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## **An ethical approach to sharing school successes in times of high-stakes accountability**

**Karen Spiller, Judy Smeed, & Megan Kimber**

### **Introduction**

High-stakes testing has become an important element of the Australian educational landscape. As one part of the neo-liberal paradigm where beliefs in the individual and the free market are paramount, it is of concern how school leaders can respond to this phenomenon in an ethical manner. Ethics and ethical leadership have increased in prominence both in the educational administration literature and in the media (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2006). In this paper we consider ethical theories on which school principals can draw, not only in the leadership of their own schools but in their relationships with other schools. We provide an example of a school leader sharing a successful intervention with other schools, illustrating that school leaders can create spaces for promoting the public good within the context of high-stakes testing.

We discuss a case study from a girls' school where one of the author's is principal. In response to a concern about achievements in numeracy, the school engaged an academic who worked in the area of school performance. A professional learning program was implemented where teachers developed skills to analyse the information from students' NAPLAN test results to ensure areas of need were being addressed in their classroom teaching. In terms of the narrow indicator of high-stakes testing, the program was successful as students' numeracy results in subsequent high-stakes and classroom tests improved. In response to this success, the program was shared with other schools, specifically those in low socio-economic areas. These schools' performance in NAPLAN tests improved from being below like school means in the national numeracy test to being above or well above the mean. This program has led to similar success for other Queensland schools, with one school listed by the Australian Assessment and Reporting Authority as one of the fifty most improved schools in 2014.

Rather than concentrating on the professional development program itself, in this paper we focus on the principal's and the academic's willingness to work for what they consider to be the greater good. They have sought to achieve this goal by offering the successful program to other schools. What these actions indicate is that, for educational leaders to be professional and ethical in times of high-stakes accountability, it is necessary for them to be mindful of the common good (Singer, 1994), in this case being open to sharing knowledge and skills to bring about improvement in numeracy for students in other schools. The paper concludes with some questions school leaders might ask themselves in determining whether their decisions promote the public good. We commence with a short examination of ethics to provide a context for this discussion.

### **Ethics**

As teaching is often viewed as 'a value-laden profession', ethics plays an important role in school leadership (Ehrich, Kimber, Millwater, & Cranston, 2011). Ethics can be viewed 'in terms of right relationships among' people (Uhr, 2010, 79). Such an understanding is important for school leaders, who often have to make ethical decisions in a variety of complex situations such those pertaining curriculum, management, students, staff, and parents (Cranston, Ehrich, & Kimber, 2006). School leaders need to ask 'hard questions about values, giving honest and public answers, and living by them' (Preston & Sampford,

2002, 164). They must ‘make and justify an ethical decision’ (Kimber, Carrington, Mercer, & Bland, 2011, 116). Holding onto the one’s values and moral compass are critical at these junctures. There can be no Faustian bargains in school leadership. We first consider normative and professional ethics, and then turn our attention to ethical leadership.

### *Normative ethics*

Normative ethical theories that might guide a school leader are consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. Consequentialists view the ethicality of their actions in terms of their consequences. Utilitarians, for example, believe in the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. The utilitarian perspective has been associated with neo-liberalism, due to the stress on individualism and freedom (James, 2003; Preston, 2007). One example of utilitarian ethics is Peter Singer’s (2013) effective altruism, where, for example, donating to an organisation that provides mosquito nets to hundreds of children in developing countries is seen as better than anonymously donating a kidney to another person as many people benefit from the mosquito nets but only one person benefits from the kidney.

Another way of understanding ethics is deontology, which is a rule- or reason-based ethics. There are two forms of deontology—religious ethics and Kantian ethics. For religious ethicists, ‘the duty or right to be obeyed is revealed by a divine authority, for instance in the Bible or the Qur’an’ (Preston, 2007, 40). Many writers cite the Christian principle of “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” as illustrative of religious ethics. Through ‘rationality, consistency and universality’, Immanuel Kant arrives at a similar principle. Kantians implore us to, ‘Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always as an end and never as a means only’ (Preston, 2007, 41).

Yet someone might reason an ethical course of action but not enact it because they do not have an ethical character. This perspective is an important part of the virtue ethicist’s perspective. Virtue or character ethics derives from Plato and Aristotle (Ehrich, Kimber, Cranston, & Starr, 2011). Virtue ethicists concentrate on the connection between character and reason. For virtue ethicists, ‘it is only through cultivating good character that one is likely to choose to do what is right. Within virtue ethics, the means as well as the consequences must be ethical’ (Kimber et al., 2011, 116). Virtue ethicists ‘promote the relationship between people, society and institutions in pursuit of the common good or the public interest’ (Preston & Sampford, 2002, 26-7). Drawing on Ehrich, Kimber, Millwater, and Cranston (2011), examples of virtues are ‘care, integrity, honesty, openness, justice, trustworthiness, love, faith, dignity, equitability, and prudence’ (Kimber et al., 2011, 116). Prudence or practical wisdom has been considered the most important virtue, as one must have developed many of the other virtues to effectively use it (Kane & Patapan, 2006). It is ‘the practical judgement for deliberating and knowing what principles to apply in a given set of circumstances’ (Duignan, et al., 2003, 84-6). It ‘incorporates all of the elements that are necessary for being a good moral judge’ (Campbell, 2010, 30), going beyond individual self-interest and the rationality of social groups (Campbell, 2010, 30-1).

### *Professional ethics*

A school leader’s professional ethics may support their personal ethics. Professional ethics is about “the ‘right conduct’ expected of a member of a particular profession” (Uhr, 2005, 37). This right conduct derives from the nature of the particular office such that “ethical responsibilities vary with role” (Uhr, 2005, 78)’ (Kimber & Campbell, 2014, 209-210). Thus professional ethics is concerned with the values and beliefs that guide professionals not only in their decision making but also in their interactions with others (Ehrich et al., 2012).

Such values and beliefs can inform the codes of ethics (principles) or codes (behaviours) of ethics devised by professional associations such as the Queensland College of Teachers (Ehrich, Kimber, Millwater, & Cranston, 2011). They are also evident to some extent in Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's (2011) *Professional Standards for Principals*, where values form an important element. As these codes are broad guiding principles only, school leaders need the virtue of practical wisdom to assist them in working with the 'constraints and competing priorities' (Sumison, 2000, 173) common in their everyday working lives.

In a complex situation entailing competing priorities (Ehrich, 2000) a school leader might have to choose between wrong and wrong such as between obeying a supervisor's directive that conflicts with their professional ethics and going to the media or right and right such as between care and justice (Cranston et al., 2006; Kidder, 1995). In such situations use of what Starratt (1996, 2003) calls the ethic of critique might be needed. Starratt implores leaders to question whose interests are being served.

#### *Ethical leadership*

Ethical leadership can inform how principals work in their own schools and how they work with their community. In the report of the findings from her Churchill Fellowship, Karen Spiller identified a number of factors that act as barriers to increasing the number of female school leaders. She also identified factors that can enable more women to become school leaders. These enablers include women-only leadership programs, mentoring, and networking. An important aspect of these enablers is relationships — relationships among principals; relationships among principals and principal aspirants; and among principals, principal aspirants and teacher educators. Such relationships can involve a desire to work with others and share successful outcomes from this work.

The following case study documents a university-led innovation at St Aidan's Anglican Girls School and how it was then shared with other schools. Such an approach aligns the university lecturers and the principal's personal and professional ethics, with the university's values and the Christian values that underpin the school. It resonates with Starratt's (1996, 2003) understanding of going beyond self-interest or to the Golden Rule of Christian ethics mentioned above.

#### **An ethical response to high-stakes testing**

In a context of high-stakes testing, schools need to perform well and be seen to perform well. In response to this situation, St Aidan's School contacted a university academic to provide professional development for staff. St Aidan's School is an independent Kindergarten to Year 12 girls' school in suburban Brisbane. The school was founded in 1929 by an order of Anglican nuns, who remain its owners. It had an enrollment of 730 at the time of the intervention. The principal is responsible for the school's day-to-day management. In Australia, all schools are scaled according to socio-educational advantage, which is based on socio-economic data, parent qualification data, percentage of indigenous and percentage of language background other than English students, and, finally, whether the school is metropolitan, rural, or remote. St Aidan's is rated as socio-educationally advantaged.

The professional development program at St Aidan's focused on staff learning what to do with the information generated from these high-stakes test data. Following analysis of students' literacy and numeracy test data, a short-term intervention was developed by the

academic and implemented in the school. As a result of the program, there was a marked improvement in numeracy results. The school transitioned from performing below the level of like schools to performing above. This outcome resulted in the academic suggesting to the principal that the program be moved on to other schools, especially low-socio economic schools located within the same city. While we consider a professional development program devised as a response to identified needs in relating to high-stakes accountability, we focus on the sharing of this intervention, something that might be discouraged in a climate of secrecy in relation to improved student performances. This case suggests that, even in times of high-stakes accountability, educational leaders can serve the needs of the educational community at large.

Following the success St Aiden's experienced as a consequence of the professional development program, the principal and the academic shared the program with four low-socio economic schools. These schools trialled the innovation and experienced improvements in their high-stakes test numeracy results. The innovation has since been used in other schools across Queensland. While recognising the importance of sharing initiatives, we also recognise that such successes can be context specific. Thus school leaders need to adapt initiatives to their own communities (Lingard, 2010).

This decision to share the innovation with others schools might be seen as promoting the public good (Cranston et al., 2006; Preston, 2007; Singer, 1994). Using Starratt's (2012) ethic of critique, the question a school leader could ask themselves who benefits from the professional development program. In this case, the principal and the academic considered withholding information from the wider education community would be a failure of moral responsibility—understood here as serving the public good by going beyond the individual school. In the case of a Christian school such as St Aiden's, those who live by Christian ethics give weight to principles such as the Golden Rule. The educational success of a student in one part of a state is as important as the educational success of a student in another part of the state.

As indicated above, it is possible that the stress on performance and competition that derives from the dominance of neo-liberal thinking in high-stakes testing might lead some principals to act differently to the response taken in this case study. A school leader may wish to keep a successful intervention to themselves or only share it with like schools. The pressure brought by such heightened accountability may have, in some instances, prompted some school leaders not to respond and share. Making the decision to share the program with other schools was about professional ethics — it was right expected of the professional

### **A school leader's ethical questions guide**

In making such a decision school leaders might ask themselves questions about the impact of their decisions and actions on the educational community as a whole. Cranston, Ehrich, and Kimber's (2006) work on ethical dilemmas experienced by school leaders provides several lenses including the global, legal, political, and community through which a school leader might consider their decisions and actions. The questions a school leader might ask themselves include the following.

- What do I expect of myself in respect to my personal ethical values? Do I believe in the greatest good for the greatest number, the equality of all, or promoting relationships to achieve the common good?

- What is expected by the community from a member of my profession?
- Who will my actions benefit? Will they benefit the students at my school? Will they benefit both the students at my school and the students at another school in my community?

## Conclusion

We have considered the approach taken by one school in response to sharing knowledge and skills to improve performance across school and system boundaries in a time of high-stakes testing. Central elements of this approach were the personal ethics of both the university academic and the principal, the professional ethics of the school principal, the ethos of the school, and the common or the public good. Under the current regime of high-stakes accountability, it is timely for education leaders to be cognisant of the ethical responsibilities which are an integral part of the position of leadership and of their profession as a whole. The success for Queensland schools that have implemented context-specific variants of this professional development program illustrates that it is essential to consider the common good in our decision making. To this end, we suggest that school leaders ask themselves about the impact of their decisions and actions on the educational community as a whole.

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