

**International Leadership Institute  
Adelaide 2 August 2001**

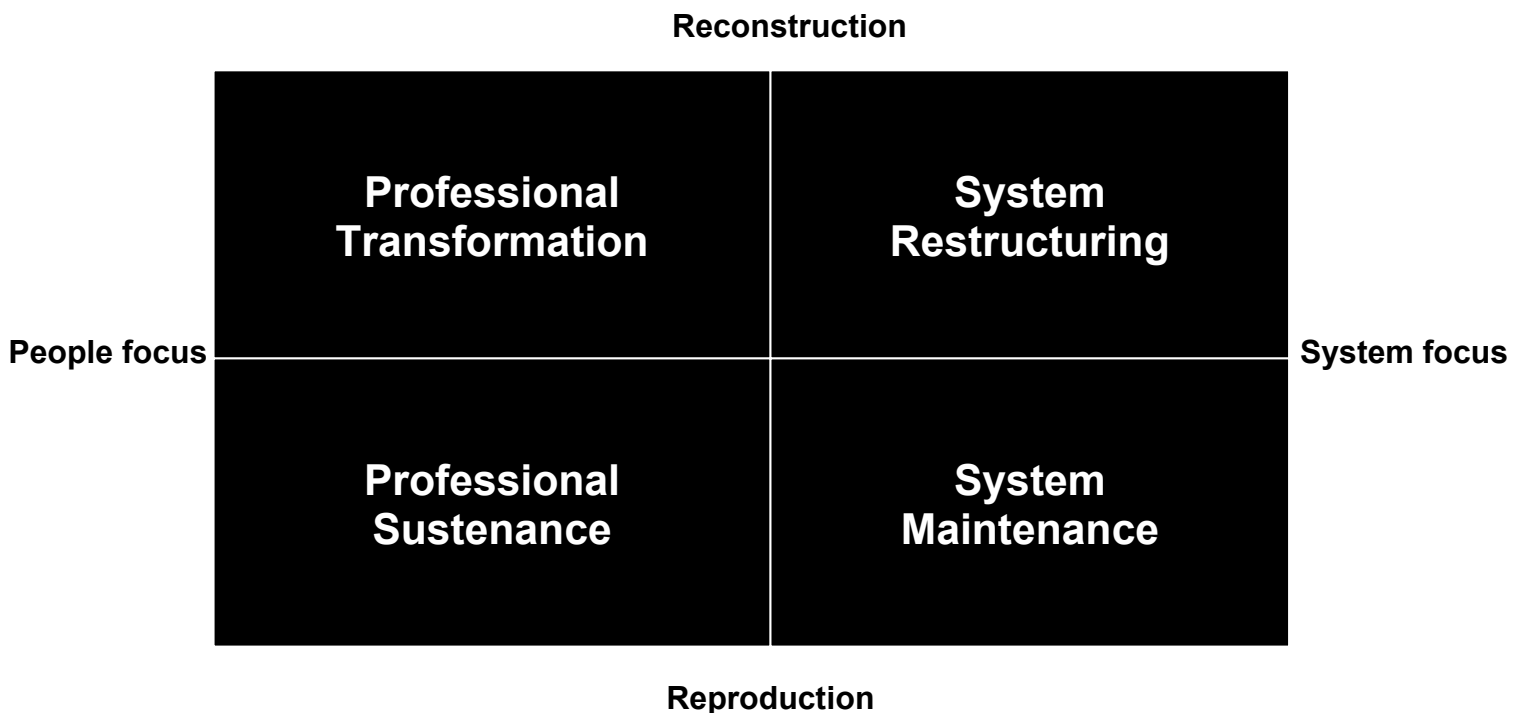
**The Ethical Development of School Principals\***

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The ideology of economic rationalism (Pusey 1991) has reshaped public administration into what is now being called New Public Management (Ferlie, Ashburner and Pettigrew 1996). The hallmark of New Public Management (NPM) is the movement of public services into direct competition with their private enterprise counterparts. The impact of economic rationalism is so widespread that NPM is now a common feature of public sector policy throughout the developed world, the publicly funded provision of school education has not been exempt from this trend. In this presentation I discuss one manifestation of NPM in education – the quasi-privatisation of public education, its impact on the ethical climate of schooling and the ethical development of principals.

The presentation is divided into four sections:

1. the explanation of a theoretical framework for understanding emphases in the professional development of school principals;
2. an overview of New Public Management and public schooling – globalisation and NPM, the centrality of competitive values accompanying globalisation, and the impact of NPM and its underpinning market theory on educational provision;
3. the discussion of selected results from a recent study of ethics in school leadership<sup>1</sup> in the light of a description of NPM's impact on the ethical climate of public schooling as experienced by school principals; and
4. the identification of some implications of this analysis for the provision of professional development for school administrators.



**Figure 1. A framework for analysing professional development**

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<sup>1</sup> The research was conducted as part of an Australian Research Council Strategic Partnerships with Industry Research and Training 1998 grant funded project. In-depth interviews with a small sample of school principals were conducted during 1998, followed by a survey questionnaire administered in 1999 to all Queensland government school principals. The response rate to the survey was 45% (N=552).

## A Theoretical Framework for Professional Development

I have been developing and refining a framework for analysing professional development in education (see Figure 1) for some time (Logan and Dempster: 1992, Dempster and Beere: 1996). The framework is based on Burrell's and Morgan's (1979) paradigms of social theory. In Figure 1, I use two intersecting continua to define four orientations to professional development: **System Restructuring, System Maintenance, Professional Sustenance and Professional Transformation**. The poles of each continuum identify oppositional positions, the **x axis** showing a 'people focus' vs a 'system focus' on human activity, the **y axis** showing two views of change, 'reproduction' vs 'reconstruction'.

A **System Maintenance** orientation towards professional development is based at worst, on an organisation's view of the learning needed to maintain the status quo, at best on its acceptance of learning which creates minimal disruption through marginal or incremental change. From this orientation, employers set out expectations for what knowledge and skills are necessary for the roles people play and they then provide training and development programs to ensure that employees are appropriately equipped to carry out their organisational functions. This approach to professional development makes use of didactic pedagogy and positional power relationships to mandate participation. When it succeeds, it enables principals to gain the necessary functional knowledge and skills to carry out their everyday tasks. When it fails, the failure is often attributed to poor in-service education, and/or to the principal's inability to learn or to transfer required knowledge and skills to others. According to a **System Maintenance** approach to professional development, principals' learning should be:

- competency-based, in terms of leadership and management skills;
- linked to enduring educational policies and priorities set by the central authority;
- focused on the authorities, responsibilities and accountabilities of school leadership.

Professional development activity directed towards **System Maintenance** is usually dependent on the initiative and support of system administrators.

A **System Restructuring** orientation towards professional development is grounded in pressures to learn about system change, and is usually demanded by organisational leaders using the human resources available to them to achieve centrally determined restructuring objectives. A relationship between system development, school development and professional development is emphasised (Preston: 1990, Varghese: 2000), along with the benefits of clear goal-setting and the evaluation of productivity against system nominated priorities (Hopkins, 1992). In school education, a **System Restructuring** approach to professional development requires that principals pursue efficiency and effectiveness in implementing both government priorities and values, and system plans and objectives. Principals who participate in **System Restructuring** professional development activities should learn:

- how to develop values and attitudes consistent with those of the parent system;
- how to make changes in the structure and function of their schools in system-determined directions;
- how to work towards system-nominated change outcomes within set budgets; and
- how to gather and use system-stipulated performance data related to the above.

Professional Development activity directed towards **System Restructuring** is usually dependent on the initiative and support of system administrators.

A **Professional Sustenance** orientation towards professional development emphasises learning derived from the individual and collective subjective experience of people in their everyday educational practice. From this perspective, principals' professional development seeks to meet personal and collective professional needs as they are encountered in leading specific communities of students, teachers and parents. Needs tend to arise out of practical, moral and ethical concerns over aspects of daily leadership and management practice. **Professional Sustenance** oriented professional development activities require participants' involvement in determining the topic, direction and means to achieving preferred outcomes which address the needs identified. Self-determination is an essential criterion of this approach while sustaining

professional values is its key purpose. Generally, programs for principals consistent with a **Professional Sustenance** orientation should emphasise learning that is:

- based on issues or concerns arising from 'on-the-job' school leadership and management practices;
- linked to principals' personal definitions of professional identity; and
- consonant with ethical professional independence.

Professional Development activity directed towards **Professional Sustenance** is usually dependent on personal initiative and the support of colleagues.

A **Professional Transformation** orientation towards professional development is concerned with learning about alternatives to system orthodoxy and the achievement of human goals such as personal growth, social justice and equity. This approach to principals' professional development encourages them to consider the social, institutional and personal constraints on their practice (Hinkson, 1991) and what might be done differently in their own interests, in the interests of the people with whom they work, and in the interests of society at large. It emphasises learning that is collaboratively initiated and supported, and seeks ways to empower staff and school communities to bring about socially constructive, people focused change. Professional development programs from a **Professional Transformation** orientation should concentrate on learning which enables principals to work with others to:

- undertake constructive social, system and organisational critique;
- question taken-for-granted understandings (the 'sacred cows') of leadership, management and schooling;
- analyse and reshape personal and collective professional knowledge; and
- reconstruct schooling and school administration in alternative ways.

Professional development activity directed towards **Professional Transformation** is usually dependent on personal initiative and the support of colleagues.

The framework outlined in Figure 1 implies that **System Maintenance** and **Professional Sustenance** oriented professional development tend to confirm and sustain existing organisational and social relations by emphasising reproductive forms of in-service education, while **System Restructuring** and **Professional Transformation** approaches tend to promote change through reconstructive forms of in-service education.

In terms of pedagogy, **System Maintenance** and **System Restructuring** approaches favour didactic teaching based on the primacy of the system in the lives of learners, while **Professional Sustenance** and **Professional Transformation** approaches favour co-operative learning adopting a people focus that emphasises individual and collective power and action (Logan and Dempster: 1992, Dempster and Beere: 1996).

One clear implication which can be drawn from the framework is that the resources and funding for principals' professional development are more likely to be associated with 'system focused' orientations than they are with 'people focused' orientations. This is understandable as organisations control resources and have every right to expect employees to undertake training and development in their interests. Another implication is that a balanced professional development agenda cannot be achieved by means of allegiance to a single orientation. A third follows from these two – if resources are more likely to be accessible to orientations on the right hand side of the framework, then those on the left are likely to be under-emphasised in professional development provision. Imbalance in professional development opportunities and experience, I argue, is highly probable unless counter measures with a 'people focus' are readily available. That they have not been available in the recent past is partly the consequence of the dominance of New Public Management, the phenomenon to which I referred at the outset to this presentation.

### **New Public Management and Public Schooling**

Throughout the eighties and nineties the public sector has been subject to the phenomenon of globalisation, the effects of which are most apparent in the rise of NPM. Involving the

reduction of a government presence in service provision in favour of private enterprise, this approach has been adopted by national governments of all political persuasions across the OECD<sup>2</sup> countries and beyond. The most obvious feature of NPM in action is the sale of public utilities such as electricity, water, airlines, railways and telecommunications. Ferlie, Ashburner and Pettigrew (1996) carried out an analysis of this approach in an endeavour to understand the phenomenon better. The results of their work show that there is growing evidence that different countries, and different segments of the public sector in those countries, have introduced their own forms of NPM according to their historical and cultural traditions, political agendas and economic conditions. In other words, globalisation is mediated through local interpretations.

Nevertheless, despite the differences between countries around the world, most, according to Mahony (1997) and Hilmer (1995), have experienced changes in the public sector such as the following:

- a reduction in government's role in public service provision;
- the imposition of the strongest feasible framework of competition and accountability on public sector activity;
- explicit standards and measures of performance and clear definition of goals, targets or indicators of success, preferably in quantitative form;
- a greater emphasis on output controls - a stress on results, not processes; and
- a reduction in the self-regulating powers of the professions.

At the heart of these changes is an allegiance to the market theory view that competitive markets provide the following benefits:

Increased competition is meant to improve responsiveness, flexibility and rates of innovation; to increase the diversity of what is produced and can be market chosen; to enhance productive and/or allocative efficiency; to improve the volume and quality of production; and to strengthen accountability (Marginson 1997,p.5).

Although market theory asserts that the satisfaction of values of efficiency, effectiveness and product quality are best achieved by the interaction of supply and demand, consumer choice and head to head competition, it has little to say about the satisfaction of collective values:

It takes little effort to demonstrate that while the marketplace has been an exceedingly effective mechanism to generate wealth, on the whole, its success has been achieved because of, not despite its lack of a moral core. This is not a character flaw but a characteristic. Markets are not moral; they are necessarily preoccupied with self-interest and advantage and as such, are unfit arbiters of what constitutes our collective well-being (Robertson 1997, p.3).

However, a large number of school principals who are caught up in this milieu are concerned about education's moral core and the contribution of schools to the moral well-being of society. They are also worried about the impact of market-oriented trends on schooling's contribution to the development of this public good.

As we have observed above, different forms of NPM are evident in different cultural contexts. Nevertheless, where NPM has colonised government decision-making, it has resulted in the restructuring of public schooling with the following impacts:

- decentralisation of much decision-making through the introduction of school self-management;
- injection of conditions to encourage competition between schools;
- imposition of greater demands for financial accountability;
- increase in consumer control over what goes on in schools;
- recentralisation of curriculum and assessment control;

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<sup>2</sup> The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

- pressure for outcomes-based assessment of students, principals and teachers;
- the expectation that schools expose their performance to public scrutiny;
- assessment of teachers against employer directed competencies; and
- tighter regulation of pre-service teacher education.

These impacts of NPM on public schools have been introduced via either radical or incremental change. Radical change has been sudden and severe such as in England and Wales following the introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act, or as in New Zealand as a result of the Picot Report of 1989. In other locations, reform has been experienced at a slower pace, as in, for example, Queensland and Denmark where the implementation of change in the shape of NPM has taken longer to gain momentum (Moos and Dempster 1998).

### **Ethical Issues for Self-Managing Schools**

Difficult decisions have always been the companions of school principals and teachers but there is growing evidence that normative complexity has become a major concern for today's principals (Walker 1995). This suggests that the character of normative complexity in today's schools may result not from the perennial features of schooling but from more recently introduced ones. For instance, in an international study of the expectations of school leaders, Dempster and Mahony (1998), found that principals reported that many ethical issues resulted directly from the impact of NPM on schools. The issues include such matters as: student selection, streaming, exclusion, open access, staff profile control (staff reductions, manipulating the teacher age profile, staff contracting and casualisation), teaching competence, parent inclusion, selective reporting, income generation (sponsorship, fees), scholarships, saleable curriculum specialisations, marketing, advertising and poaching. These matters were identified by principals as troublesome ones particularly where school funding policy necessitates direct competition for student numbers.

Research in which I have been engaged with my colleagues Mark Freakley and Lindsay Parry with principals in Queensland government schools has found evidence of the negative impact of NPM on schools. The results suggest that the conditions of NPM present principals with an increasingly difficult ethical climate. I turn now to present some of our results from that study.

### **Selected Results from the Principals' Ethical Decision-making Study (PEDMS)**

This study as indicated earlier, was an ARC funded project in partnership with Education Queensland designed to achieve the following purpose:

- to identify and describe situations in which school principals face ethical dilemmas, to record the decisions they make, to explain their reasoning and why they take the action they do.

The Principals' Ethical Decision Making Study was designed around a series of intensive interviews with principals (N=25) from a range of metropolitan, provincial and rural schools to identify what they regard as ethical issues and how they go about their resolution. The results of the interviews provided data from which a survey was produced. This was administered to all government school principals in Queensland producing returns from 552. Some of the data are tabled and discussed below. Findings related to some of the troublesome circumstances principals face under NPM and influences on the ethical climate of schooling are presented first followed by the identification of frequent and troublesome ethical issues as well as a range of case accounts of testing matters requiring resolution.

### **NPM and Ethical Issues**

Finance in a competitive environment was one issue of concern raised by principals in our interviews and one principal expressed his point of view about it in the following way:

I listened to our DG (Director General) at a conference. He talked about bringing enrolments back from the private sector. At the time it sounded wonderful and then we got into the next issue called marketing which is one of the issues I have major ethical problems with. Our core business is about teaching and learning. It's not about going out and selling our school and getting sponsorship and endorsements and all those sorts of things. It's one thing to put out a glossy brochure to say 'we believe this is a really positive school'. That's quite different to putting a lot of energy, a lot of money, a lot of valuable resources into a PR machine to drag back enrolments.

Most interesting, however, are the data shown in Table 1 on how troublesome principals find three finance and funding matters now quite common in restructured education systems.

	Troublesomeness of these Circumstances					
	A great deal	Much	Somewhat	A little	Not at all	Uncertain
Dealing with Commercial Sponsorship	3%	7%	11%	19%	40%	14%
Dealing with income generating opportunities for the school	3%	7%	18%	31%	34%	5%
Dealing with the promotion and marketing of the school	4%	13%	20%	25%	33%	1%

**Table 1. The troublesomeness of three finance and funding circumstances for principals**

As Table 1 shows, forty percent (40%) of principals reported that *Dealing with commercial sponsorship* caused them trouble ranging from a little to a great deal. The data for *Dealing with income generating opportunities for the school* attracted a similar, though slightly stronger pattern of responses with fifty-eight percent (58%) of principals reporting some degree of troublesomeness with this issue. *Dealing with the promotion and marketing of the school* was the most troublesome of the three finance and funding related items for public school principals. Sixty-two percent (62%) of the respondents said that this matter caused them a degree of troublesomeness ranging from *a little* to *a great deal*. When the age data related to these three items are analysed it is clear that older principals found each of these finance and funding matters more troublesome than their younger counterparts. This may be because younger principals have only experienced a system which now has these expectations of the principals' role, while older principals are having to learn new skills quite different from those expected of them when they were first appointed to school leadership.

These results, when coupled with other data from the survey discussed below, suggest that many principals are finding themselves in new and unknown ethical territory.

In our interviews with principals, a number of different views were expressed about the ethical climate of contemporary schooling. In particular, principals suggested that a number of possible trends in public policy making may influence the ethical climate of schooling. These trends included:

- the competitive marketing of schools;
- an emphasis on consumer choice;
- thinking of students as customers;
- success as measured by market performance; and
- allowing market forces to shape the provision of schooling.

In the follow-up questionnaire survey, we included a list of these possible trends and asked respondents to indicate their views about the extent to which the trend was either a positive or a negative influence on the ethical climate of schooling. We provided respondents with a seven-point scale running from “Very positive influence” to Very negative influence,” including a neutral midpoint. Table 3 provides the summed percentage frequencies obtained for each of the two sets of directional points on the scale as well as the neutral point.

N = 552	Neutral Influence	Trend as a Positive influence on ethical climate	Viewed as a negative influence
	%	%	%
The competitive marketing of schools	6	23	69
An emphasis on consumer choice	18	37	42
Thinking of students as customers	10	34	51
Success as measured by market performance	11	13	73
Allowing market forces to shape the provision of schooling		7	81

**Table 2. Frequency of principals’ views about the influence of market oriented trends in schooling on the ethical climate of schools**

Just over two-thirds (69%) of all principals viewed the trend towards “the competitive marketing of schools” as a negative influence on the ethical climate of schooling, while only just over one-fifth (23%) of all principals viewed this trend as a positive influence.

Just over two fifths (42%) of all principals viewed the trend towards “an emphasis on consumer choice” as a negative influence on the ethical climate of schooling. Almost equally, just under two-fifths (37%) of all principals viewed this same trend as a positive influence on the ethical climate of schooling. Half (51%) of all principals viewed the trend towards “thinking of students as customers” as a negative influence on the ethical climate of schooling. While just over one-third (34%) viewed it as a positive influence. Almost three-quarters (73%) of all principals viewed the trend towards “success as measured by market performance” as a negative influence on the ethical climate of schooling. While only one-eighth (13%) viewed it as a positive influence. Finally, just over four-fifths (81%) of all principals viewed the trend towards “allowing market forces to shape the provision of schooling” as a negative influence on the ethical climate of schooling, while less than one-tenth (7%) of all principals viewed it as a positive influence.

A common theme in the interviews was that the values of economic rationalism were inconsistent with many of the professional and personal values held by principals. In order to test how widespread this view is in the population of principals, the survey included the following item. Principals were asked to register the extent to which they personally agreed or disagreed with the statement “Values that many principals hold dear are being pushed aside by the values of economic rationalism.” As can be seen by an examination of Table 3, the overall response was strongly skewed towards agreement with the statement.

	% n=552
Strongly agree	16
Agree	56
Undecided	12
Disagree	13
Strongly disagree	1

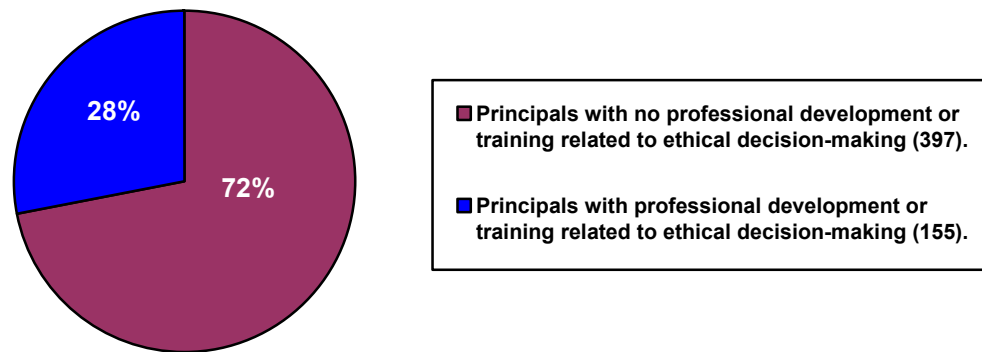
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**Table 3. Extent of agreement with the statement: “Values that many principals hold dear are being pushed aside by the values of economic rationalism”**

What these results show is that nearly three-quarters (72%) of principals think that the values of economic rationalism are negatively impacting on their professional and personal values.

Our survey did not investigate why principals hold the views they do, but the opinions expressed in the interviews suggest that principals feel that they are now being asked to operate their schools on a set of ‘economic rationalist’ assumptions, some of which at least, are inconsistent with valued beliefs about education and its purposes for young people.

Among the key findings of the PEDMS are those pertaining to principals’ professional development needs in ethical decision-making. The survey found that there was considerable scope for improving principals’ access to and participation in professional development programs that focus on their ethical responsibilities and decision-making roles. For example, as Figure 2 shows, less than one third (28%) of those surveyed indicated that they had undertaken any training or professional development that was specifically related to ethical decision-making.



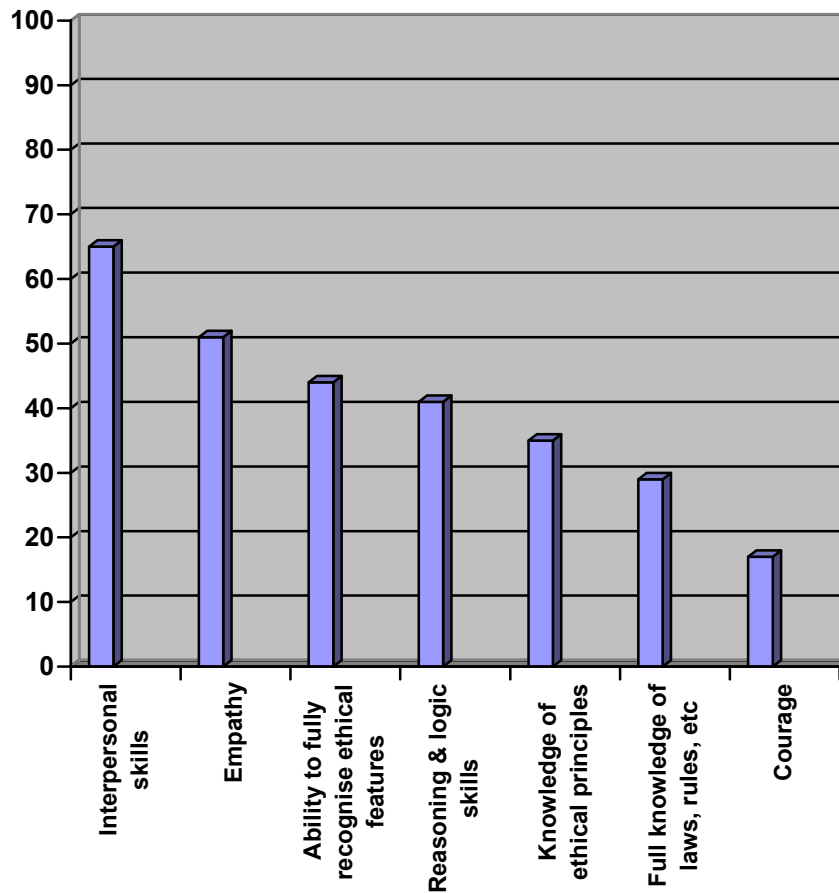
**Figure 2. Percentages of principals with professional development and training related to ethical decision-making**

Of the 155 principals who had experienced professional development in ethical decision-making:

- 12% indicated that their pre-service teacher education had included training in ethical decision-making;
- 4% indicated that they had undertaken other undergraduate studies that had incorporated such training; and
- 35% claimed to have undertaken postgraduate studies in which ethical decision-making was specifically addressed.

#### **Attributes necessary for ethical decision-making**

The study also found strong agreement among principals regarding the personal attributes they considered to be most important for ethical decision-making (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Principals' ranking of the three most important attributes involved in their ethical decision-making. (N=552)**

As figure 3 shows, two thirds (65%) of survey respondents identified interpersonal skills as being among the three most important attributes; one half (51%) perceived empathy to be one of the top three attributes; 44% ranked the ability to recognise the ethical features of a situation among the top three; and 41% included reasoning and logical skills among their three most important attributes. All four of these attributes were perceived by at least 40% of those surveyed to be very important for ethical decision-making. In addition, knowledge of relevant laws, organisational rules and procedures was rated as important or very important by two thirds (66%) of respondents.

At the same time, the study found that one quarter (24%) of survey respondents had little or only moderate confidence in their own interpersonal skills and abilities in situations requiring ethical decision-making. A slightly smaller proportion (21%) had little or only moderate confidence in their capacity to empathise in such situations. Forty per cent of respondents had only moderate confidence in their ability to recognise fully the ethical features of a situation, while another 9% had little or no confidence in this area. In regard to their reasoning and logical thinking skills in ethical decision-making situations, one third (33%) of the principals surveyed felt little or only moderate confidence. Furthermore, only 30% were confident or very confident of their own knowledge of laws, organisational rules and procedures relevant to their ethical decision-making.

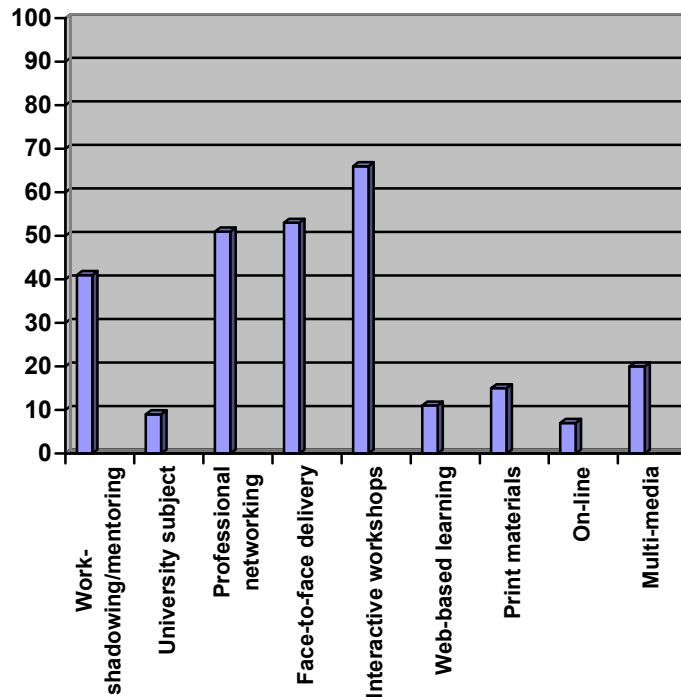
#### **Interest in professional development opportunities**

Accordingly, the principals who responded to the survey displayed considerable interest in being provided with opportunities to improve their ability to recognise fully the ethical features of a situation (32% recorded great interest), their knowledge of relevant laws, organisational

rules and procedures (30% were greatly interested), their reasoning and logical thinking skills (24% were greatly interested), and their interpersonal skills (23% indicated great interest).

### Delivery mode of professional development programs

Figure 4 shows that the most strongly preferred modes of delivery for professional development in ethical decision-making were those that involve interaction with others in face-to-face settings.



**Figure 4. Professional development on ethics and school leadership : Preferred delivery mode. (N=552)**

Interactive workshops were favoured by 66% of the principals, face-to-face delivery (53%), professional networking (51%) and mentoring (41%). Technology-based modes of delivery (eg, on-line learning -7% - web-based delivery - 11% - and multimedia packages - 20%) were favoured by considerably fewer of the principals surveyed for the study. Studying a university subject was favoured by only 9% of principals.

### Attributes necessary for ethical decision-making

The study also found strong agreement among the surveyed principals regarding the personal attributes that they considered to be most important for ethical decision-making. For example, two thirds (65%) of survey respondents identified interpersonal skills as being among the three most important attributes; one half (51%) perceived empathy to be one of the top three attributes; 44% ranked the ability to recognise the ethical features of a situation among the top three; and 41% included reasoning and logical skills among their three most important attributes. All four of these attributes were perceived by at least 40% of those surveyed to be very important for ethical decision-making. In addition, knowledge of relevant laws, organisational rules and procedures was rated as important or very important by two thirds (66%) of respondents.

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### **Preferred content of professional development programs**

Principals' views on the preferred content of professional development in ethical decision-making reflected, in particular, their interest in improving in these areas. Thus, 60% of those surveyed indicated that such professional development should focus on the interpersonal skills needed for ethical decision-making; 59% thought that it should be designed to develop their ability to recognise the ethical features of a situation; 55% believed that it should develop their knowledge of relevant laws, organisational rules and procedures; and 45% indicated that it should focus on developing their reasoning and logical thinking skills.

### **Timing and delivery mode of professional development programs**

As far as the timing of relevant professional development opportunities is concerned, the survey identified a strong preference among respondents for programs offered during the principalship, while they are in positions in which they face the kinds of ethical dilemmas that principals encounter, rather than beforehand or during their induction period. Survey respondents also indicated that they would prefer to undertake professional development in ethical decision-making in departmental time, rather than their own.

### **Summary**

In tying this section of the paper together, it must be emphasised that principals have sent at least three messages in their responses to the survey: (i) they have recognised their lack of training and development in ethical decision-making; (ii) they have identified some of the areas in which they are keen to improve practice; and (iii) they have stated clear preferences for the timing and kinds of learning from which they believe they are likely to benefit. Indeed, there is a key message in the data that professional learning in ethical decision-making should centre on contact and engagement with other principals during their service.

It remains now to outline some of the frequent and troublesome issues involving ethical consideration reported by principals and to provide some illustrative cases which might be used to stimulate professional learning.

### **Principals' most frequent and troublesome ethical problems**

The survey on which I have reported above included several sections which sought to ascertain the kinds of ethical problems which arose most frequently for principals, and which ones they found most troublesome. Principals were asked about four categories of circumstances: those involving students; those involving staff; those involving finance and resources; and those involving external relations.

#### **Circumstances involving students**

Of 20 types of circumstances involving students principals were asked to assess, that of *dealing with harassment, intimidation or bullying by students* was identified as occurring most often (for 38% of principals, it occurred often or very often), while that of *dealing with cases of possible child abuse by individuals outside the school* was found to be most troublesome (49% of principals reported having much or a great deal of trouble dealing with it). However, the issue of *dealing with conflict between the school's values and the values taught to students at home* was identified as the most frequent and troublesome. One third (32%) of principals indicated that they encountered this kind of ethical problem often or very often, and 38% of principals reported having much or a great deal of trouble dealing with it.

#### **Circumstances involving staff**

Principals were presented with 25 types of circumstances that involved staff and could entail ethical decision-making, and were asked to assess both their frequency and their troublesomeness. In terms of frequency, *monitoring staff performance* rated most highly, with 60% of principals indicating that they faced this issue often or very often. A related ethical problem, that of *dealing with diminished work performance by staff*, rated most highly in terms

of troublesomeness, with 47% of respondents reporting that they experienced much or a great deal of trouble in resolving such problems. However, it was the former of these two circumstances that, overall, was identified as being most frequent and troublesome: not only was it faced often or very often by 60% of principals, it was also rated by 29% of principals as a problem that caused them much or a great deal of trouble to resolve.

### **Circumstances involving finance and resources**

Ten types of circumstances involving finance and resources that may entail ethical decision-making were also rated by principals in terms of both their frequency and their troublesomeness. *Deciding on the allocation of funds to curriculum areas* was clearly the most recurrent of these circumstances, with 60% of principals identifying it as one they encountered often or very often. In terms of troublesomeness, the circumstances listed in the survey questionnaire did not rate highly for most principals. The most troublesome was that of *dealing with the mismanagement of school merchandise*, with 14% of principals reporting that they experienced much or a great deal of trouble dealing with such problems. Overall, the circumstance that was identified as being most frequent and troublesome was that of *deciding on the allocation of funds for use by senior administration*. For 38% of the principals surveyed, this issue arose often or very often, and 11% of principals reported having much or a great deal of trouble dealing with it.

### **Circumstances involving external relations**

Nine circumstances that involve external relations and may entail ethical decisions were presented to principals, who rated them according to their frequency and their troublesomeness. *Dealing with policy or directives from central office* was rated as the most frequent, with 62% of principals indicating that they encountered such circumstances often or very often. Most troublesome and also, overall, most frequent and troublesome, was the issue of *dealing with overly demanding parents*: 30% of principals reported that this type of circumstance occurred often or very often, and 40% of them reported having much or a great deal of trouble in dealing with it.

Having identified the kinds of ethical issues principals reported as most frequent and troublesome, the record of accounts produced through interviews has been consulted to select illustrative examples. The cases presented below, it is argued, together with their stimulus discussion questions, could provide the beginnings of a set of professional learning materials for principals to improve their knowledge and skills in ethical decision-making.

## **Illustrative cases**

### **Circumstances involving students**

As indicated above, the issue of *dealing with conflict between the school's values and the values taught to students at home* was identified as the most frequent and troublesome in this category. Two examples of this kind of circumstance are selected and summarised from the interview data to illustrate the issue.

#### **Case 1: Fair treatment**

Peter Bourke is the principal of a large primary school that includes students from 54 different ethnic and cultural groups. The difficulty of delivering fairness across all groups is a perennial concern to Peter.

Students of a particular ethnic group recently 'borrowed' a bicycle from school and failed to return it. In their culture, 'ownership' has little significance and the 'borrowing' of the bicycle was considered to be quite acceptable. However, in mainstream Australian culture, such behaviour is commonly regarded as theft.

When faced with situations such as this, Peter has struggled with the question of how to deal fairly with students who 'see the world differently'. He believes that *taking the legal path is an easy road to take*, while readily acknowledging that this course of action *delivers fairness only in the eyes of some while alienating others*.

*Discussion Question:* Where does a resolution that is 'right, fair, just and good' lie in this case?

**Case 2: Working with the community over standards of behaviour**

Beverley Milton is the principal of a rural primary school located not far from a large metropolitan centre. According to Beverley, the school has a *number of children who come from socially and emotionally damaging environments. The behaviours they bring into the school are quite different from what is socially acceptable.* She believes that equal treatment for equal misbehaviour would be inappropriate and unfair for these children. Moreover, she believes that she should not make decisions about appropriate treatment on an *ad hoc* basis, or without some shared ground for decision-making. She explains it this way:

*I can't arrive at a decision to exclude a student from school on my own. I don't believe it's something [about which] I have the right to say, "This is a decision made on my set of moral values and my set of principles." Instead, I think the important things to have behind you are clearly articulated policies and statements about what is the general rule and how you might address exceptions to that general rule. Obviously you're not always going to have things in place – sometimes something happens that is totally unexpected. But if you do have general rules, if they're transparent, and if they have been communicated clearly, then you're less likely, I believe, to have huge dilemmas where a decision that you take is going to have big ramifications.*

**Discussion Question:** How can unequal treatment for equal misbehaviour be 'right, fair, just and good'?

**Circumstances involving staff**

In this category, the problem of *monitoring staff performance* was identified in the survey results as the most frequent and troublesome for principals. Two examples of this kind of circumstance are selected and summarised to illustrate the issue.

**Case 1: 'You have to confront the person at a certain stage'**

Adele Kingston, the principal of a medium-sized primary school, observed over time, that one of the ancillary staff was not performing satisfactorily. *He wasn't doing his job and I suspected that he had been thieving from the school. At the time, a teacher alerted me to the fact that this person had been caught stealing from a local shop. As a result, he had become very unpopular in the community.*

Adele found this a tough situation, and one that became very 'messy'. As she recalls:

*In the first instance you've got the decision about what to do when something has come to your attention. This person has been accused of thieving. It is widely known in the community and one of the teachers mentions to you, "There is something you should know." It was not something that could be ignored.*

*Then you've got to make a decision whether or not to take it up with the person, bring him in and talk to him about it. And finally, you've got the decision about whether the matter should be taken further.*

*It puts stress on you. Because he was not terribly pleased with me at the time. He became vindictive and did some quite strange things. It was a little unsafe for me when I was working back late at school. But I had an excellent cleaning staff who looked out for me.*

Adele concludes: *But I think that you do have to confront the person at a certain stage.*

**Discussion Question:** How should this issue be handled so that an ethically defensible decision is reached?

**Case 2: 'It doesn't make me feel good, but what was I to do?'**

Noel Roberts, the principal of a large secondary school, recently placed one of his mathematics teachers on diminished work performance. Prior to this, the teacher had

experienced a mild heart attack. He had returned to work after recovery, but continued to be plagued by ill health and was not performing satisfactorily. As Noel recalls:

*He did not teach the students. He wrote stuff on the blackboard and the kids were rioting. The kids who wanted to learn were told to come down to the front, and the rest could go down the back and play merry hell.*

In dealing with this situation, Noel was concerned about the well-being of the teacher.

*It's a very difficult decision. The teacher lost face and everyone knew about it even though we tried to keep it confidential. This teacher was having a miserable time. He was ill and in his fifties. When he should be looking at a fairly comfortable existence, you've virtually taken away his source of income, or his self-esteem, or whatever little self-esteem he had left. He couldn't change jobs. He had nowhere to go. And, you could ruin his whole life. You could end up destroying him. So it was a dilemma.*

However, Noel was also concerned about his responsibilities to the students.

*The teacher is there to do a job. He's affecting the lives of 150 to 200 kids, having a critical effect on their lives, and he's not accepting his responsibilities. It was nothing against the person. I couldn't tolerate it because he's there to do a job.*

Noel decided to help the teacher get a medical discharge, but the teacher did not like this at all and claimed that he was being unfairly treated. Within a month, he died of a heart attack whilst writing on the chalkboard. *I think*, reflects Noel, *that my actions contributed to his heart attack. It doesn't make me feel good. But what was I to do?*

*Discussion Question:* Was this as good as Noel could do? If not, what should he have done?

### **Circumstances involving finances and resources**

As indicated above, principals who participated in the survey found *deciding on the allocation of funds for use by senior administration* to be, overall, the most frequent and troublesome of the listed circumstances involving finances and resources. Those who took part in interviews offered some examples of such circumstances, including the following two summarised below.

#### **Case 1: The weekend retreat**

Katherine Vincent is the newly appointed principal of a large primary school. She has been considering taking her administration team of two deputies and a registrar away for a strategic planning weekend led by an outside facilitator, but the question of whether to allocate funds to an exercise for administrators alone has troubled her.

*We looked at the prices of a facilitator and ... the cost was about \$1000 per day. So I had to decide if we should have the facilitator for two days. But a perception, if it gets out to the community and to the staff, would be that I blew \$2000 on a facilitator. I've been trying to balance up the benefit to the administration team and to the school long-term against the flak that I could get from staff and community when they hear that I blew \$4000 on one night away. They could perceive it as a 'booze-up'.*

Katherine eventually decided to go ahead with the planning weekend, but only after discussing the matter with her District Director. She did this for a number of reasons, but mainly to get an external viewpoint on the issue.

*I just verbalised my concern that some staff wouldn't perceive its worth. And he said to me, 'Well, are you going to share the outcomes with*

*them?’ That helped me think about making sure I avoided problems. So I have written an article in the newsletter to parents. I’ve told the staff up front. I’ve told them why we’re going on the weekend. I’ve told the community and I’ve been honest. I’ve told them I’m paying a facilitator.*

Katherine says she feels better about a decision in which she has been honest, rather than ‘whitewashing’ something because she thinks she’ll suffer the consequences from staff and parents who hold negative views about the school.

*Discussion Question:* Is an ‘honest’ decision like this ethically defensible when the consequences may create long-term antagonism in the school and its community?

### **Circumstances involving external relations**

Among these types of circumstances, the most frequent and troublesome for principals, according to the survey results, is the problem of *dealing with overly demanding parents*. Two examples of this kind of circumstance are selected and summarised to illustrate the issue.

#### **Case 1: Letting the vote speak**

Sandra Morgan recalled the case of a parent trying to exercise power to advance his own child’s interests.

*We had a boy who was an excellent swimmer and captain of the state swimming team. His father was very keen on his son taking a place on the School Council; he spoke to me about how fitting this would be, given his son’s contribution to the school’s sporting successes. However, when we held the elections the boy did not receive enough votes from students. The parents took him out the day after the election results after telling me in no uncertain terms that I should have intervened. I am very aware of the need for a very open approach with any voting by students, so that it’s never seen that there is any corruption of the voting process, because it certainly could lend itself to that. I believe that the principal has to be seen by staff to be very straight where matters of this kind are concerned.*

*Discussion Question:* Is it true that the principal’s stand is the only ethically defensible one?

#### **Case 2: Special pleading**

Joel Benaud relates another story about openness of process in the case of an overly demanding parent.

*At the beginning of the year there was a father who felt that his daughter should have received a silver pocket for achievement rather than an award pocket for Instrumental Music. He argued his case most lucidly and gave a very sophisticated analysis of the data in terms of who got what other pockets, as well as what he thought were the many and varied defects in the process of awarding pockets. Now one of the other staff members involved in the decision-making was very critical and said that this fellow was being overbearing and unreasonable. He argued that we should ignore the father. However, I explained that we couldn’t do that, because we had a responsibility to respond in the way that the father had approached the issue: lucidly and logically. And at the end of the day we did. We explained to the father how we went about the award task and we apologised for not better informing parents about the rules until after the event. As it turned out that was his core concern and so he accepted with more or less good grace what the situation was. In this case I had to hose down those staff members who were responding emotionally and ensure that the parent was not belittled or treated like a fool.*

*Discussion Question:* What judgments could be made of the principal's actions on this matter?

### **Summary**

This section has presented a series of cases which, when coupled with the knowledge that 'face-to-face' learning is preferred by principals, should prove useful in providing a springboard for their professional development.

### **Implications for Professional Development**

The results described above capture the spirit of the experience of principals leading schools within restructured school systems. Where self-management is the platform, the school leader often feels alone, cast in the role of arbiter or mediator relying on personal values and professional ethics to make morally defensible decisions on a terrain of competing values. But finding a consistent and sustainable position in the face of competing demands from school authorities, parents, students, and the wider public isn't easy, for as the research described above indicates the task presents itself as a worrisome and ever present struggle to reach ethical resolutions amongst competing interests.

NPM is not going to go away. Therefore, urgent attention must be given to equipping principals and teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to work their way through the difficult ethical issues shaped by NPM. And it is critical that the development of professional values and knowledge about ethical issues faced by principals in self-managing schools are given high priority in in-service education programs. Without greater attention being given by providers of professional development to the ethical challenges of school decision-making, those within schools will continue to feel isolated and vulnerable.

What then, must be done in-service education with principals? I suggest three areas on which professional development might focus.

#### *(i). The Policy Context of Ethical Decision-making*

First and foremost, principals should be engaged, formally and informally, in the reflective analysis of broad political and economic policy affecting education. Knowing what is happening is a precursor to developing understanding and a personal value stance to what seem like inexorable change agendas. Understanding the 'big picture' should result in the development of personal explanations of:

- why public policies and their educational derivatives are changing in the way they are;
- what effects they are having now and are likely to have over time;
- whose interests are being served through reform;
- what practices and positions placed in jeopardy by educational change are worth defending; and
- what alternatives to the dominant orthodoxy are worth fighting for.

#### *(ii). Ethical Values*

In-service educators should build the examination of professional values into their programs. This should help principals find answers to the question: *What is distinctive about the moral dimensions of education?* If making things better for students is a core moral activity, then consideration of the impact of government policy on that outcome must lie at the heart of professional values acquisition. We suggest that programs of study and discussion about some of the contestable values dualities experienced in education, such as those listed in Table 4, would go a long way towards shaping and confirming the professional values principals now need in their everyday work.

- |  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the rights of the individual child versus the rights of majorities;</li><li>• the interests of the student versus the interests of the school;</li><li>• mainstream views versus minority views;</li></ul> |
|--|

- excellence versus effort;
- quality versus equity
- self-determination versus social responsibility;
- local need versus system priority;
- intellectual achievement versus other kinds of success;
- individual preference versus community obligation;
- compliance versus professional autonomy; and
- loyalty to parents versus loyalty to teachers.

#### **Table 4. Contestable Values Dualities**

Inquiring into and engaging with the principles underpinning these values dualities is an important process that needs to be revisited by all teachers from time to time, so that the basis for ethical decision-making is reconfirmed in the light of changing circumstances.

##### *(iii). Case Studies of Ethical Issues*

Principals should be brought together to discuss specific ethical issues and their resolution. In doing so, concentration should be given to those issues which put professional values under pressure – professional values developed through discussion of dualities like those listed above. In this way, principals would be able to test their personal professional values against real-life scenarios brought about by the political and economic changes driving education. A comprehensive data base of ethical issues for this kind of in-service education program is not yet available to our knowledge. However, Freakley and Burgh (2000), have attempted to provide the means for advancing engagement with these issues through enhanced modes of discussion that support the development of communities of ethical inquiry. A distinctive feature of their approach is the use of vignettes of ethical issues in schooling for the purposes of learning about the processes of applied ethical inquiry.

#### **Conclusion**

With the shift to school-based management which has accompanied structural reform in education over the last decade in most developed economies (Davies and Ellison, 1997), the role of the principal has assumed a primacy not experienced by previous generations of educators (Pierce, 2000, 6). Principals now have more power than they have ever had yet they are simultaneously more prone to stress related illness, redeployment and early retirement than they have ever been before. In other words, principals are now the key decision-makers in their schools but some of them suffer long-term, from the after effects of dealing unaided with the many complex issues encountered in modern school leadership and management (Pierce, 2000, 7). Many of these issues require resolution at the local school level by leaders able to reach decisions that are 'right, fair, just and good'. In short they require ethically defensible decisions justifiable in pluralist societies where climates of contestation and competing demands prevail. I hope that the ideas presented here go some way towards developing a bank of materials on which effective ethical development programs for principals can be built.

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\* **Note:** This presentation is a combination of materials produced and presented in several papers for international conferences in 2000 and 2001. The contributions of colleagues Mark Freakley and Lindsay Parry to those papers are acknowledged.