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**‘RIGHT’ VERSUS ‘WRONG’ AND ‘RIGHT’ VERSUS ‘RIGHT’:  
UNDERSTANDING ETHICAL DILEMMAS FACED BY  
EDUCATIONAL LEADERS**

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## **‘RIGHT’ VERSUS ‘WRONG’ AND ‘RIGHT’ VERSUS ‘RIGHT’: UNDERSTANDING ETHICAL DILEMMAS FACED BY EDUCATIONAL LEADERS**

### **Abstract**

In recent years the conduct of leaders, in an ethical sense, in many professions and types of organisations has captured public attention. In particular, educational leaders are often faced with ethical dilemmas in the daily course of their work as they are required to make complex decisions in the best interests of their students and their schools. This is understandable given the complex challenges and competing forces that beset leadership which is clearly a values-based activity (Walker & Shakotko, 1999). There is little doubt that, given the rapidly changing social, economic and political context in which schools now operate, the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership continue as important topics for exploration.

This paper reports the findings of recent research into the ethical dilemmas faced by a number of heads of non-government schools in Australia. These dilemmas centred broadly around making critical decisions, usually about staff and students, where a number of competing forces impacted on the decision itself, with the potential to lead to significant implications for individuals as well as for the school more generally. The paper uses a model developed by the authors, as an analytical framework to assist in better understanding the dynamics of the ethical dilemmas, and the forces at play as the school heads endeavoured to resolve the dilemmas. The model, when applied to the ethical dilemmas identified by the school leaders, provides a useful way for explicating the processes involved in identifying and resolving such dilemmas. The paper suggests that school leaders in all types of settings should be able to use the model as a reflective tool to understand more fully the forces impacting upon, and the dimensions characterising, the ethical decision-making process.

### **Context and introduction**

A focus on the ethical dimensions of leadership has become a key theme in the educational leadership and management literature. This paper makes an important further contribution to this literature by reporting research into the ethical dilemmas faced by a number of school leaders in Australia.

The research involved in-depth interviews with the heads or principals of five non-government schools, all with religious affiliations. The interview data were analysed using a model developed by the authors that provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of, and forces at play as leaders endeavour to resolve ethical dilemmas. The model has been successfully applied in non-education sectors, such as the public service (see Cranston, Ehrich & Kimber, 2003a) to illuminate the decision-making process. The research reported here concludes that the model is equally useful in dealing with ethical dilemmas arising for leaders in the school sector. As such, it provides not only a useful

framework for understanding the dynamics involved in ethical decision-making processes, it also offers a tool that might assist aspiring leaders to contemplate ethical decision-making dimensions inherent in school leadership. The next part of the discussion considers the heightened interest in ethics within the education literature, together with mention of several theoretical approaches to ethics. The interview data from the five heads is then reported, using the model as a framework for analysis. Finally, the implications of this research and possible future directions are discussed briefly.

### **Background - towards an understanding of ethics for leaders**

It is not surprising that the meaning of ethics is contested. Further, application of the notions and principles underpinning the ‘discipline’ of ethics is far from a scientific one. For example, while some authors define ethics in terms of what it is not, referring to matters such as misconduct, corruption, fraud and other types of illegal behaviour, others refer to notions of integrity, honesty, and professional codes. Despite this variability, there appears to be general agreement that ethics is about relationships. Put simply, ethics ‘is about what we ought to do’ (Plato in Freakley & Burgh 2000, p.97). It requires a judgement be made about a given problem or situation (eg. Haynes, 1998). Ethics, then, could be considered to be about how we ought to live. If ethics is viewed in this light it indicates that people are faced with choices that require them to make decisions that enable them to lead an ethical life within the context of their relationships with others. This suggests that people can be placed in ethical dilemmas. That is, an ethical dilemma arises from a situation that necessitates a choice be made among competing sets of principles, values, beliefs or ideals.

Resolving dilemmas appears to be an everyday occurrence for leaders in all types of organisations. Generally, however, it is likely that they make decisions with little or no knowledge of the theoretical approaches to ethics. Although theoretical approaches cannot be applied entirely to solving dilemmas due to the abstract nature of theory and the complexity of practice, they can help leaders organise their beliefs and perspectives in a more coherent and systematic way (Freakley & Burgh 2000, pp.95-6). It is not possible to provide an extended discussion of theoretical approaches to ethics here. However, it is instructive to note that five approaches are of interest to this research. These are consequentialism, non-consequentialism, virtue ethics, an amalgam of these three approaches and institutional ethics. These are discussed briefly below.

Consequentialism can be defined as ‘any position in ethics which claims that the rightness or wrongness of actions depends on their consequences’ (Hinman <http://ethics.acusd.edu/Glossary.html>, p.1). A consequentialist adopts the perspective that actions can only be justified with reference to the end or outcomes they achieve (Freakley & Burgh, 2000, p.120). By contrast, those who adopt a non-consequentialist approach to ethics live ‘by an uncompromising, moral legalism which requires adherence to duty, principle or absolute truth, etc as more important than consequences ... in determining what is good, just, right and fair.’ (Burke, 1997, p.15). Non-consequentialists make judgements based on duty, rights, laws, motive, intuition, or reason. The golden rule of doing unto others what we would want them to do to us, illustrates non-consequentialism.

Critics of consequentialism and non-consequentialism note that an ‘ethic of care’ is missing from both approaches. Those who advocate virtue ethics assume that morality is best understood in terms of peoples’ inner traits (Freakley & Burgh, 2000, p.124). Virtue ethicists ‘argue in favour of a connection between character and reasoning for without good character I may reason about what is right but still choose not to do so’ (Freakley & Burgh, 2000, p.125). From this perspective, the virtue approach is critical to professional ethics as ‘... “a just society depends more upon the moral trustworthiness of its citizens and it[s] leaders than upon structures designed to transform ignoble actions in socially useful results”’ (Hart in Preston & Samford, 2002, pp.25-6). Virtue ethics is important not only to individuals but also to institutions since it is people who create and work within them. For those who promote institutional ethics the focus needs to be on individuals within institutions. They require these individuals to justify their institutions to the community in terms of how the institution serves the public interest (Preston & Samford, 2002). Institutional ethicists are concerned with building ethics ‘into the operations and decision making of the institution’ (Preston & Samford, 2002, p.50), making it part of rather than peripheral to decision-making. For this reason, institutional ethicists require the values and functions of an institution be determined through ongoing discussion because these values are multiple, complex, competing and changeable.

Haynes (1998) suggests a further theoretical approach to assist school leaders in making ethical decisions. She suggests combining ‘care’ – i.e. educationalists often place a duty of care towards students as their primary concern and their actions are taken in response to a specific situation – with due regard to the ‘consequences’ (consequentialism) for the individual and the school community and to ‘consistency’ (reason or rule-based ethics) so that decisions can be justified in accordance with the leader’s underlying personal and professional values or modified and justified to take account of making decisions in a more ethical manner. Haynes stresses the context and relationships in which school principals operate. This approach links with Starratt’s (1996, 2003) three ethics of care, justice and critique.

Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of ethics can be useful in gaining insights into ethical dilemmas and their complexities. It is important to note that in practice, however, ethical dilemmas faced by educational leaders (and those in other operational contexts) are likely to be highly complex and not simply framed by one particular theoretical approach or the other. Rather, it is more probable that some or all of these approaches may be at play to some degree or other.

### **Ethics, ethical dilemmas and educational leadership**

The moral and ethical dimensions of leadership have received increased emphasis in recent literature (eg. Campbell, 1997, 2003; Cooper, 1998; Duignan, 2002a; Gorman & Pauken 2003; Haynes, 1998; Roth, 2003; Starratt, 1996, 2003; Stefkovich & Poliner Shapiro, 2003; Strike, 2003). This attention has been, in part, driven by the belief that ‘values, morals and ethics are the very stuff of leadership and administrative life’ (Hodgkinson, 1991, p.11). As Duignan (2002a, p.4) puts it, if leaders ‘are to act on what they know to be right, they need ethical and moral frameworks to guide their practice’.

Furthermore, communities expect those who hold leadership positions to act justly, rightly and promote good rather than evil (Evers, 1992). Leaders are required to demonstrate both moral and professional accountability to those they serve (Eraut, 1993). Moral accountability is concerned with wanting the best for learners – whether they be students or staff. Professional accountability is concerned with upholding the standards of ethics of one's profession (Eraut, 1993; Edwards, 2001). Both accountabilities reinforce the notion that fundamentally educational leadership has a moral purpose (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). Finally, educational leaders are expected to view a duty of care towards their students individually and as a group as central to their work, and seek to ensure that all students are provided with the means to gain a quality education that will enable them to reach their full potential (eg. Haynes, 1998).

The more complex and changing operational milieu (Grace in Campbell 1997, p.223) in which leaders are now working is also contributing to the heightened interest in ethics within education in recent years. The advent of school-based management has generated new forms of, and competing, accountabilities (Burke, 1997; Ehrich, 2000). Indeed, the devolution and decentralisation associated with school-based management can expand not only the number of ethical dilemmas that a leader may experience but also increase the number of people exposed to such dilemmas. 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 arising from economic rationalist/managerialist thinking is inconsistent with the professional and personal values of school leaders and can contradict important ethics of care and justice. When contractual accountability, that is accountability to the government or system, is strong and competes against moral and professional accountabilities, there is heightened potential for ethical dilemmas to emerge. In this situation, a skilful administrator needs to optimise his or her most valued beliefs, responsibilities and obligations in ways that minimise adverse consequences such as the downplaying of equity or the promotion of the external goods of school leadership like power and status (Preston & Samford, 2002).

Various 'cases' which could be described as ethical dilemmas have been reported in the literature. For example, a case not uncommon in schools focuses around deciding whether to provide further professional development to an under-performing staff member or to dismiss him/her (Day, Harris & Hadfield, 1999; Day, 2000), especially when that staff member is a friend and/or actively promotes the values of the school. Another evident in the literature concerns the tensions in relationships among teachers such as those that might arise when one staff member is promoted over another (Day et al, 1999).

Other examples referred to in the literature include dilemmas emanating from blurred or competing accountabilities (Ehrich, 2000; Preston & Samford, 2002), such as those between students and staff for ensuring equity towards students on the one hand and the education department for meeting financial and performance targets on the other hand.

Yet others have been noted where there is a clash between the dimensions of ethical conduct (Edwards, 2001) such as conflict between justice and mercy.

### **A model for understanding ethical dilemmas**

The model for considering and analysing the ethical dilemmas reported here, is discussed in detail elsewhere (Cranston, Ehrich, Kimber, 2003b). The model (refer figure) represents diagrammatically the context, forces, and decision-making process that individuals facing ethical dilemmas are like to experience. It also highlights the implications and effects that decisions can have on the individual decision-maker, the organisation and the community. While the five components of the model can be considered separately, it is clear that there is an interdependence among them. It should also be noted that ethical dilemmas do not necessarily follow a linear pattern; rather, the actual decision-making process is likely to be one that revisits, revises and reacts to various forces and components in the model.

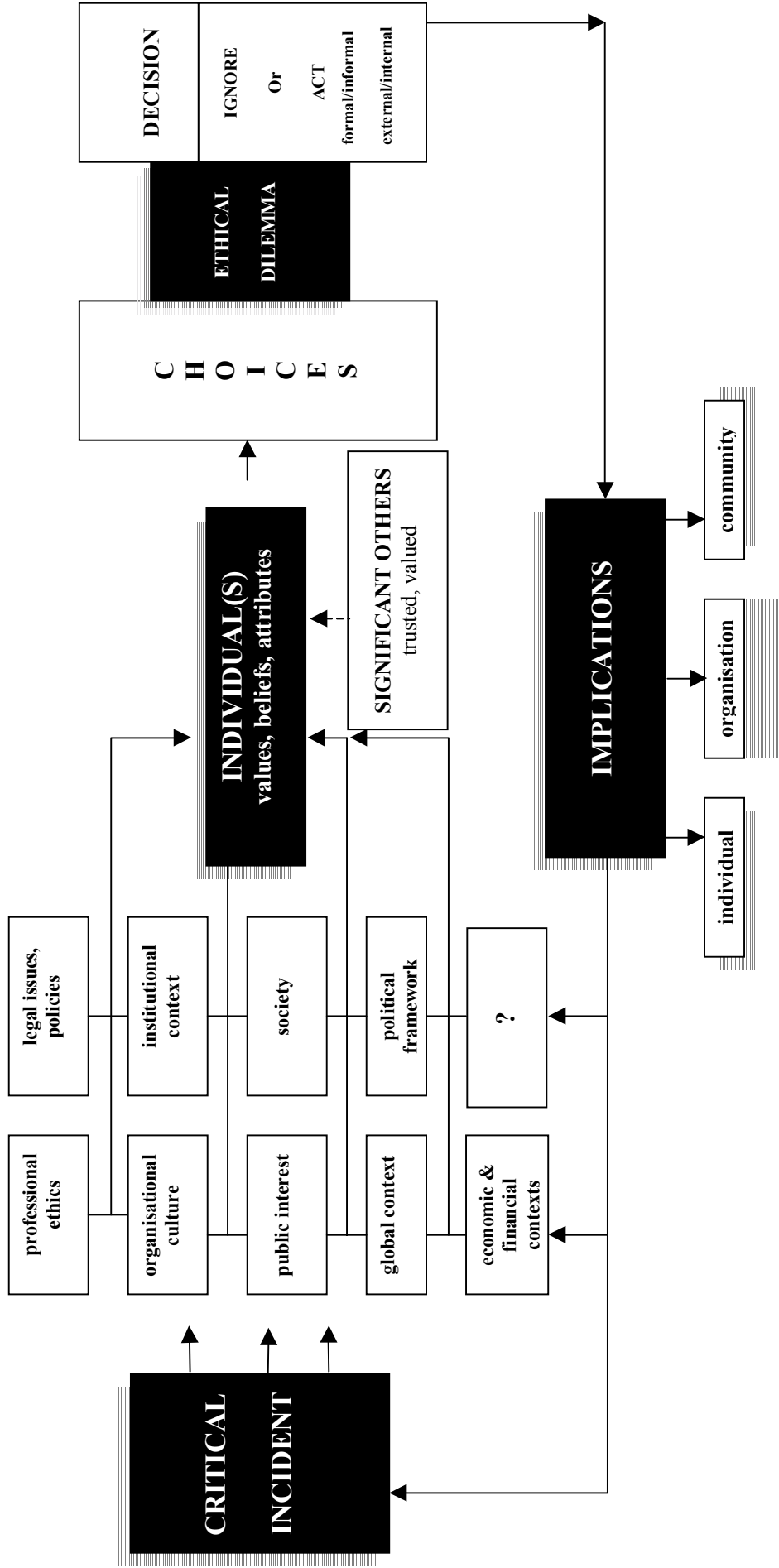
The first part of the model is the *critical incident* that triggers the ethical dilemma. Second is a set of *forces*, each having the capacity to illuminate the critical incident from its own particular basis. Clearly there may be competing tensions across these. There are nine competing forces – *political framework; professional ethics; legal context; the public interest; society and community; global context; economic and financial contexts; institutional context; organisational culture; and ?*. The untitled force (?) signifies that a significant force not identified at this time could emerge in the future.

The third part of the model is the *individual(s)* faced with the challenge of resolving the ethical dilemma. The individual(s) brings to the issue his/her own values, beliefs and personal attributes that have been shaped over time by a variety of sources such as religion, socialisation and conscience (Edwards, 2001; Singer, 1993). This might include consultation with significant and trusted other(s) like a partner or colleague. The fourth component of the model is the *choice* that is made among the competing alternatives. It is in considering the alternatives that *the ethical dilemma* emerges. The decision might lead to either *ignoring* the dilemma or *acting* in one or more ways to resolve it. Those actions can be *formal* or *informal* or *external* or *internal*. Finally, the action (or non-action) is likely to create particular types of *implications* for the *individual(s)* concerned, for the employing *organisation* and for the *community* as a whole. These implications could continue generating new critical incidents, dilemmas and/or contribute to new ways of thinking about the forces involved in the dilemma.

### **Methodology for the current research**

The data gathering for this research comprised semi-structured in-depth interviews and some document analysis. The sensitive nature of the research required adherence to strict ethical guidelines. A notice, providing information about the research project and inviting school leaders to participate, was placed in a newsletter circulated by the relevant professional body. In response, five heads contacted the research team directly and agreed to participate. Participation was entirely voluntary and interviewees were assured

Figure



that their anonymity would be respected – any reporting would not contain their name or that of their school or college.

The interviews were designed around a set of key issues in an aide memoir made available to participants prior to the interview process (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1990, p.92). The main focus of these interviews was an invitation to the heads to talk at length about a particular ethical dilemma (or dilemmas) they had faced either in their current or previous schools. All interviewees had no difficulty in identifying such a case to discuss.

All five interviewees were heads of non-state schools with religious affiliations. Four were male, one female. One school was co-educational, another one was all-girl while the remaining three were all-boys. All participants had been the heads and/or deputy heads of more than one school, the majority having served first in state and then non-state sectors. Some had held school leadership positions in several states.

Four of the five participants allowed the interviews to be tape-recorded. The fifth declined due to the sensitive nature of the dilemma discussed. Notes were also taken by the two researchers during the interviews. Transcripts were returned to participants for checking and endorsement to ensure they accurately reflected their perspectives. (In the case where the interview was not taped, a summary was provided for endorsement.) Interview transcripts were then analysed using the model as described above as a framework. That is, the analysis endeavoured to identify the major forces (as per the model) evident in the particular dilemma of interest, along with the key dynamics surrounding the dilemma and its resolution.

## **Discussion of findings**

### ○ *Widespread nature of ethical dilemmas*

As an introductory comment, it is interesting to note that all interviewees were very willing and frank in their discussions of the ethical dilemmas they faced in their positions. One observed that ethical dilemmas were “*really the bread and butter of what school principals do*”. He went on to highlight the importance of such situations in his work by 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 that you are making are not just affecting individual staff and students, they’re creating a culture.*

Another believed that they were common-place, noting “*the magnitude of ethical dilemmas in a place like this (school) is very broad*”. These observations stressed the significance of ethical dilemmas in the work of school heads. They also indicated that heads appreciated how they managed such dilemmas had important implications for the school. This notion of implications is a feature of the model.



Interestingly, many of the ethical dilemmas raised by the heads focused on similar issues, such as dealing with difficult staff and students. As a final introductory comment, it could be argued that among the raft of ethical dilemmas raised by the heads, it might well be that they represented management or leadership challenges with only minimal ethical dimensions to them. However, very clearly, those summarised in the table represented ethical dilemmas for the particular head concerned. That is, while the school heads saw them as ethical dilemmas, as presented, some situations seemed to stop short of what might be seen as major values struggles for the decision-maker, viz. the head. These and other related matters are discussed in more detail later.

The following table endeavours to summarise, with the aid of the model, some of the key aspects of the ethical dilemmas referred to above. More than one significant dilemma was identified by some heads. The table summarises the critical incident of the dilemma (ie. what brought it to a head), the type/focus of dilemma and highlights some of the key forces at play as the head endeavours to resolve the dilemma.

In considering some of the ethical dilemmas identified by the school heads, it is interesting from a theoretical point of view, that the earlier noted ideas of Haynes (1998) seem particularly relevant, in so far as she highlights 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. Heads stressed the need for ethical organisational cultures and significant emphasis was placed on personal and professional values, particularly where all these factors combined. The extent to which these factors were aligned appeared to often determine how the heads in this research approached and resolved a dilemma. Where the organisational culture and institutional context were strongly ethical these factors seemed to ease the head’s personal stress and trauma involved in making such decisions

○ *Applying the model*

In the majority of cases of ethical dilemmas identified by the heads, most of the factors identified in the model were present. In some situations, some of these factors conflicted with each other while in others they complemented each other. It was evident that heads found it harder to introduce change into an organisational culture and institutional context that was characterised by strongly unethical practices, for example, for head 3, the challenge for resolution was exacerbated by the powerful position held by the individual perpetrating what was seen as unethical behaviour – potentially illegal behaviour. The head was faced with confronting, in what could be a very public way, the most senior individual in the institution with serious allegations. Alternatively, he could ignore the unethical practices and continue as head, or leave and seek a position elsewhere. That is, his very position in the school was at stake in his approach to, and resolution of, the ethical dilemmas he faced. This particular ethical dilemma highlights consideration of the values and beliefs, espoused, practised and promulgated in particular contexts and how these may conflict in most significant ways with the professional ethics and personal values of the school head. There is some further discussion of this following.

**Ethical dilemmas and forces as reported by school heads**

<b>Head</b>	<b>Critical incident(s)</b>	<b>Type/focus of dilemma</b>	<b>Key Forces</b>
<p align="center"><b>1</b></p>	<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 of the school, whose mother died recently, is suffering psychologically – she commits an act warranting expulsion. Should the student be expelled?</p>	<p>Staff underperformance - individual versus school/community; professional ethics versus personal values/loyalty.</p> <p>Professional ethics as an educationalist versus ethics as a Christian; Individual versus community; mercy versus justice; professional ethics versus personal values.</p>	<p>Professional ethics, professional standards, society/community, institutional context; culture</p> <p>Professional ethics; institutional context; society/community; organisational culture; ethics of role as Christian leader</p>
<p align="center"><b>2</b></p>	<p>A mother informs the head that her son has told her that students are bringing drugs to school, Should the child be expelled because he was also involved directly?</p> <p>Despite intervention according to the required guidelines, a senior staff member continues to underperform in his position. The staff member is given the choice of resigning from the position of authority in the school or being removed. 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. When, at a later time, the staff member applies for a promotional position, the head asks whether he should remove himself from the decision-making process?</p>	<p>Individual versus community; justice versus mercy.</p> <p>Individual/community, institutional needs; perceived conflict of interest</p>	<p>Legal, institutional context, professional ethics, culture</p> <p>Professional ethics, institutional context, organisational culture, legal force, society/community</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 the person has inappropriately used school funds for private gain. Unable to effect any real change because of the person’s position, the head is faced with a decision as to whether to try to change a very strong culture accepting of such behaviours or whether to leave.</p>	<p>For the head – accountability/responsibility to school community versus maintaining personal and professional integrity as well as fulfilling the public interest.</p>	<p>Professional ethics, law, institutional context, organisational culture, society/community, public interest, legal.</p>
4	<p>A young female student refuses to go home after school as she is no longer able to cope with her father’s alcoholism and violence. In light of no support available from external agencies at the time, the head is faced with taking responsibility for the girl’s welfare without approval of the father - in the immediate future at least.</p>	<p>Professional ethics &amp; personal values v. law – while not legally obliged to do anything the head feels personally and professionally she must in this case.</p>	<p>Professional ethics, legal, institutional context, organisational culture, society/community, public interest.</p>
5	<p>Following appointment at a school espousing Christian values, head believes that these are not evident in the practices and processes of the school. A particular incident with a student highlights this for the new head – there is considerable resistance to changing the school culture to be more in line with the espoused values .</p>	<p>Sub-groups of long serving staff versus wider school community interests – competing groups in society; implementing change and dealing with resistance, values conflicts between those espoused and practised.</p>	<p>Professional ethics, legal, organisational culture, institutional context, society/community, public interest</p>

The major themes to emerge in these ethical dilemmas for the heads as summarised in the table focussed around managing poorly performing, often senior, 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 or taking what might be described as ‘the tough decision’ and following through with deliberate and sustained actions. Such actions often required the removal of the staff member or the student from the school. In the case of the staff member, the dilemma often became more acute for the head as the individual often was a long serving member of the school staff. In one instance, the staff member was a personal friend of the head. Importantly in these dilemmas, what cannot be ignored are the likely negative impacts on the students should the staff member remain in the school. As such, there were significant issues to consider such as the school culture (eg. previous actions, expectations, precedents), the impact on other staff as they observed the events unfold and the impact of certain actions on the individual concerned. The types of ethical dilemmas found in studies by Day, Harris & Hadfield (1999), and Day (2000) resonate with the dilemmas reported here.

In the case of student focussed dilemmas, an additional issue to consider was the likelihood of the establishment of a precedent as a result of actions in a particular case. If more than one student were involved in an incident, one head noted that he might find himself dealing with quite 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 particular 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.*

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

*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.*

The implications (refer model) of decisions taken as a result of ethical dilemmas were of concern to most heads in this study. That is, 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, including the remainder of the student population. What, in part,

the comments of heads such as those noted above illustrate is that ethical dilemmas rarely involve simple decisions between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. Rather, as Kidder (1995) points out, the “really tough choices ... involve right versus right. They are genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in ... core values” (p. 18). That is, often in these cases there are degrees of ‘right’ on both sides and such complex situations rarely are amenable to simple solutions (Duignan and Collins, 2003), hence an ethical dilemma arises.

Evident in all dilemmas as reported by the heads was the significance, profile and contribution of both the values and beliefs espoused by the school (as noted earlier, all schools were religious based) as well as the personal values held by the heads – as might be expected, 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 strong 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 went on to point out that one could not make the assumption, just because the context for the dilemma (ie. the school) was one where certain values and beliefs were espoused, that all parties necessarily shared those values and beliefs – at least when the ethical dilemmas arose for their particular child. As a result, resolving ethical dilemmas often involved situations where conflicts in values were in evidence making their resolution potentially even more challenging. This is not to downplay the myriad other forces at play when ethical dilemmas arise, such as those illustrated in the model, summarised in the table and reported elsewhere (see for example, Walker and Shakotko, 1999).

Most heads saw dealing with ethical dilemmas – whether they be dilemmas of right versus wrong (the easy ones!) or of right versus right - as almost everyday occurrences. In their dealings with the dilemmas, they noted that the need to be “*objective*” as “*the head needs to be seen to be fair*”. While the heads spoke of dealing with some dilemmas alone, with one noting “the headship can be a lonely job”, in some cases they indicated they shared the dilemma with trusted others (‘significant others’ in the model). In some cases this was a (life) partner, in others a professional colleague or close friend, in others a member of the school council with whom they had developed respect and trust.

Overall, the findings of this research are consistent with similar work reported elsewhere. For example, research by Duignan and Collins (2003. p. 282) indicated that

*The most difficult challenges facing leaders ... present themselves as dilemmas, paradoxes or tensions. These tensions are usually people centred and involve contestation of values.*

### **Summary comments and implications**

The research reported here from interviews with five independent school heads suggests that ethical dilemmas are common place in their roles as leaders of their schools. In a sense, the interview data re-enforce Sergiovanni and Carver's (1980, p. 19) earlier notion of a "web of tension" surrounding the working lives of educational leaders. Typically, the dilemmas faced by this group of educational leaders focussed on student and staff issues. However, the significant misuse of resources in one instance was quite different from other dilemmas and potentially had major legal implications for the school and other parties concerned. Apart from this case, the general thrust of the findings is consistent with research reported by Duignan and Collins (2003) and Wildy, Louden, Dempster and Freakley (2001) who identified two dominant causes of tensions (or dilemmas) for leaders: staff ineffectiveness and student misbehaviour (p. 284).

The model developed in earlier work by the authors and applied to the dilemmas here, provides a useful framework for better understanding the dynamics and forces at play in such dilemmas. Key findings to emerge following analysis of the dilemmas for educational leaders using the model include the significance of the values and beliefs, espoused and practised by the head, the staff and other parties involved in the dilemma. Further, the professional ethics of the head manifested by the strong sense of duty of care of young people was highlighted as a key contributor to decision-making in such circumstances by all heads in some way during their discussions.

While this study was limited to heads of non-state schools, it would be useful to expand the research into the state sector and map similarities and differences of ethical dilemmas faced by the respective school leaders. Of particular interest would be a further exploration of the notion that not only is one's personal values significant in how one approaches an ethical dilemma but also the extent to which these values are aligned with one's professional values and how these forces interact with the culture of the school. It seems that these are very significant in the identification and resolution of ethical dilemmas. The findings reported here also suggest that no single theoretical approach to ethics and ethical dilemmas is better or more important than the other approaches. Rather, a combination of these approaches may be appropriate for the school setting. Yet, after saying that, it seems that duty of care and genuine ethical practices are integral to embedding ethical decision-making within schools.

What is clear is that ethical dilemmas are evident in the life of school leaders and that ultimately it is them, and them alone 'guided' by their own values, their professional ethics and their institution's values, who must resolve such dilemmas. As one of the interviewees noted:

*It's the loneliness of the position in those situations that's really the hardest thing to carry – this happens quite a lot with ethical decisions in schools.*

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. Notwithstanding this, it is clear as schools become more complex and the challenges facing the leaders of those schools more acute, that some attention to this area of ethics and ethical dilemmas is required. Duignan (2002b), Dempster, Freakley & Parry (2001) and others have started to address this need. However, research such as that reported here is potentially helpful in generating conversations among school leaders such that they are in a position to better understand the dynamics and forces at play in resolving the ethical dilemmas faced in their work. The model used for the analysis of this research would be a good starting point for conversations among leaders about such dilemmas.

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