

# Educational leaders and ethical dilemmas: Trying to make sense of the complexities

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## Context ... consider

- complex operational milieu has created a multitude of competing obligations and interests for all school leaders → **shifting accountabilities, competing priorities, politicisation of education, pressures of high stake testing ...**

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- value laden nature of much of a school leader's work → dealing with people (students, staff, parents, community)

→ **ethical dilemmas arise**





# Ethics, ethical dilemmas - some theoretical considerations

- **Moral & ethical environment determines how we react in terms of justice, fairness, right, wrong, good, evil, tolerance, care, forgiveness ...**
- **Ethics is concerned with values and value judgments in human affairs** (Burgh et al, 2006)

## Working definition ... an ethical dilemma is ...

- **A situation where you feel that you have been required to take an action or asked to make a decision (or have observed a decision taken or action performed by others) that you consider problematic or wrong/inappropriate. For instance, in your view, values, principles (your own, your schools, your departments) and/or codes of conduct have been challenged as a result of the decision or action. In such situations, you may feel personally and/or professionally uncomfortable.** (Cranston, Ehrich, Kimber, 2004)

## 'right' v 'wrong' & 'right' v 'right'

- Kidder (1995):
  - **Right v wrong situations** are less difficult to deal with for honest, ethical individuals, HOWEVER
  - **Right v right situations** are at the heart of the most difficult choices
  - *The really tough choices, then, don't centre upon right versus wrong. They involve right versus right. They are genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in ... core values (p. 18).*

# A dilemma of choices!





# Overview of the research

- **short survey – exploratory of existence, nature, prevalence**
- **semi-structured in-depth interviews**
- **focus on interviewees talking about ethical dilemma(s) they had experienced**



## Findings for school leaders ... summary

- all principals had no difficulty identifying what, for them, had been ethical dilemma(s) – refer definition → wide spread nature of Eds
- one commented that they were *“really the bread and butter of what school principals do”* – everyday occurrences
- another: *“the magnitude of ethical dilemmas in a place like this (school) is very broad”*



## Nature of the EDs

- main foci for EDs were concerned with:
  - **poorly performing (often senior/long serving) staff**
  - **student issues (often behaviour issues)**

## Major forces at play in the EDs

- values, beliefs, ethics of the school – **at least those espoused!**
- values, beliefs, ethics of the principal
- “expectations” of the school community (again, values etc ...)
- strong professional and legal ethic of duty of care evident
- → **consideration of the implications of taking a particular decision – precedents are established**

# Under the microscope!



# Duignan & Collins summarise this as...

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

(2003, p. 282)

# Workshop



# “Managing” ethical dilemmas

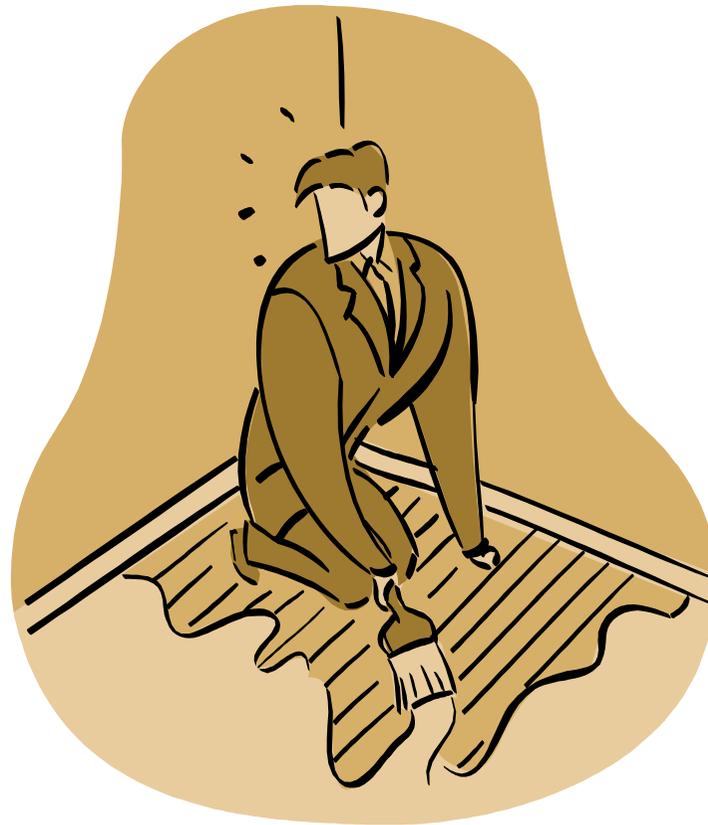
- **Precursors:**
  - **understand your own values/value positions** - what do you really stand for? What are your non-negotiables?
  - **understand those of your school** – espoused & enacted
  - **understand those of your community** – all the community, not just the dominant/powerful/vocal few

## How to ...

- Get the full facts – avoid knee-jerk reactions – **rules ain't necessarily rules** - your first response might not be the “best” one
- Think through the implications, consequences and the precedents various alternative decisions will create – **there is rarely one “right” answer**
- If student(s) involved - **what are the duty of care issues to consider** (might also be the case if teacher(s) involved)
- Re-visit the value positions – yours, school, community – **is your intended decision in alignment?**

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- Put yourself in the position of the individual(s) at the centre of the ED (ie all the individuals) – **the final decision-maker, the person(s) at the centre of the dilemma, others who might be affected**
  - Ask the question – how would I like my child (me, my friend, ...) to be treated in this situation?
  - Manage the outcomes – **the decision(s) is not the endpoint, there will often be significant implications, consequences and precedents**
  - Learn from the experience – **share with others, question what we can do avoid such dilemmas arising again**

**Avoid being painted into a corner!**



# Some useful references

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