On

Language and turns of phrase rife with metaphors of struggle and war radiated through the interviews I conducted. The notions of proverbial lines in the sand, battles to be fought or retreated from, and hills on which to stand or fall were invoked repeatedly by many of the Canadian principals in this study. These boundaries, regardless of how they were figuratively portrayed, whether internally generated or through expectations and policies made explicit by the host country authorities, acted as buttresses within the principals' own sense-making processes. For some, though the boundaries were unassailable, how exactly they were constituted or where exactly they may lay remained ambiguous. As Chris noted, "again, there aren't any very clear lines all the time." Leslie remarked that "it's hard to say obviously where the line is, kind of until you see it." Navigating up to, around, or through those boundaries was an active consideration for the principals as they contended with morally distressing situations in their schools and attempted to find a place of ethico-political balance within their own professional identities.

Anecdotes in which hard lines or limits were raised typically involved an ideological line set by the Chinese state which the Canadian principals needed to understand and moderate their actions around. As Chris concluded, "and that's sort of what it boils down to here, right? The government says something, you listen. You don't do what they told you not to do." Shannon noted that no amount of reflection or examination of one's own motives or intentions ultimately mattered in negotiating these lines when "there is sometimes just a 'that's the way that it is' kind of reality to some aspects of the job here." As Toby conceptualized these situations, there was a clear understanding of the consequences of transgressing those lines. They said:

> I sometimes think, okay, if I do cross these boundaries, or if I do have those conversations, or I do say something that I know does not align with what is happening in this country, will I be able to do my job effectively in the future here? And I won't, because I wouldn't be here. That's just a fact. And that's something I consider too.

The Canadian principals chose their words carefully, understanding that an affront to an ideological line held by the local education authorities could include both their speech and their actions, and may well end their international principalships.

With an understanding of the finality of result in crossing a line that should not be approached, the Canadian principals still found themselves approaching such positions as they contended with morally distressing situations. Administering their programs faithfully to the expectations of their home provinces sometimes situated the principals in positions that were untenable to the Chinese authorities. Sam recalled thinking that they would “just not roll over on something so fundamental” as a deeply held principle, even if holding their own line may have imperiled their employment. In resolving a dispute with the Chinese administration in their school, Sam remembered that:

> It was one of those things where I was going in to my [Canadian] staff and saying, ‘well, this might be it. This might be it.’ And again, it was what I felt was the right decision to make, the decision that needed to be made. And it wasn’t easy going down that path.

In Sam’s case, there was careful deliberation before approaching their Chinese counterparts, and an awareness from the outset that they may have been on precarious footing.

Managing an approach towards or retreat away from mandated boundaries was a function of continuously cultivating relationships for the principals. Chris noted that “you have to know which battles to fight and which ones to cede, just for the *guanxi*.” Understanding when to risk putting sometimes hard-earned relationships at risk for the sake of asserting one’s position was, for Chris and others, an active component of their sense-making process. Pat stated that “there are hills I’m prepared to die on, and I choose them very judiciously.” They framed their capacity to know when to push and when not to push within their understanding of their relationships with their Chinese counterpart. By operating within the sphere of their positive *guanxi*, Pat was able to convey to their colleagues that if they pushed back on something that was being mandated by local authorities, it must have been an issue of great importance to Pat.

Knowing how and when to challenge a boundary involved calculating risk. Nick noted that "what I've tried to do is know when to pick my battles in a lot of situations, because sometimes it's just not worth it. Sometimes it's not worth it to fight." They recounted incidents in the school that, with hindsight, were likely too laden with risk to have pushed any harder on. Knowing when to proceed into risk involved a thorough scan of the dynamics that were likely at play, sometimes having to surmise if these were not explicit. For Sam, who also recalled situations in which their moral judgement on the principles which underlie the Canadian curriculum were being challenged, the variable to consider in their measured response was energy. They said:

> I think one of the things you learn is just how much energy you want to spend on fighting. Like, how much energy do you want to expend on making this an issue? And I think some people just say, like, it's not worth it. It's just not worth the fight. It's just not worth the energy that's going to be involved.

Whether the calculation to challenge the conditions which bounded morally distressing situations was characterized as the weighing of risk, time spent, energy expended, or social capital flexed, the principals proceeded cautiously, always attuning themselves to intercultural dynamics and the political realities of their context.

The principals made concerted choices about their words and actions so that they could tread deliberately through the morally distressing situations they faced. Charlie felt that when they attended carefully to "the checklist items that we have to follow, then I don't think we have to worry too much about coming up to the line, let alone crossing it." For Ari, as long as what they were being asked to do did not lead them "way outside my moral compass," then they were able to navigate within what was decreed by the local authorities. Andy understood that intentionally focusing on the bigger picture, serving students and ensuring that they were learning well, allowed them to be comfortable having these hard ideological lines be part of the equation in how they perceived their role. Chris summed up their stance with a particularly Canadian metaphor:

> You have to know that you are going to have to choose your battles. You're going to have to choose which hills to die on, and which hills to run down the other side of on a toboggan. You have to learn how to navigate that area.

To contend with the morally distressing situations they faced, principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China exercised an expedient and cautious judgement when their own values sat in discord with those of their adopted home country.

Becoming Inured or Resigned

To be inured typically connotes a state of being in which a person becomes accustomed to something unpleasant or unpalatable. To become resigned is to accept conditions less than favourable as one's reality. These phrases are generally used pejoratively, as if the acceptance of worse conditions might be a reflection or manifestation of a person's character, of an inability or a reluctance to somehow effect a more agreeable state. For the principals in my study contending with morally distressing situations as they led their Canadian schools far from Canada, a nuanced reckoning of their own inurement or resignation to local dictates and policy was an active component of their sense-making processes. As Shannon stated:

> There is a feeling sometimes that no matter what I do, we will not be able to fix some of the situations that do lead to moral distress. Of saying, you know, I believe this is the right way. Am I able to get that happening at this school? And when I can't, is it my fault? Or is just the context I'm in? Or is it, well, you tried, and it's just the way it's going to be. And I don't want to resign myself to that, but I mean, there is an element of that.
>
> Sometimes you just can't do what you really think is the right or best thing to do.

These principals navigated the ethical tensions they faced within unique conceptualizations of how best to accept, resist, or work around the conditions which structured their experiences of constrained moral judgement. In the way I made meaning of the data, envisioning the principals' responsibilities and obligations on one side of a scale and their beliefs and values on the other, striving for a tenable balance in a conceptual terrain, "identities, structures, or social practices do not have fixed positions" (Alakavuklar & Alamgir, 2018, p. 37), and the principals' own ethico-political understandings informed their decisions and actions.

Alex recognized that some expatriates, perhaps those who held too strongly to personal convictions borne of their home country's sensibilities, tended to get progressively more frustrated and angrier over time with what they were experiencing in China. Alex saw these heightened emotions as running counter to the kind of cultural acclimatization that needed to occur for an outsider to begin to accept China for what it is, a place immutable to outside influence. Remarking on the ideological chasm between China and Canada in how discourse was controlled, Alex noted that "for me, I don't get very emotional about it. You have to either accept it or it will start chewing at you. You have to accept things. There's certainly no changing it." Alex maintained that "you just have to sit back and take a deep breath and say, you know, 'serenity now,' or whatever." This kind of acceptance was integral to Alex's sense of acclimating to the cultural values and expectations of China, acting then as a buffer from the feeling of burning out or burning up that they saw others going through.

The idea of control and the limits of the principals' own agency over conditions which framed their experiences in China was central to their process of making sense of morally distressing situations. Kelly recognized that understanding what can be controlled, both in terms of the conditions in which the school operates and their own reactions to those conditions, was crucial in buttressing against the affective repercussions of moral distress, stating:

> You just try to find a way to sleep at night. And usually you just try to, I wouldn't exactly say minimize it, but find a way to be like, well, I have no control. There are things that we have no control over here. Knowing that I have no control over it, therefore I can't be miserable and keep getting frustrated, because it's not going to change anything, it's not going to change the situation. It's just me who is going to be miserable.

In this way, a sense of resignation to the inevitability of constraints on their own moral positioning became a constructive component of the principal's sense-making. That is, Kelly actively reconstructed their own tenable ethical balance by diffusing the negative emotional reactions that arose; they granted that it would be futile to do anything else. If the particular details that created or bounded the morally distressing situations could not be altered, it hurt only Kelly to dwell on those conditions.

A focus on the larger mission of their roles as school leaders was an avenue for the principals to come to terms with working within morally distressing situations. Shannon considered what was elemental and what "we can just allow to fall by the wayside," prioritizing within their own conception of moral stewardship and ethical leadership only the courses of action which allowed them to focus on the quality of learning and the students' educational experience. Shannon said, “so, when it comes to being resigned, that’s just the way it is, and all I can do is focus on my mandate and my mandate is to make this a happy place for kids and teachers.” Whether to stand on a principle or to cede at times of misalignment with their Chinese counterparts, even when the principle was foundational to their own personal and professional identity, was not a binary that could be reduced to resignation or not resignation; rather, there was a more liminal and dynamic terrain in Shannon’s sense-making process. They said:

> Yeah, we can’t be resigned. We have to fight, um, not fight, but push. And I think that being able to differentiate those things is a very important part of not driving yourself crazy about whether I actually have the influence and the ability to do things that I want to do here. And I think that finding that balance is the key to being successful over here.

The notion of balance, of when to push and when to hold back, became integral for the principal as they contended with constraints on their moral reasoning. When discussing how they felt being forced to censor course materials, Chris stated that, “we try to work around it in every way we possibly can. Is it ideal? No. Can we work around it and still provide a solid educational foundation? Yes.” Chris was more than uncomfortable with the mandate issued by their local education bureau; they were morally distressed. In this case, rather than simply acceding, granting that something must be as it has been decreed, Chris worked to pivot towards effecting the same end via different means. Redirecting one’s own disquietude in order to focus on their larger mission and navigate themselves through morally distressing situations was a purposeful strategy adopted by the principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China.

In considering whether they had become resigned or inured to being compelled to act in a manner not fully consonant with their own moral positionality, Kelly noted that, “now, it’s just normal. So, I think over time, you normalize things and I guess you become part of the culture also." They were aware that to stand against what was mandated would be to cause new, or more, tension. To become resigned to what must be done was not fully an act of relenting or giving up; instead, the Canadian principal had more nuance to consider in their actions. As Kelly said, if something was culturally decreed and accepted in China as a way of thinking or being, then "it's normal here. So, if you are going against that, then you're the one who is not normal." Reconceptualizing resignation or inurement to encompass strengthening a sense of fit and belonging allowed the Canadian principal to reconcile their own feelings of moral distress.

Coming to terms with how things were done in China, even when that sat in opposition to what the Canadian principal believed to be morally correct, may also, as Sam characterized it, be "necessary to, for lack of a better word, survive in this context." Ari used the same phrasing when discussing how they navigated moral discord, noting that:

> Humans, as a human, that's what we do, right? That's how you survive. I don't get inured to it. I don't get habituated to it. It's still there. What you choose to do about it is so limited that you need to sort of compartmentalize it.

For Ari, limitations on what actions might be pursued to mitigate their own moral distress resided in a sometimes-unbridgeable divide between disparate worldviews. Actions that may be taken to assuage the feelings associated with moral distress required a conscious parsing or parceling of Ari's own convictions in a way that still allowed them to fulfill their role within the school. Whether they conceived of their facility to come to terms with local values, expectations, or policies that misaligned with their own convictions as survival, resignation, or acclimatization, the principals in this study examined their own moral positionality in the larger context of external considerations.

Time to Reset or Time to Leave

People who live away from their home countries may go through periods of being prone to becoming affected or overwhelmed by cultural dissonance, as they are constantly "navigating unfamiliar socio-cultural and physical environments" (Hack-Polay & Mahmoud, 2020, p. 286). This dissonance is not solely informed by the realities of geographical distance from home, language barriers, or being surrounded by unfamiliar customs and ways of being in the world; instead, these factors may amplify the widely disparate cultural values and assumptions which create the conditions in which the principals must contend with morally distressing situations. Though the principals of Canadian-accredited schools in this study had each spent a significant amount of time in China, there was, for some, an active consideration of periodically connecting to Canada, or to somewhere decidedly not-China, so that they might lessen the generalized feelings of anxiety, frustration, or bewilderment (Hack-Polay & Mahmoud, 2020) that may build within them.

Sam recalled the previous principal at their school getting progressively more frustrated and resentful when navigating nearly constant practical and philosophical disagreements with the Chinese school administration. That principal, who by Sam's account was a seasoned school leader with experience in other international contexts, reached their own tipping point. Sam said, "he was just at that point of frustration where he just said, 'I can't take this anymore. I just need to get back to Canada.'" This was not uncommon, as Sam noted that they knew of other principals who reached similar levels of frustration and disenchantment, returning to Canada far sooner than they had originally intended. Sam's observation encompassed more than cultural unfamiliarity as the impetus for this exodus; it also involved a person's inability to accept the reality of what China is. They remarked:

> You can't come here and demand that things change how you want them. And I know, I've seen principals come here, they come here, and they get off the plane, they look around, they say, 'oh, I can't wait to leave. I'm only staying a year.' Like, why would you agree to come in the first place? If it took you only that long to make that decision, you're clearly not the right person for this job.

To Sam, those principals lacked the capacity to adapt to the particular kind of challenge which China presented to foreign principals, one that was based less on surface differences between two countries but was rooted more deeply in ideological rifts.

For Pat, ideological differences between their moral judgement and courses of action dictated by Chinese policy mandates came to a head early in their tenure. Pat recalled that:

> Earlier in the year, it was really difficult, and I was on the phone to my [spouse] at the end of September. And it was just like, 'I don't think I can do this. This is not going to work for me. I don't think I can stay.' It took some real, uh, I would call it moral fortitude to decide to stay, to take the high road.

In this case, the high road for Pat required them to cede position on a strongly held belief concerning how students were treated and valued. Pat weighed the effects of their possible exit on personal grounds, the ripples within their own professional identity and sense of moral agency, and with regard to the deleterious effects on the stability of the school, its students, and its teachers. It became a concerted act of will and took a thorough reflection on the limits of their own moral malleability to have enabled Pat to tilt away from a course of action that impelled them to leave their principalship.

The principals recognized that the decision to lead a Canadian-accredited school outside Canada, the decision to be in China at all, was fundamentally theirs to make. As Leslie stated, "look, I'm in a unique situation where I don't have to be here. I choose to be here." Recognizing that even having to contend with the morally distressing situations they faced in their role all sprang from an act of their own volition was part of Leslie's considerations in handling the emotional cost of leading a Canadian school in a context very different than Canada. There could be a temporariness imposed by Leslie if they foresaw moving past a figurative moral point of no return. Kelly leaned into a similar sentiment:

> At the end of the day, it's a decision we make, right? From my perspective, it's always like, well, if I'm not happy, if I disagree, I always have the option to leave. So yeah, there are boundaries and limitations and everything, and I know that deep down, maybe one day, I'll be like, well, this is too much for me. I completely disagree with what's happening. And morally, I cannot live with this, whatever that would be. Well then, I have the option to leave.

The awareness that there is agency and volition acted as a bulwark in the principal's process of making sense of their experiences contending with moral distress. There could be finality, a time when the principal would no longer need to grapple with their own consternation if they could not find consonance between their own moral judgement and the constraints that prevented them from acting thusly. That the imposition of this finality was in their own hands was both a font of solace for the principals and an expression of agency within their own professional identities.

For some of the principals, it had not required that much finality to seek some metaphorical breathing room. Temporarily leaving China allowed the principals to reset or recharge. Shannon believed that "being able to come and go really allows you to have that perspective and kind of stay grounded to allow you to reflect on what it is that you like, and what it is that you hope for." Shannon cited reconnecting with family and friends in Canada, spending time in nature in their home province, and being able to live within known cultural expectations as a reprieve from the ambiguity and dissonance of China. Leaving China allowed Shannon to return invigorated, ready again to wade through the ideological divide in order to meet their own expectations of moral stewardship and ethical leadership in their school.

This notion of recharging and recalibrating was integral to the principals' capacities to maintain their own senses of momentum and equilibrium. It was less important exactly where this reset happened than it was just somewhere not-China. The ability to leave, the understanding that a principal might find temporary respite or may opt to end their tenure if they were pushed too far beyond the bounds of their own moral positionality, was an active consideration for some of the participants in this study. This awareness provided these principals a measure of comfort and an assertion of their own agency as they made sense of their experiences working in a cultural context very different from one they understood more fully.

Political Acumen

"Oh my gosh, politics is everything," Andy answered in response to my question about the function of political acumen in how they navigated Chinese cultural values and expectations that often sat in opposition to their own convictions. Andy continued:

> It is definitely an exercise, a constant exercise, of recognizing being in this role, recognizing who the key players are, how they need to be addressed, what makes them tick, what strategy is going to be more effective when working with them. Yeah, it really is. That constant negotiation.

Negotiating dilemmatic spaces and finding their own balance between professional obligation and personal convictions required, as Fransson and Grannäs (2013) asserted, "the negotiation of power" with "implications for how individuals intersubjectively construct their individual and professional identities” (p. 8). Doing so in the international context where they had chosen to live and work, where a keen understanding of the political and social dynamics of *guanxi* colour every facet of society, informed the principals’ own meaning-making. For these principals, a measure of political sagacity was not solely about how best to manage the practical realities of their jobs and their innumerable interactions with Chinese counterparts. Rather, a keen level of political acumen and skill, of knowing when, how, and why to acquiesce, to hold firm, or to challenge local authority was an integral part of their capacity to make sense of their experiences.

I gave shape to my interpretations of the principals’ sense-making processes, cultivated my own insights, through the notion of an ethico-political space, a conceptual framework in which one’s convictions are the driver of movement through an inherently political subjective terrain. That is, compliance with or resistance to policies and mandates which a person finds morally unpalatable is an act of balance, of understanding the subtleties of power dynamics, ideological positioning, and one’s own value system. After listening to the principals recount anecdotes and conceptualize their experiences, I feel now that this framework would resonate as strongly for the participants as it did for me when I encountered it before our interviews began. The principals recognized that their shrewdness and their facility to understand the scope and limits of their influence was an active consideration in how they led their Canadian schools in China. They balanced professional obligations with their own principles as they contended with moral distress and continuously calibrated their own professional identities. This was crucial, for as Alex noted, “yeah, you’re sometimes walking on a tightrope above a minefield.”

Ari’s tightrope may not have stretched over a metaphorical minefield, but their recognition that a measure of political astuteness was important in how they fulfilled their role was as strong as Alex's and Andy's. Ari saw their own interactions with the school's Chinese principal as being a kind of necessary political interplay. They remarked:

> It's a constant kind of negotiation, a work between getting consensus and saying, 'well, this just has to be done this way.' Or trying to build consensus. Or trying to walk the tightrope so that you don't piss too many people off. And at the end of the day, you just hope that a decision proves itself. And sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't. But that in the end, it's good for kids. And that's kind of your reason for doing it.

By maintaining a focus on what they held to be the greater mission of the school, on the quality of learning the students receive, Ari was able to nest their political maneuvering within their own notions of ethical leadership. This allowed Ari to stretch at times when their own best course of moral reasoning needed to be ceded. When expected to align with and show outward support for their Chinese principal's handling of a student management issue, a punitive measure that "doesn't sit real well," they remarked that "so, I was asking a student to do something that I wouldn't normally ask them to do if it was a [Canadian province] school in Canada. But we're a [Canadian] school in China. We have to comply with the rules that are there."

Toby considered their compliance with policy directives that were not fully aligned with their sense of moral reasoning as a continuous act of political negotiation. They declared:

> Like, consistently, I feel like that's going on all day, and there are so many things that go into that. I'll consider what type of tone I used in a previous conversation. So, because I'm trying to figure out that nuance, I often will spend a lot of time trying to figure out what sort of tone and what sort of approach works best for me to get the most out of people or get what I need. And for me, that also causes a lot of consideration. And it's also a very political way of looking at it.

Constant consideration of words, the implications of those words as they land within the worldview of their Chinese counterpart, and the manner in which the words were delivered guided Toby's interactions. For Toby, "always being conscientious of the approach, of how to approach the Chinese staff about issues" was fundamentally political and was a necessary component of their ability to navigate morally distressing situations.

Political astuteness was especially important for the principals due to the intercultural dynamics at play in Canadian schools in China. Leslie recognized that "sometimes there has to be some shrewd negotiation that happens" so that the Canadian principal was able to reconcile the constraints imposed on their decision-making. Because these constraints were informed by Chinese social or political expectations, Leslie said that the constant negotiation "can be a bit challenging because you're dealing with some cultural things that you might not necessarily be aware of." For Leslie, recognizing that there may be cultural blind spots or knowledge gaps in how they understand Chinese culture became a part of their own process of navigating the tensions they faced.

To Charlie, the fact that they must be so politically minded was anathema to them, even as they granted the necessity of constantly managing actions and interactions within a context loaded with cultural dissonance. They said:

> Political skill is far more important than it should be. And I hate it. I hate it, truly. And there's not many things that I hate. But I hate the political side of things here. I'll say that the political jockeying or that infighting or that part of this job, it doesn't have a positive impact on people or on teaching or learning. But sometimes you have to go along with it. Yeah, I don't have much time or patience for it. That'll probably be my eventual downfall as an administrator here.

Charlie calibrated their decisions and set courses of action within their aversion to the ideological negotiation which necessarily existed between their own beliefs and the structures imposed by the local authorities. Knowing when and how to act to mitigate conflicts and tensions was paramount in Charlie's process of making sense of their experiences. In their mind, "no matter what, you still have to take the high road, even if it doesn't fit or go your way."

Shannon conceived of the political nature of their role as a terrain in which to strengthen the Canadian program, noting that "when I need something, I know how to, um, I carefully kind of decide how I am going to get [the Chinese principal] to say yes to me." When I asked Shannon whether they considered themself to be a political person, and whether being political was a factor in how they contended with morally distressing situations in their school, they responded in this way:

> So, like, it would depend on the definition of political, but I don't think that I'm overly outright political in the way I speak and things like that. But I think it's the way I think and the way that I try to get people to do things. Like, I want buy-in, you know? I want people to come together to create something that I believe is the way a school should be. And to me, that's a very political process.

Having enough political acumen to know when to leap forward, when to inch forward, or when to retreat tactically was part of the principals' calculus as they navigated affronts to their best moral judgement. As Shannon weighed their own moral positionality with movement towards what was best for the students and teachers, there were times when acceding was politically expedient, even if there was a toll on their emotional being and ripples into their own professional identity.

The principals factored political expedience into their decision-making, and it was also a central concern in their process of reflection, learning, and professional growth. In an anecdote about mandated censorship, Nick granted that "playing politics" was necessary, "because that's how I need to get things done." Being compelled to withhold access to information and to disallow topics of conversation affected Nick's emotional state, saddening them that they must follow a policy that rankled their own beliefs. Drawing on their own political shrewdness to move them to a place where the dissonance was not overwhelming, Nick declared:

> I mean, I don't like [censorship]. But I kind of work around that in, you know, to just sort of keep my own morality, my own sense of morality. And if I want to keep my job, I've got to comply, right? I feel that allows me to do my job without it affecting me that badly.

Nick recognized that there were likely limits to their own ability or willingness to play politics. A measure of shrewdness may work as an avenue by which the principal can make sense of morally distressing situations, but Nick did not want to normalize that as a condition of who they were within their own morality. They continued:

> I feel like if I had to do that too much, though, I would be concerned about losing myself to that, right? You feel the need to play politics, you put on that mask, and then eventually that becomes your face, right? So, it's one of those things where I don't want that to become my face.

There was concern that the constant need to be political in their role as a Canadian school leader in China would mould their permanent identity, perhaps tilting them too far from a palatable ethico-political balance.

Terry adopted a broad philosophical view of the need to be politically skilled as a Canadian principal in an international context. In a figurative echo of Nick's choice of the word 'play' to describe the consideration of engaging disparate ideological positions, Terry saw an element of each party playing a role in a kind of drama. This infused Terry's approach to the constant negotiation required in the role, both interpersonally and within themself. They said:

> So yeah, that's all negotiation, and it's a little bit of theatre as well. It's a significant amount of negotiation. But that's, I would say, that's relational. It's attention to the relational. And it's not just as mercenary as 'I'm going to negotiate a win/win' or a zero sum or any of that type of stuff. Or I'm going to own this. I'm going to say it's more, um, it's more trying to understand how we all move together.

Terry used their political acumen to find comfort with what they knew they were expected to do in order to meet the expectations of the local authorities. For Terry, this involved a process in which they considered not just what was being said to them, but also the subtext and context of those demands. It required a kind of "frame by reference shifting", in which they "spend a lot of time thinking about the way that others would think about something." Terry's capacity to strike a balance between their own convictions and the ideological realities which bound the expectations upon them was encompassed within a broader consideration. Terry stated:

> There's a lot of dimensions of leadership that are aimed at delivering what is the promise of the school. What is the public value of the school? So there's that organizational part, the instructional leadership part, that type of stuff. That's aimed at delivering on a promise. There's a lot of thought that goes into saying, okay, what exactly is that promise? What is the public value? What is the explicit public value of the promise? And what's the implicit, the hidden, one as well? And you have to be careful with that. But the relational leadership, the political, that negotiation, that's just the grease that allows everything else to move.

Their own political acumen allowed Terry to conceptualize a movement forward through the dissonance which arose when a Canadian curriculum was offered in a place with an ideological architecture very different than that of Canada.

Insight into the language employed by the principals as they made meaning of their navigation through the morally distressing situations they faced, how they came to accept (or at least understand) constraints on their moral judgement, and how they understood their role in light of larger cultural and political dynamics coalesced into my interpretation of the principals finding their way through a complex and nuanced terrain. These understandings intertwined, informed, and amplified facets of my interpretations of the principals' unique and ongoing processes of making meaning of their experiences.

Chapter Nine: Finding One's Perspective

Alakavular and Alamgir (2018) wrote that though one may "seem cynically compliant with organizational requirements and objectives, the struggle seems to keep and retain the autonomy of selfhood and identity. Hence, resistance may be covert and implicit" (p. 38). Coming to terms with the social and cultural climate of China amounted to finding their place. Understanding the nuances of their role in light of the expectations and realities of working in a Canadian-accredited school in China was the principals finding their footing. Finding their route through encompassed the components of their sense-making as they settled into the complexities of their roles and conceived of their own forward progress. Room to wiggle, a Swiss Army knife, a good soldier, a great many hats, living under a microscope, locked gates, houses that may not be approached, and tightropes over minefields: these were a few of the colourful metaphors invoked by the 15 principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China as they made sense of their experiences navigating morally distressing situations. In *finding their perspective,* I consider the principals' own more conceptual understandings of their role and their obligations in the international context where they had chosen to work: their constantly evolving professional identities, their sense of the moral rightness of even doing what they do in a country so far removed from Canada, and their ability to shift their perspectives and reframe their thinking as a means to work through moral dissonance or disquietude.

Professional Identity

A principal's professional identity is in constant flux because the role itself calls for ceaseless improvisation (Ryan, 2007). The capacity to adapt to situations calls for a strong understanding of the many dynamics at play in the school (Notman, 2016) and that the principal be keenly attuned to nuance and subtle shifts in atmosphere. Notions of self and self in context can sometimes be contradictory and require careful cultivation. That is, with a constant interplay of values and perceptions, both from within and influenced by interactions with others holding their own beliefs, principals balance a vast array of imperatives. What they hold to be foundational in their own professional expression may not neatly align with what they know to be required to fulfill the expectations of their role. It is an exhausting, exhilarating dance, one in which the principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China found themselves moving through disparate ideological terrain to contend with morally distressing situations. As Blake affirmed:

> I've had to develop confidence in my role. I've had to develop communication skills. I've had to hone my listening skills. I've had to hone my critical thinking skills. I've had to hone my creative problem-solving skills. And I've had to hone my cultural awareness.

It is the extra challenge of intercultural competence, of leading Canadian schools in an international context informed by a vastly different political and ideological climate than Canada's, which obliged the principals to attend to their own fluctuating identities differently than they would if they were leading schools in their home provinces.

The cultural and political values of China had a direct impact on the principals' professional identity. Toby maintained that developing their own facility with values fostered within a Chinese standpoint continued to be an active function of their own sense-making process. They remarked:

> I don't know if I could be the same principal in Canada that I am in China. I feel like there are certain ways and certain things that I do here, and certain things that I have to consider here, or vice versa, that would be so different. And the amount of tension that I often have to navigate around things here is different. And there are boundaries, the

> cultural boundaries, you have to set for yourself. And there's the importance of being culturally competent.

For Toby, there was an immediacy in cultivating and honing the ability to mould their own conceptions of the limits of what they considered to be morally acceptable to encompass a broader positioning. Meeting the expectations of their Chinese counterparts, even when the actions required were discomfiting, was a component of Toby's fluctuating identity. They stated:

> And if they're saying that this is something that needs to be done, then I have to do my best to try to make it work. I oftentimes take this whole thought, um, sometimes, even though I've never been in the military, I feel like I would be a good soldier. Because if somebody says to me, 'listen, this is something that needs to be done,' and I look at it and ethically or whatever it's not going to push me too far in a wrong direction, then I'm going to make it happen. This is what we need to do.

For Toby, being a good soldier was not following mandated action blindly; rather, there was an active consideration of multiple value systems in Toby's understanding of the structuring of their own professional identity. That is, Toby actively negotiated their fluctuating identity with consideration of the social and political context they worked in.

In his 2021 book *The Attributes*, retired US Navy SEAL Commander Rich Diviney defined integrity as "the ability to act in accordance with the relevant moral values and social and cultural norms" (p. 202). Integrity is inherently subjective and calls for a person to be deeply attuned to the political realities and social constructs of an external reality, one in which context must be a prime consideration. This calibration with context is at the root of Alakavuklar and Alamgir's (2018) conception of ethics, "wherein compassion, care for others, and the self-configuration of policies interplay" (p. 33). The notion of integrity was at the core of how principals in this study made sense of morally distressing situations within the context of their professional identities. Andy, for example, invoked the word directly as they framed their actions in regard to their overarching commitment to a larger mission:

> I think ultimately my check is, in this situation, what's gonna serve this school community the best? Obviously, there are parameters that I need to work within and definitely Ministry and school expectations where there's not a lot of wiggle room. But ultimately my compass is what is best for the school. Again, there's probably subjectivity in that it's what I believe is best for the situation. But I mean, that's an integrity thing, right? It's what you believe you're doing within your job to the best of your ability.

As part of this personal and professional integrity and using what is best for the school as a touchstone, Andy diffused the tensions they recognized building within themself by "recognizing that this is not a personal thing and it's not a [Canadian province] vs. China thing. This is just how it works."

While Vic might have concurred that the ideological expectations of China would be best not seen as a personal affront to their professional identity, they were somewhat less conciliatory in accepting its inevitability. Vic felt that becoming defensive was not something to be elided over as one constantly reconceptualized their role and their function in a larger context; instead, it should be embraced as a natural byproduct of constant adaptation. In recounting a boisterous disagreement on principle with their Chinese counterpart regarding student discipline, Vic noted "yeah, you become defensive. It's a natural feeling. It's not just about, oh, I have to make sure we're all going to be nice and happy and kind to each other." They continued:

> I am always convinced, and I learned this a long time ago, that it's not about me, it's about them. I keep on convincing myself of that. I have to be honest in how I feel and not

> create this lie to myself that you can still continue to go on and just forget everything. So even though a situation is frustrating or distressing, I can learn something from that.

Vic believed that these negative feelings, the sense of frustration or despair, sometimes buoyed them through morally distressing situations. Incorporating their own negative feelings as an active component of their sense-making process was a function of Vic's conception of integrity, one which honoured the multiple forces that coalesced to inform their own professional identity.

Maintaining one's own sense of integrity when dealing with morally distressing situations had an outward-facing component for the principals, even in times of heightened emotional reactions. Nick remarked:

> Occasionally, we may need to make some moral compromises that we're not entirely comfortable with. If you're going to take your morality out of the management of the school, it's not going to end well, I don't think. You know, we put who we are out into the world, and if we're compromising who we are, and what we believe morally, then that's, um, it's really going to cause some issues.

They recognized that in their role in China, there were always instances in which their beliefs did not align with those of their Chinese counterpart. Many times, the course of action that was taken was, at best, a compromise and a concession. For Nick, there was a balance to be struck, a constant negotiation that occurred within their own notions of professional identity and professional obligation. Knowing when to draw upon one facet of their identity at the expense of another came from wisdom acquired through experience.

Continuous learning was fundamental to the professional identities of these principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China. It is the commitment to continuous personal and professional growth (Robertson, 2017) that allowed these principals to be more than reactive to the tensions they experienced. Instead, it was their proactivity, manifesting as concerted effort to grasp the intercultural dynamics which informed the dissonance they felt, as well as their capacity for reflection that allowed the principals to navigate morally distressing situations as elegantly as they could. Kelly said that they reminded themself that, "well, you know, I am learning. I will always be a learner, and in this situation, I am learning. I am trying my best to navigate this whitewater." This kind of self-affirmation bolstered Kelly as they contended with constraints on their best moral judgement in times when local expectations clashed with their own deeply held beliefs.

The complexity that arose from the differences in cultural expectations between those that underlay the Canadian curriculum and those that were entrenched in their Chinese school. Shannon recognized that as principal they were "forced to wear every different hat that you could ever think of in different situations here." They believed that their identity was continually being informed and reconstituted by their own purposive reflection on their own actions, "and that's something that makes this job unique in terms of creating that professional identity." While this is not unique to principals in China and their conceptions of professional identity, as Canadian-based principals likely engage a similar process and contend with similarly complex dynamics themselves, Shannon maintained that the particularity of their specific context affected their own efforts to find moral consonance within their own professional identity.

Chris also discussed the multiplicity of functions and expectations they embodied in their role, noting their own constant questioning of their role in light of the larger context. Chris said that dealing with the challenges and pressures they had faced because of fundamental differences in worldview had "made me into quite the Swiss Army knife, I think is the best way to put it. I think I can face a million different issues. Sometimes I do find myself questioning more and more though what my identity is here. It's fuzzy." The haze of ambiguity may sometimes have diffused the principals' clarity on how they conceived of their own professional identities, but it did not obstruct them in their constant adaptation to the pressures they faced and the tensions they navigated.

Moral Rightness

In my candidacy defense, I was asked by a committee member about the general nature and purpose of Canadian-accredited schools abroad, and whether I felt their existence in some way amounted to a kind of colonial or imperialistic project, an imposition of Canadian educational and societal values onto the citizens of another country. I answered then, as I would now, that while it was an important question, a thorough consideration of whether these Canadian schools abroad are indeed exporting values and social discourses to the detriment of the local country was beyond the scope of my research direction. It was peripheral, perhaps, but certainly not central to a dissertation study in which I interpreted participants' sense-making of morally distressing situations within the context of their own professional identities. I recognize plainly that a researcher approaching the existence of these schools from any number of critical methodological perspectives would have generated a different document.

I do contend, though, that the question is germane in understanding how these principals navigated the tensions that arose when their own sense of moral authenticity was constrained by local expectations and realities, as in many ways, their own moral positionality was an essential part of their processes of making meaning of their experiences. That is, part of the principals' meaning making was situated by them in a conceptual terrain suffused by the notion of the rightness of even having these Canadian programs in China. Some of the principals raised this themselves in the first of our two semi-structured interviews. For the other participants, and based on my awareness that this, for some, was an important part of their calculus in how best to navigate misalignments between what they felt they ought to be doing and what they were expected by their Chinese schools to be doing, I included the following question in our second semi-structured interviews:

> Regarding the 'moral rightness' of leading a Canadian school in China (or its converse, a kind of 'moral imperialism', a charge sometimes levied at educators working internationally), some might contend that a curriculum is inherently about transmitting values, ways of understanding, and ways of interacting with the world. In your current context, these are western/democratic/Canadian values to citizens of a country whose government doesn't necessarily hold those same values. How do you conceive of this within your own sense-making process?

In a few cases, I altered the wording of the question slightly based on the flow of the conversation leading up to this topic. Three participants asked for further clarification of the conceptions of moral imperialism and moral rightness, which I provided by drawing on Djerasimovic's (2014) assertion that most transnational education (TNE) arrangements are seen by critics to "involve an imposition of educational, cultural, and economic discourses of the exporter institution and the exporter country onto the host context" (p. 207). While Djerasimovic (2014) did seek to problematize or refute this in their article, they added:

> The idea of cultural imperialism or colonialism within the TNE field is constructed around the notion of one educational and cultural discourse, carried by more powerful actors, establishing dominance over another educational and cultural discourse, supported by those who either willingly or unwillingly allow for such dominance. This then makes way in the long term for a sort of an ideological hegemony, this ideology contained,

> perpetuated, and disseminated through the dominant educational and cultural discourse. (pp. 207-208)

For the principals of 15 Canadian-accredited schools abroad in this study, orienting themselves to the moral rightness and overall sense of mission in guiding young people, who just happen to be Chinese citizens studying a Canadian curriculum in China, to be thoughtful, creative, and critical human beings was an active component of their sense-making processes as they navigated moral distress borne of dissonant cultural imperatives.

Initial reactions to the question of whether they believed themselves to be moral imperialists, a question heavy in implication but posed lightheartedly (I concluded my reading of the question with ‘Are you a moral imperialist for doing what you do there?’), were telling. Responses ranged in content and tone from a casual acceptance of the premise to vehement opposition. I position Andy on the former end of that spectrum, as they responded:

> Well, it's interesting because I definitely think it is a rightful charge. Because I would say, when I first came, a lot of my conversations in this role in particular, although I'm sure I did it when I was teaching as well, there definitely was an attitude of I'm here because the [Canadian province] school system is a better system and a better, you know, approach to education. And, I wouldn't have said that, necessarily, but definitely it was part of my mentality.

While Andy accepted the notion of moral imperialism at face value, they granted that their attitude had shifted, both as a result of the total time spent working in China and due to the nature of their transition from teacher to principal. In their role as school leader, Andy believed they had a more broad and nuanced understanding of the intercultural dynamics at play within the school, dynamics which informed their relationships with a Chinese administrator equally committed to the notion of student success. Andy continued:

> But it is something that I have consciously tried to be more aware of and more open in my discussions of, well, maybe [my Canadian province] doesn't have the be all and end all to every situation and having a more open discussion on what works for our school here is what we need.

Andy's perspective on the moral rightness of having a Canadian program there was consonant with their counterpart's when they both consciously oriented towards the larger mission of preparing students well for global citizenhood, rather than focusing on the philosophical differences that surely existed between cultural worldviews and avenues of social discourse.

Nick's answer embodied the opposite end of that response spectrum, noting immediately, and vociferously, that they felt claims of moral imperialism were spurious. They said:

> Absolutely not. Not even a little bit. I really actually dislike the term 'moral imperialism'. I think it's very, very narrow minded. I think it's a very narrow view of the world. And a very weak argument. Claims of moral imperialism kind of suggest that by coming over here and teaching our values, we are trying to force these people to change to be what we want them to be. And that's not what it is. Because that's just simply not how the mind and the psyche work. Can you adjust or can you open people up to new experiences? Yeah. Can you bring different values and different perspectives? Yeah, of course. There is part of that, but it's just, it's a very, very simplified view of how humans actually are.

For Nick, those who would categorize Canadian schools in China as imperialist were "virtue signaling" and eschewing the positive impact of being able to cultivate empathy and understanding from and for diverse cultural perspectives. They concluded by asserting that:

> I feel that by being an educator overseas, I have helped my students and other staff members to probably become more open, more empathetic people. And I have also become more open and more empathetic myself through this process. And that's, that's just how it is, right? That's how you build empathy, by learning different perspectives, realizing you don't have to agree on everything, making compromises sometimes, and just, you know, realizing the world's a messy place, and we can't solve all these problems by narrowing it down to, you know, one very, very narrow view of how people and societies are shaped.

Nick and I laughed aloud when I asked, "yeah, but how do you really feel?" They noted again that this assertion of moral imperialism was frustrating to an educator who had given so much of themself to ensure that the students in their school were as prepared as possible for what came after high school, likely post-secondary studies outside of China. To Nick, ensuring that students were fostered to become thoughtful and compassionate global citizens, even if this involved Nick's own struggle through morally distressing situations, was a touchstone within their own sense-making process and within the core of their own professional identity.

Blake's transactional conception of the moral rightness of the program relied on an understanding that all parties benefitted from the arrangement. They said:

> I don't view it as moral imperialism or as a chance to export ideology at all. I never really thought of it in those terms. But what's interesting to me is, who benefits from the arrangement more? So obviously, the country that I'm in has accepted this new style of education, and they've done it for a reason. So, it's like this negotiation. So, what does Canada get out of the experience? And this is a critical, critical awareness piece. And what does China get out of the experience?

This awareness allowed Blake to situate themself in the role of facilitator, as a kind of guide attuned to the motivations and machinations of all parties involved. Blake continued:

> But I think whatever it is, there's a negotiation, and both side's needs must be met by the arrangement in place, which is to have these offshore schools in this home country. They choose to come to our system because they recognize the values that are important to them. It aligns with what they want, and the end result will get them to where they want to go. And we're simply serving up the opportunity, and I'm delivering the knowledge to help lubricate the system. I'm just a piece that helps this system perpetuate itself.

By their own admission, Blake's professional identity was purposefully malleable, allowing them to shift their positionality when necessary and lean into their own intercultural competence. This enabled Blake to reconcile a moral rightness that both served the Chinese students in their private, for-profit school and allowed Blake to fend off self-doubt about their own mission.

Charlie refuted the notion that Canadian-accredited schools in China represented a kind of colonial project. For Charlie, the moral rightness of their role was premised on the similarities of values inherent in both countries' educational discourse. They said:

> I don't think I am a moral imperialist because it's not my place to force my values or the things that I think personally are important on to our students and families. We do what we can to educate as best as possible around the [Canadian] curriculum and help them understand that there are things they will be required to do while they are here. Some of that is balanced out by the local programs that our students have to continue to participate in while they're here at the school. Sometimes those things align quite nicely. You know, you talk about respect for teachers and facilities and your peers, those things are present in every curriculum in some way, shape, or form, even in our local context. In a Chinese

> curriculum, they're there. We can apply our values, circumstantially, when it's appropriate. We can be objective in the other things.

Charlie declared that bringing this awareness to the forefront of their mind, especially during times when the navigation through local policy directives elicited moral disquietude, was an active component of their process of making sense of their experiences.

Other principals similarly countered an accusation of moral imperialism by asserting that their roles involved recognizing and cultivating a set of positive human values common to both China and Canada. To guide students to become respectful, compassionate, engaged, and thoughtful people was not a culturally specific aim of education; rather, this was universally held in both countries. As Terry passionately attested:

> Western values? Maybe they're not just Western. Like, maybe allowing kids to be kids, allowing them to have voice, activating their voice, amplifying their voice. Is that a Western construct? Or is that a non-Asian construct? I don't think so. I think everybody wants that. And so, I don't know if it is imperialism. It's a deep question to think of. Well, should I just go back to Canada and be with my own, then? I mean, I don't know, right? Where should I be where I want to be who I want to be, and help kids around what I think are our fundamental human conditions and rights and values? We have got four values in our school that I think are more important than the Math and Social Studies that we're teaching. That's respect, responsibility, honesty, and hard work. Tell me that's North American imperialism, or Chinese or anti-Chinese sort of thinking. No, you can't. That's trying to be a good person, growing up and finding a place in society.

Curricular content, teaching methods, and modes of assessment may have differed, but for these principals, there was a common call to encourage students to develop a global worldview, one infused with empathy and understanding for those whose perspectives may differ. These human values may manifest differently across different cultures, but their ethos was essentially the same regardless of geographical location or the cultural narratives that fostered their development.

There was also a recognition that China had its own agency, which it strongly asserted, in this relationship between different cultures of schooling. An imposition of values, a subjugation of the discourses and social narratives of China by Canadian education, did not reflect the practical realities of education in China. As the principals noted, there were structures from the local education authority built into the education the students received, despite the fact that nominally these students were enrolled in a Canadian program. There remained a thorough and systemic inculcation of Chinese doctrine and cultural values through the Chinese host schools, who mandated programs or courses that ran as a complement to the Canadian programs. The values of cultural harmony, piety, and loyalty, themselves drawn directly from Chinese state rhetoric (Hu et al., 2018), were embedded in the mandatory Chinese politics, history, and culture classes in which students of Canadian-accredited programs were concurrently enrolled. Students registered in Canadian-accredited schools in China were not exempt from meeting the expectations set by the local and provincial education authorities.

The principals' responses to this assertion of moral rightness were indicative of the thoughtful and constant reflection they undertook in their role and their mission in leading Canadian-accredited schools in China. All participants were keenly aware of how restrictions imposed by local authorities presented both practical and philosophical considerations in how they administered their programs. This involved the managerial and pastoral elements to ensure that the teachers in the Canadian programs were also attuned to the policy expectations of the host country. It also brought the principals to consider their own moral positioning at a level beyond themselves and their own sense of professional autonomy and identity. That is, participants tended to situate their role in a larger, more layered context in order to appraise its moral rightness; this allowed the principals a mechanism to make sense of their own navigation through the morally distressing situations they faced. They moved amongst what Terry named as "different moralities," because holding inviolably to only one conception of a right and moral standard would itself have been a necessary condition for a morally imperialistic perspective.

Reframing and Repositioning

A Canadian principal's capacity to reposition or reconceptualize their thinking was a constituent piece of their ongoing sense-making process and served two functions: first, as a practical strategy to find themself closer to positions more attuned to the cultural and political realities of their adopted context, and secondly, to act as a kind of internal salve to attend to their own moral disquietude and ethico-political imbalance. The principals navigated morally distressing situations by consciously attending to the development of their own highly nuanced and situationally specific cultural competence. Their capacities to shift, and the intentionality that undergirded that, became a driving force in their sense-making processes. Reframing their perspectives in light of complex intercultural dynamics, many of which were informed by ideological positioning at odds with what the principals themselves held to be morally correct, was a process which called for purposeful forethought, action, and reflection. As Kelly characterized this:

> It's all about balance and trying to navigate those grey zones where like, really, there's no right or wrong. It's all a question of perspectives. Yeah, just keep trying to do what, you know, considering all of those aspects and balancing everything, what I believe would be best for our students.

Kelly maintained that while it was exhausting to add these layers of deliberation onto how they made the countless daily decisions required of their role, doing so had increased their own levels of resilience and adaptability in dealing with dissonant positionalities. Kelly's reframing anchored around their understanding of what was best for the students, stating "I've really learned to accept things that maybe are not always from my core values" so that they can keep "that bigger picture in mind." The principals recognized the emotional toll of navigating the tensions that arose in morally distressing situations, pushing to find a tenable emotional state that allowed them to fulfill their role. That is, they saw that they required their own deliberate process of reframing their own perspective in light of broader intercultural considerations; engaging this process for themselves prevented the principals from being overwhelmed by the emotions that arose when they navigated moral distress.

Terry's active reframing began with ensuring that they, as well as the Canadian vice-principal and Canadian teachers at the school, "always assume positive intent" from their Chinese counterparts. Entering all discussions and negotiations under the assumption that both the Chinese and Canadian sides were united in their end goals allowed Terry to find their own comfort level when conflicting worldviews became manifest. When there were clear differences between what Terry saw as a morally correct course of action and that which was being compelled by the local authorities, they immediately paused to look for multiple paths through uncertain terrain. They encapsulated their process:

> Let's just think about this differently. It doesn't mean that we're going to do something differently. It doesn't mean that. We better examine this first. The other thing is I have developed a tremendous tolerance for ambiguity. Everything has just got to be working back through some deeper listening and trying to understand what's going on. Of course,

> if it's something I can't sit with, then I've got to talk that through with leadership. That's my job to try to pivot it. And I know it feels like you're talking to the wall sometimes. But it does make some change.

The constant pivoting was crucial for Terry as they "purposefully examine the discontinuities" between Chinese and Canadian cultures of schooling. They said:

> And so I rarely go about doing anything without trying to examine how I perceive how the different cultures of schooling are going to view what we're going to do. And it has to be purposeful, and it has to be a habit of mind.

For Terry, this involved steeping themself both in the principles which underlay the Canadian curriculum they were obligated to administer and in a nuanced understanding of the Chinese authorizing environment in which they were working. Terry's statement invoked for me their own kind of double hermeneutic. Both predictively and in reflection, they continually interpreted and tried to make sense of what they expected the experiences and interpretations of others would be, leading me to believe that as well as being an excellent school leader, Terry would be a natural IPA researcher.

A reframing infused with positive intent became both a habit of mind and a preventive measure to alleviate moral distress for Terry. They noted:

> I just watch, observe, try to get where the parameters are. The other thing that has helped me adjust is just to say to myself, almost with a sense of wonder or sense of awe, a sense of humour to it, to say, you know, here in China, some of the things that you think are going to be so easy are the hardest thing in the world to do. And then the other thing, which you think is going to be impossible, is just like *mei shi*, no problem, the easiest thing to do.

Navigating difficult conversations, disparate worldviews, and the ambiguity which was so often a variable for them became a process of "finding ways to mitigate that discontinuity. Just trying to figure out where the bridges are, and then work on those." Ensuring that they always sought to frame the challenges which arose from sometimes contrary ideological perspectives and policy imperatives as opportunities to learn and grow was an inherent component of Terry's professional identity. This reframing did not always work as a panacea to alleviate moral distress, but it was a function of Terry's own agency which allowed them to navigate the tensions which existed between two different cultures of schooling.

A capacity to reframe and reposition their own thinking was both a strategy towards the seamless operation of a Canadian program in a larger Chinese school and a mechanism by which the principals could reconcile their own moral misgivings. Practically, the ability to inhabit, at least temporarily, the perspective of a Chinese counterpart when their own moral judgement was being constrained was part of their route to action. Pat noted that often "it's much better to learn to ask questions in a different way." Philosophically, the imperative to do so informed their approach to mitigating moral distress. As Pat said, "again, it's back to how do you frame things? And how do you think about things?" Just as Kelly continuously pivoted themself towards their understanding of a larger purpose, Pat similarly navigated morally distressing situations. They declared that "I think keeping that focus on what's good for students and supporting staff as absolutely much as possible is one of the most important ways to try to mitigate that internal struggle." For Pat, reframing difficulties and organizing the complexities of their own sense-making process into spheres of influence and control helped to assuage moral dissonance. The principals characterized interactions and relationships in terms of the level of agency they may had in affecting change or progress, and to do so required constant deliberation on the positionality of all actors.

Principals recalled anecdotes in which their actions, which aligned with the ethos of the Canadian curricula they administered, could have been perceived by their Chinese counterparts as tantamount to an act of subversion. For Alakavuklar and Alamgir (2018), who conceived of "resistance and its content against managerial control as a rational and political action" (p. 31), an imposition of organizational or structural values compelled actors to reconceive their own ethico-political balance. Typically around issues of censorship, both actively by being forced to remove certain resources, or implicitly by feeling compelled to self-censor their own best moral reasoning, the principals characterized their own movement within or through moral discomfort as reliant on the capacity to shift their own perspectives. For Toby, the imperative to attempt to honour the perspective of their Chinese counterpart was one that propelled their own professional growth. They noted:

> Yeah, it is challenging. Like, I'm not going to lie to you, it is challenging. But it's motivating in some ways too. It's motivating in the sense that, okay, now I have to find other ways to get my point across about this.

Toby dug into their own nuanced understanding of local political realities to shift themselves to a place that was morally congruent enough for them. That is, they used the process of working through the challenge and tension of morally distressing situations as a kind of fuel to further propel them towards a place where they were able to minimize, as much as possible, the adverse effects of that moral distress.

Shannon similarly found ways "to get around" teaching those parts of the Canadian curriculum which ran afoul of Chinese policy. To do so required much deliberation, patience, creativity, and a healthy respect for why those policies were so important to the Chinese authorities in the first place. Shannon walked a careful line, believing that their own perspective should have been informed by both Canadian and Chinese imperatives. They said:

> And I think that's how I get around compromising myself morally, is I use a different way to say the same message. So the result is the same, but we just have a different staircase to get there. I think that would be the way that I'm able to overcome those things that I can't accept.

Shannon's staircase was a carefully constructed one, allowing them to see the capacity to reframe perspectives as integral to their own sense-making process. Shannon, and a number of the other principals in this study, were able to shift their perspectives and actions so they could find some level of comfort in times when they were constrained from acting in a way that they believed to be both morally authentic and morally right. For them, this sometimes included finding other ways, other staircases. For example, while their Canadian curriculum called for specific content to be addressed and certain competencies, such as the social responsibility to speak out against perceived injustice, to be invoked, Shannon saw that doing so would not be received well by their local counterparts. Instead of plowing ahead and dealing with fallout, essentially acting to subvert local expectations, or forgoing that part of the curriculum completely out of an abundance of caution, Shannon had honed their instinct to operate within boundaries that both they and their local counterparts found tenable. Shannon recognized that this involved compromise but chose to understand that process as being both interculturally proactive and necessary to stave off the moral distress they felt. Shannon, and the other principals, constantly oriented themselves towards being culturally responsive, to work within strictures that may not always have rested easily within them, and to be pedagogically creative.

By doing so, these school leaders were able to reconcile some of the frustration and consternation they felt within their own professional identities.

Taken in concert with the Personal Experiential Themes which constituted *finding one's place*, *finding one's footing*, and *finding one's route through*, the more conceptual components of *finding one's perspective* round out my interpretation of the principals' own unique sense-making through the complexities of administering a Canadian school in a place with a sometimes vastly different ideological climate. I hold that these themes honour the idiographic "concern for the particular" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29), in which "the person becomes the universe of exploration" (The British Psychological Society, 2021, para. 10). The themes I derived represent my interpretations of a process that began for each the principal the moment they encountered moral distress while leading their Canadian-accredited school in an international context.

Chapter Ten: Another Piece of My Moral Compass

As Alakavuklar and Alamgir (2018) contended in their conception of ethico-political space, to exist in a relationship in which one must at times assume the mantle of resistance is to enter a "dynamic and organic process that interacts with, changes, and becomes intertwined with managerial control. It may create multiple potentials or open up new spaces for change that organically and simultaneously emerge out of each other" (p. 34). The principals in this study often sought to find a tenable moral position within themselves when faced with constraints on their moral judgement. They needed to resist at times, acquiesce at others, to maintain their own sense of consonance between meeting their professional responsibilities and staying true to their own moral bearing. In this chapter, the first of two Discussion chapters, I offer the four-part framework I created in which to situate the principals as they contended with morally distressing situations while leading their schools in China. I named this four-part framework *moral fidelity*, as the principals' processes of making sense of their experiences was indicative of and faithful to the central belief which, in any given moment, anchored their own moral positionality. In their own sense-making and to assuage the moral distress they experienced, the principals oriented themselves towards an obligation they felt to their adopted home (*to context*), to the tenets which underlie the Canadian curriculum they administered (*to curriculum*), to the employment contract they had signed (*to contract*), or to their own personal and professional growth (*to self*). Then, in a process I called *moral fluidity*, I conceptualized a mechanism in recognition that the principals shifted the locus of their moral reasoning to constantly align their sense of duty with their own moral judgement, to move between the obligations they oriented towards, to do what they needed to do in the place where they were doing it to make sense of morally distressing situations.

Stylistically, though I present this chapter as Discussion, it bears addressing that ample participant voice is found within each section. While this may appear atypical, it is not without precedent in studies employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Winzenried & Coburn, 2023; Edmonds, 2021; Shahmoon et al., 2019; Rhodes et al., 2019). Smith and Osborn (2015) emphasized that it is the participants' insights which both structured and resonated within the researcher's interpretations; situating participant voice only in the data presentation chapters was a stylistic convention which may be overlooked. To have the participants' own words, and the researcher's interpretation of them, anchor and ring through the discussion section is aligned with the methodological call in IPA to honour the idiography of participant voice, to shine light into each participant's complex inner world (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Though others have combined discussion and findings sections when presenting an IPA study (Winzenried & Coburn, 2023), I demarcate findings (chapters five through nine) from discussion and implications (chapters 10 and 11).

Moral Fidelity

In their 2014 publication entitled *Accord on the Internationalization of Education*, in which they acknowledge responsibility for the preparation of teachers for professional practice, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education recognized that "local and global forces are challenging educational systems to respond to increasing levels of complexity, uncertainty, diversity, and inequality in Canada and internationally" (p. 4). They called for the development of a set of principled practices for the internationalization of education which would "create opportunities for collaborative knowledge production, exposure to different contexts and worldviews, more complex and nuanced analyses, and improved capacity to respond to change and diversity" (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2014, p. 5). They explicitly named increased intercultural understanding and dialogue as an avenue to cultivate and foster richer understandings of the connection between Canada and the world. Principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad live this accord. In their schools, the principals in this study served as the medium in which students should be fostered "to understand local and global connections critically, to expand frames of reference and possibilities for rethinking relationships and educational, economic, and social practice" (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2014, p. 5). Doing so in China, a country where the ideological heft and direction of the state are undeniable and complete, required these principals to situate their ethical bearing within a highly complex and changeable terrain in the context of their own professional identities.

In the four chapters preceding this one, my interpretation of the principals' anecdotes and insights coalesced into an understanding of some constituent pieces of their sense-making processes. Some of the principals' words evoked their understandings that they may not have had the level of professional autonomy they felt they should have, or that they found some situations within their schools to be morally untenable, or that their reliance on relationships they maintained with Chinese counterparts affected how they were able to fulfill their roles, or that there was a constant need to reconcile their focus on student learning with their schools' business concerns, or that their own intercultural awareness and machinations required ceaseless cultivation and deliberation. In many ways, there was a lack of fit or consonance between different cultural values and expectations (Aktas et al., 2019; Bottery et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2007). As I conceive of their experiences when their actions and best moral judgement were constrained, I hold that how these principals made meaning of their experiences is, in many ways, grounded in how they felt obligated to lead their schools. Their actions represented their best intentions and moral judgement in a particular moment, whether they were acquiescing to conditions or strictures which sat uneasily within them, or whether they were resisting those constraints, the principals engaged in the kind of constant micropolitics (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013) that was necessary for them to fulfill their professional duties. Their actions were driven by ethical calls grounded in the maxim which suffused their need to find and hold their own unique ethico-political balance: "if ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind" (Alakavuklar & Alamgir, 2018, p. 39). That is, the principals' processes of making sense of contending with the moral distress they felt had them seeking out, consciously or not, a morally tenable terrain in which they could anchor themselves.

Moral fidelity considers this anchoring. As I was sitting with and within the data, I found myself asking many questions to further unfurl and unravel the principals' unique processes of making sense of their experiences. To what did the principals affix their own senses of moral rightness and moral responsibility? How did they calibrate, or continuously recalibrate, their own moral compasses? How did they level their own balance of deeply held convictions with the cultural expectations and political realities of what they understood they were expected to do? How did the principals reconcile themselves in a dilemmatic terrain bound by values and ideological imperatives that may have not rested easily within them? How did they ensure that students be able to "be exposed to multiple worldviews and offered critical tools of analysis to assess the historical, political, ethical, and social implications of different positions, including their own" (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2014, p. 10) in a context which did not affirm this call? How did they ground their own changeable notions of professional identity to buoy themselves through the particularities of instances in which their moral judgement was constrained? How were they battling the "pervasive sense of resignation" (Aktas et al., 2019, p.

184) within their own professional identity? To which part of their obligation as a Canadian school leader abroad were they, in that moment, most faithful?

Terry asserted that when they navigated the complexities and ambiguities inherent in their role, they were "able to shift my frame of reference and fall on another piece of my moral compass." Then, when they encountered turbulence, whether that came from outward disagreement with others or as feelings of inner disquietude, they would evoke the image of their own moral compass. "Tap, tap, tap, tap. Oh, is it still pointing that way?" This process did not always lead to a smoothing of frustrations, or to tidy and elegant solutions, or to an amelioration of the affective reactions embodied within moral distress, but it did afford Terry a measure of agency and a position in which to situate themself within their own professional identity.

I constructed this moral fidelity framework with four parts, though I use the word "parts" only because I could not seem to settle on a better term. "Avenues" might have worked, but I feel that connoted something less foundational, more transitory, than I intended. This is not a neat or easily illustratable model, not because it is especially abstract, but because the nature of how the principals made meaning of their experiences was neither linear nor absolute. These four parts are not equally or evidently defined quadrants. They are not separate levels of a singular conceptual entity, nor are they discernable points plotted on an axis between moral judgement and external realities. This framework is not premised on binaries, either someone is this or is that, does this or does that. There are not polarities at the ends of a spectrum; existing in one part of this schema did not preclude a principal's simultaneous existence in another part. One part of this four-part framework is not necessarily better or more right than another; there is no judgement attached by me to where or how the principals moored themselves.

The principals had unique sense-making processes through morally distressing situations, processes which were malleable based on their own subjective and dynamic conceptions of the nuances of their roles themselves. A rigid model could not be appropriate, as the principals were not necessarily fixed in one part or another at any one time. Consistent with Cruz-Gonzalez et al.'s (2021) assertion that a principal's professional identity is actually a dynamic multiplicity of identities, each principal moved to where they needed to be in order to contend with those instances in which their moral responsibility was assailed. This is reflected in my own processes of interpreting and sorting data, as the participants' own words can often be read in support of more than one part of this framework at the same time. In some cases, the participants' own words can be parsed to reveal contradictions of internal consistency within their own insights, actions, and sense-making capacities. To borrow from Walt Whitman, the process of making meaning of morally distressing situations is large and contains multitudes. The obligation to context, to curriculum, to contract, and to self were formed by, imbued with, and grounded in layers of positionality that incorporated a complex sense-making process, one that is all of intellectual, philosophical, practical, and emotional (Jerdborg, 2022; Robertson, 2017). In the following four sections, I explain this framework.

An Obligation to Context

For many of the principals, there appeared to be an explicit calculation of the potential costs of violating the spirit of an understanding cemented when committing to their roles in a location so far away from their home Canadian provinces. To disregard local policy restrictions and expectations would be to dishonour China, to no longer act like the guests in the country that some of the principals believed themselves to be. This conception of acting as one's host would expect them to act was a guiding force for many of the participants, allowing them to constantly accommodate the discourses inherent in seemingly disparate understandings of what a school leader ought to be doing. That is, one would not want to be perceived as being a bad guest in the home of a host; to do so would be to adversely affect relationships that were necessary for these Canadian schools to operate well in China. It would also be a poor reflection of one's own character, a grave consideration for a person so invested in modelling and affecting the development of positive identity and social responsibility in their students. It would be an affront to ethical leadership, itself informed by concerted attention to the intercultural dynamics (Walker et al., 2007; Gill et al., 2014) which underlay the relationships the principals have fostered.

Some principals believed that their motivations and their actions should be framed as those of a special guest who had been afforded an opportunity that came with a great responsibility. Ari felt like an honoured guest in China generally and in their school specifically, stating:

> Then I behave myself accordingly. I'm not going to make any political changes or political statements. I have some of those thoughts in my mind about some of the things that are going on and how I'm reacting to them, but right now I'm focusing on the job and focusing on the school and on the students and the teachers. And yeah, there are a lot of things that you then have to compartmentalize.

They recognized that while it would have felt morally authentic in some instances to deviate from what was mandated or expected from the Chinese school, it would have been impractical, non-expedient, even impolite to do so. Ari fixed their "strong moral compass" to an obligation to act as a revered guest would in the home of someone they revered equally. This commitment to context compelled Ari to sometimes consider how far they would "be able to deviate from that moral compass until that feeling builds up, and you think, no, that's not where I want to go."

Leaning into their sense of responsibility as a guest allowed Ari to move themself into and through morally dissonant waters, even invoking a nautical metaphor to encapsulate this calibration. They said:

> But within that range, I mean, I'm thinking of my sailing experience. And, you know, you can only move when the wind is at a certain angle. Once it gets beyond that angle, you're in irons, you're not going to move anywhere. So, I keep things moving forward, but only being able to travel just a little bit outside that moral compass, where I still think, at the basis, it's going to be good for kids.

Positioning themself in a frame of mind where they were able to make compromises was tantamount to enjoying the hospitality and graciousness of someone with whom you may not always agree. A good guest exhibits tact and reciprocates with grace in someone else's home.

Other's notions of the function and limits of their role were similarly predicated on an understanding that a guest is not the person entitled to set the rules and expectations in a home. For Kelly, this recognition was accompanied by a sense that to push against that understanding would be an exercise in futility. They mused:

> I think at some point you get to an understanding that yes, we're here, and we're doing our jobs, we're doing our best and everything, within limits. So, we have a lot of flexibility, we can play a lot within these borders. But then there are just some borders that you don't cross, because you remember that you are a guest here. That will never change. It's something that is way bigger than us, and yeah, it is what it is.

Kelly's willingness to nudge boundaries, sometimes even breach them in order to follow a course of action they held to be morally correct, was tempered by their belief that no matter how long a principal led their Canadian school in China, they would always be perceived as a guest in someone else's house. They would also be received as such by their Chinese counterparts, regardless of how long the Canadian principal remained at the school. The inevitability and the weight of this realization was softened when the principal was able to shift themself and their own sense of moral responsibility accordingly.

Like Kelly, Toby's capacity to make sense of their experiences in navigating disparate ideological imperatives relied on an understanding of what China is and will always be, and an awareness that they entered of their own volition. Toby believed that:

> I guess one of the reasons I've been able to work abroad and live abroad for such a long time is that I get over things very easily. I don't dwell too much. Like I said, I take some time, I don't have to accept, I just kind of understand. And I did fully understand that part before I came here, right? So, I fully understood that there would be certain things that just wouldn't be allowed. And I've bought into that.

Toby again invoked their metaphor of a locked gate to describe their preparations for entering a context informed with vastly different political and cultural realities from those in Canada. For Toby, stepping into a place so carefully guarded required forethought and an acceptance of the realities found within. They noted:

> There's an aspect of, like I said before, when I came here, I've accepted that the gate exists. So I've prepared myself and know that there's a gate. I think that that's a huge part of it. Like, when you have the ability to enter a situation, knowing what you're getting yourself into, and you still enter that situation, then you should be prepared for what's about to come, you know?

Because they held that they had a responsibility to understand what kind of ideological landscape they would be entering, Toby felt an obligation within their own professional identity as an element of their own conception of integrity to honour their adopted context and act accordingly.

Grounding their sense of moral responsibility and right action in terms of representing their home country well to their Chinese hosts was a strong consideration for the principals. For Sam, this called for compromises in thought and action on their own best judgement of how the Canadian school should be administered. Though this caused inner frustration and discomfiture, Sam felt that a function of their role was to bear these tensions because they had committed to themself, and their Chinese school, that they would. Sam said:

> Don't come here trying to change the world. You've got to work within the rules. We're, you know, we're guests in their country. And we have to be, you know, we're trying to be good ambassadors for Canada, and partners with the Chinese staff and Chinese parents and students to give them opportunities that they otherwise wouldn't have.

Sam approached their obligation to context as a touchstone, then shaped their own moral positionality, behaviour, and interactions with others in order to amplify a larger intercultural consideration.

Charlie centered their moral judgement on this obligation to context as they oriented towards an acceptance of local practices and expectations. Their Chinese city is a long way from their home Canadian province, both literally and figuratively. Charlie declared:

> You also have to keep in mind you're working here, and you're not working in Canada. You're working in a very different culture. They may take some of the things that you're doing, they may respond quite well to some of the things that you are doing, or maybe they won't. But really, at the end of the day, you're a guest working here, in a country

> outside your own. You can't point the finger and say you're doing this wrong, or this is bad practice. Because it's the practice here and the culture they've been brought up in.

Ulusemre and Fang (2022) labelled a stance like Charlie's as one of ethical relativism, differentiating it from an ethical imperialism that would see an actor holding tightly to the norms of their home country and never shifting towards the host country's culturally accepted manner of being. Charlie's ethically relative stance would seem informed by a position that "there are cross-country variations in ethical standards, and therefore what is right or wrong should be judged according to the prevailing local standards" (Ulusemre & Fang, 2022, p. 312). As it did for others, Charlie's fidelity to local context allowed them a grounding in which to make sense of their experiences, some of which were morally distressing.

Leslie recognized that their own orientation towards local context centered their sense-making process. For Leslie, they felt a duty towards being interculturally aware, even when, or perhaps especially when, they themself were mired in moral distress. Leslie said:

> But we're also very culturally sensitive towards making sure that we're not doing anything that's going to insult the people who have invited us to their country and allowed us to live and prosper in their country. You know, we are not in Canada, and we have to respect what the expectations are. And so there's that.

Maintaining moral fidelity to the cultural and political realities of their adopted home buffered the affective reactions the principals encountered when contending with morally distressing situations. Through their own careful consideration of intercultural dynamics and the shades of difference in ideological posturing between Canada and China, they found some semblance of a tenable moral positioning when they deliberately invoked their own responsibility to act as a good guest.

An Obligation to Curriculum

The curricula which the principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad were obligated to administer by their respective Canadian provincial Ministries of Education are imbued with values which align with western democratic sensibilities. The Association of Canadian Deans of Education (2014) asserted that "pedagogy and content should reflect the contributions of different populations and ways of knowing" and that "students should be supported in the development of intercultural and international dispositions" (p. 10). That is, with inherent calls for students to be fostered to express themselves creatively and critically, to engage and evaluate information fully and freely, and to access the capacity to dissent from cultural or political narratives which do not align with their own convictions, Canadian provincial curricula manifest differently than Chinese curricula. This is reflected plainly in curricular design, instructional strategies, assessment practices, and how students are able to, even expected to, express themselves as individuals in a larger social context; this is a reality which coloured how the principals in this study contended with the moral distress they felt.

Mooring themselves, their own professional identities, and their actions on their obligation to the values which undergird the Canadian curricula shaped the principals' sense-making processes as they contended with morally distressing situations in China. Though the curricular language may differ slightly across the curricula from the three Canadian provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario) represented in this study, they each have at their foundation the development of students as critical thinkers, able to evaluate, judge, and when necessary, express dissent. Critical thinking is one of seven core competencies in British Columbia's curriculum, with principals responsible to foster students who are "analytical and investigative, willing to question and challenge their own thoughts, ideas, and assumptions and challenge those of others" (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2023b). To be faithful to the tenets embedded in the Canadian curricula they felt morally obligated to deliver sometimes brought these principals into dissonant or dilemmatic space when those values could not find their expression in China. As Terry characterized this imperative, "that's part of the moral stewardship. Willingness to go on the point of the spear." It could have been precarious to lean too far into a course of action so fully consonant with these curricular principles, especially when doing so moved the principals further away from local expectations and political realities.

As I attested at the beginning of this chapter, there are not neatly defined demarcations between the obligations at the core of the four-part schema I present. To be seen to be affixed to one does not preclude the simultaneous holding of another. Shannon felt the pull of both context and curriculum in their sense-making process, orienting themself thusly. They said:

> But yeah, I would say that always going back to that idea that we are following a culture and a curriculum. And making sure we don't stray too far from that, gives us that little platform that we can overcome all of those issues.

The issues to which Shannon referred were the conditions which bounded the moral distress they felt when hampered by local policy directives from accessing all parts of their Canadian curriculum. In our discussion about the frustrations and feelings of powerlessness that accompanied being compelled to withhold content or narratives that were problematic to raise in China, Shannon shifted themself to an understanding that there were multiple avenues of expression available to them that could still allow a fulsome administration of their curriculum. I wondered how Shannon reconciled those tensions, asking "how does this censorship and self-censorship sit within you?" They responded:

> Yeah, I think I'm okay with that. I guess it doesn't bother me having to avoid certain topics and explore other ones, as long as I'm giving them the opportunity to develop the skills that somebody gave me. And so personally, that doesn't bother me. But I know for some of my other colleagues, it does bother them because they believe that this is wrong. And this is right. And that's okay too.

Shannon employed a line of thinking based on their own convictions and the values inherent in their Canadian curriculum. While they may not have overtly calibrated their moral compass based solely on an obligation to the tenets of the curriculum they delivered, their orientation towards the imperative to do so aligned with those curricular values themselves. That is, Shannon made decisions based on their own analytical and evaluative processes to find their own balance between their personal responsibility and their social responsibility. Shannon recognized that they still contended with the resultant moral disquietude, but saw this as an understandable byproduct of delivering a Canadian curriculum in a country which does not hold the same cultural or ideological values in the same way.

The obligation to their Canadian curriculum was a holistic touchstone for some principals. It was not about what the students were learning or how they were learning it per se, nor was it necessarily about the principles that underlay the curriculum itself; rather, the Canadian program's existence in China allowed them to reach students who may be unreachable in Chinese schools because of a lack in those settings of the kinds of awareness and social-emotional support embedded within a Canadian curriculum. For example, Leslie's willingness to persevere through "the nights when I lose sleep" to "do the best I can for the kids here" became a buttress as they contended with morally distressing situations. They said:

> The way that I get through it is just knowing that if I feel like there is anything more I can do, then I'm going to do that, because that's my duty. I have to. But if there is nothing else I can do, then I just do what I can to help as many kids as I possibly can. I know that we've made huge differences in the lives of a lot of kids who are at-risk here, especially here in China where those kids just don't have the support network.

It was not to the content of the Canadian curriculum that Leslie turned, but to a more holistic understanding of how a fulsome expression of a Canadian curriculum manifested, one in which students who needed support could receive it. Leslie actively oriented themself to this obligation in order to contend with the embodied reactions which arose from being unable to follow a course of action wholly aligned with their own sense of moral responsibility.

The values which underlay the Canadian curriculum created dissonance in the Chinese context for the principals. Ari maintained that guiding students to be able to express themselves fully, both within the confines of the school and then outwardly as they developed as global citizens, was at the core of their professional obligation. To act in any manner towards this was to see issues that would be non-issues in their home province take on symbolic significance in the Chinese context. Discussing their misgivings on being compelled to act in consort with the punitive measures demanded by their Chinese counterpart towards a student who had stepped afoul of the school's dress code, Ari declared:

> So I could care less what colour a kid has their hair. It's absolutely meaningless to me. I mean, it has absolutely no effect on how I view that kid at all. So that is a dilemma, and a dilemma that I try to put as much finesse and input into to make it easier for the kids. But I watch this girl struggle with it.

Ari rooted themself in an expression of their own obligation to the tenet of fostering students' authentic expression, because they felt compelled from within to do so. Ari then actively worked to mitigate the fallout, both for the students and within their own working relationships.

Andy's fidelity to curriculum was foundational in their sense-making process through morally distressing situations, even though they granted that this obligation was itself an everchanging conception. Andy mused:

> It's just come more and more clear to me how many variations and interpretations of those curriculum documents there are. And how it's kind of my job to keep everyone on the same page, and that's easier said than done. So I think it's been trying to stick with the documents but also being open to what is needed in this situation. That's been an interesting balance for me in terms of that internal and external compass. (p. 36)

Andy drew to the curriculum, sometimes to the actual wording but more often to its spirit, as a means to find their equilibrium through tensions and ambiguity. There was no rigidity here, no blind understanding of what needed to be done because of a curricular ethos from half a world away. Instead, Andy relied on their own professional discretion and moral reasoning to find a balance between what they felt they must do and what they knew they must be. Their professional identity shifted and developed due to context and the kind of necessary social negotiation (Whiteman et al., 2015) they believed they needed to constantly undertake.

For Sam, there was a similar movement to calibrate their own moral positionality in light of the principles intrinsic to the Canadian curriculum they felt obligated to deliver in its fullest expression. I had asked Sam why they would continue to work in an atmosphere which gave rise to moral distress. They responded:

> Maybe this is my rationalization, but I kind of hope to think that what we're trying to do here is to instill in students the tools that will take them to these points of questioning things. To give them those critical thinking skills, where they may look back on things, and they may reflect on things that are going on, from what they've learned in their classes. And I would argue that okay, maybe it is a bit of a rationalization, but I also think that what we're doing here is still a noble pursuit.

Orienting towards the values which infuse their Canadian curriculum provided purpose and tempered Sam's moral discomfiture. By positioning the curricular imperatives as akin to a worthy calling, Sam was able to alleviate their own consternation when they were constrained from acting in accordance with their best moral judgement.

An Obligation to Contract

If an obligation to local context involves a Canadian principal's reckoning of the ramifications of violating the spirit of an understanding that they will act as a good guest would, an obligation to contract is an orientation to the actual letter of the law that formalizes such an arrangement. Alakavuklar and Alamgir (2018) maintained that the "process of participation already begins when an employee signs the contract with the employer that forms the basis of exchange relations, and in fact, compliance with managerial decisions and subordination are taken for granted" (p. 33). Canadian principals agreed to employment contracts with their Chinese host school and local government authorities. There are explicit clauses within those terms of employment that stipulate right and appropriate conduct while living and working in China. This contract language aligns with local and provincial Education Bureau mandates, which themselves align with national discourse issued and controlled by Beijing. To sign a contract is to attest that one will act in accordance with the terms therein, which typically include a commitment to honour the cultural and political harmony of China. Practically, these clauses serve to ensure that certain topics are not discussed and that certain actions, such as voicing dissent, engaging in any manner of civil disobedience, or encouraging others to do so, either tacitly or explicitly, are verboten. For some of the principals in this study, an obligation to contract moulded their moral reasoning, for to violate that contract language would have been to fail to honour a solemn commitment.

Terry understood the scope of their role in terms of building community through careful attention to numerous intercultural dynamics. They mused that the principal of a Canadian-accredited school in China builds capacity through a holistic approach to the development of their students as conscientious and committed learners. They also recognized that a range of other practical considerations fell under their purview as they oversaw the operation of a complex machine. Terry relied on the terms of their contract to bound their consideration of what must be attended to. In our discussion around the frustrations that arose when a principal's professional autonomy and agency were constrained on issues of resource procurement and allocation, Terry noted that "sometimes there's a feeling of a lack of transparency towards the budgetary process. That gives some people anxiety. Not so much me. I've gotten over that." Terry was able to compartmentalize their concerns by understanding their role as it was defined by the terms of their employment contract. Concerns beyond the operation of the Canadian program, which is itself a giant machine with countless moving parts to be continuously calibrated, especially those which may have proven to be fertile ground for morally distressing situations to arise, could be mitigated by aligning their sense of moral responsibility with what they had agreed by contract to oversee.

Andy also considered the scope of their role in terms of responsibilities enumerated in their terms of employment. With a contractual obligation to ensure that the Canadian program ran well in its Chinese setting, its teachers were providing quality instruction, and its students were meeting learning outcomes, Andy still contended with challenges that arose from larger considerations. That is, the nature of a small Canadian program embedded within a larger local Chinese school ensured that there were sometimes gaps or rifts between disparate cultures of schooling. Andy's positional authority did not extend to the management of local faculty and staff, even though the actions (or inactions) of those people had direct bearing on the smooth operation of the Canadian program. When required, Andy needed to turn to their Chinese counterpart for help in resolving issues. Andy noted:

> I have to kind of just be willing to accept that I have to leave it in the hands of the Chinese director, whether or not I see his approach as being effective or not, or whether that sits well with me or not.

The Canadian and Chinese administrators' approaches were driven by their respective culturally informed perspectives (Bottery et al., 2013; Hammad & Shah, 2018; Wilhelm & Gunawong, 2016). Decisions made by the Chinese director were sometimes morally problematic for Andy. Of their own accord, they would not have followed courses of action that sat so uneasily for them. As an avenue to dampen their own moral disquietude, Andy anchored their sense of duty and obligation to a contractually defined understanding of the boundaries of their role.

Kelly's obligation to contract was central to their own process of making meaning of their experiences through morally distressing situations. They were clear in their orientation towards a commitment they made of their own volition, stating:

> Well, there is actually, in our contract, a part that says that we are not allowed to discuss some sensitive topics. And you know, that was said ahead of time, and we knew the expectation before we signed the contract. So if you strongly disagree with the fact that you can't talk about those sensitive topics, then you don't have to sign the contract, you know? I think that when the expectations are there beforehand, and you accept them, well, then, you have to accept them.

Kelly recognized that accepting certain conditions did not ensure that these conditions sat well within their own sense of moral reasoning and responsibility. As others did, Kelly granted the seeming inevitability of dissonance and discord and found their own way in contending with this. Their commitment to an understanding that they agreed to at the outset grounded Kelly's own journey through the navigation of moral distress.

A reckoning of the conditions that gave rise to some of the morally distressing instances the principals faced occurred in their shift towards fidelity to the contract they had signed. For Toby, this had implications both for themself and for the continued existence of the Canadian program in the larger Chinese school. Toby declared:

> It definitely has challenges because, yeah, you're not in Canada. You're in a place that has different ideas and different rules and regulations you need to follow. And you'll always have to be aware of that, because of the fact that if you don't, especially someone in an administrative position, not only will you put yourself in jeopardy, but you could also put the program in jeopardy. So I do feel that there's a lot of responsibility that comes with that.

A large part of that responsibility came with being the one to bear the frustrations and grapple quietly with the moral distress so that the program itself operated as seamlessly as possible. Toby granted that pushing back against the policies which were not morally palatable for them would more likely affect the program adversely than resolve any ideological chasms within themself. The principals often took on the role of mediator (Ryan, 2007; Robertson, 2017), situating themselves in a liminal space between two different sets of expectations, sometimes at the cost of being able to take any action to reconcile the conditions which framed their morally distressing situations they faced. Orienting themselves towards the contract they had signed did serve to alleviate the effects of this positioning.

As our conversation continued, I asked Toby a version of the same question I had posed to Shannon: "How does being forced to avoid topics of conversation, being compelled to censor an expression of your own beliefs, sit within you?" Toby replied:

> Obviously, it doesn't sit with me perfectly. But I've always bought into the idea that you have to accept that that's part of being here. It's not like it's a surprise. Anyone that does any research at all knows that's what it is here. So I feel like because of that, I know what I signed up for. I understood that there would be challenges and there would be things that are off-limits. I feel like if I can't follow those rules or only want to follow the ones that I want to or that I like, then this is probably not the right place for me to be. I've kind of bought into that whole perspective.

That whole perspective leaned towards an understanding that to violate the terms of the contract was itself a morally untenable position. Toby affixed their moral judgement to the commitment they signed to in their employment agreement, one in which they entered willingly after their own process of constructing and reconstructing their own professional identity.

An Obligation to Self

Terry mused that “we’ve got a foot in Canada and a foot in China, so it’s a long-term commitment. And I really strongly believe that I’ve made a promise here to the community I serve.” The fourth part of my moral fidelity framework is an obligation to self. This is a grounding that, like the others, was not mutually exclusive from an equally and simultaneously held orientation towards context, curriculum, or contract. I conceive of this as an extra layer of nuance, an extra support perhaps, as the principals found meaning through moral distress within their own professional identities. A principal’s obligation to self was a kind of mooring of their own moral reasoning and sense of responsibility on notions of their own professional and personal growth. It was a centering of one’s moral compass on the capacity to learn, stretch, and wonder through opportunities to immerse themselves in perspectives so different than their own. As Notman (2016) attested, a principal’s facility to adapt to unfolding situations, to learn as they go, was fundamental to the ongoing refinement of their professional identity. It was the ability to position one’s self and revel in different ways of engaging new people, cultures, and ideals, to live and explore and travel in a place far removed from the place they call, or called, home. It was the opportunity to celebrate a figurative footing in two worlds. Leaning into this obligation allowed the principals to find a semblance of livability and tenability in a subjective terrain sometimes rife with moral distress. The morally distressing situations they navigated compelled the principals to continuously, perhaps deliberately, attend to their own notions of a changeable professional identity.

Terry’s relentless contemplation on their own positionality through a deep excavation of their own intercultural understandings propelled them through morally distressing situations. They said:

> I spent a fair amount of time on [reflection]. And that in itself is sometimes distressing, right? Although it's good. It's good, but sort of like, let me play this through and let me play that through. Let me play through what is happening, and I think that is the growth part of it.

Terry's own professional identity and sense of self-worth as a school leader were infused by a sense of duty to the community they served, and their decisions and actions flowed from that personal obligation. They understood that they were sometimes required to compromise or bend, because they needed to manage imperatives from more than one cultural perspective. In times of compromise when Terry reckoned with constraints on their own best moral reasoning, they looked to find a congruence within their own balance of what they must do and who they must hold themself to be. This balance was sought and struck within Terry's own professional identity as they considered their reactions to morally distressing situations in light of what they believed to be best for the community they served.

When Sam grappled with those parts of their role which amplified cultural or ideological rifts between Chinese and Canadian imperatives, they considered the potential costs of acting in defiance of local expectations. They said:

> Should I be making a statement, a public statement for the world to see? There's part of me that sort of, I mean, it doesn't take long for me to talk myself out of it, because of the risk. There's little chance of benefit, you know, and there is a lot of downside to that. There's a huge downside to that. And you know, again, the reward is, for myself, a peaceful life that pays reasonably well. It gives me a very comfortable lifestyle.

Sam's prudence was buttressed by a consideration of their own benefit, staying in a role they believed to be both challenging and professionally fulfilling. Voicing opposition to mandates they struggled to reconcile would have done more harm than good, both for Sam and the Canadian school itself. They actively weighed their decision-making through morally problematic situations with the practicalities of continuing in their role and remaining in China.

Ari's sense of mission was given a more fulsome expression through their obligation on two fronts: to continue to grow and adapt as an interculturally responsive educator, and to build bridges across cultural differences with their Chinese counterparts. Ari also saw themself as a mediator, which Ryan (2007) held to be a driving force in the expression of a principal's professional identity. Ari declared that "I'm here to visit, to see, to help, and to share some of the west meets east ideas." Calling back to their sailing metaphor, Ari ensured that they were "not in irons" by looking for movement, even if it was barely incremental, as part of their own sense-making. In that movement there was professional growth and a celebration of focusing on the commonalities, rather than the dissonance, between very different worldviews.

In their process of reflection, Andy was able to conceptualize the difficulties they had faced in their role as grist for their own growth as a more conscientious educator and school leader. Working through morally problematic situations over time had moved Andy to be more attuned to their own sense-making process. Andy opined:

> I think for most of my life, I lived by that external rulebook mentality. And over the past five years, it has been more of a reconstructing and looking outside what I'm externally being told and looking more at what's the right and loving thing to do in this situation. And I think that has also come into my decision-making as an administrator.

Andy gazed inwardly in their own exercise of making meaning of their experiences. For Andy, this obligation to self was driven by meditative and contemplative facets (Ryan, 2007) within their own professional identity. They recognized that an awareness of their own shifting way of being and engaging the world was foundational in reconciling their experiences leading their Canadian school in China.

Similarly, when Nick felt overwhelmed by constraints on their moral reasoning, they reminded themself of their professional growth, both in terms of how they had developed to mediate discord more competently and how they conceived of their role holistically. Granting that “it is wearing” to be so often affronted by morally distressing situations, Nick found a measure of solace in their own capacity to develop as a more thoughtful educator. This is consistent with Jerdborg’s (2022) assertion that principals see challenges as opportunities for their own reflection and growth. Nick said:

> I think in some ways, having worked in China has challenged me to share my perspectives a little bit more often, or encourage people to think of counter viewpoints, even if it’s something I don’t necessarily agree with, but encourage looking at opposing viewpoints and encourage questioning.

Being faithful to their own continuous development as a school leader enveloped the principals’ sense-making process through morally distressing situations. They recognized the personal, professional, and intercultural complexities of administering their programs where they did. A sense of fidelity to context, curriculum, contract, and/or self grounded their processes of making meaning of their experiences when they found themselves in morally distressing situations and when they believed their own professional identities to be constrained.

Moral Fluidity

By dint of where they had chosen to live and work, these principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China inhabited an intercultural terrain replete with complexity and ambiguity. These principals internalized a call for educators to promote “intercultural awareness, ethical engagement, understanding, and respect" (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2014, p. 7) in a context where doing so required them to sometimes follow courses of action incongruous with their own convictions. This terrain they inhabited is one where, as it does for their Canadian-based peers, "values intersect and collide," where "values are at play in everything, and school leaders are the centre of it all" (Alberta Teachers Association, 2019, p. 21). School leadership anywhere is itself a cognitively and emotionally demanding role (Stelmach et al., 2021; Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019; Demerath, 2018; Ryan, 2007). Contending with mandates and expectations that may have been antithetical to those they held situated the principals in a dilemmatic space, experiencing moral distress when they were unable to follow courses of action which aligned with their best moral judgement. Accepting moral responsibility, then being prevented from acting in accord with what one believed to be right, gave rise to a host of embodied reactions. Frustration, anger, feelings of powerlessness and lessened autonomy, a questioning of one's own purpose, these served to amplify the dissonance in an already dissonant space. The 15 principals in my study each manifested a capacity to actively inhabit that part of their own moral compass which could keep them in as much alignment as they needed in that moment to fulfill their professional duties and assuage their own moral disquietude. In the face of the moral distress they felt, these principals engaged their *moral fluidity* to shift their positionality within their own sense-making processes.

I chose the term *moral fluidity* for two reasons. First, it felt right to me. As a complement to the four-part framework of moral fidelity, I understood that I needed a mechanism for the movement, the flow, between those parts. Intuitively, I knew as soon as I wrote it down in my journal that the phrase connoted exactly what I had hoped for. Secondly, I thought of the Chinese maxim *shui di shi chuan*, which is typically translated to be something like 'dripping water penetrates the rock'. Over time, the stone is worn away by the soft but relentless water. It is a metaphor about perseverance and steadfastness as much as it is about the potential, maybe even the inevitability, of erosion and change.

I offer this notion to add further nuance to how these principals were able to remain interculturally responsive and philosophically nimble enough to do their jobs well where they did them. Moral fluidity is not a component of the four-part moral fidelity framework; rather, it is the mechanism that allowed the principals to shift between those four parts. I intend the conception of being morally fluid to be a constructive one, an interpretation of how the principals found a semblance of balance between what they knew they needed to do and remaining authentic to who they knew themselves to be. I do not frame this fluidity as pejorative in any way; this is not equivocation or acquiescence. This is not a kind of indifference. None of these principals were looking only to serve their own best interests; each of them continuously strived to follow a course of action consonant with their moral judgement, yet none of them held too rigidly to the convictions they had on the day they entered China. There was much more complexity at play here, and each of these principals continuously evolved their capacity for moral fluidity through their own process of making meaning from their experiences. This was a crucial consideration as the principals navigated constraints and hindrances on their moral judgement, as Stelmach et al. (2021) declared that morally distressing situations "remove professional autonomy, which throws agency, and ultimately, identity into question" (p. 15). That is, to be morally fluid, whether deliberately or consciously cultivated or not, acted as a mechanism whereby the principals were able to find the moral positionality they needed in order to both meet their professional obligations and hold themselves in, or close enough to, a kind of moral equilibrium.

In their examination of how expatriate business managers contended with the subtleties of *guanxi* when operating in China, Ulusemre and Fang (2022) stated:

> The international business ethics literature has identified three ways to address cross-cultural ethical dilemmas: ethical imperialism, ethical relativism, and integrative social contracts theory. (p. 311)

A consideration of international business ethics is not the same as understanding Canadian school leadership in China, and cross-cultural ethical dilemmas are not the same as morally distressing situations. Yet, there is some resonance here. Ulusemre and Fang (2022) defined ethical imperialism as the belief that the concepts of rightness or wrongness from one's home country should be regarded as universal standards. That is, because an expectation to reciprocate a favour granted to secure a future advantage may be frowned upon in one country, it should rightly be frowned upon in all countries. They defined ethical relativism as actions guided by "cross-country variations in ethical standards, and therefore what is right or wrong should be judged according to the prevailing local standards" (Ulusemre & Fang, 2022, p. 312). This is tantamount to a stance of 'when in Shanghai, do as the Shanghainese do', or a notion like 'what happens in Beijing, stays in Beijing', even if those actions would be adjudged negatively in one's own country.

Ulusemre and Fang (2022) then offered a third option which sits between imperialism and relativism, which they named integrative social contracts theory and holds that there are general principles that apply to all countries and "local norms that specify what is right or wrong in a particular context" (Ulusemre & Fang, 2022, p. 312). A society develops its own norms within broader and universally held principles. These general and local norms then inform national values and discourse. Again, this scholarship is complementary, as it considered an entirely different scope of endeavour and posited a structural model rather than delving into an individual's sense-making, but there are useful corollary notions here. Ulusemre and Fang (2022) sought to reconcile decision-making by non-Chinese actors living and working in China around a cultural expectation which added complexity and dissonance to their roles.

The principals of Canadian-accredited schools in this study were neither wholly imperialists, relativists, nor integrative social contractors. Ultimately, I hold that tripartite model as too neat, too structured, too absolute, to ground their sense-making processes. The principals each had a capacity to maintain fidelity within their own professional identities, allowing them to mitigate, and make sense of, the moral distress they experienced. They oriented towards the moral obligation they needed to orient towards. This moral fluidity was unique to each principal, acting as a driver within their own professional identities as they navigated complex social dynamics and political realities (Ryan, 2007) while concurrently negotiating their own beliefs and values (Robertson, 2017). It was their ability to access that piece of their own moral reasoning which allowed them to shift and adapt as they needed, as they moved themselves to a morally tenable position as they considered their own autonomy and agency. This fluidity was both a mechanism for evolution and a product of the principals' own evolving understandings within their professional identities.

The participants in this study spoke a great deal about moral fluidity without knowing the phrase (they couldn't have, of course, as it emerged from my interpretation of the data many months after our interviews had concluded). Discussing the moral distress they felt when seeing the host school prioritize business concerns over student learning and success, Chris declared:

> Yeah, so like I said, it's not ideal, but once you get comfortable with it, and you learn how it works, it's kind of just how it works. And the reality is that it's not going to change. So you make the best of what it is and just try to learn your way around it.

Shifting their locus of moral reasoning to one more aligned with the practical realities of their situations, while still striving to meet their own expectations for moral stewardship, was a function of the principals' capacities to find a measure of moral consonance. They shifted and adapted, they flowed, because they knew that this was required in order for them to fulfill their roles and find a place of tenability within their own professional identities.

The openness required to be able to shift their own moral reasoning came partly from an intercultural awareness and competence that deepened over time. Ari said:

> And I don't think it's as much as 'oh, that's the way they do things here and I better get used to it'. It's more like 'I understand it better than I did before through a different lens'.

The other component of this capacity to be morally fluid arose from an excavation of Ari's own values and assumptions, a careful and critical examination of themself within their own professional identity and within the cultural climate in which they worked (Robertson, 2017; Ryan, 2007). As Kelly characterized this, "being flexible is definitely important, and here, more than ever," and "I need to adapt to the context I am in." For these principals, adaptation did not mean acceding to the demands of local context or giving up what one held to be right; rather, it was about accessing another part of one's moral compass. This is intercultural sensitivity in action, intercultural awareness as praxis to honour a divergent orientation to the world (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) while simultaneously holding resolutely to their own perspectives and moral positionalities.

The principals' ability to exist in the tensions which arose when their moral judgement was constrained evolved over time. This capacity to shift, as one needed and to what one needed, is the essence of moral fluidity. As Toby mused:

> Do I necessarily agree with their philosophy pertaining to all that stuff? No, no, I don't. But unfortunately that's a cultural difference that I've learned since I've been here that I need to, uh, not fully accept, but understand. Or try to understand, I should say. It's probably something I learned when I came here in 2010, when I realized that I don't necessarily need to accept everything that happens in China. You know, like I don't have to accept the things that happen that are quite different in our culture. But I do need to take the time to understand.

What rankled them to their core more than a decade ago was not processed in the same way now. Rather than seeing this as a function of acceptance or inurement over time, I saw Toby's constant shift towards tuning their moral fork as a function of moral fluidity. They shifted towards an obligation to the tenets which underlay the Canadian curriculum when they felt that this would help them make sense of moral distress. In other instances, this sense-making required an orientation towards their own professional growth or to a reminder that they should be acting as a good guest would in someone else's home.

The title of this chapter came from Terry's statement about falling on a different piece of their moral compass when that was required. It seems right to end this chapter with more from Terry. They said:

> For me to make accommodations into my thought process or be flexible, to take different perspectives and step in and out of my upbringing and where I've been working for so long, I don't see it as very difficult to shift frames of reference. I always want to be a

> person who practices a frame of reference shift, well, to the extent that I can. Let's figure this out. Let's try to shift.

"To the extent that I can" was an expression by Terry that there were limits. Terry was able to be fluid, to move their moral positionality because they understood that the nature of their role as a Canadian principal in China demanded this. They were not relinquishing who they were or what they held to be morally right; rather, they were actively engaging the process of making sense of morally distressing situations in the context of their own professional identity in the best way they knew how.

Chapter Eleven: Looking Ahead

In this final chapter, I first offer my perspective on the importance of bringing an awareness of the phenomenon of moral distress to the field of educational leadership and the positioning of my study in the broader context of moral distress scholarship. Next, I discuss what I have learned about myself through this doctoral journey, a brief section which could easily and rightly be expanded into its own separate 200+ page document. I then suggest future directions in scholarship on two fronts, one based on the further use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a research methodology in educational leadership literature, and one based on a broadening of the research sample to include both Canadian onshore principals and those in schools not necessarily Canadian nor located in China. This third section also includes my thoughts on a proactive implementation of measures for school leaders contending with moral distress similar to those enacted for and by health care professionals. I reconsider my nine hours and sixteen minutes in April 2014 in light of the moral fidelity and moral fluidity notions I created. Lastly, I present some parting words of advice from the 15 principals in this study to those who may be considering their own future principalships in Canadian-accredited schools abroad.

The Power of Naming

It took me a long time to fully and properly express the ethical consternation I knew I was feeling leading a Canadian school in China, years of being uneasy with being compelled to act in a way that I knew was not fully congruent with my own sense of best moral reasoning. It was only after coming to the phenomenon of moral distress at the beginning of my doctoral studies that I finally had a name for how I felt. This led to an understanding of how these feelings affected my own professional identity. With time, I saw that I had been centering my role and my identity on actualizing intercultural and international dispositions (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2014) in a Canadian way, in a way that both informed and aligned with my own moral bearing; doing so had me at odds with the cultural and political values of my adopted home country. In my mind, to be able to process and navigate feelings that one knows to be neither tenable nor sustainable is to have a deepened sense of one's own capacity; this is an important component of understanding the structures by which one makes sense of their own lived experiences, their own existential grappling. There is a 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 reactions to not being able to act in a way that one believes to be morally correct. Nook et al. (2021) asserted that naming emotions "might crystallize affect in the short term but increase understanding of one's emotions and thereby facilitate self-regulation in the long term" (p. 195). This naming can act like a salve, perhaps even allowing for a recapturing of a sense of agency over one's own affective reactions to morally distressing situations.

The principals in this study expressed a similar sentiment, indicating that having an understanding of moral distress now helped them to see not just why they were reacting to external mandates or internal strife in a particular way, but also better helped them conceptualize how they constantly made meaning of their school leadership experiences in China. Blake said that "if you realize that [moral distress] is there, then it's helpful to deal with it. It becomes an agitation, and then it comes out in the personality of the individual. They may become resentful, or difficult or angry, and they may not know why." To recognize the affective reactions associated with moral distress was to diffuse them.

Another participant opined that "the idea of talking about these things, about moral issues, that haven't been talked about" allows principals to understand their own roles better.

They felt that “this is going to be really helpful, because you don’t want to put someone in a job environment that they are not actually aware of what they’re getting into.” It would also enable them to relate more fully to all other members of these learning communities, including the Canadian teachers, the school ownership, the Chinese national administrators and teachers, the parents, and the students themselves. The principal added that “this kind of research is amazing. It’s practical. It’s meaningful and timely.” For these principals, having a more fully realized understanding of self was an avenue to both better connect to their entire school communities and to better understand their own everchanging professional identities.

Terry looked beyond the implications of understanding moral distress in the context of their own professional identity, considering the impact on the profession itself:

> This is a topic that is very much real in my work and my life, and also in the lives of my colleagues. And I hadn’t yet articulated some of the feelings I see in myself, feel in myself, as moral distress. But it’s useful for me to think about it in this way, because I want to support the profession. I have a commitment to the profession, and I want to support that and other principals. And sometimes you see them, and they’re just exasperated. They’re on their last frayed nerve, on those last frayed edges of sanity. And it's sort of like, ‘but why, what’s going on?’ And if I can know more about that, I know I can help people. They get wrung out. They feel wrung out and I can see it in some of them. And maybe it’s time to start asking why.

Being able to recognize that moral distress exists as a real phenomenon, that the affective and psychological reactions that a school leader may be experiencing are normal and expected, could ease some of the tensions that these principals currently and inevitably faced. The knowing might well act as a layer of understanding the self in the process of making sense of living within reach of those last frayed edges of sanity. Musto and Rodney (2016) posited that moral distress should be considered an occupational risk, as it is for health care professionals; to know more about what moral distress is and how it might manifest will allow principals to more fully conceptualize themselves in the context of their own professional identities. Effective school leadership calls for principals to act resolutely and in a manner consonant with their own sense of moral judgement and professional agency to respond to the contexts impacting schools (Demerath, 2018; Levinson, 2015); moral distress may well impede this leadership. Bringing awareness to the profession may, as Terry offered, lead to a kind of questioning that ultimately benefits all school principals, regardless of where they may be located or what the specific context and details of their morally distressing situations may be. On an individual level, this kind of awareness and questioning may lead to a principal's more robust understanding of their own professional identity and moral positionality. At an institutional or systems level, this may lead to reflection on the conditions inherent in the profession itself which could contribute or give rise to moral distress for the individuals within. There is resonance and alignment again with recent nursing scholarship here, as Deschenes et al. (2020) proposed shifting the emphasis of responsibility from the person experiencing moral distress "to place a heavier onus on systemic and institutional concerns" (p. 1127). They stated that shifting responsibility from the individual to a focus on systemic factors such as "the moral environment, barriers to ethical practice, and support for moral learning and value sharing" (Deschenes et al., 2020, p. 1144) is necessary. Moral distress should not solely be borne by those who experience it, as its existence as a phenomenon speaks to something untenable occurring within the system itself. This study serves to situate principals in the same broad context as nurses in terms of needing to understand moral distress at both individual and systemic levels.

What I've Learned About Myself

One of the professors in this program said that a question they always asked in a doctoral defense was what the person learned about themself throughout the process of conducting research, analyzing data, and writing their dissertation. Not about the topic or the findings, but about the researcher themself. They remarked that the question catches some candidates flat-footed. I would not be that candidate. In fact, I think it would require many more words than anyone would be willing to read to express fully how this process has pushed me, stretched me, and invigorated me. Without that kind of space, I'll comment briefly on what I've learned about my own moral positionality and fluidity, about the emotional heft and rigour of fully committing to this kind of research, and about the importance of community in an undertaking like this.

I was, and am, overwhelmed by the depth of insights offered by the Canadian principals who participated in this study. Their understandings of the complexities of their role, both at a granular level and in the larger intercultural consideration of delivering the curriculum of one country into a wildly different political and social context, were so laden with nuance and deliberateness that I could not help but excavate my own understandings. That kind of digging and examination always results in learning, and ideally, growth.

I have always been a reflective person, one wont to examine my thoughts and actions as a means to more fully understand myself, my place in a web of interconnection with others, and my engagement with a world of ideas. I have learned now that my own introspection was still being bound and clouded by my reticence to accede to policy demands on principle. It was many things over many years, but it was primarily one specific incident around censorship which impelled me on this research direction. What I originally characterized for myself as feelings of ethical consternation, what I later understood to be moral distress, was being amplified by my own indignance, my own stubbornness, my own self-righteousness. I offer this now with as much grace as I can muster, because I also believe that my own moral positionality is integral to who I was as a Canadian principal in China, to who I am as a human being. But I now hold that what I originally perceived as nonchalance or indifference by my peers in the face of mandated constraints on what I understood to be their moral obligations, was more a projection of mine than a deep understanding of how they navigated morally distressing situations within their own professional identities. This is vitally important learning for me, serving also to underscore that each principal's continuous process of reconstructing themselves and their identities is not solely an intellectual consideration; rather, there is also a complex affective dimension as well.

It is the scope of this affective domain which surprised me the most on this research journey, both feelings long left alone within myself and those that arose as I lived within the data. In a discussion on his eponymous podcast with Dr. Lex Fridman, a professor of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics at M.I.T., Dr. Andrew Huberman, himself a professor of Neurobiology and Ophthalmology at the Stanford School of Medicine, remarked that while data may not be exhaustive, as this was sometimes not possible, they must always be accurate (Huberman, 2021-present). Their conversation was not around the quantitative particulars of their chosen areas of study and expertise, but on the importance and emotional toll of relaying with fidelity the narratives Fridman had collected from those affected by war on a summer 2022 trip to Ukraine. Accuracy is neither an aim nor within the realm of possibility in qualitative research, but credibility, applicability, dependability, and trustworthiness are. In my own process of sitting with and interpreting the data I collected, I have learned that to be faithful to this process, to be deliberate and conscientious and to achieve trustworthiness, requires a commitment that is both intellectually and emotionally demanding.

Engward and Goldspink (2020) characterized the engagement with data in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in this way:

> Through our analytic engagement, the data gain access to our everyday lives, new lodgers who come to dwell in the domains of our cognition, affect, and behaviour. We hear, see, and feel aspects of their experiences because the IPA researcher is not merely an observer or data processor, but is an active contributor to interpretation. The data make an impression on us, sometimes momentarily or staying with us for some time. (Engward & Goldspink, p. 43)

This is a complex process that requires "the systemic application of ideas, and methodical rigour; but they also require imagination, playfulness, and a combination of reflective, critical, and conceptual thinking" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 40). It is a process that refuses to mute itself neatly when it is time to stop working for the day. I have learned that what I originally thought would be a mostly intellectual exercise with other people's stories, instead precipitated, and required, a deep examination of my own affective reactions to the things I heard from the 15 Canadian principals in this study. I know now that the presence, and sometimes urgency of, this emotional dimension was something that I was unprepared for at the outset; it is something that has required me to continuously calibrate and learn as I have gone.

Lastly, I have learned about the importance of support and community. From preparing to collect data all the way to writing the final document, a dissertation is mostly a solitary pursuit. I knew that it would be before I started, and this was not something for me to have feared. I am an introverted person, social only when I need to be, who loves to read, write, and work through complicated puzzles and complex ideas. I enjoy the quietude that comes with having the time and space to do those things. I thanked a number of people by name in the Acknowledgements at the beginning of this paper, but that does not fully capture the importance of leaning on and drawing from that collection of people over the last few years. There have been others as well: Dr. Stelmach's other doctoral students, classmates through my coursework, people who have asked questions as I have presented incarnations of this work at academic conferences and in professional settings, and a myriad of other friends and acquaintances who have listened to me and helped me form my thoughts. This is indeed a mostly solitary pursuit, but it is one greatly enhanced by interactions with others in ways I did not foresee at the beginning of this process.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

A wise doctoral supervisor once counselled me that good research should end with good questions, not final answers. My interpretations of the insights shared by these principals about contending with morally distressing situations while leading Canadian curricula schools in China are a starting point for a myriad of future directions. With a step back to understand what was learned from the findings and discussion of this study, one looks forward. Implications for future research and practice address the 'okay, so what now?' From this study, I have learned that moral distress affected principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China. I have learned from them that moral distress reaps a psychological and an emotional toll and has relational implications, colouring how the principals interacted with those around them. I have learned from the participants themselves that the values at the heart of a principal's professional identity are not different to those at the core of a health care practitioner's: compassion, service, integrity. I have learned that there is a contextual and negotiable (Whiteman et al., 2015) element within professional identity, and that a principal's own conception of themself in their role is derived from both their own values and from reflection on interactions with others (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Ryan, 2007), all of which is made more complex by intercultural considerations.

I have learned that there were a multitude of components to the principals' unique sense-making processes. I have learned that these principals developed a capacity, deliberate or not, to be able to orient themselves towards the part of their moral positionality that they needed to in order to assuage the moral distress they felt. I have learned that when necessary, the principals had the capacity to shift to another part of what impelled or buoyed their obligation to do the best they could in the circumstances they were in, then maintained fidelity to that. I have learned that a deeply held obligation to their local counterparts and context, to the values inherent in the curriculum they administered, to the terms of their employment contract, or to that part of their own professional identity that was reflective and dynamic (Ryan, 2007) and changing and changeable (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021) was not an either/or proposition. Looking forward, I offer three possible avenues for future inquiry here, two academic and one in terms of leadership practice, all in the form of questions: one methodological, one about expanding the scope, and one phronetic, as I wonder about the urgency of enacting proactive measures to support school leaders affected by their own embodied reactions to moral distress.

As I wrote earlier, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative methodology primarily utilized by researchers in various fields of health care. Arising from the social and health psychology of Jonathan Smith and typically focused on the participant-oriented insights as people coped through illness or personal turbulence, IPA is employed to understand how people experienced, perceived, or made sense of their lives. Other than an article stemming from a doctoral dissertation about the lived experiences of a small group of British deputy headteachers (Guihen, 2020), IPA has not yet been used as a methodology in the fields of education or educational leadership. For me, IPA was just intuitively right as a methodological approach and structure in which to engage educators about their sense-making processes on any number of the complexities they faced in their intellectually and emotionally demanding work. What is educational leadership if not an exercise in finding meaning through turbulence and change, after all? What is teaching if not a constant cycle of deliberation, action, reflection, and learning about one's self? Regardless of the conceptual kernel being sought or the actual research direction, I wonder about having more educational scholarship from researchers using IPA in their studies. In terms of methodological implications then, I pose this question: How would future research in educational leadership benefit from using an IPA methodological approach?

The principals of Canadian-accredited schools in China shared some common challenges and experiences based on the ideological underpinnings of their adopted home country. Conceptually, this study bounds how a group of school leaders contended with being constrained from acting in accordance with their most sound moral judgement in one specific international context. The affective reactions of frustration, sadness, or despair, the effects on their relational capacities, the increased self-doubt or feelings of being unmoored or ethically adrift, their need to extricate themselves from situations they found untenable, these may well have been specific to Canadian principals in China. I strongly suspect not; there have been a lot of heads nodding in knowing recognition when I have spoken to different groups of Canadian principals in Canada, and different groups of international principals in contexts other than China, about moral distress over the last few years.

Yet, until others undertake a concerted exploration of the moral distress felt by Alberta-based, British Columbia-based, or principals based in any other Canadian province or American state or in any other country in the world, for example, some people may wonder if this is a phenomenon limited in scope by geographical context. A reader may be wondering if there was something specific about the cultural or political realities of China that contributed to school leaders there needing to navigate moral distress. Or perhaps there was something unique in character about being Canadian, or something inherent in the principles which underlay Canadian curricula that predisposed those who administered them to be sensitized to moral concerns in a particular way?

Again, I would be shocked if this were so. I would expect that actual geographical location or the specifics of any particular set of conflicting ideologies or policy demands were not the essential conditions of moral distress felt by school leaders. As Stelmach et al. (2021) asserted, “moral distress is global, and thus timely” (p. 5), and a consideration of it and its effects on the sense-making of school leaders who just happened to be in China transcends any one particular geographical context. Are there differences in principals’ sense-making processes that are distinct to region or to a particular type of constraining directives? What about Canadian principals trying to make sense of ever-shifting pandemic policies, some of which may not be congruent with their moral positionality? Is there some difference for principals in large urban settings as opposed to rural parts of the provinces in how moral distress is experienced and made sense of?

Is there a better or more apt four-part (or five-part or two-part or nine-part) framework to use to understand how principals anchor their beliefs, calibrate their moral compasses? There might well be shades of nuance in someone else’s conception of moral fluidity that make it more appropriate for a set of participants not working in Canadian schools in China. Or another researcher might see it completely differently and eschew my notion of moral fluidity, then propose their own mechanism for how principals adapt to find some moral consonance. For me, given the data I had and the insight cultivators I employed in order to analyze and interpret them, I maintain that the constructs of moral fidelity and moral fluidity that I derived revealed more nuance in the sense-making processes of this particular group of school leaders. Understanding the constituent parts of their meaning-making capacities to navigate dissonant imperatives and values and contend with moral distress was to focus on the idiographic; organizing individual themes into group themes, then creating a conceptual architecture in which to layer those themes added depth. I hold that moral fidelity and moral fidelity are both apt and germane to this particular group in this particular context, but I also recognize these constructs may not find purchase universally. It is far outside the discussion from this study, but I wonder if this sense-making framework could be modified and applied to other professions? Perhaps to police officers and firefighters and military personnel, for example, more professions with an element of helping and service at their core, as health care and education have.

With all of this in mind, and until someone undertakes further research, there will be no more contributing insight into what I hold to be a very important concept, one which should be urgently redressed. So, towards future scholarship and to broaden an understanding of moral distress in educational leadership, I pose a question by modifying the question which guided me in this study, with a future researcher filling in the blanks to suit their own direction: How do _________ principals navigate morally distressing situations that can arise when their own beliefs and/or values are in tension with ____________?

Lastly, I turn to the practical. In November 2020, along with Dr. Stelmach, I attended an online Health Ethics symposium called Moral Distress: Caring for Those Who Care. This one-day event on Zoom was facilitated by the University of Alberta's John Dossetor Health Ethics Centre. The participants and speakers included nurses, physicians, therapists, medical ethicists, and university professors from various health care disciplines. In this group, the phenomenon of moral distress is not new, conceptual, or abstract; it is real and accepted as something with which those in helping professions must contend.

Health care scholarship and practice have a significant head start on education in terms of defining, recognizing, and addressing moral distress. Ideally, those of us in the field of education, whether toiling in Horace's *silvas Academi*, the groves of Academe, or working in schools as practicing professionals, would stand on the shoulders of those who have already spent generations building awareness of best support practices. The affective reactions which arise from feeling morally constrained, the feelings of reduced autonomy and increased self-doubt, frustration, and anxiety, these have real implications for the profession itself.

Writing of health care professionals, Musto and Rodney (2016) asserted that "interventions in moral distress need to focus on both helping to ameliorate the experience, as well as fostering action that will generate positive change" (p. 84) in the system itself. I assert that the same holds true for principals and for education. In Appendix G, I have included two screenshots from the Health Ethics symposium. In their opening remarks, organizers had granted explicit permission for participants to capture the presentations as screenshots and encouraged attendees to continue to spread awareness of moral distress in their own professional circles. In the first screenshot, the presenter discussed institutional responsibilities, which could rightly be framed as a holistic response from the entire discipline, one premised on validating practitioners' experiences and working to create an atmosphere of support and solidarity. In the second slide shown in Appendix G, the presenter proposed responses for those feeling morally distressed, such as seeking support, sharing their experiences with peers, and developing a self-care plan. While contacting an ethicist may fall beyond the scope of a principal's or a teacher's range of strategies, the other measures are as relevant and accessible for educators in their field as they are for health care professionals in theirs. In terms of continued learning and implications for future practice then, I pose these questions to educators: What approaches can we adopt from other helping professions to address, and hopefully mitigate, the moral distress we may feel? And then, what do we do with this awareness? Should we be proactive and build an understanding of moral distress into leadership development programs or our professional associations? Or start earlier, and discuss moral distress and its implications with pre-service teachers in their university programs?

Nine Hours and Sixteen Minutes: Revisited

In the final section of my bridling journal, I revisited the time I spent agreeing to a course of action I knew was a violation of what I stood for, who I was. Armed with the constructs of moral fidelity and moral fluidity I created to understand how the principals in my study made sense of moral distress within the context of their professional identities, I asked myself what meaning I found in that time now, nearly a decade after it happened.

I believe that I was not able, or willing, to access the kind of moral fluidity required to engage all parts of my role as the principal of a Canadian-accredited school in China wholly. Had I been able to conceive of the capacity to orient myself, to anchor myself, to calibrate myself differently, in those moments in that office or in the many moments after when that experience affected me, perhaps I could have moved deliberately to a place of moral tenability within myself. I see that my own outrage limited me in more ways than I could have even envisioned then. I was so rooted in my obligation to the principles of free expression and the right to dissent that I could not tilt any other way. And yet, I still maintain that I did what I had to do. I made the only choice I could have made with stakes as high as they were.

Revisiting that time is reflective of my own continuing process of making sense of what I experienced, of describing my own learning through this process. I had not overtly considered the continuous construction of my own professional identity then. Knowing what I know now, armed with my own conceptions of moral fidelity and moral fluidity, I may well have acted to mitigate the moral distress I felt differently than how I perceived situations then. Though I have a greater understanding of how others trod their own careful path in navigating the tensions they faced and the moral distress that affected them, I do not have definitive answers to my own rhetorical musing. In a thought experiment like this, removed from the immediacy of it all, that kind of certitude is not possible. I may have reacted the same, felt the same; I may have envisioned it all more conceptually.

Advice for Those Who Lead Next

The analysis that informs this dissertation is my interpretation of the sense-making processes of the 15 participants who shared so generously of their insights. I have sought to order and synthesize understandings and experiences that were not my own, through a filter that is uniquely mine. I have taken as many measures as I could conceive to ensure that the data were presented with fidelity to reflect how these principals navigated tensions and contended with morally distressing situations in their schools, while at the same time asserting, as I did from the outset, that I am everywhere in this document. The nature of this engagement and the rigour of the methodology I chose demanded nothing less.

I am even more convinced now than I was at the beginning of my doctoral studies that social reality, one's way of being in the world, is a construction informed by multiple interwoven perspectives. Understanding is moulded by context, by culture, by affect, and by modes of engaging others that are unique to each individual. The conception of knowledge is itself relative; that is, knowing is bound and shaped by one's values, assumptions, expectations, and biases. Dialogue and reflection are each a vehicle for the creation and negotiation of meaning. Narrative and metaphor deepen the human imperative to make sense of experiences. Words and ideas, and the capacity to freely and fully express them, could not matter more.

As the closing question in the second interview, I asked each participant for any advice they might share with a principal about to assume their first principalship at a Canadian-accredited school in China, in a place where they might be compelled to contend with morally distressing situations informed by political ideologies sometimes antithetical to those they themself may hold. I hoped that answers to this question would deepen my own understanding of how these school leaders did what they did in the place where they did it. These were seasoned educators used to helping others, to imparting wisdom, to navigating complex cultural and intercultural dynamics and dispositions (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2014), and I believed that their answers would unfurl even more nuance in how they continued to make sense of their experiences within the context of their own professional identities. I was not disappointed; responses ranged from the practical to the philosophical, from the managerial to the ideal. It is with their words, sometimes abridged for the purposes of space but offered here verbatim, that I feel most right about ending this dissertation.

Alex:

> You know, you definitely need to go with the flow. You have to use your soft skills quite a bit. But, you know, even water can shape a mountain given enough time. So, be careful, be observant. Be careful, for sure. Be patient. You've got to take the good things with the bad things, and always look on the bright side. That's my model for surviving in China.

Andy:

I would say work on the relationships. Don't be too quick to make changes. I think being aware of that, as well as understanding that you don't see or understand the whole picture because of that cultural piece. So, take the time to learn the culture and understand the culture. Focus more on developing the relationships. And I mean, don't ignore concerns, but definitely talk through the concerns before making changes to the system.

Ari:

I think it's the importance of having those relationships and being able to bridge the divide. You've got to be able to gauge the room and see, you know, what you're asking, how it's being received. And being able to ask for sure, to check in for understanding, instead of having to trial and error. So, I think, a lot more work on the cultural. I think just somebody taking the time to go through the cultural differences, and how to process that, how not to get frustrated or not let the frustration turn to something personal, um, not to personalize that frustration. Yeah, that's probably the biggest thing.

Blake:

To distill it down into the important pieces, I would say, one, be aware of culture shock. Two, be prepared to accept things the way they are, not the way you want them to be. And number three, make sure that the students are being well looked after. But also make sure that you're looking after your own needs as well. And whatever that is for you, whatever you are coming to this environment and looking for, a certain experience, try to get that out of it as well.

Charlie:

I think the learning curve is always steeper than you think it is. Be very good, or become very good quickly, at the technical things. You know, work to be good at scheduling, work to be good at organizing your time, work to understand your contracts, your policies, your procedures, so that you're not caught off guard. So work, you know, work in the background to excel at the technical things, and then work in the foreground, work in a very visible way, to build relationships and be around, in and around the school. Be visible and be accessible.

Chris:

I suppose to sum it up, I'd say to leave your ego at the door. There it is in one line. As I said, the position itself is fuzzy, the roles and responsibilities are fuzzy. Just try not to get worked up over little things, right? Try not to make everything personal. Try not to make everything an attack on you and your position when things go wrong, because quite often they're not going to go the ways that you believe in your heart they should go. They're not. That's the culture, and you're not going to win those fights. I do wish that someone had told me that a little more sternly. I sort of wish someone told me that, to check my ego at the door, and then just, you know, not get stressed out over things out of your control, because there is a lot out of your control here.

Kelly:

I think what I would say to somebody coming from Canada directly to this position would be to be open minded. Be open minded, be open to different perspectives. And be kind. And, like I was talking about earlier, try to navigate those grey zones the best you can. But sometimes, like, again, not being 'oh, I'm right' all the time. Sometimes it is difficult, because we tend to believe that we are right. But it's all a question of perspective. So, trying to understand your context the best you can, that will help you. It'll help you navigate those grey zones.

And another piece of advice, well, make sure you create good relationships, trusting relationships, with your peers from the Chinese administration.

Leslie:

Avoid the assumption that you run the school. You're being brought over, you have a boss, and they're going to have their ways of doing things.

Unless you are the type of person who believes in global citizenship, then you should probably reconsider whether or not to come overseas. If you don't have that open mind, to change and to experience and learn about different cultures, then you're really not going to be successful here.

Make sure that you are learning about *guanxi* early on in China. Make sure that you are doing the little things that you can to build that *guanxi* with your Chinese staff.

And I think the last thing is to just understand that you are a guest in another country. You live in China now and this is the way that things are done in China, so just adapt.

Nick:

It's really important to build rapport, genuine rapport, with the people around you, with the school leaders, with the Chinese staff. Work to build those genuine positive relationships early on, because that is going to make things so much easier when it comes to negotiating and handling difficult situations as you go forward.

I would also say to know where your lines are, but be flexible. Know the places you cannot cross, both personally and within the larger context of the school. But have the flexibility to know when it's a battle worth fighting and know when it's not. Pick your battles wisely. And sometimes for the sake of moving forward in the best possible way, it's important to compromise.

Pat:

Spend more time listening and learning than you do talking and teaching. There you go, in a nutshell.

Sam:

Make sure that you get well connected with the people you work with.

If you think you're going to come and change the world by teaching students and running a good school, then fine. But if you think you're gonna change China, well, no.

Shannon:

I would suggest that in order to succeed here, that you should keep your confidence and what makes you who are you are in Canada. But then also have that respect, no matter what your previous notion is, or what you've heard, to come in willing to respect that the other side is not necessarily wrong, that it has something to offer you.

Terry:

As soon as you get into the building, first of all, go in a little bit quiet. Listen the best you can. And look around for one or two people that you feel you can really trust. That will help you reduce the ambiguity of the situation, because that's where the frustration and distress come from really. The morally distressing parts can be mitigated by being humble and listening to other ways of understanding the context that you're in.

And number two, being friendly, and attending to and building relationships. That's going to help with centering you.

Try to understand how things happen. Although you may need to make quick decisions, there's no reason to shoot from the hip. Just take a little more time. If it looks confusing or ambiguous, take a little bit more time and listen deeper.

Spend time to understand the ways of knowing and doing in the community that you go into. It doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to agree with everything, but you've got to endeavour to understand that you're stepping into someone else's world.

Toby:

I think that the most important thing, at least for me, is obviously don't jump to conclusions. Don't make the assumptions that you're being treated differently because of your culture or because you're coming from abroad.

Vic:

I would say that they have to prepare themselves on knowing the culture before soaking themselves in the job. To know the environment, to do research to know the people that they're working with. To do that research.

A Postscript: Where Are They Now?

I am writing this postscript in May 2023, a little more than two years after I received approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board and began interviewing the principals for this study. I completed those 30 interviews, two each with 15 participants, by the end of August 2021. As of today, there has been some significant movement by these school leaders:

- Four of the 15 principals remain where they were when we spoke in Spring 2021.
- One of the principals left the Canadian-accredited school they were at in June 2021 to move to a different Canadian-accredited school in China. They returned to that new school for a second year (2022-2023), intending to move back to Canada in July 2023.

- Two of the principals ended their tenures in June 2022 at the Canadian-accredited school they were leading in Spring 2021. They both remained in China to assume leadership roles at international schools not affiliated with any Canadian province.
- Four of the principals left their positions at the end of June 2021 to return to Canada, where two of them assumed a school leadership position in their home province. The other two principals pursued opportunities outside of school leadership.
- Three of the principals left their positions at the end of June 2022 to seek leadership positions in their home provinces in Canada. Each of these educators indicated to me that while they are looking to secure employment in Canada for the 2023-2024 academic year, they were using the 2022-2023 school year to ease back into life in Canada.
- One of the principals left China in July 2022 to assume a leadership position in a different international setting for the 2022-2023 academic year.

From fall 2022 through to spring 2023, I was able to continue correspondence with eight of the 15 principals. Of those eight, six had left the school they led when they participated in this study, with five of those having moved out of China. I asked each of them if they had left China and their principalship of a Canadian-accredited school because of the moral distress they felt. Three of the principals told me that they had reached a point where they knew they could no longer stay, where they could no longer find it within themselves to contend with tightening mandates and restrictions on their professional and moral judgement.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in an Interview

Date: day/month/year

Dear [Potential Participant]

I am a graduate student pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy degree under the direction of Dr. Bonnie Stelmach in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this email is to ask you to take part in a research study towards my dissertation. I am contacting you to invite you to participate in my study, Moral Distress Among Principals of Canadian-Accredited Schools Abroad [Study ID: Pro00101358]. Moral distress is defined as the emotional or psychological reactions a person may feel when they are constrained from acting in a way that they believe to be morally right. Specifically, I want to explore how principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad make sense of morally distressing situations that can arise when their own beliefs and/or cultural values are in tension with locally prescribed mandates.

Your participation is voluntary and would be anonymous and confidential. It would involve a virtual interview and follow-up interview to be conducted between March 23, 2021 and June 15, 2021. You can read the details of your participation and your rights in the attached information letter. I am happy to answer any questions to support your decision. You may also contact my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Bonnie Stelmach (bonnies@ualberta.ca), if you have questions at this point.

I have also attached a consent from so that if you choose to participate you can electronically sign and return to me via email.

The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta [Study ID: Pro00101358]. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, you can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in my research. I would appreciate your response by March 31, 2021.

Sincerely,

Lee Smith
PhD candidate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
780.499.7215
smith6@ualberta.ca

Appendix B: Information Letter and Consent Form

Study Title: Moral Distress Among Principals of Canadian-Accredited Schools Abroad
[Study ID: Pro00101358]

Research Investigator:	**Supervisor:**
Lee Smith	Dr. Bonnie Stelmach
University of Alberta Faculty of Education Department of Educational Policy Studies	University of Alberta Faculty of Education Department of Educational Policy Studies
Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3	Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3
email: smith6@ualberta.ca	email: bonnies@ualberta.ca
Tel: 780 499 7215	Tel: 780 492 9890

Date Range of Research: [March 23, 2021 – July 31, 2021]

Background
You are being invited to participate in this study because you are the principal of a Canadian-accredited school abroad. I obtained your contact information through publicly available information from your provincial Ministry of Education website. The data from this study will be used in support of my pursuit of a Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Before you make a decision about participating in this study, please read over this form carefully. You are encouraged to ask questions if you feel anything needs to be made clearer. Please retain a copy of this form for your records.

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of moral distress and how the principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad make sense of their experiences leading Canadian schools in an international context. Moral distress is the psychological or emotional distress of being in a situation in which one is constrained from acting on what one believes to be right. Specifically, I am interested in how principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad navigate morally distressing situations that can arise when their own beliefs and/or cultural values are in tension with locally prescribed mandates. I am interested in the affective and psychological reactions you have felt working abroad, and how you have been able to make sense of your experiences. This study will benefit existing scholarship by addressing an absence of literature regarding moral distress with regard to school principals. As well, this study will inform the professional practice of principals and teachers working in increasingly diverse and complex schools.

Study Procedures
In order to gather data for my doctoral study, I will be interviewing ten current principals of Canadian-accredited schools abroad over a period of four months. Your participation would involve an initial interview of 60 minutes, with a subsequent interview at a later date of 60 minutes. I will make an audio recording of each interview. I will also seek your consent to make a video recording of each interview. Each interview will be recorded only with your explicit consent. Your participation is voluntary; there will be no consequence to you should you decline to participate or decide to withdraw from participating. You may choose not to answer any question. I will send you the interview questions before the interviews take place. These questions will be used to guide our conversation.

After each interview, I will send you a transcription of the interview as well as my summary of the main points I understood you to make. You will have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription and my interpretation of it.

Benefits
This study may be of benefit to you in that you will have an opportunity to consider the manner in which you are able to contend with any misalignment of cultural or personal values when you are leading your Canadian-accredited school abroad. These considerations could potentially inform your own conceptions of moral agency and professional identity as you continue in your career. Also, this study may be of benefit to you as it will allow you to name and consider the affective and psychological reactions which arise from constraints on your moral judgement.

I would be pleased to email you a digital copy of my completed dissertation. If you would like to receive this, please check the box after the consent statement at the end of this form.

There is no guarantee that participants will experience benefit from this study.

Risks
There is minimal risk inherent in this study. That is, the probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation is no greater than those encountered by you in those aspects of your everyday life. In the interview process, you may choose to share experiences about leading your school abroad which had caused you some frustration, stress, or distress. Recounting these experiences may cause you to experience negative emotions. Please let me know if this happens; we can always pause or stop the interview. Many people, however, find the opportunity to reflect on their experiences to be beneficial.

You will be thoroughly briefed from the outset about the phenomenon of moral distress, so that you will choose to participate in this study only if you feel comfortable sharing experiences which may pertain to the overall research interest. You will be encouraged to continue or share only to the degree which you feel comfortable and psychologically and emotionally supported. As well, you will be free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Voluntary Participation
You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the

study. You may opt out of this study at any time until the point when data analysis commences. I will provide you with the latest possible date of withdrawal when I return the transcript of our second interview together. To withdraw from the study, please submit your request by email by (insert date here) and I will destroy all data.

Confidentiality and Anonymity
All data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Your name and the name of the Canadian-accredited school where you work will not be revealed, but I will identify the country where your school is located to help contextualize the comments. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used in all written representations of the data. Any hard copy data, including my summary notes, will be either locked in my campus office (Room 7-150 ED North) or in my home office (7 – 6805 112 ST NW, Edmonton). I will be the only person with access to the raw data and any identifiers; my supervisor and supervisory committee will only have access to the anonymized version of the data.

Digital data will be stored on my personal computer under a secure password-protected system. I will be the only person with access to these data. Data will be used to complete my doctoral study, my graduate program, and may be used in future presentations and publications in educational contexts. All data will be destroyed, in a manner which preserves privacy and confidentiality, five years after the completion of my graduate program per University of Alberta guidelines.

Contact Information
If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Lee Smith at smith6@ualberta.ca or Dr. Bonnie Stelmach at bonnies@ualberta.ca.

The plan for this study has been reviewed by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta [Study ID: Pro00101358]. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call 780 492 2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Consent Statement
I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and understand that I should retain a copy of this form. I further understand that Lee Smith will acknowledge receipt of the signed form via email.

____ ____________________
Participant’s Name (printed) and Signature Date

____ ____________________
Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

☐ I would like to receive a digital copy of this completed dissertation.

Appendix C: Initial Interview Questions

Can you tell me briefly about your professional experience as both a teacher and then principal, including how long you have been the principal of [insert school name]?

Can you tell me what it is like being a principal in an international setting? (What is rewarding or enriching? What is challenging?)

Have you ever had an experience when you had to deal with a mandate that ran counter to what you believe on a personal or a professional level? What did you do in that situation?

How did you feel about making decisions in that situation? Was there ever and frustration or anger that you feel you had to work through?

How do you think you were able to make sense of and contend with this situation?

Were you able to move on quickly from this experience? Can you explain why the experiences lingered [or dissipated quickly]?

Did you feel that you were able to strike a balance between your own beliefs and those political and cultural realities of [insert country name]? If so, how did you achieve that?

How do these kinds of situations factor into your thinking on how long you will continue to work in [country name]?

Is there anything else that you would like to add that you think I should know?

Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix D: Second Interview Questions

[*I began the second interview by asking the participant if they had any questions about the first interview and if they wished to add any further thoughts to any of their answers from the initial interview. Then, I asked the follow-up or clarification questions I may have had from the first session. I limited this number of follow-up questions to three per participant. I provided the Second Interview Questions to the participant at least one week prior to our scheduled session.]*

About things you said in Interview One:

1.
2.
3.

Generally, and again, we don't exactly have to march through these one by one, but I am interested in understanding how you navigate and make sense of the morally distressing situations that may arise as you administer your Canadian program in an international context:

1. How do you (or can you) parse the 'moral part' of your role from the managerial/practical parts of your job there? Do you think that this is complicated by intercultural differences, the differences in worldview between the western curriculum you administer and the Chinese context you're in?

2. What are the specific affective (emotional and/or psychological) reactions you have experienced while navigating morally distressing situations? How do you make sense of those feelings as you continue to do your job there?

3. What do you feel is the role of political skill/acumen in how you do your job there?

4. Regarding the 'moral rightness' of leading a Canadian school in China (or its converse, a kind of 'moral imperialism', a charge sometimes levied at educators working internationally): Some might contend that a curriculum is inherently about transmitting values, ways of understanding, and ways of interacting with the world. In your current context, these are western/Canadian values to citizens of a country whose government doesn't necessarily hold those same values. How do you conceive of this within your own sense-making process?

5. What advice do you think you would offer to a Canadian principal about to assume their first principalship in China? Is there anything you could share with them that you wish you had known when you were getting started?

Appendix E: Towards a Personal Experiential Theme

In the photograph below, I offer an example of how I worked through a transcript. After multiple readings, I had already pulled from the full transcript the printed sections which I believed contained insights on how this participant made sense of morally distressing situations. The notations on this page include a few questions and a reminder to myself to follow up on a point in the second interview. The other notes are the experiential statements I generated and then, enclosed in boxes, the Personal Experiential Themes I identified when I completed the experiential statement process for the entire transcript. I placed the pink paper on the page to preserve the anonymity of the Canadian province the participant referred to on four occasions.

freedom ... with limits

So the fortunate thing is that I do feel in a lot of ways, I have a fair bit of freedom and autonomy to make decisions, regarding the [redacted] side of things anyways. So within our classes. **It's a little bit interesting actually because you'd think having these two conflicting, sometimes, cultures of Canada and China, and having requirements from both, would be even more restricting than normal. And I guess in some ways it could be. But I think I find myself in a fortunate position where because I have built trust on both sides, sometimes I can fly under the radar. Very often I can fly under the radar**. I mean, there are certain aspects of the [redacted] side of requirements that I don't agree with either, so I can kind of, in some situations, **like pick and choose**. I can have "**this weird sort of freedom**" **to pick and choose how to structure and make decisions based on what I know are hard lines from the Chinese side, what I know are hard lines from the [redacted]de, and know where the freedom is, where the wiggle room is, to adjust those decisions.** (p. 11, 39 – p. 12, 4)

- recognition of the dissonance

- link to freedom + autonomy section

expedience + acumen

- finding a balance in a liminal space - existing in that position between two value systems

reframing

on self? on program?

If that does happen, I find that, um, first of all, it's something I need to think about with okay, how important is this? How important is this? What kind of impact is it going to have? **Is this worth me really pushing on it? So again, that's the first step to that, is trying to decide is this worth me continually pushing forward on that? Sometimes it involves making compromises that I wouldn't necessarily like to do. But you know, there's just not always ways around that. But yeah, I find that if we're really just coming from two different places, it really comes down to deciding how important is this for me to pursue.** And sometimes too, there are certain things where if I compromise, and I know this from experience, if I compromise on this, it may not amount to anything in the end anyways. Because sometimes these are just ideas that are coming forward from the Chinese side of things, it's like okay, we're going to do this, this, and this. But then, I might ask for a little bit of negotiation and I might compromise a bit more, but sometimes it doesn't even come to fruition. (p. 12, 23-34)

- operating between hard lines - not just an awareness of ambiguity but a purposeful positioning of self.

- becoming inured or negotiating with self?
- or looking to focus and hone

such as? practical or philosophical? follow up in pt. 2

political expedience acumen

capacity to look beyond own perspective and to actively try to understand the other side

- back and forth
- seeking movement within the transactional.
cost/benefit analysis (first time of 3 mentions)

And I tell them **that I'm not getting in this battle. I'm not fighting it**. If you want to do it, then you talk to [redacted] about it. But I'm not pushing that, that's not our contract. And every year they give in.

reframing

"weird sort of freedom" possible epigraph or ch. title?

Appendix F: Bridling Journal Excerpts

5/16

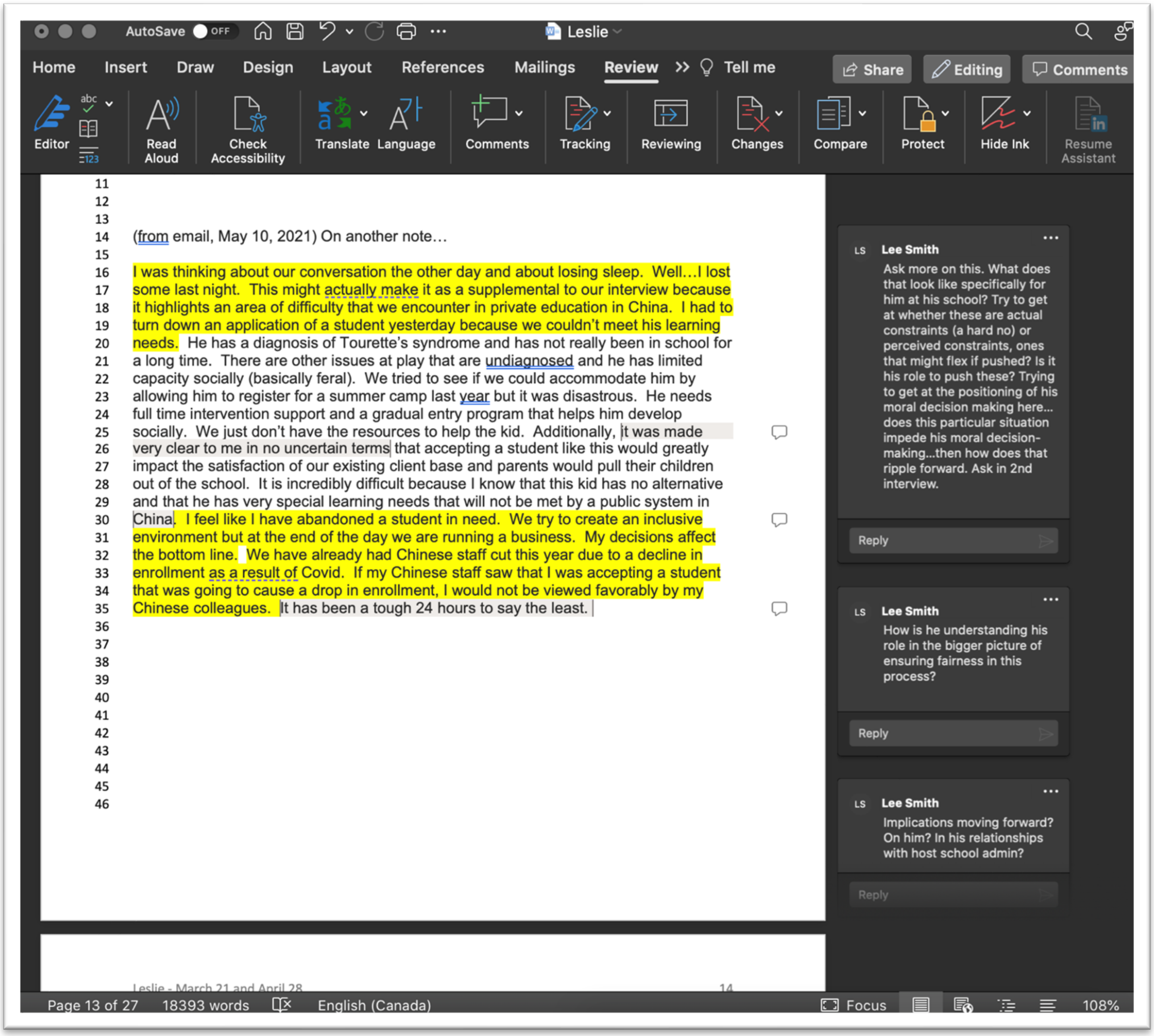
Reread [redacted]'s 2nd interview today. The part where he's talking about the boy at high risk of suicide, and having the family essentially ignore the message. This one hit me hard today. It's been four hours or so, and I can see that I'm still on this. It's not exactly foremost in my thoughts, but rereading it today makes [redacted]derstand how this has been sitting with me since the interview. [redacted] talked about duty of care, and his conversation around this culminated in the 'this is one of the ones where you lose sleep' bit. His notion of d of c expands out to the family and to the counselors who try to deal with this without support or training. Well-intentioned and caring people who basically flounder because there is no structural support of their efforts.

I know that I'm thinking a lot of this anecdote because of my experience with [redacted]dent suicide at Sias. The conditions and the failed interventions [redacted] describes are nearly identical to what I did. His result, thankfully, and for now, is different than mine.

- follow up with him on where this went with student and family.

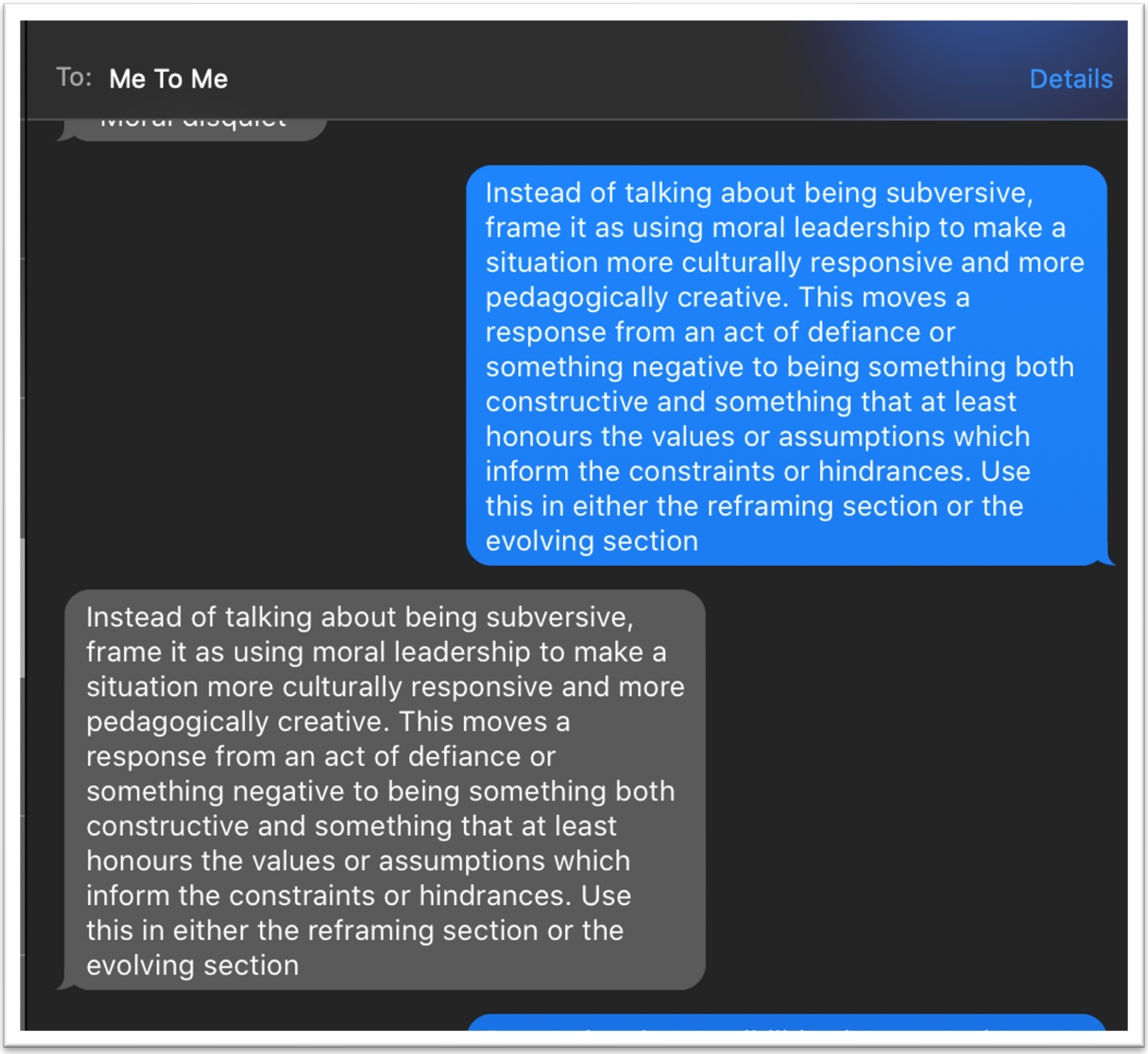
- Why is this anecdote affecting me differently than the other situations I've been hearing.. many of these morally distressing and upsetting and similar to my own experiences? How do I pursue this line with him as objectively (non-emotionally?) as possible?

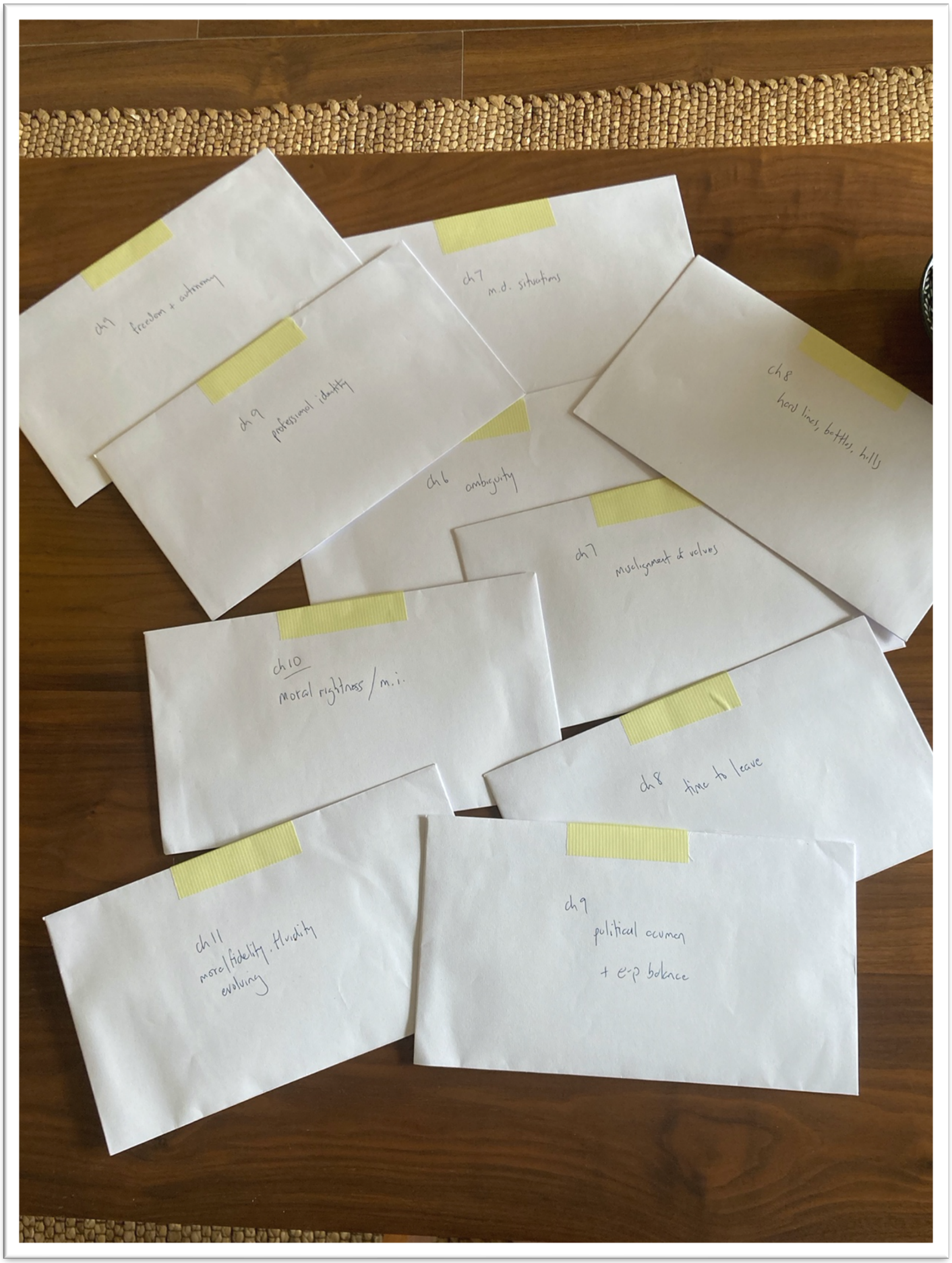
- function of time? - feelings dissipate until mentioned again?



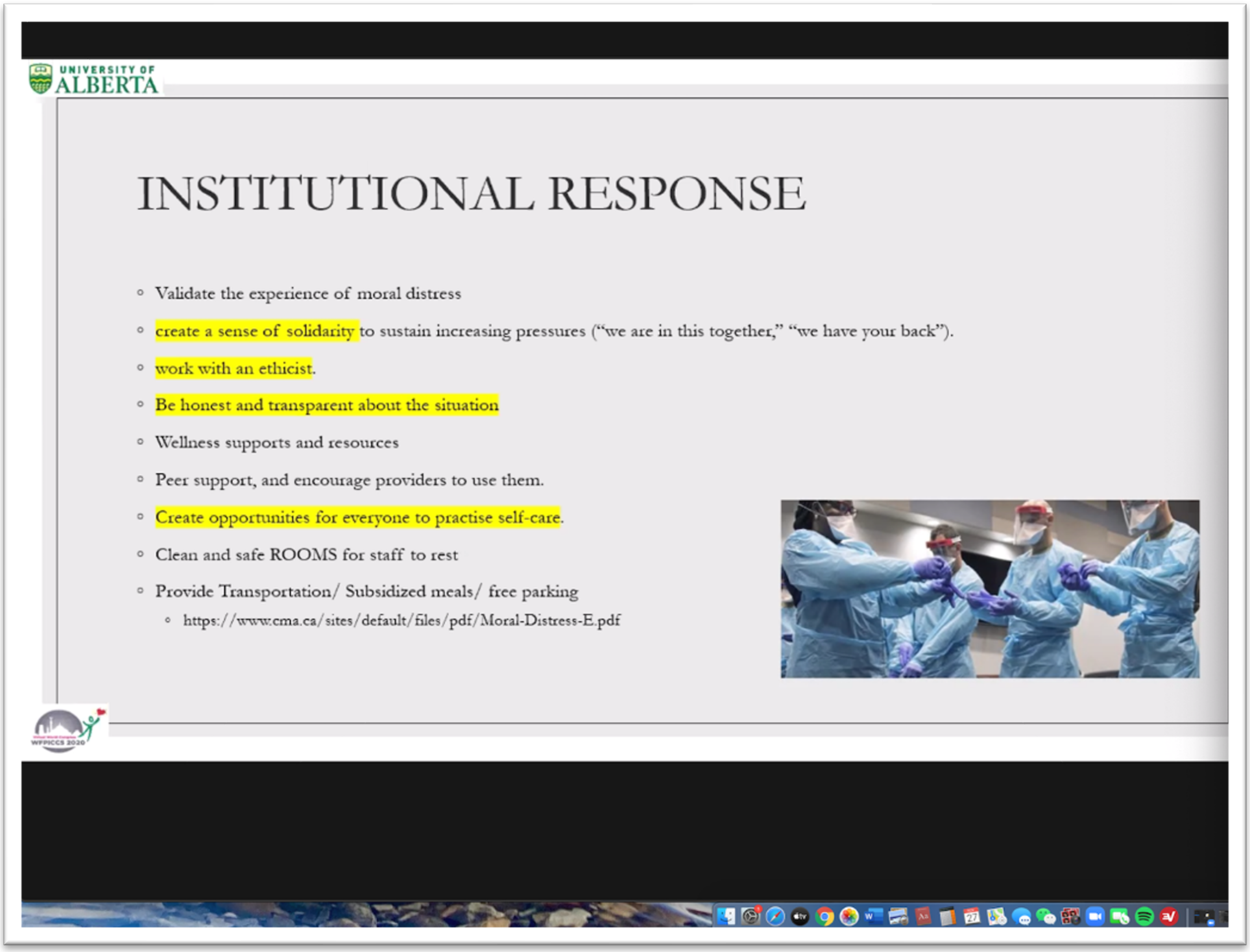
(from email, May 10, 2021) On another note…

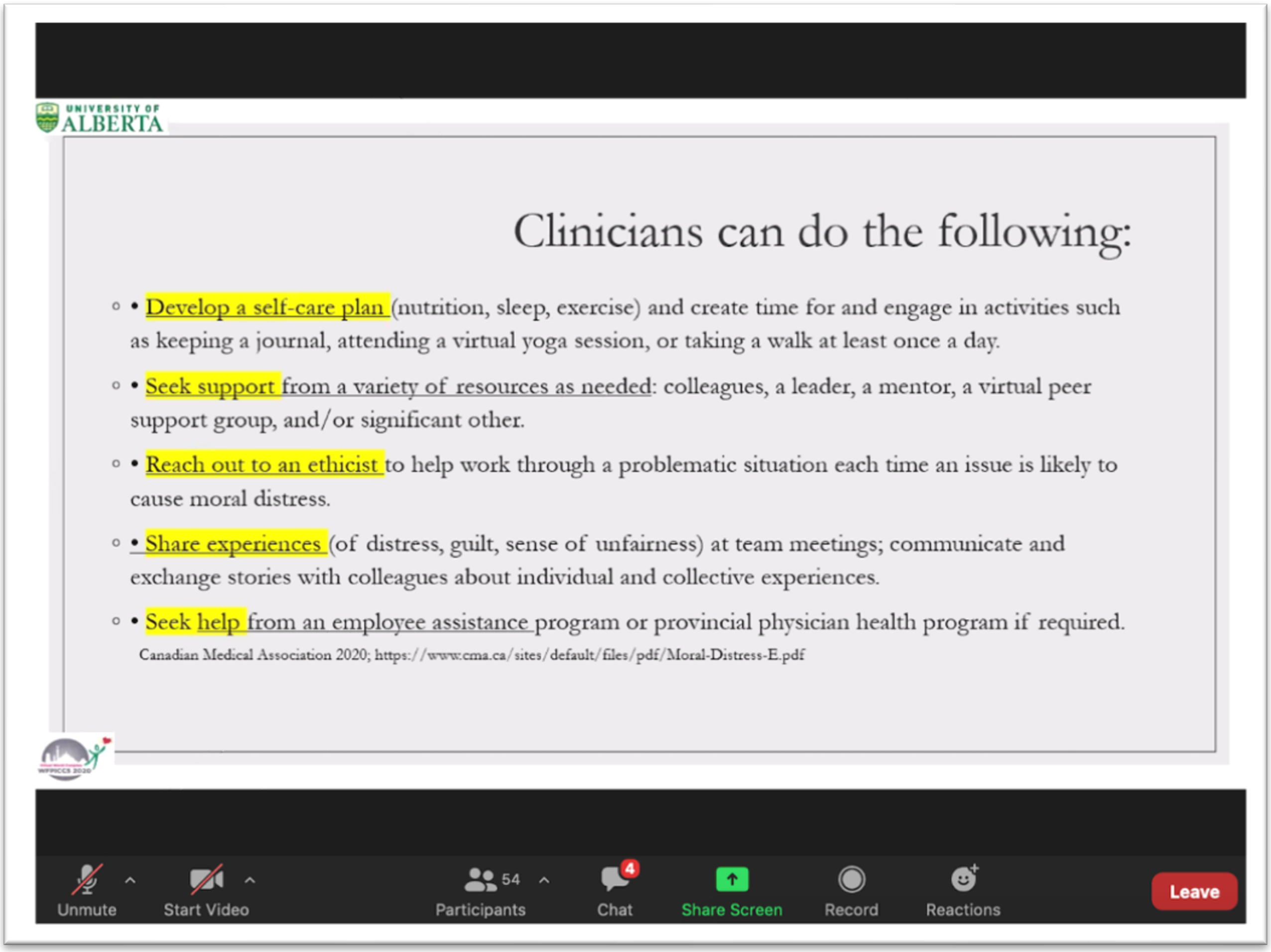
I was thinking about our conversation the other day and about losing sleep. Well…I lost some last night. This might actually make it as a supplemental to our interview because it highlights an area of difficulty that we encounter in private education in China. I had to turn down an application of a student yesterday because we couldn't meet his learning needs. He has a diagnosis of Tourette's syndrome and has not really been in school for a long time. There are other issues at play that are undiagnosed and he has limited capacity socially (basically feral). We tried to see if we could accommodate him by allowing him to register for a summer camp last year but it was disastrous. He needs full time intervention support and a gradual entry program that helps him develop socially. We just don't have the resources to help the kid. Additionally, it was made very clear to me in no uncertain terms that accepting a student like this would greatly impact the satisfaction of our existing client base and parents would pull their children out of the school. It is incredibly difficult because I know that this kid has no alternative and that he has very special learning needs that will not be met by a public system in China. I feel like I have abandoned a student in need. We try to create an inclusive environment but at the end of the day we are running a business. My decisions affect the bottom line. We have already had Chinese staff cut this year due to a decline in enrollment as a result of Covid. If my Chinese staff saw that I was accepting a student that was going to cause a drop in enrollment, I would not be viewed favorably by my Chinese colleagues. It has been a tough 24 hours to say the least.


To: Me To Me
Details
Instead of talking about being subversive, frame it as using moral leadership to make a situation more culturally responsive and more pedagogically creative. This moves a response from an act of defiance or something negative to being something both constructive and something that at least honours the values or assumptions which inform the constraints or hindrances. Use this in either the reframing section or the evolving section
Instead of talking about being subversive, frame it as using moral leadership to make a situation more culturally responsive and more pedagogically creative. This moves a response from an act of defiance or something negative to being something both constructive and something that at least honours the values or assumptions which inform the constraints or hindrances. Use this in either the reframing section or the evolving section


ch9 freedom + autonomy
ch7 m.d. situations
ch9 professional identity
ch8 hard lines, battles, hills
ch6 ambiguity
ch7 misalignment of values
ch10 moral rightness / m.i.
ch8 time to leave
ch11 moral fidelity. fluidity evolving
ch9 political acumen + e-p balance

Appendix G: Screenshots from Health Ethics Symposium: Moral Distress

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Clinicians can do the following:
• Develop a self-care plan (nutrition, sleep, exercise) and create time for and engage in activities such as keeping a journal, attending a virtual yoga session, or taking a walk at least once a day.
• Seek support from a variety of resources as needed: colleagues, a leader, a mentor, a virtual peer support group, and/or significant other.
• Reach out to an ethicist to help work through a problematic situation each time an issue is likely to cause moral distress.
• Share experiences (of distress, guilt, sense of unfairness) at team meetings; communicate and exchange stories with colleagues about individual and collective experiences.
• Seek help from an employee assistance program or provincial physician health program if required.
Canadian Medical Association 2020; https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/Moral-Distress-E.pdf
Unmute
Start Video
54
Participants
4
Chat
Share Screen
Record
Reactions
Leave