

# Towards an understanding of Ethical Dilemmas Faced by School Leaders

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## ETHICS AND EDUCATION

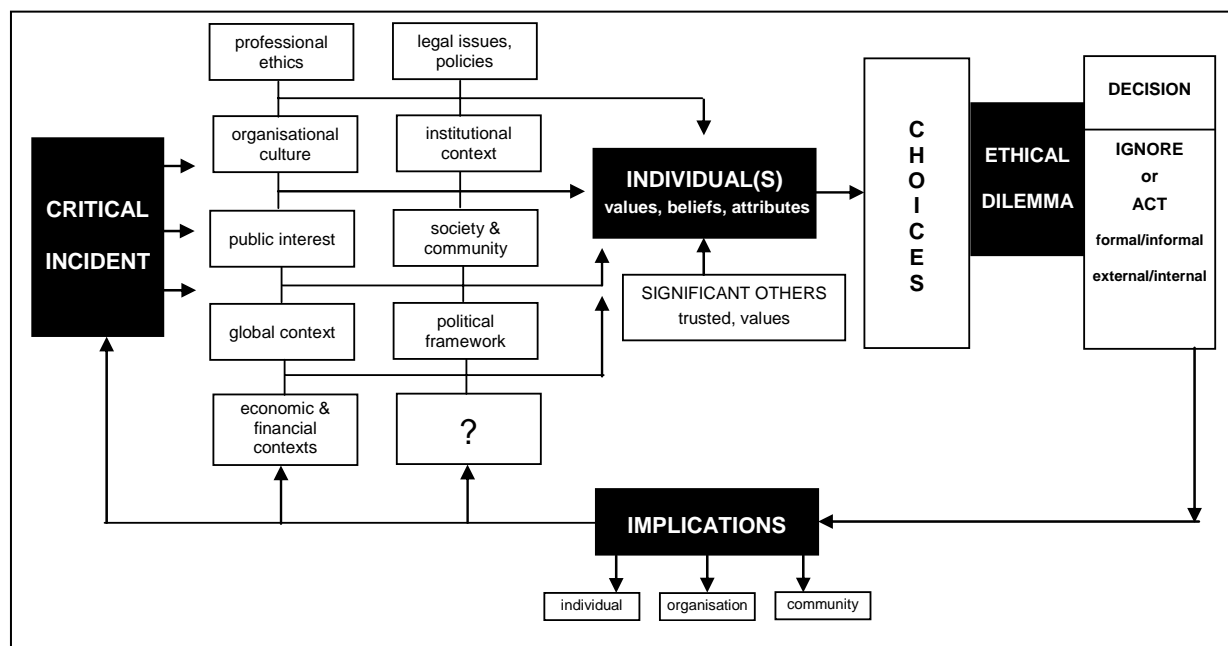
The field of ethics has attracted increasing interest in educational contexts in recent times (see for example, Burke, 1997; Campbell, 1997; Dempster, 2000; Dempster, Freakley & Parry, 2001). One reason for this heightened interest is the more complex operational milieu (Grace in Campbell 1997, p.223) in which leaders are now working. The advent of school based management, for example, has generated new forms of, and competing, accountabilities (Burke, 1997; Ehrich, 2000). Several writers (Burke, 1997; Dempster, 2000; Dempster, Freakley & Parry, 2001) argue that the values underpinning managerialism and school based management are opposed to the traditional understanding of education as a public good. These writers maintain that the focus on management as a technology of control may be inconsistent with the professional and personal values of school leaders and may contradict important ethics of care and justice.

Not surprisingly, the meaning of ethics is subject to much contestation. While often defined in terms of what it is not, referring to matters such as misconduct, corruption, fraud and other types of illegal behaviour, it has also drawn on notions of integrity, honesty, Personal values and professional codes. Importantly, there does appear to be general agreement that ethics is about relationships - whether relationships with people, relationships with animals and/or relationships with the environment. Further, it can encompass what people see as good and bad or right and wrong. Freakley and Burgh (2000) put it simply when they say that ethics, "is about what we ought to do" (p.97). Evers (1992) observes that there "can be little doubt that most people expect those in leadership positions to do right rather than wrong, to promote good rather than evil and to act justly rather than unjustly" (p. 22).

These perspectives imply that an ethical judgement often may need to be made about a given problem or situation. Viewed in this light, there is the implication that educational leaders may often be faced with choices that require them to make decisions that have no clear cut resolution and are likely to be highly problematic. That is, they are likely to find themselves confronted with ethical dilemmas. Simply put then, an ethical dilemma, arises from a situation that necessitates a choice among competing sets of principles, values, beliefs, perspectives.

## A MODEL FOR CONCEPTUALISING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Our recent work with senior public sector managers (Cranston, Ehrich & Kimber, 2002) and now with educational leaders (Cranston, Ehrich & Kimber, in press) has given rise to the development of a model that endeavours to assist our understanding of the forces impacting upon, and the processes characterising, the dynamics involved in both the emergence and resolution of ethical dilemmas.



The model represents diagrammatically the context, forces, and decision-making process that individuals facing ethical dilemmas are likely to experience and attempts also to identify the relationships among individuals, institutions and the community in evidence in the ethical dilemma. It acknowledges that decisions can have implications for, and effects on, the individual, the organisation and the community either directly or indirectly.

Clearly, trying to simplify a complex milieu is difficult and re-enforces the essentially dynamic nature of the model. Thus, while we describe the various components of the model separately, we are acutely aware of the interdependence of the components and often-times non-linear nature of the dilemma we are attempting to capture.

The model consists of five main parts. The first is the critical incident or problem that is the trigger for the ethical dilemma, i.e. that is what 'sets off' the dilemma. The second is a set of forces, each of which has the capacity to illuminate the critical incident from its own particular bias or basis. Clearly there may be competing tensions across these and not all may be in evidence or evident to the same degree in every ethical dilemma. Illustrated here are nine competing forces - professional ethics; legal issues, policies; organisational culture; institutional context; public interest; society and community; global context; political framework; economic and financial contexts; and ? The untitled force (?) was included to signify that a significant force not identified at this time could emerge in the future.

Detailed theoretical explanations of each of these forces and the components of the model are provided elsewhere (Cranston, Ehrich & Kimber, 2003). However, to illustrate application of the model in practice, we now provide a scenario and a commentary based on that scenario, using the model as a framework for analysis.

### **SCENARIO**

Heavenly State Secondary College has a strict policy on drugs for students - immediate exclusion for any such offence. The teachers and parents are very supportive of the policy and two students have been excluded this year. Daniel, a year twelve student, is caught at the school formal two weeks before his final examinations with a small amount of marijuana. Daniel has not always been an easy student for the school although in the past year he has worked hard, not been in trouble with teachers and seems likely to achieve his ambition of achieving well enough to attend a TAFE and become an electrician. Harriet, the principal, knows that he works 15 hours part-time to support his ill mother and younger brother who also attends the school. Exclusion means he might miss his final exams and his place at TAFE and potentially lose his part-time job if his employer finds out.

### **COMMENTARY**

The following commentary makes three important assumptions. These are that:

(1) The School Principal is ultimately the final decision-maker in such cases in this school - this is likely to be consistent with current practice in most schools where the Principal is the accountable officer for decisions taken in the school. Of course, in practice, it may be that other members of the school administration team, potentially the school council or governing board and/or significant others might be involved to some degree through consultation, sharing of information and so on.

(2) The School Principal, in this position of decision-maker, actually finds this particular situation problematic; that is, that there is the potential for an ethical dilemma to arise in such circumstances. The following commentary assumes that there will be an ethical dilemma of some order for the Principal.

(3) There is a range of options in terms decisions that the Principal might take.

The critical incident in this scenario centres around the student, Daniel, being caught with a small amount of marijuana at the College formal. Subsequent events are triggered when this is reported to the Principal, Harriet.

The milieu of forces at play for the Principal with respect to this critical incident is discussed below. It is important to note that the forces may be evident to varying degrees and intensity at different times and there are likely to be tensions across them. As such, the following comments are indicative only of the various impacts on the individual, Harriet, the Principal, as she responds to the reporting of the drug incident with Daniel.

- *professional ethics* - educators (Principals, teachers) are expected to operate according to certain established codes of behaviour and/or within particular ethical frameworks (these are often formally documented); other less formal aspects here might include the desire to do the best for all students (i.e. moral accountability) and general expectations placed on teachers by the community to act in certain ways;
- *legal issues, policies* - given the particular misdemeanour of interest here, viz. possession of a prohibited substance, there may be certain legal obligations that the Principal must respond to, eg. reporting such incidents to the police; duty of care, from a legal perspective, is also likely to impact here as the safety and welfare of students (both Daniel as an individual and the school student population more generally) now feature as key responsibilities of educators with failure to do so adequately likely to lead to potentially litigious situations;
- *organisational culture* - the school culture (eg. is it supportive, inclusive or otherwise) will play an important role in the Principal and the school response; the actions by the school in similar incidents previously will also contribute to overall impact of the culture on the decision response;
- *public interest* - there may be a broad public interest in this incident involving 'tough on drugs' community expectations related to a desire to reduce drug-taking among young people; alternatively, or possibly concurrently, there may be strong community support for the socio-economically disadvantaged; the notion of education as a public good and hence, the implication that drugs should be strongly discouraged by punitive action may also be evident here;
- *society and community* - the school community, for example through the school council or parent and friends' association may play a key role in this incident eg. parents may have collaboratively developed, with school staff, a school drug policy requiring a particular response in this case;
- *institutional context* - most schools will have established behaviour management policies and practices which one might expect would address issues of drugs in school, expectations on students regarding these and penalties for failing to conform to these expectations;
- *global context* - wider societal developments and influences (eg. post modern changes that have seen a collapse in some measure of the influence of church and the State) may present challenges to schools expectations in such incidents eg. as drug taking among some young people persists as a challenge for schools as well as the broader society, resulting in a clash of social norms and behaviours across the various individuals and groups involved, such as students, parents, teachers;
- *political framework* - the capacity for schools to exercise any discretion in such incidents may be seriously limited by external systemic constraints, such as binding responses imposed by education departments or systems in such incidents - these constraints may well reflect a particular (and potentially powerful) ideological stance of the government of the day;
- *economic and financial contexts* - the financial situation of the student may have a key influence here, as might less tangible influences such as a negative impact on the school reputation as a result of a particular decision resulting in parental decisions about enrolments in the future; at a broader level, it might be argued that broader economic policies, such as economic rationalist trends, may have led to the situation whereby Daniel and his family are financially challenged, particularly in terms of Daniel's longer term educational goals; and
- *The question mark (?)* acknowledges the point that a critical force not identified at this time could be evident in a different dilemma.

All of these forces will interact to varying degrees on the individual as the principal responds to the incident. It is more than likely that Harriet's personal attributes, own ethical position and her values and beliefs will play a major role in determining the type of decision she will make. As a result, a number of choices emerge. It is worth noting that the model can 'accommodate' cases where a group may make the decision (hence, "individual[s]") or where an individual may consult a 'significant other' person (eg. trusted colleague, friend or partner in arriving at a decision). The decision taken creates, and is part of, the ethical dilemma for the Principal as she struggles to

rationalise a clear 'acceptable' response, to the student, school (staff), school community and parents, wider community and to herself.

The actions taken subsequently or as part of the decision itself by the Principal may be either formal or informal, external or internal. Ignoring the situation, an action in itself, is most likely not an option in this case as there will be expectations of some response by the Principal, for example, from those catching the student with the drugs. Hence, actions might include some or all of the following (note these are examples only and the possibilities are many, complex and potentially interrelated).

Formal action might mean following the processes and procedures (i.e. school policy; legislative requirements) developed in the school, but possibly also required by the law, regarding the handling of students who are caught with drugs leading to suspension or exclusion from school. An informal action, which is probably unlikely in this case, may be to warn the student verbally with no formal recording of the incident in any way.

External action might incorporate actions taken outside the school such as if the Principal contacts the police and the police then take action. An internal action might include some 'internal school' penalty of a lesser degree than say a suspension, such as a detention. There are many possibilities here.

**As a result of the decision, there are certain implications for the:**

- *individual* - the reputation of the school both within and external to the school may be affected impacting on perceptions on the Principal's reputation as leader of the school; the future career prospects of the Principal may also be affected, as might the general health and well-being of the Principal if stressful consequences result; of course there are also the effects on Daniel, the student - these could be major as his future study prospects and financial position may well be altered as a result of particular decisions taken.;
- *organisation* - as above, the reputation of the school may be affected in the wider community; in addition, there may be considerable repercussions internally for the school among the teaching staff and parent body; finally, as a result of this 'case', there may be a review of the school's current drug policy;
- *community* - as above; in addition, the broader community perception of school generally and their roles and responsibilities in the social development and care of young people may be affected.

Clearly the implications across the individual, the organisation and the community are not independent with considerable overlap and consequential effects occurring. The cyclical nature of the model re-enforces that this ethical dilemma, like others, does not take place in isolation and that the particular decision taken in this case will most likely have an impact on similar subsequent incidents, ie. a precedent may be established.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The scenario discussed here is characterised by potentially conflicting values and/or accountabilities - between school policies and personal values, between the best interests of the student and school policies, between the values and beliefs of different sections of the school community and the law. Moreover, it is likely that there will be compromises as some values will be embraced, while others will be silenced in pursuit of a resolution. In other words, the principal is caught in a highly complex dynamic milieu of forces. In fact, her own personal ethical position may be seriously questioned.

Trying to develop a model to better conceptualise ethical dilemmas faced by educational leaders has reinforced to us the complexity of the field of ethics and underscored the acute challenges of resolving ethical problems in such complex organisations as schools. There is no doubt that if institutions are going to move in the direction of embedding ethical practices into their culture, processes and structure, there is a strong role for leadership in facilitating this process. In this regard, Sharpe (1995) notes that "leadership is about doing what is right and good, not what is expedient ...All of us have a set of principles or values which guide our lives. We need to activate these constantly in our leadership role" (p. 12). Better understanding of the dynamic complexities of ethical dilemmas, as we have attempted to do in the model presented here, should contribute in some way to unravelling how leaders might respond to the ethical challenges increasingly evident in much of their decision-making.

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