



COVER SHEET

Cranston, Neil and Ehrich, Lisa C and Kimber, Megan (2006) Ethical dilemmas: the “bread and butter” of educational leaders’ lives. *Journal of Educational Administration* 44(2):pp. 106-121.

Accessed from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au>

Copyright 2006 Emerald Group Publishing Ltd.

**ETHICAL DILEMMAS: THE 'BREAD AND BUTTER' OF EDUCATIONAL
LEADERS' LIVES**

Associate Professor Neil Cranston
School of Education
University of Queensland
Brisbane 4072 Australia
Email: n.cranston@uq.edu.au
Tel: +61 7 3365 6425
Fax: +61 7 3365 7199

Dr Lisa C. Ehrich
School of Learning & Professional Studies
Queensland University of Technology
Victoria Park Road
Kelvin Grove Qld 4059
Australia
Email: l.ehrich@qut.edu.au
Tel: +61 7 3864 3038
Fax: +61 7 3864 3981

Dr Megan Kimber
Senior Research Assistant
Centre for Learning Innovation
Queensland University of Technology
Victoria Park Road
Kelvin Grove Qld 4059
Australia
Email: m.kimber@hotmail.com

ETHICAL DILEMMAS: THE “BREAD AND BUTTER” OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERS’ LIVES

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to report on research into the ethical dilemmas faced by school heads from seven independent schools in Australia.

Design/methodology/approach – Data for the research were gathered by semi-structured in-depth interviews with the Heads, all of whom were experienced school leaders. All the schools had religious affiliations.

Findings – The findings are broadly consistent with the conclusions reached in other Australian and international studies dealing with school leaders which suggest that ethical dilemmas, usually concerning issues to do with staff or students, are so common now that they have become the “bread and butter” of educational leaders’ lives. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the struggles school leaders experience when faced with such dilemmas and the forces at play as they seek to resolve them. Typically, the dilemmas are not about “right” versus “wrong” but “right” versus “right” options.

Research limitations / implications – It is clear that the ethical dimensions of the work of school leaders require further investigation as ethical dilemmas are almost a daily occurrence for them as they strive to make complex decisions in the best interests of their school communities.

Practical implications – Professional development in the areas of ethics and ethical decision-making for school leaders is indicated. Problem-based learning offers potential in this regard.

Originality/value – The research reported in the paper adds to, and builds on, the growing body of research into ethics in education, particularly how ethical issues emerge when school leaders are required to make complex decisions in contexts where individual, group and organisational interests may be in conflict.

Keywords: ethics, educational personnel, Principals, decision making, Australia

ETHICAL DILEMMAS: THE ‘BREAD AND BUTTER’ OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERS’ LIVES

INTRODUCTION

The ethical dimension of leadership has become a key theme in the educational leadership literature (see for example, Campbell, 2003; Dempster and Berry, 2003; Starratt, 1996). In the changing and challenging operational environment in which schools now operate, it is not surprising that educational leaders are often faced with ethical dilemmas in the course of their daily work as they endeavour to make complex decisions in the best interests of both staff and students. This article contributes to the growing literature on ethics and educational leadership by reporting research into the ethical dilemmas faced by a group of leaders from independent schools in Australia. The research involved in-depth interviews with the Heads of seven schools with a view to investigating the extent to which ethical dilemmas are ‘the bread and butter of educational leaders’ lives’ and to unearth the nature and scope of the dilemmas. Previous work undertaken by the authors in relation to ethical dilemmas facing retired senior public service leaders (see Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber, 2003a; Kimber, Ehrich and Cranston, 2003) middle to senior level public service leaders (Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber, 2005; Ehrich, Cranston and Kimber, 2004) and academic leaders (Ehrich, Cranston and Kimber, 2005) provided the basis for the research approach utilised in this study. The paper begins by reviewing some of the seminal literature on ethics and leadership.

ETHICS AND LEADERSHIP

The moral and ethical dimensions of leadership have received increasing emphasis in recent literature (eg. Campbell, 2003; Chittenden, 2004; Day, 2000; Day, Harris and Hadfield, 1999; Dempster and Berry, 2003; Duignan, 2002a; Duignan, et al., 2003; Ehrich, 2000; Gorman and Pauken, 2003; Haynes, 1998; Roth, 2003; Starratt, 1996, 2003; Stefkovich and Poliner Shapiro, 2003; Strike, 2003). In part, this attention has been due to the increasingly complex context in which leaders work (Cooper, 1998) and the view that educational leadership is clearly a values-based activity (Walker and Shakotko, 1999). Hodgkinson (1991, p. 11) goes as far as saying that ‘values, morals and ethics are the very stuff of leadership and administrative life’ (Hodgkinson, 1991, p.11). Communities expect those holding leadership positions to act justly, rightly and promote good (Evers, 1992) as well as demonstrate moral and professional accountability (Eraut, 1993; Edwards, 2001). In other words, educational leadership has a moral purpose (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991; Greenfield, 2004) and educators, leaders included, have a responsibility and duty of care to act in the best interests of both students and staff.

The whole field of ethics is a contested terrain. While some authors describe ethics in negative terms and stress what it is not (misconduct, corruption, fraud and other types of illegal behaviour), others use a positive frame and refer to notions of integrity, honesty and care (eg. Uhr, 2002; Preston and Sampford, 2002). Nonetheless, there appears to be

general agreement that ethics is about relationships. It 'is about what we ought to do' (Plato in Freakley and Burgh, 2000, p. 97), thus requiring a judgement about a given situation or circumstance (Haynes, 1998; Duignan, et al., 2003). As Duignan, et al. (2003, p. 88. Emphasis in original) argue, '[f]or ethics, the concern is with how people *ought* to act in response to value conflict and dilemmas. The focus of ethics is on normative decisions, on what we judge to be the ethically correct thing to do ...'. Ethics, then, could be considered to be about how we ought to live and behave.

Ethical Dilemmas

When people find themselves in perplexing situations that necessitate them choosing among competing sets of principles, values, beliefs or ideals, ethical dilemmas emerge. Badaracco (1992) refers to these competing sets of principles as 'spheres of responsibility' that have the potential to 'pull [leaders] in different directions' (p.66) and thus create ethical dilemmas for them. Kidder (1995) maintains that many of the ethical dilemmas facing professionals and leaders 'don't centre upon right versus wrong [but can] involve right versus right' (p.16) or wrong versus wrong (Hitt, 1990) for that matter. Yet, within complex contexts and circumstances, it may not be so easy to discern what the 'right' and 'wrong' option might be. In fact, Day, et al. (1999) argue that 'a key part of being a leader was not only being able to deal with tensions but also "having to make the tough decisions"' (p.15). The next part of the discussion highlights some of the sources of the tough ethical decisions that have been reported by leaders in the research and more general literature.

Sources of Dilemmas

In a study that explored the ethical decision making of 552 Queensland government school principals, Dempster and Berry (2003) categorised ethical dilemmas in four main ways. These related to students, staff, finance and resources, and external relations. First, the most frequently occurring student-based dilemmas were situations when students harassed, intimidated or bullied others. Other issues related to dealing with students with disturbed behaviour; conflicts between the values of the school and the values of the home; suspending students; and child abuse-/custody arrangements. Second, in relation to staff, Dempster and Berry (2003) found that 60 per cent of principals reported that monitoring staff performance caused ethical tension and concern for them.. A British study by Day et al. (1999) revealed that often principals felt ethical tension when they were required to choose between developing or dismissing an underperforming staff member. The third source of ethical dilemmas facing leaders Dempster and Berry (2003) identified related to the allocation of funding across competing areas. Finally, leaders confronted ethical dilemmas that arose from external relations, directives from central office that conflicted with the needs and interests of the school community, and decisions made by school councils or parents and citizens groups (Dempster and Berry, 2003).

Similar dilemmas were evident in a qualitative study of eleven school administrators from the United States of America and Canada by Begley (2005). Principals identified dilemmas that centred what was considered to be 'in the best interests of students', on

conflicts with parents or community members, and on abusive and/or incompetent staff. The dilemmas that the principals reported often were connected to conflicts between organizational policies (i.e. punitive and rigid policies such as zero-tolerance) and their own sense of professional autonomy/discretion. Other tensions emerged from conflicts between their moral position, those of the profession and school community. In Begley's (2005) sample, as in Dempster and Berry's (2003) research, accountability to the system and accountability to others appeared to be a major concern for principals as they struggled to make ethically defensible decisions. Other writers (see Ehrich, 2000; Pauken, Kallio and Stockard, 2001; Preston and Sampford, 2002) have highlighted tensions emerging from competing accountabilities such as those between students and staff, and ensuring equity on the one hand and the education department or system for meeting financial and performance targets on the other (Byrne-Armstrong, 2000, p. 3)

In referring to the relevant department of state, it is pertinent to note that a key finding of a study that explored the ethical dilemmas of retired senior public sector managers by Cranston et al. (2003a) was the strength of the political dimensions that impacted upon the managers' decisions. While the leaders were working at very senior levels of their departments and thus the political context is unsurprising, this finding is relevant in that many of the public servants recalled dilemmas that arose because they were given directives from supervisors (in some cases ministers) that conflicted with their professional and personal values. This tension between top-down directives and the professional and/or personal values of those who are expected to follow such orders (i.e. leaders) is a consistent finding of other research based studies (Campbell, 1997; Dempster and Berry, 2003; Begley, 2005; Roche, 1999)

METHODOLOGY

The research reported in this study investigated the nature and scope of ethical dilemmas as they were experienced by a small cohort of school principals of independent schools in Australia. A qualitative research methodology guided the study because it is concerned with understanding phenomena from the point of view of the actors involved (Patton, 1991). In this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen as the main data collection instrument because they have the advantage of collecting large amounts of data about participants' perspectives relatively quickly and permit immediate follow-up and clarification of issues if required (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). They also enable researchers to understand the experience of others and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Seidman, 1991).

An important consideration in a study of this nature was the need to adhere to careful and strict ethical guidelines throughout the research process, starting at the participant recruitment phase through to data collection phase and the write up phase for publication. After receiving ethical clearance from the university, the research team struggled with the most appropriate way of recruiting participants. Because a study of this nature is likely to yield sensitive and confidential information, we were reluctant to recruit schools directly. Consequently, we sought the support and services of an intermediary – the professional association to which many Heads of independent schools in Australia belong - which

would seek participants on our behalf. The professional association supported us in this endeavour and agreed to a notice being placed in their newsletter that outlined the project and invited school leaders to contact the research team if they were interested in participating. During the data collection phase of the study, the research team reassured participants that their experiences would be treated with the utmost confidentiality and their anonymity and the school's anonymity would be protected. Following the data analysis phase, the research team sent participants a draft copy of a paper based on their experiences for their comments and endorsement.

Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured in-depth interviews that formed the prime data collection source for the study were designed around a set of key issues derived from the literature referred to earlier (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander, 1990, p.92). These issues were outlined in an aide-memoir or interview guide and made available to participants prior to the interview process (Minichiello et al., 1990). Of the seven Heads of independent schools who participated in the study, six agreed to their interview being tape-recorded. The seventh declined because of the sensitive nature of the discussion. For this participant, the researchers took detailed notes. All participants received a copy of the interview record and were asked to check and endorse that it was an accurate reflection of their experiences.

Data analysis occurred during and after the interviews were completed. After each interview, members of the team met to discuss the nature of the specific participant's ethical dilemma. Once the interviews had been completed and transcripts returned, another layer of analysis began. The team searched 'for general statements among categories of data' (Marton, 1988, p.111). A key analysis tool used in reviewing the transcripts was a model of ethical dilemmas developed earlier by the researchers (Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber, 2003b). This model identified a set of 10 forces likely to be at play as individuals confronted their ethical dilemma, together with a series of implications resulting from the decision taken. Consistent with Marton's (1988) approach, we followed procedures for data analysis whereby comments are brought together into categories on the basis of their similarities and categories being differentiated from one another in terms of their variances. This process enabled us to identify not only emerging categories and themes but also important issues pertaining to the complex environment in which school leadership takes place.

Demographic information about participants

Table 1 shows a summary of each of the seven Heads and some demographic information about them and their current schools

Take in Table 1 here

As can be seen from Table 1, the seven Heads who responded to the invitation to participate in the study were working in independent, generally religious-based schools in

mainly metropolitan parts of Australia. Not surprisingly, all of the participants alluded to Christian values that underpinned their school's philosophy and mission. Schools were either single-sex (boys or girls) or co-educational. All of the interviewees were male except for participant 4 who was the principal of a girls' school and the deputy principal at Principal 7's school who participated in the interview with Principal 7. Principal 7 and the Deputy Principal have been treated as 'one' participant in this study because they discussed the one and same ethical issue which emerged from their particular context. The seven participants represented a very experienced pool of Heads as all of them had been Heads and/or Deputy Heads of more than one school, the majority having served first in government and then in independent schools. Many had served in several states and some at schools throughout a particular state.

FINDINGS

All of the seven Heads of independent schools had no difficulty identifying one or more ethical dilemmas on which to focus during the interview. They were very willing and frank in their discussions regarding the ethical dilemmas they experienced in their position and seemed to appreciate the opportunity to talk about the difficult decisions they were compelled to make. The three key findings discussed here relate to (i) the widespread nature of ethical dilemmas; (ii) the nature and type of dilemmas facing Heads; and (iii) the role and importance of personally held values.

Widespread nature of ethical dilemmas

All participants commented that ethical dilemmas emerge in the course of their work as leaders. One participant observed, ethical dilemmas were '*really the bread and butter of what schools principals do*'. He went on to highlight the importance of such situations in his work noting that:

I've really been looking for a sign from people that this kind of dimension to the work that school principals do needs a whole lot more serious attention because ... at one level this is absolute core business because the ethical decisions you are making are not just affecting individual staff and students, they're creating a culture.

Another viewed that ethical dilemmas were commonplace noting '*the magnitude of ethical dilemmas in a place like this [i.e. the school] is very broad*' while another suggested '*you can deal with them [ethical dilemmas] every day*'. Such comments highlighted the significance of ethical dilemmas in the work of school heads.

Nature of and type of dilemmas experienced

The seven Heads pointed out that they generally faced a variety of ethical dilemmas that ranged from conflicts of interest surrounding the offering a gift through dealing with serious student or staff misbehaviours, through the handling of staff underperformance to protecting a child from potential violence from a parent and attempting to change an unethical organisational culture. The dilemmas which became the focus of their

discussion were those that appeared to be the most taxing for them personally and professionally. Table 2 summarises these ethical dilemma(s) and provides a categorisation of the dilemma(s) according to the type of dilemmas that have been identified in the literature.

Take in Table 2 here

As summarised in Table 2, the Heads referred to a similar range of ethical dilemmas. The themes focussed around two major areas and these were managing poorly performing staff and dealing with student issues of a significant nature. Typically, the head in each of these types of dilemmas, was faced with a choice of ignoring the 'problem' as it arose, employing a less contentious or less difficult solution like providing further professional development or taking what might be described as 'the tough decision' such as removing the staff member or the student from the school. In the case of participant 3, the 'tough decision' resulted in him resigning from his position and seeking employment elsewhere because he considered the situation unresolvable in a way satisfactory to him. Unlike the other staff based dilemmas, the issue for participant 3 concerned the unethical behaviour of a powerful external other. In the experiences shared by other participants, the ethical dilemma often became more acute when the under-performing staff member was a long serving member of the school staff and/or actively promoted the values underpinning the school. In one instance, the staff member was a personal friend of the head (participant 1). Importantly in these dilemmas, what cannot be ignored are the likely impacts on the students should the under-performing staff member remain in the school. Consequently, there were significant issues to consider such as the school culture, the impact on other staff as they observed the events unfold and the impact of certain actions on the individual concerned.

Turning to students, the types of dilemmas leaders faced appeared to be divided equally between promoting the welfare of a student, particularly when the student is in a home situation that is detrimental, and dealing with misbehaviour from one or more students, especially in cases where expulsion may be necessary. In the case of student-focussed dilemmas, an additional issue to consider was where several students were involved in an incident. One head noted that he might find himself dealing with a diverse group of people (students and parents), some of whom could be somewhat 'aggressive' in their response to the school's actions. As one head said, *'if it is a group suspension, the families do get together and mount forces'*. This collective 'resistance' by parents in such circumstances was noted by another head, who had experienced negative campaigns against himself by small groups of parents as a result of decisions he had taken regarding a specific punishment directed at particular students. Notably, a strong professional and legal ethic of duty of care was evident in heads' comments about dilemmas involving students. For example, following a particular decision, one observed, *'Whilst there has been a negotiated outcome for the child, I still have that gut feeling that it's [the problem is] not going to go away and I've just got to hope that she doesn't get hurt'*. Such care for individual student's welfare pervaded many of the dilemmas.

This concern with the personal, professional and institutional implications of decisions taken was summarised by Participant 4:

Can I sleep at night with this decision? Do I feel good in myself? It's deeply very personal. I have difficulty making an unethical decision and living with it unless someone can point out that my values that underpin that decision were a bit skewed.

Most heads in this study were keenly aware of the consequences of their decisions. Illustrating the pervasiveness of the individual/community dilemma, in some cases there was a tension between what was in the best interests of the individual, versus what was in the best interests of the rest of the school. This concern resulted in several heads continually reflecting on their actions. One participant knew that further decisions would be necessary. Another felt that he would act differently in future. In the case of the dilemma facing Participant 7, the leadership team worked through the dilemma to ensure that they fully justified to the school community why they were suspending a certain student in this specific circumstance.

Role and place of personally held ethical values and an ethical institution

Participants emphasised the need not only for ethical organisational cultures but also the importance of having clear personal ethical values and professional ethics. For instance, one interviewee argued that, *'Ethical decisions are not difficult to make if you're values-based'*. Another believed that the best solutions came from taking a situational perspective and from having a leadership team. For another participant, managing and dealing with ethical dilemmas took time. This interviewee argued that leadership was about *'coming back'* to a core set of beliefs you have about education and about what the school is about. Such an understanding implied that leadership has a moral basis. As a further head stated, school leaders must *'walk the talk'*. They needed to *'practice what they preached'*.

Evident in most dilemmas heads reported was the significance of the values and beliefs espoused by the school as well as the personal values held by the heads. These two sets of values were similar. As one head pointed out, *'until you enter a crisis, you are not confronted with your values'*. These values connected with their professional ethics, which they interpreted as emphasising duty of care to students and providing them with the best learning environment (Haynes, 1998). While most heads spoke of the strong sense of values evident in their schools, and that these should provide clear and agreed upon guidance for the school, students and parents in addressing ethical dilemmas, one noted that, *'When we're talking about ethics, we're talking about underpinning values. ... There would be an assumption that coming to a (religious) school ... there would be some consonance in terms of values. But that's not so.'* He asserted that it could not be assumed that, because the context for the dilemma (ie. the school) was one where certain values and beliefs were espoused, all parties necessarily shared those values and beliefs – at least when the ethical dilemmas arose for their particular child. In some cases, parents virtually asked the Head to set aside the values of the school and the individual Head to

accommodate the actions of their son or daughter. Similarly, it could not be assumed that because a member of the school council/board was a member of a particular profession that that person necessarily practised the ethics associated with their profession.

Finally, it worth noting that most Heads sought the input of a ‘significant other’ as a critical friend, such as a spouse, as they struggled to resolve the dilemma. Importantly, few sought the support of a peer from another school, someone who may well have been faced with a similar dilemma in their own experiences. Resolving ethical dilemmas, then, often involved situations where conflicts in values were evident, potentially making their resolution more challenging.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

That our research found that ethical dilemmas are widespread and commonly experienced by leaders was not surprising. A great deal of recent Australian and international studies (Day, 2000; Day et al., 1999; Dempster and Berry, 2003; Duignan, et al., 2003; Duignan, 2002b; Duignan and Collins, 2003; Roche, 1999) have found this to be the case within schools and other frontline organisations. For example, of the five Australian Catholic elementary principals in Roche’s (1999) study, four of them reported encountering ethical dilemmas on a daily basis. Likewise, in Dempster and Berry’s survey of government principals, 30% noted they experienced them weekly, 25% monthly and 14% daily. These findings provide support for the point that regardless of the system (i.e. Catholic, government, non-government), principals find themselves caught in the web of ethical decision making. What most of the previous research has been silent on, however, is the identification of any really effective support mechanisms for principals in resolving ethical dilemmas.

In a sense, the interview data reported in this study reinforced Sergiovanni and Carver’s (1980, p. 19) notion of a ‘web of tension’ surrounding the working lives of educational leaders. For example, research by Duignan and Collins (2003, p. 282) indicated that the tensions or dilemmas facing principals ‘are usually people centred and involve contestation of values’. Typically, the dilemmas faced by this group of educational leaders focussed on student and staff issues. The general thrust of the findings is consistent with research reported by Dempster and Berry (2003), Begley (2005) as well as Duignan and Collins (2003) and Wildy, Loudon, Dempster and Freakley (2001) who identified staff ineffectiveness and student misbehaviour as two commonly experienced areas for ethical dilemmas facing leaders. Indeed the types of staff and student dilemmas reported here were similar across the state (Dempster and Berry, 2003; Duignan, et al., 2003), independent (this research) and Catholic (Duignan, et. al., 2003) and international (Begley, 2005) sectors.

Other important dilemmas cited less frequently revolved around change, especially change that clashed with the existing organisational culture, and/or around resourcing. Another important issue was when changes were introduced that conflicted with values of the teacher and/or of the school (eg. Chittenden, 2004; Day, 2000; Duignan, et al., 2003).

We found that this situation was acute in cases when managerialist policies were being imposed on schools that privileged care and development of staff as well as of students. It was also important in cases where those in positions of authority acted in an unethical manner, especially when their conduct was inconsistent with the values on which the school was founded. The significant misuse of resources in one instance was quite different from other dilemmas. It potentially had major legal implications for the school and other parties concerned.

These findings indicate that the dilemmas heads experienced tend to fall into the categories of dilemmas identified in the literature and in previous research. In many instances the situation a participant faced fitted into multiple categories. Individual versus community, justice versus mercy (Kidder, 1995), conflict among the dimensions of ethical conduct and conflict emanating from blurred or competing accountability (Begley, 2005) seem to have been the most prevalent categories. Dilemmas that involved underperforming staff, for instance, involved balancing the needs of the individual staff member with those of the school community as a whole (Day et al., 1999). Dilemmas involving students might also be included in all these categories in that the needs of the individual had to be weighed against those of the community, that a balance was needed between justice and mercy (the policy says expulsion but in this circumstance is it warranted?), and conflict among the dimensions of ethical conduct was apparent in that policies may need to be bent or discarded. That more than one category characterised a specific dilemma highlights the complex and challenging nature of the ethical dilemmas facing school leaders.

In considering some of the ethical dilemmas identified by the school heads (Table 2), the Aristotelian approach promoted by Haynes (1998), Duignan et al., (2003) and Duignan and Collins (2003) seems particularly relevant. They highlight the important people side of the decision-making process, and powerful notion of 'duty of care' so evident in the dynamics and culture of schools. Several of the Heads stressed the importance of specific circumstances in determining how they approached an ethical dilemma. Resolving ethical dilemmas, then, could entail striking a balance and/or ensuring flexibility. In these cases decisions sometimes involved not enacting a school policy or working around the law. Such decisions were usually reached in circumstances when care for the individual student appeared paramount. However, the school leader/ team generally explained their actions to the community, ensuring that care, processes and critical reflection remained central.

Our study raises a number of implications for Heads. These relate to the dominant theme of Heads' strong sense of moral and professional ethics regarding decisions relating to staff and students and their belief that an ethical institutional culture is vital for supporting and facilitating ethical decision making in schools. And secondly, a key implication relates to the need for ongoing support and development for Heads for whom ethical dilemmas are likely to continue to be part of their work and practice in the future. This matter is taken up further below.

The findings of this study reveals that school leadership is about relationships, and the care and development of students and staff, for that matter, are central to the personal values and professional ethics of heads. Thus, for Heads, being attuned to each circumstance was a significant concern and in many cases, an ethic of care provided the anchor for decision-making. We concur with Begley (2005) that ‘a strong inclination to adopt “students’ best interests” ... is ... a reassuring finding in this day and age [of] accountability’ (p.15). Such a finding reinforces that educational leadership has a strong moral purpose (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991).

In this study, the Heads spoke a great deal about their own personal values which were closely tied to their professional values and how ethical dilemmas often tested the strength of their values. The Heads also spoke about their schools’ values and philosophy and how these valued were helpful in providing guidance for resolving dilemmas. Problems occurred when there was a clash between the personal values held, and professional ethics practiced, by the head with the institutional structures and organisational culture of the school. It appeared that this arose when those structures and that culture were unethical and/or when there was a change to managerialist policies as opposed to those based on care and learning. Such findings point to need the need to embed ethics within institutions. These examples illustrate the importance of the situational approach to ethics promoted by Haynes (1998) and Duignan, et al. (2003). They draw attention to the necessity for institutional ethical decision-making within schools (eg. Preston and Sampford, 2002). Institutional ethics focuses not only on the importance of ethical behaviour of individuals within institutions (leaders and others) but also the point that ethics needs to be ‘built into the ethos, policies and practices of an institution’ (Preston and Sampford, 2002, p.50). Preston and Sampford (2002) identify a number of strategies for ethics building in institutions and these include conducting an ethics audit; subjecting the values and functions of the institution to ongoing debate and discussion within the institution itself and within the community generally; developing and implementing a code of ethics; and ensuring that all members of the institution receive training and education. It seems that if organisations such as schools wish to move in the direction of embedding ethical practices into their culture, processes and structure, there is a strong place for leadership in facilitating this process.

In this study, while the majority of Heads saw themselves as having ultimate responsibility for the students and staff in their school, they varied in the extent to which they involved others in decision-making. Generally, these ‘others’ were part of the leadership team and/or were guidance officers or others external to the school such as life partners / friends. When a leadership team was used there appeared to be a greater collaborative approach to decision-making. It appears that sharing the dilemmas helped the leaders deal with more effectively with the ethical dilemmas. Following the work of Preston and Sampford (2002), we would maintain that ongoing engagement in dialogue with others in the organisation is an important step in the direction of building ethics into the institution and represents a more democratic and communal approach (Furman, 2004) to ethical decision making. This point leads to the final implication and that is ongoing support for leaders in this field.

How one prepares educational leaders and those aspiring to such positions to 'deal with' ethical dilemmas is highly problematic, given the value-laden nature of such dilemmas. As schools become more complex and the challenges facing school leaders more acute some attention to this area of ethics and ethical dilemmas is required. Dempster and Berry (2003) argue that employing bodies and universities have a responsibility to provide adequate professional development and support to principals regarding ethical decision making. They make this claim on the basis of the findings from their study that indicated that 68% of principals in their sample had not participated in any program that concentrated on ethical decision making. Interestingly, four-fifths of the sample indicated an interest in undertaking professional development that focused on this area. Such findings suggest that practitioners are very interested in learning more about this important field. For ourselves, we have endeavoured to address this need by disseminating our research at principals' conferences both interstate and overseas as well as introducing students enrolled in leadership and management subjects within the Masters degree at our institution to ethical issues in leadership and problem based learning cases and activities (developed from our research). We suspect other degree programs in leadership in Australia and elsewhere similarly provide opportunities for students to learn about ethics, ethical theory and ethical decision making. We concur with Begley (2005) that an important challenge for us as developers of school principals and educators is to assist them to become more reflective practitioners who can reflect upon their practice and context and therefore be in a better position to make defensible decisions.

The proliferation of writing on ethics and ethical leadership available in both practitioner based journals and more academic journals demonstrates how authors have begun to disseminate research and other writing on this important topic. Duignan and his colleagues (2003), for instance, promote authentic leadership, mentoring within organisations and building a culture of leadership. They stress the importance of a team approach and building a critical mass of leaders who can resolve ethical dilemmas in a courageous and competent fashion. This approach challenges both hierarchical and market models of governance, responding to the changing contexts in an empowering manner. Ultimately, the more empowered citizens and their leaders are to resolve dilemmas in an ethical manner the stronger democratic discourse will be in the future. The challenge is to develop and embed such an approach to leadership.

It seems that formal writing in the field and formal programmes of study have a part to play in professionally developing school principals in the field of ethics and ethical decision making. However, it is incumbent on principals themselves to be proactive by seeking opportunities to dialogue with and gain feedback from peers regarding ethical issues and decisions in the course of their every day work. Dempster and Berry (2003) make this point when they advocate the establishment of 'informal ethics learning cooperatives' (p.475) as a type of professional learning conversation for principals. Such an approach would be instigated and facilitated by principals themselves. A final suggestion offered in regard to support and development of Heads with respect to ethical dilemmas is to draw on the potential of problem-based learning (Bridges and Hallinger, 1991; Vernon and Blake, 1993). In brief, what this might entail, is the development of a

number of likely ethical dilemma scenarios and make these, with structured guided questioning along problem-based learning principles, available to Heads to access as part of their professional development and learning. Given the ease with which the participants in this study were able to identify ethical dilemmas, the generation of ‘real-life’ scenarios would not be difficult and would provide a potentially rich and powerful way for Heads to develop practical skills and response repertoires when such dilemmas arose.

CONCLUSION

Although this study was limited to a small sample size and involved a specific type of Head (i.e. Independent school Heads), we believe that it does contribute powerfully to the ongoing dialogue that is vital for raising awareness and understanding about ethical decision making for school leaders. Any type of learning opportunity, whether it is formal or informal, that assists school leaders to understand how to deal more effectively with ethical decisions, i.e. ‘the bread and butter’ of their work and professional lives, needs to be encouraged and construed as a step in the right direction. Assisting Heads to develop appropriate responses when ethical dilemmas arise as suggested here, provides some sound practical researched-based advice for professional development in the future which may go in part, to lessening the sleepless nights raised by one of our Heads.

REFERENCES

- Badaracco, J. (1992), “Business ethics: four spheres of executive responsibility”, *California Management Review*, Vol. 34, pp. 237-253.
- Begley, P. (2005), “The dilemmas of leadership: Perspectives on the moral literacy of principals from Ontario and Pennsylvania”, Paper given at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec, 11-15 April.
- Begley, P. and Johansson, O. (eds) (2003), *The Ethical Dimensions of School Leadership*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht.
- Byrne-Armstrong, H. (2000), “Ethics and the Teaching Profession”, Combined Dinner 2000-The Dilemma of Ethics, Wednesday 31st May 2000, Mercure Hotel Lawson, Sydney. [Available on-line: http://hsc.csu.edu.au/pta/pda/ByrneArm_TALK_ComDin2000.html (Accessed 5 December 2002)].
- Bridges, E. M., and Hallinger, P. (1991), “Problem-based learning in medical and managerial education”, Paper presented for the Cognition and School Leadership Conference of the National Center for Educational Leadership and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Nashville, TN, September.
- Campbell, E. (1997), “‘Administrators’ decisions and teachers’ ethical dilemmas: implications for moral agency’”, *Leading and Managing*, Vol. 3, pp. 245-257.

- Campbell, E. (2003), "Let right be done: trying to put ethical standards into practice", in Begley, P. T. and Johansson, O. (Eds) *The ethical dimensions of school leadership*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp. 107-125.
- Chittenden, A. (2004), "Ethical Leadership in the Context of Structural and Organisational Change in Pastoral Care", *Leading & Managing*, Vol.10 No. 1, pp. 77-102.
- Cooper, T.L. (1998), *The responsible administrator: an approach to ethics for the administrative role* (4th edition), Jossey Bass, San Francisco.
- Cranston, N., Ehrich, L. and Kimber, M. (2003a), "Ethical dilemmas faced by senior public sector managers: towards an exploratory model", A paper presented to Academics and Practitioners Day, Institute of Public Administration Australia Annual Conference, Griffith University, South Bank Campus, 26 November.
- Cranston, N., Ehrich, L. and Kimber, M. (2003b), "The "right" decision? Towards an understanding of ethical dilemmas for school leaders", *Westminster Studies in Education*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 135-147.
- Cranston, N., Ehrich, L. and Kimber, M. (2005), "Ethical dilemmas and middle and senior-level managers in the public service: managing the tensions", Unpublished paper.
- Day, C. (2000), "Beyond transformational leadership", *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 57 No. 7, pp. 56-59.
- Day, C., Harris, A. and Hadfield, M. (1999), "Leading Schools in Times of Change", Paper Presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, Lahti, Finland, 22-25 September.
- Dempster, N. and Berry, V. (2003), "Blindfolded in a Minefield: principals' ethical decision-making", *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 457-477.
- Dempster, N., Feakley, M. and Parry, L. (2001), "The ethical climate of public schooling under new public management", *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, Vol. 41, pp. 1-12.
- Duignan, P.A. (2002a), "Being an authentic leader in a contemporary world", *Prime Focus*, Vol. 31, pp. 2-4.
- Duignan, P. A. (2002b), "Formation of authentic educational leaders for Catholic schools", in Duncan, D. and Riley, D. (Eds) *Leadership in catholic education: hope for the future*, Harper Collins, Sydney.

- Duignan, P. and Collins, V. (2003), "Leadership challenges and ethical dilemmas in front-line organisations", in Bennett, N., Crawford, M. and Cartwright, M. (Eds) *Effective educational leadership*, Sage, London, pp.281-294.
- Duignan, P., Burford, C., Collins, V., Cresp, M., d' Arbon, T., Fagan, M., Gorman, M., Ikin, R., Kavanagh, A., Kelleher, M., Nagappan, S., and Walsh, M. (2003), *Contemporary Challenges and Implications for Leaders in Frontline Human Service Organisations*, Australian Catholic University.
- Edwards, G (2001), "Ethics in practice", *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration*, No. 102, pp. 11-17.
- Ehrich, L. (2000), "Principals as morally accountable leaders", *International Journal of Education Reform*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 120-127.
- Ehrich, L., Cranston, N. and Kimber, M. (2004), 'Public Sector Managers and Ethical Dilemmas', *Journal of Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management*, Vol. 10 No.1, pp. 25-37.
- Ehrich, L., Cranston, N. and Kimber, M. (2005), "Academic managers and ethics: A question of making the 'right' decision", Paper given at the Higher Education, Research and Development Society of Australasia Annual Conference, University of Sydney, 3-6 July.
- Eraut, M. (1993), "Teacher accountability: why is it central in teacher professional development?", in Kremer-Hayon, L., Vonk, H.C. and Fessler, R. (Eds) *Teacher professional development: a multiple perspective approach*, Swets and Zeitlinger, Amsterdam, pp. 23-43.
- Evers, C. (1992), "Ethics and ethical theory in educational leadership: a pragmatic and holistic approach", in Duignan, P. and Macpherson, R. (Eds), *Educative Leadership: a practical theory for new administrators and managers*, Falmer, London, pp. 21-43.
- Freakley, M. and Burgh, G. (2000), *Engaging with ethics: ethical inquiry for teachers*. Social Science Press, Australia.
- Fullan, M.G. and Hargreaves, A. (1991), *What's worth fighting for? Working together for your school*, Australian Council for Educational Administration, Hawthorn, Victoria.
- Furman, G. (2004), "The ethic of community", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 42 No. 2, pp. 215-235.
- Gorman, K. and Pauken, P. (2003), "The ethics of zero tolerance", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 24-35.

- Greenfield, W.D. (2004), "Moral leadership in schools", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 42 No. 2, pp. 174-196.
- Haynes, F. (1998), *The ethical school*, Rutledge, London.
- Hitt, W.D.(1990), *Ethics and leadership: Putting theory into practice*, Battelle Press, Columbus, Richland.
- Hodgkinson, C. (1991), *Educational leadership: the moral art*, Suny Press, Albany.
- Kidder, R. M. (1995), *How good people make tough choices: Resolving the dilemmas of ethical living*, William Morrow, New York.
- Kimber, M., Ehrich, L. and Cranston, N. (2003), "Theorising Ethical Dilemmas Faced By Senior Public Servants: An Excursion Into Australian Public Sector Ethics", Refereed paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association National Conference, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 29 September – 1 October 2003, Hobart.
- Marton, F. (1988) "Phenomenography" in R.R Sherman and R.B. Webb (Eds) *Qualitative research in education: focus and methods*, London, Falmer, pp.141-161.
- Minichiello, V., Aroni, R., Timewell, E. and Alexander, L. (1990), *In-depth interviewing: researching people*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.
- Patton, M. (1991), "Qualitative research on college students: Philosophical and methodological comparisons with the quantitative approach", *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 32 No. 5, pp. 389-396.
- Pauken, P., Kallio, B.R. and Stockard, R. (2001), "The ethics of public school academic accountability legislation: A multidimensional analysis", *Journal of School Leadership*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 162-181.
- Preston, N. and Sampford, C. with C. Connors (2002), *Encouraging ethics and challenging corruption*, Federation Press, Sydney.
- Roche, K. (1999), "Moral and ethical dilemmas in Catholic school settings", in Begley, P.T. (Ed) *Values and Educational Leadership*, Suny Press, Albany, NY, pp. 255-272.
- Roth, K. (2003), "Freedom of choice, community and deliberation", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 393-413.
- Sergiovanni, T. J. and Carver, F. D. (1980), *The new school executive: a theory of administration* (2nd edition), Harper and Row, New York.
- Siedman, I.E. (1991), *Interviewing as qualitative research*. Teachers College, New York, Columbia University.

- Starratt, R. (1996), *Transforming educational administration: meaning, community and excellence*, McGraw Hill, New York.
- Starratt, R. (2003), "Democratic leadership theory in late modernity: an oxymoron or ironic possibility?" in Begley, P. T. and Johansson, O. (Eds) *The ethical dimensions of school leadership*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp. 13-31.
- Stefkovich, J. and Poliner Shapiro, J. (2003), "Deconstructing communities: educational leaders and their ethical decision-making" in Begley, P. T. and Johansson, O. (Eds) *The ethical dimensions of school leadership*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp. 89-106.
- Strike, K. (2003), "Community, coherence, and inclusiveness" in Begley, P. T. and Johansson, O. (Eds) *The ethical dimensions of school leadership*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, pp. 69-87.
- Walker, K. and Shakotko, D. (1999), "The Canadian superintendency: value-based challenges and pressure" in P. T. Begley (Ed.) *Values and educational leadership*, State University of New York, Albany. NY, pp. 289-313.
- Wildy, H., Loudon, W., Dempster, N. and Freakley, M. (2001), "The moral dimension of school principals' work: standards, cases and social capital", *Unicorn* on-line refereed articles.
- Taylor, S.J. and Bogdan, R. (1984), *Introduction to qualitative research methods: the search for meanings*, 2nd edition, New York, John Wiley & Sons.
- Uhr, J. (2002), "Competing Models of Integrity", *Res Publica*, 11(2).
- Vernon, D. T. and Blake, R. L. (1993), "Does problem-based learning work? A meta-analysis of evaluative research", *Academic Medicine*, Vol. 68 No.7, pp. 550-563.
- Yin, R.K. (1989), *Case study research: Design and methods*, Newbury Park, Sage Publications.

Table 1
Demographic Information about participants

Participants	Gender	Current Role	Current School	Metropolitan / Non-metropolitan	Religious Affiliation
1	M	Head	P-12	Non-metropolitan	Anglican
2	M	Head	8-12 Boys' school	metropolitan	Catholic
3	M	Head	High School	Metropolitan	Catholic
4	F	Head	P-12 Girls' school	Metropolitan	Anglican
5	M	Head	4-12 Boys' school	Metropolitan	Christian based
6	M	Head of Junior School	P-12 Co-ed	metropolitan	Anglican
7	M	Principal (M)	P-12 Co-ed	Metropolitan	Anglican
	F	Deputy principal (F)			

Table 2
Ethical dilemmas reported by School Heads

Head	Dilemma(s)	Type of dilemma
1	<p>A senior staff member, who is also a good friend of the head, fails to reach satisfactory professional standards for his position despite receiving considerable support to do so. Should he be forced to leave the school?</p> <p>A senior student, whose mother died recently, is suffering psychologically. She commits an act warranting expulsion. Should the student be expelled?</p> <p>A mother informs the principal that her son has told her that students are bringing drugs to school. Should the child be expelled because he was directly involved also?</p>	<p>Staff underperformance – professional development or remove; Individual versus community; Professional ethics versus personal values/loyalty; Justice versus mercy; Potential conflict of interest.</p> <p>Student behaviour and welfare; Professional ethics versus personal values; Justice versus mercy; Individual versus community.</p> <p>Student behaviour; Individual versus community; Justice versus mercy; Conflict between ethical principles.</p>
2	<p>Despite intervention according to the required guidelines, a senior staff member continued to under-perform. The staff member was given the choice of resigning from the position of authority or being removed from it. As the head is new and this staff member has been at the school for 15 years, the staff member's family and work colleagues feel that the head is biased. Given these views, when the staff member applies for a promotional position, the head questions whether he should remove himself from the decision-making process.</p>	<p>Staff underperformance; Individual versus community (and determining which community); Conflict among the dimensions of ethical conduct; Potential conflict of interest.</p>
3	<p>The head experiences continual interference in educational matters by a powerful external person (with strong positional power links to the school). He also discovers that this person has inappropriately used school funds for private gain. Unable to effect any real change because of the person's position, should the head continue to try to change a strong unethical culture or leave the school?</p>	<p>Supervisor misbehaviour and change; Accountability/responsibility to the community; Blurred or competing accountability: immediate school community versus wider public interest; Affecting change.</p>
4	<p>A student refuses to go home as she is no longer able to cope with her father's abuse. In light of no support from external agencies, the head is faced with taking responsibility for the girl's welfare without the father's approval.</p> <p>Despite professional development, a senior staff member,</p>	<p>Student welfare; Professional ethics and personal values versus the law; Conflict among the dimensions of ethical conduct..</p> <p>Staff underperformance; Individual versus</p>

	who is committed to teaching, and to the school and its values, remains unable to act confidently in a higher-level position to the satisfaction of parents. The school council advises the head to sack the staff member.	community; Accountability to school community.
5	Following appointment at a school espousing Christian values, the head believes that these are not evident in the practices and processes of the school. A particular incident with a student highlights this situation – there is considerable resistance to changing the school culture to be more in line with the espoused values.	Change; Sub-groups of long serving staff versus wider school community; Values conflicts between those espoused and practised.
6	The new head of a K-12 school built upon an ethos of care for and development of the whole person employs a marketing manager, who shares his managerialist agenda. Staff in the primary school object to this agenda as they see it places the children at risk. The primary head is directed to nominate several children for a proposed media event. Unable to convince the new head or the marketing manager that their plan is inconsistent with the school culture, the primary head has to decide if he follows his supervisor's directive or whether he should take alternative action?.	Change – managerialist versus care and development; Short-term versus long-term; Relations between teachers.
7	In response to an assignment on a controversial issue, a student mischievously brings an illegal substance to school. The leadership team needs to decide if the student's action (which contravenes school policy) warrants expulsion	Student behaviour and welfare; Individual versus community; Justice versus mercy; Clash between the dimensions of ethical conduct.