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# **The centrality of ethical leadership**

## **Introduction**

Our central thesis in this paper is that effective, ethical school leadership becomes imperative in a context of increasing performance driven accountability. Indeed we emphasise the need for ethical leadership characterised by moral, ethical and professional dimensions that are likely to produce improvements in student learning and contribute to the life chances of all students. We define ethical leadership as a social, relational practice concerned with the moral purpose of education (Angus, 2006). We concur with Niesche and Haase (2010) who argue that ethics is “a dynamic and continuing activity rather than an adherence to a system of moral codes and principles enshrined in formal policy statements” (p. 2). In this paper we are not arguing against the necessity for leaders and teachers to be contractually accountable to the system by “fulfilling the expectations of particular audiences in terms of standards, outcomes, and results” (Mulford, Edmunds, Kendall, Kendall and Bishop, 2008 p.20). Rather, our argument is that there is an urgent need for school leaders to consider multiple forms of accountability, including those concerned with issues of ethics and ethical leadership. To this end we argue for the place and purpose of ethical leadership that is aligned closely to equity and inclusivity in education (Ainscow, 2007; Carrington, 1999; Comber and Kamler, 2009; Klenowski 2009a, 2009b).

In this paper we provide a background discussion of our federally funded research study with a focus on investigating how school principals, middle managers, and teachers engage in ethical leadership practices to promote equitable learning outcomes for students. We report on preliminary interview data with school principals pertaining to their understandings of the challenges and opportunities they face in the current climate of high-stakes testing accountability. The paper begins with a discussion of the wider socio-political context of schooling in which our study is located. It then reviews some of the salient literature pertaining to ethical leadership and puts forward a theoretical framework following the work of Starratt (1991, 1996). The next part of the paper discusses the methodology that guided the study and the findings in the light of the theoretical framework and literature in the field. The final section points to future plans regarding the ongoing research project.

## **Context**

Our focus lies on the challenges and opportunities faced by school leaders in a context of data driven or contractual accountability. Australia, like many countries around the world, has embraced high stakes testing to raise standards and in so doing has increased external accountability for schools. High Stakes testing on a national level in Australia was introduced in 2008 by way of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Currently, every year all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are assessed on the same days using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. Between 2008 and 2010, it was mandatory for schools to publish results on their websites. Additionally, during these years, publication of results was undertaken individually by each state. However, from 2010 the NAPLAN results have been

published on the Federal Government's MySchool website ([www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au)) and are often cited in the press. National testing in the form of NAPLAN, together with the publication of results, has become a significant part of the educational landscape.

The impact of these high stakes tests on jurisdictions, school principals, parents and students has been considerable. The public availability of achievement measures via the Australian Federal Government's My School website has resulted in both intended and unintended outcomes. Published Australian research on the impact of high stakes literacy and numeracy testing (Hardy and Boyle, 2011; Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2011) has shown how an approach to accountability through testing runs the risk of repeating unintended consequences similar to those experienced in the United States and England. These consequences have been well documented by Stobart (2008) who has illustrated the "uses and abuses of testing" and Nichols and Berliner (2007) who have discussed how "high stakes testing corrupts schools".

The Australian government's push for high stakes testing stems from a desire to achieve public accountability, demonstrate transparency and maintain public confidence in the standards of schooling. A key issue for educators in Australia is meeting systemic accountability demands and the government requirements while also ensuring high quality and high equity teaching and learning. It is our argument that ethical leadership is required to achieve these goals in a context of competing accountabilities. By competing accountabilities we refer to different types of accountabilities (such as moral, professional and contractual) (Eraut, 1993) that may be in tension with one another. In the current context, leaders may find themselves in conflicting situations when system's demands (i.e. contractual accountability) are indicating one course of action and their personally held values about what is the most equitable way of meeting students' needs (i.e. moral accountability) are suggesting another (Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber, 2006). This study, then, investigates questions of how ethical school leadership operates in a context of increasing performance driven accountability is our central question.

### **Ethical leadership**

We define ethical leadership as a social, relational practice concerned with the moral purpose of education (Angus, 2006) since ethics is about relationships with others (Preston, 2007) and leadership is a human centred relational activity (Ehrich and Knight, 1998). Ethical leaders, in this professional context, are those who act fairly and justly. They are viewed as caring, honest, and principled persons who make balanced decisions and who communicate the importance of ethics and ethical behaviour to their followers (Brown and Trevino, 2006). Moreover, they promote values such as inclusion, collaboration, and social justice when working with staff and students alike. In this way, they promote the achievement of all students, especially those who are least advantaged and marginalised by the current system.

Several writers in the field of educational leadership have provided important frameworks to help illuminate ethical leadership. Earlier approaches to ethics and ethical leadership have referred to a single approach to understanding ethics and solving ethical dilemmas (Eyal,

Berkovich and Schwartz, 2011). An example is the work of Noddings (1984) who argues for an “ethic of care” where care should be the over-riding focus to guide educators’ personal and professional actions and Beck (1992) who “places caring at the top of the values hierarchy” (p.488) within the field of educational leadership practice. This singular perspective lies in contrast to Starratt’s work (1991, 1996, 2009) and that of his colleagues (see Langlois and Lapointe, 2007; Shapiro and Gross, 2013; Stefkovich and Begley, 2007; Furman, 2004) who have put forward a multi-dimensional framework to explore ethical leadership that incorporates three ethics: an ethic of care, an ethic of justice and an ethic of critique. For the purposes of this study, Starratt’s (1991, 1996) framework is discussed.

*The three ethics: Care, Justice and Critique (following Starratt 1991, 1996)*

According to Starratt (1996), an ethic of care refers to a standpoint of regard for the dignity and worth of individuals that “requires fidelity to persons, a willingness to acknowledge their right to be who they are, an openness to encountering them in their authentic individuality, a loyalty to the relationship” (p. 163). It places human relationships at the centre of leadership where all voices are heard and valued (Beck, 1992; Noddings, 1984; Shapiro and Gross, 2013). While an ethic of care is relationally driven, an ethic of justice is concerned with fair and equitable treatment of people (Starratt, 1996). Here justice is “understood as individual choices to act justly, and justice understood as the community’s choice to direct or govern its actions justly” (p. 163). Both types of justice are said to be important. Leaders who are driven by an ethic of justice create an environment whereby democratic practices operate build and where a strong community spirit is nurtured (Starratt, 1991, 1996). The final ethic, an ethic of critique, draws insights from the work of critical theorists who question power structures in social relationships and institutions. This ethic requires that leaders reflect on current policies/practices so that they may uncover injustice or exploitation that is embedded in social structures. The challenge for leaders, then, is to redress injustices and make social practices more responsive to the needs of all in the community (Starratt, 1991, 1996). Starratt (1991, 1996) maintains that all organisational structures, relationships and arrangements can be scrutinised in an endeavour to achieve greater equity for all students and staff.

Starratt’s (1991, 1996) framework offers a useful heuristic for the exploration ethics in educational leadership for this study. According to his framework, however, the three forms of ethics described by Starratt are not discrete, rather they are interrelated and “each implies something of the other” (1991, p. 198). For instance, an ethic of critique is based on a sense of social justice and human rights while an ethic of justice could not operate without a level of caring about relationships. Moreover, an ethic of critique requires an ethic of caring if it is to focus on the importance of relationships. The three ethics in Starratt’s model complement and enrich each other (Starratt, 1991, 1996). *The ethics of operating in times of test based accountability: Prevalence of ethical dilemmas*

In many parts of the world, schooling has been characterised by high stakes testing and data driven accountability. Yet school leaders also respond to the “moral purpose” (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992) and ideals of social justice in education. In the current climate, it is not surprising that school leaders face conflicting pressures when making decisions concerned

with student data (Peterson, 2005). When decisions are required to be made among competing sets of values or principles, ethical dilemmas emerge (Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber, 2006). These dilemmas are likely to pull leaders in a variety of directions as they struggle to meet the demands of the system on the one hand and the specific needs of students and staff on the other. Some of the early research on ethical dilemmas and school leadership (see Cranston *et al.*, 2006; Day, Harris and Hadfield, 1999; Dempster and Berry, 2003) categorised the sources of tension leaders faced and identified competing tensions within dilemmas. For example, school leaders in an Australian qualitative study conducted by Cranston *et al.* (2006) pointed to poor performing staff and student issues as the major sources of their dilemmas, while Dempster and Berry (2003) categorised four sources of ethical tension and these related to students, staff, finance, and resources. Two competing tensions that emerged from the dilemmas described by leaders in the study by Cranston *et al.* (2006) included (i) balancing the needs of individual underperforming staff (i.e. showing mercy and compassion) Vs the needs of the school and student community; and (ii) adhering to the rules / regulations (i.e. zero tolerance policy) Vs mercy and compassion (to the individuals concerned). What was apparent in the findings of their study was the dominant value of a duty of care. In many cases, this meant that the principals' ethic of care took precedence over school rules.

Norberg and Johansson (2007) conducted a study of educational leaders (including principals and aspiring principals) in Sweden to understand their ethical dilemmas. Key ethical dilemmas identified by principals in their sample included misbehaving staff and students, students uncomfortable in school, and various dilemmas concerning parents and superintendents. Tensions emerged for principals when their professional loyalties were challenged (i.e. do I support the student or the staff member?). Here there was often a conflict between the principals' professional values and their personal values. The finding that dilemmas for principals mainly concerned students is consistent with the work of others (Cranston *et al.*, 2006; Dempster and Berry, 2003) including Begley (2005) whose study of Canadian and American principals saw "student's best interest" as a key concern for leaders. In more recent times, research and writing have explored how leaders make decisions in the current climate, characterised by increasing forms of "external" (Knapp and Feldman, 2012) or "test based" (Strike, 2007) accountability. Spillane and Kenny (2012) ask "how school administration manages the dual organisational imperatives of legitimacy and integrity in a changing institutional environment" (p.543). Strike (2007) answers this question stating that ethical leaders are those who manage to find a balance. They do this by "find[ing] ways to honor ... mandates and benchmarks while serving a praiseworthy conception of education and creating a professional democratic, and deliberative culture in ... school[s]" (p.148). Yet, how leaders balance different forms of accountability is likely to vary across school contexts because balance is a subjective and highly contextual concept. We concur with Mintrop (2012) that balance "does not mean equal weights but assigning weights according to a rank order of normative importance" (p. 702).

The work of Mintrop (2012) is useful as he provides three possible responses educators may draw upon when working in a climate characterised by external accountability obligations.

These responses are resistance, alignment, and coherence. Of these, he argued that coherence resonates most closely with balance because it neither resists nor aligns with systemic requirements but endeavours to forge “productive congruence and consensus between external demands and internal programs and orientations” (Mintrop, 2012, p.702). Each of his three responses is now discussed.

### *Responses by educators to external accountability: Resistance, alignment and coherence*

Mintrop (2012) argues that resistance, as a sole strategy, tends not to be used widely by school leaders because its consequences could lead to termination of their employment. *Resistance* would mean ignoring or subverting top down mandates or benchmarks and pursuing leaders’ and teachers’ own standards of education. While resistance is a turning away from the system, *alignment* is a turning towards the system and embracing the system’s needs. Schools that align:

“internally reorder goals, programs, and data with system elements. They focus on the system goals, deemphasise non-tested subjects [and] carefully orient instruction to test items that recur on state tests” (p.698).

*Coherence* refers to a whole school approach where schools “develop a sense of shared responsibility for high performance, and establish consistency between external accountability and a school’s internal accountability culture” (Mintrop, 2012, p. 698). Schools that pursue coherence are those that strive to achieve “integrity” as they are able to “interrogate accountability demands ... and maintain sensitivity for countervailing student needs” (p. 699). Integrity has a strong moral dimension because it is concerned for the betterment of students (Eraut, 1993).

Utilising “coherence” as a strategy would mean leaders using a variety of data to inform their school’s performance to help them make judgements about whether they are providing a good education (Strike, 2007, p.xvi). This was the case in a study by Knapp and Feldman (2012) that explored the leadership practices of schools leaders in 15 US schools. In their study, leaders used a variety of data to lead school improvement to gain a clearer picture of the school’s situation. This included not only student test score data but other forms of environmental surveys, observations, feedback from external others and students’ work. The leaders used the data to help them identify achievement gaps that “provided a basis for professional forms of accountability” (p.684). While the aforementioned discussion has focused on the ethical challenges of working in a climate of high stakes testing, the next part of the paper considers the methodology that guided the current study.

## **Methodology**

This paper is derived from a large federally funded study that involves a partnership between two universities and six schools in Queensland, Australia. Its focus lies with the role of

ethical leadership in improving student learning and equity in a time of increasing accountability. This paper, then, addresses two key research questions:

1. What are the current practices in which school leaders engage that fit within an ethical leadership framework?
2. How do leaders balance current competing accountabilities?

To answer these questions, we carried out interviews with the principals of each of the six partner schools to explore their current understandings of ethical leadership, current practices in the school that fit within an ethical framework, and competing accountabilities or tensions they face in their role. These interviews were held early in the life of the project so that we could gain a sense of the principals' views about ethical leadership before we started working closely with them on our three year research project.

Interviews were conducted because they have the advantage of collecting large amounts of data about participants' perspectives relatively quickly and enable opportunities for clarification to be made (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). To analyse the interview data, we used the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 2006) that allowed categories based on similar ideas to be brought together to generate themes. Concurrently, we used a theme coding system (based on theoretical constructs taken from Starratt, 1996) to assist in the reorganising of data (Minichiello *et al.*, 1990). We also looked for illustrations of Mintrop's (2012) three core strategies used by leaders who are working in systems characterised by strong external accountability. To protect the identity of principals and schools, pseudonyms have been used in this paper.

The six partner schools include five regional state high schools and one urban state primary school. In the initial phase of this project, a member of the research team presented each of the six partner schools with a situational analysis based on publicly available data, including school performance data from NAPLAN and the Queensland Core Skills Test<sup>1</sup> and demographic data from each school. These data showed that the five secondary schools sat below the national mean on the Index for Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), with an average of 46% of students recognised as being in the most disadvantaged quartile. The ICSEA rating for the urban primary school, on the other hand, identified it as a relatively advantaged school.

### **(i) Current Leadership Practices**

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<sup>1</sup> In Queensland a system of school-based externally moderated assessment operates at Years 11 and 12. Year 12 students sit for the Queensland Core Skills Test that is used in the calculation of the Overall Position (OPs) and Field Positions (FPs) to rank students for tertiary entrance. An individual student's QCS Test result is not used on its own in the calculation of their OP – instead group results are used as part of the statistical scaling processes. The student's score is reported on the student's Senior Statement or Statement of Results ([www.qsa.qld.edu.au](http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au)).

Five of the six principals were interviewed by telephone and one was interviewed face to face. Except for two interviews that were conducted by one of the authors of this paper, the rest of the interviews were carried out by two of them. Interviews followed an interview schedule (see Appendix 1) and lasted between 30 – 40 minutes, which we felt constituted sufficient time for principals to share with us their understandings and describe some current practices at this early point in our collaborative research project. Key themes that emerged from an analysis of the interviews included the pervasiveness of data use and the centrality of ethics and challenges of being ethical. Insights from Starratt's (1991, 1996) and Mintrop's (2012) work were used to help explore and explain the way in which the school principals talked about their work. Each of these themes is now discussed.

### **Data Usage**

All of the principals in the study agreed that over the last ten to fifteen years, there has been a heightened need to not only understand the meaning of data but also to use it as the basis for making important decisions. They referred to a range of data both internal and external (Knapp & Feldmann, 2012). One principal in particular emphasised the importance of data in every school-based decision, including “the foods that we serve at the tuckshop” (Jane). At the other end of the spectrum was a principal who said “I don't live and breathe data. I prefer to do the capacity building and I am strategic in what I want to do” (Ira).

Within this range were two principals who cautioned that data should be used carefully and its limitations acknowledged. For example, John said: “it does not tell you where the kid is at or the sort of person they are”. Similarly another principal said “every piece of data has a story with it and I think the two need to go together” (Carey). This same principal stated how important it is not to draw naive interpretations based upon performance data but to see it holistically in the context of the school and the students' lives.

A key challenge principals identified was to help teachers understand data so that they could use it and target their teaching appropriately. One principal (William), who admitted that he has a strong maths background, said he does most of the school data analysis himself. He then works closely with members of his leadership team to make sense of and disseminate the analysis. This was a fairly common strategy enunciated by principals who indicated they shared data with members of their leadership team first. School leaders then devolve responsibility for working with teachers to arrive at a way forward to heads of department. For example, one principal saw his role as:

“sharing what that is when it is all tallied up ... and then sharing back to the teachers and to some extent the community as well but ... not to the same details. [He saw his role also to] ...filter what are the trends and patterns and the useful things that we should consider and can do something about” (Carey)

While all of the principals expressed a desire for their staff to become more data savvy, they referred to a diversity of practice. Some staff in the schools had a very good grasp of data analysis and were using data to change their practices, whereas others were either



disinterested or unwilling to respond. One principal referred to a strong interventionist approach she was using to get staff to engage with data. She said:

“We have changed the culture of the use and need to use it and use it effectively... I am having this debate at the moment with my school ... I want teachers to know where their kids are at, what they know, what they understand, how they are travelling and have given that information to the kids and then the kids go forward”. (Sara)

### **The centrality of ethics and the challenge of being ethical**

All of the principals were acutely aware of the central role of ethics in decision-making and that ethical practice needs to extend to every member of the school community. One principal referred to ethics as “doing the right thing for the right reason” (John) while another said it was “doing the right thing even when no one is watching you and checking you ... even though it may not always be popular or well received by some people”. (Carey). One of the principals linked ethics to “best interests of students” when she said,

“Ethics are to do whatever needs to be done to improve the student outcomes... if it is good for the child then it’s got to be good, and it’s matching what’s good for the student but good for the student in this community and this school” (Jane)

Determining what is “good” or “right” is not necessarily easy as one principal said “you’re always challenged in making ethical decisions” (William). A number of the principals pointed to what they deemed to be unethical practices operating in schools. One said,

“... You hear about improper practices by some principals who get into trouble for it [detering students from sitting NAPLAN tests] ... I haven’t gone down the track that those people have but at the same time I can understand them caving into pressure” (William)

As the current climate places so much attention on test scores, it is understandable that some principals might choose to pursue practices that could be considered “unethical” in an attempt to meet these high expectations for performance.

### **The three ethics: Ethic of care, justice, and critique**

In the analysis of the data, it became apparent that some statements made by principals could have been categorised as fitting under more than one ethic. Starratt (1991, 1996) explained that each of the three ethics (care, critique and justice) is inter-related and each ethic assumes the presence of the other/s. In the discussion that follows, we have placed statements under one of the three ethics that we considered to be the best.

#### *Ethic of care*

Throughout the comments made by principals was a resounding concern and care for the well-being and opportunities of all students. All of the principals indicated their belief in a strong moral purpose of schools to support students to achieve their potential, feel good about

learning, and develop skills and knowledge that will carry them into their futures. Some statements made by principals that reflect an ethic of care are below:

“It’s all about having kids feel good about their learning and about their school and parents having confidence in the school” (Ira)

“My desire is obviously to get each young person to reach their potential in whatever that means. I mean I have a balanced perspective about each young person. Being in the school that I am in, I can’t just have a focus on ...university bound students. We’ve got to have the opportunity to provide excellent opportunities for all young people” (Sara)

“a belief that every kid should and is entitled to the opportunity of education to leave here with life skills” (John)

An illustration provided by Jane referred to a child who arrived at her school to be enrolled yet was not living in the school’s catchment area. She said the rules are strict and allow only 5% of students in the school to come from outside the catchment area. Although she had already reached this quota, she decided to ignore the policy and accept this child because she was concerned for his well-being.

Another principal referred to part-time programs the school offers for students. While not all schools in Queensland provide this type of flexibility, William believes it is important to support students who may not otherwise continue studying. He gave the example of a student who works part-time as a maid in one of the hotels in the community and is currently undertaking English and maths subjects. He said this type of part-time program was common in his school and was an attempt to “provide for students’ future” (William). Yet the problem with part-time programs means that some students never complete the requisite number of subjects to qualify for a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) (senior certificate) and schools are judged on the basis of the percentage of students who receive a QCE. William said,

“I would love to see us get 100% of students with QCEs but because we have got an off-campus site for basically some of the street kids in [school’s location], and they are only doing a few subjects a year, we are never actually going to have an opportunity to get that 100% QCEs because those kids will not finish QCEs while they are at school” (William)

### *Ethic of justice*

Closely related to an ethic of care were statements that pointed to an ethic of justice. Here all principals referred to equity, equality, and equality of opportunity, ensuring that all students (regardless of their personal, social, cultural or academic circumstances) can learn and achieve. Some illustrations include:

“All students are entitled to an education and equality in education. Equality of opportunity [so that] every student that walks [through] this gate has an opportunity to

learn, develop and to leave here with skills to articulate into meaningful employment or further study” (John)

“the challenge is keeping your sights on the full range of kids in the school. Are we still managing to continue to add value to the kids who are doing well in the school? Or are we just focused on the kids who are poor performing... So it is a challenge to keep all the balls juggling around to ensure that all our students are being catered for” (Ira)

An example of an ethic of justice provided by Jane was the employment of representative democracy in her school where there is parental representation from different ethnic groups on the school council. She indicated how important it is to ensure that parents from different cultural groups have a voice and are able to contribute to discussions about the direction of the school.

For another principal, Carey, an ethic of justice tied into the role of schooling and how it should provide a particular type of environment that enables students to develop into fully functioning, fair and just human beings. He said,

“I see school as far more than just reading and writing. I see it much more as well developed adults by the time they leave school, who have a sense of fairness, equity, justice, belief in fair play that sort of thing from school. So I see school as a place where a lot of that growing up maturity can happen with youngsters so that by the time we finish with them not only can they function at an academic level they also function well at a social level. I have always had that belief that education is much more than good results” (Carey)

### *Ethic of critique*

This ethic was apparent in the discussions of principals in two main ways. First, it applied to principals who were engaged in questioning the system, and second it applied to principals who questioned teachers’ practices by challenging them to think differently about the way they are working with students. Questioning and/or challenging the status quo can be viewed as illustrations of an ethic of critique (Starratt, 1991).

#### *Questioning the system.*

Two examples emerged where school principals engaged in an ethic of critique. The first example concerned a principal who refused to follow a directive from a supervisor while the second concerned a principal who questioned current schooling practice through his work in a professional association. In the first example, William said:

“one of my supervisors advised me to pull out as many kids as I could, who I thought wouldn’t be performing well on the test [NAPLAN] and I found that quite unethical that sort of comment and I haven’t followed down that track.”

He conceded that while there may be some exceptional circumstances where students should be exempted from sitting national examinations, he went on to say that it is incumbent upon the school to “try to provide for those students who aren’t performing to try to perform at their very best”.

The second example came from Carey who reflected that there had been a number of instances in the past where he was asked to follow what he understood as “unethical” policy or directives from the department. Carey indicated that previously he had spoken out about such matters but soon learned that this strategy did not get him too far. He says he now challenges the system not so much as a solo voice but through his work in a legitimate influential professional body, QSPA (Queensland Secondary Principals’ Association). He said:

“I get involved in influential groups a lot more now... My contribution to those groups is often feeding back up really. QSPA is a good example. ...Part of the debate often is dealing with things that we are told that we have to do. And often my voice is around feeding back up well why should we do this? Why are we doing this? What’s the point of this? (Carey)

*Challenging / questioning teacher practice.*

All of the principals gave examples of how they used their position in the school to challenge teachers to avoid complacency and to strive to achieve the very best outcomes for all students. For example, one principal said he is in a good position to have conversations with people who are not acting ethically and he has been able to set up “processes in the school that ensure that ... equity takes place and that we do things with integrity” (John). Some other examples include:

“I always felt one of my challenges is to try to convince people that because the [X] community is low SES that we shouldn’t necessarily accept that students aren’t achieving at the highest level. I think that’s a cop out” (William)

“I think [my role] is to stimulate thoughts to make people think about their practices. I am a big, reviewing the system stock person. Are we doing this the best way? Is there a better way?... That sort of leadership is at the cultural level ... to change the culture of the school from a place that you know we know what we are doing” (Carey)

“I think my job is to continue challenging and creating that challenge to get staff to engage with the data for the students.... to try and get staff to see it from a point of view of how does this help inform practice?” (Ira)

The principals’ descriptions in these cases often reflect their ethic of care or justice for the school; care in terms of high expectations for all students, and justice in terms of fair and equitable school-based practices. Principals’ ethics of critique therefore leads them to challenge or question the actions of those who do not appear to act in accordance with these ethics

**(ii) Balancing competing priorities: Alignment, resistance, coherence**

The final research question in this study discusses the way in which principals balanced competing priorities in their schools. The concepts of Mintrop (2012) are considered here since his work identifies ways in which leaders responded to competing accountability requirements.

All of the principals in the study gave examples of *alignment* where they organised goals and programs in the school to achieve the demands of the system. They gave examples of specially targeted programs that were implemented in the school that helped students prepare for external tests such as NAPLAN and the QCS test (which contributes towards a university entrance score). For example, one principal referred to the “explicit teaching of writing to improve NAPLAN [results]” (Sara).

The response or strategy of *resistance* (Mintrop, 2012) was discussed the least by principals which is not surprising since resistance is not likely to be widespread (Hursh, 2003 in Mintrop, 2012). Perhaps two illustrations, discussed earlier under an ethic of critique, come closest to fitting within this strategy. The first of these referred to William who refused to follow a directive from his supervisor and the second referred to Carey who spoke out against the system in a number of forums.

In terms of *coherence* principals gave examples of how they endeavoured to work with staff to improve student performance. For example, Ira said that when he started out his career as a principal, he saw himself as a manager who would willingly follow system directives and work with staff to adopt them. Over time, he has learned to look at the system and predict what is coming so that he can move the school forward and meet systemic expectations but at the same time, “keep it focused on student learning and staff capabilities without having that compliance, artefact type process in the school” (Ira)

All of the principals referred to ethical tensions and dilemmas they faced in their work because of the competing pressures impinging upon them. Some of these include:

- subject selection in the senior years (i.e. advising students to choose an academic pathway that will lead to a university entrance score or advising them to choose a pathway that will prevent a university entrance score because of a prediction of the student not being able to achieve a score that qualifies)
- forcing all students to sit the NAPLAN test when it is known that some of them would be better off spending those few days involved in one-on-one teaching and learning experiences
- Following departmental directives that contravene one’s own strongly held beliefs about the purpose of education
- Following departmental directives knowing that these directives will put extra pressure on teachers
- Teaching for learning or teaching for the test

While principals in the study were acutely aware of the tensions they faced in their daily activities, they also sought to balance competing tensions by achieving *coherence* in order to provide the best possible outcomes for their schools. One principal summed up it well when he said,

“It’s a fine line that you work through so that staff and the community don’t feel that they are doing this for compliance but they’re actually doing it for the good of the school and good for the learning and teaching for the school” (Ira)

Another principal reflected on a time in his career that was informative in helping him understand the need for balance. He said:

“I went through a difficult time about six or seven years back when it really started to hit and this school certainly wasn’t performing at that stage and I had to make sure that we got our performance up while at the same time maintaining an ethical approach ... I think other people might have given up but I certainly didn’t do so” (William)

## **Discussion**

The findings of the current study revealed that data use was ubiquitous across the schools. These school leaders indicated they are increasingly basing their decisions upon a variety of data. This is consistent with findings from other studies examining school leaders and data usage (see Knapp and Feldman, 2012; Mintrop, 2012) in the current context of data driven accountability.

The leaders in the study were able to articulate their own understandings of ethics, which were tied closely to the notions of care and equity for all students and working to achieve students’ best interests. For these leaders, ethics and leadership are inseparable because they acknowledged that they themselves operate from a values based position and are guided by those values when decision-making (Ciulla, 2006). Literature in the field of ethical leadership (see Lawton *et al.*, 2013; Preston and Samford, 2002) maintains that ethical leaders are those persons who not only employ ethical practices themselves, but they also raise awareness of the importance of ethics by discussing it with staff. While examples of the ethic of critique including questioning staff behaviour, it is interesting to note that none of these principals reported overtly speaking with their staff about the topic of ethics. One principal (Carey) further indicated that there is a paucity of talk about ethics throughout the school system. While data use was discussed widely by leaders, the “ethical” use of data was not. Even so, it could be argued that through the leaders’ personally held values and ethical conduct, and by engaging teachers in focused conversations about teaching, ethics was an implied part of their agenda. The responses from our interviews suggest, however, that a more overt approach to discussing values and ethical conduct may be beneficial at all levels of the school system.

The findings of this study suggest that many of the illustrations provided by school leaders indicated an adherence to the notions of ethical leadership following the work of Starratt (1991,1996). Starratt’s (1991, 1996) multi-dimensional model proved itself to be useful to

interpret the principals' comments regarding their leadership in terms of how they use data in the school. Other studies (see Langlois and Lapointe, 2010; Sherman and Grogan, 2003) have also used his three ethics in their analysis of leaders' perceptions about their work. The current study found that an ethic of care was a key element of how the leaders spoke about students in their school. This finding supports other studies (Cranston *et al.*, 2006; Ehrich, 2010; Eyal *et al.*, 2011) that have underscored the centrality of an ethic of care in the beliefs and work practices of leaders. All of the principals indicated they believe in providing opportunities for students to reach their potential, to learn and develop, and to gain important skills that will carry them into the workforce and/or further study.

Both an ethic of care and ethic of justice (Starratt, 1991, 1996) were evident in the types of programs school leaders described that were established for students (i.e. part-time programs, various interventionist programs to assist students to receive improved high stakes data results) to help them improve their life chances. Principals were aware of the importance of equitable practices, equitable usage of resources, and equitable treatment of students given their circumstances. Their statements reflected a position that a good education is one that is not fixated on test scores; rather it is holistic and provides valuable learning opportunities for all students (Strike, 2007). Such a perspective aims to find a good balance between competing demands, which would be tailored to meet the contextual of each school (Mintrop, 2012).

School principals are located at the interface between the system and the school. As the formal officers within their schools they are in a good position to create organisational cultures that promote ethical practices (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992; Starratt, 2009). Through the way leaders communicate and demonstrate ethical behaviour themselves, they are able to set an ethical tone in their schools (Manning, 2003). The principals in this study were aware of their role in setting an ethical tone and they used their influence in a variety of ways to bring about changes to existing practices that needed redress. For example principals referred to the ways in which they facilitated conversations between staff members so that teachers could begin to engage in work in ways to improve the learning of all students. Many of the principals indicated they were not prepared to accept complacency from teachers; rather they challenged them to reflect on their current attitudes and practices. This type of approach is an illustration of an ethic of critique (Starratt, 1996) and points to leaders as morally accountable agents (Eraut, 1993). Another clear example of an ethic of critique was evident in the actions of William who refused to follow his supervisor's directive believing this advice to be "unethical". This act of defiance could be construed as "resistance" (Mintrop, 2012).

According to writers (see Eyal *et al.*, 2011; Knapp and Feldman, 2012; Mintrop, 2012; Strike, 2007), it is important that leaders are able to find a balance in how they act upon competing priorities in schools. Yet what this balance looks like in practice is not commonly discussed nor likely to be the same in every context. In this study, principals spoke about the need to balance a variety of demands such as demands from the system, demands from the community, demands from teachers, and demands from students. The dilemma between adhering to the system's needs (i.e. rules / regulations) versus the needs of individual students (i.e. mercy and compassion to individuals) (Cranston *et al.*, 2006) was one of a number of

dilemmas articulated by these principals. Our analysis of principals' comments, suggested that they were endeavouring to achieve "coherence" by building "a sense of shared responsibility for high performance, and establish[ing] consistency between external accountability and a school's internal accountability culture" (Mintrop, 2012, p.698). Yet, they commented on the challenge that this posed given the multiple balls they are required to juggle. These tensions have been described in the leadership literature (Badaracco, 1992; Cranston *et al.*, 2006; Duignan, 2012; Norberg and Johansson, 2007) and we would argue that the "predominant culture of accountability" (Duignan, 2012, p. 9) in which leaders now work has not lessened but only exacerbated these tensions.

As identified earlier, all of the principals referred to strategies that could be construed as alignment whereby the school's goals, programs and data were aligned to the external accountability system (Mintrop 2012). Here school leaders provided many illustrations of intervention and remedial programs and efforts to align the curriculum to standards and tests. Yet such strategies were not implemented without doubts and questioning. For instance, one principal in particular, Sara, discussed a perennial dilemma she faced between time allocated for teachers to provide teaching for learning and teaching to the test. **Conclusion**

This paper has explored six Australian school principals' perceptions of ethical leadership practice in the current climate of high stakes accountability. The findings pointed to the pervasiveness of data use in informing principals' ethical practices and their work with teachers. The three inter-connected ethics of Starratt's (1991, 1996) model of ethical leadership were evident in the accounts by leaders with many examples provided of an ethic of care, critique and justice. Mintrop's (2012) three strategies, that are used by leaders who work in climates influenced by externally driven accountability requirements, were also identified by leaders in the study. Here they described how their programs were designed to meet the system's needs (i.e. alignment) and how they endeavoured to strike a balance between external demands and student needs (i.e. coherence). That Mintrop's third strategy of resistance was not commonly discussed by principals was anticipated given that principals, by virtue of their formal position, are expected to preserve stability by not "rocking the boat" (Ehrich and English 2012). Yet, resistance, could be construed as being present in the examples provided by two principals who spoke of the ways in which they challenged the system (i.e. the department). An important finding was the way in which principals indicated they engaged teachers in challenging conversations whereby they questioned them about their expectations and practices regarding student learning and performance.

A key focus of our federally funded study, from which this exploratory paper forms a part, is to continue to support these school leaders by helping them to reflect upon the ways in which they respond to the external demands of the system. To date we have worked in each of the six schools and assisted school staff to identify and design action research projects that demonstrate ethical leadership practices that promote equitable learning outcomes for students. Most of the schools have identified at least two projects in which they are currently engaged or planning to engage. For one of these projects, a researcher with expertise in data analysis is helping principals and middle level managers interpret, analyse and plan intervention strategies to improve high stakes testing data results in the schools. This



particular work can be construed as fitting within alignment focused strategies (Mintrop, 2012) since these strategies are helping schools respond more effectively to contractual accountability demands. At the same time, this work is challenging school principals to consider equity as a key platform since it is assisting them to establish processes and structures that allow all students to leave school equipped with basic skills and qualifications that will improve their life chances. Hence our work is aimed at encouraging school principals to use strategies supportive of “coherence” (Mintrop, 2012).

Projects developed by principals and the school research teams in conjunction with the university researchers include:

- Examining the impact of new approaches to senior schooling on student achievement  
Exploring how the school can support and manage mental health issues in the school community
- Considering methods for improving data use for all teachers
- Investigating how schools can support teachers in their use of data to inform their pedagogical practices in themed classes
- Examining how a school can improve their communication and collaboration with parents and community members
- Exploring ways to improve the motivation and aspirations of all students
- Investigating how mathematics teachers can improve teaching and assessment of thinking and reasoning
- Developing and trialling new approaches to embed literacy in all subject areas
- Examining the impact of coaching and mentoring to improve guided reading practices on students’ reading performance

Several members of the team are working in one or more schools to help teachers engage in action research cycles where teachers are collecting specific types of data, reflecting on it and then arriving at strategies to improve practice. Our work as critical friends is designed to help both principals and teachers interrogate current practice and come to new understandings about different ways of working that favour equity and justice for all students. Our ongoing research aims to provide rich case studies of ethical leadership practices in the work of teachers and school leaders via these key projects.

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## Appendix 1

- How do you as a leader use data to inform your practice?
  - How does the school overall use data to inform practice?
  - What types of data do you find the most useful for informing practices in your school
  - What types of data do you find you use the least for informing practices in your school?
- What are your goals and priority areas for the school?
  - How have you identified these goals?
- Tell me about your understandings of ethical and equitable practices
  - How do your morals / ethics influence your leadership?
  - Has your understandings of ethical and equitable practices change over time?
- What are the ethical issues surrounding the use of data in and for your school?
  - Have you faced any ethical issues as a result of the context of increasing data-driven accountabilities?
  - Are the ethics of data use regularly discussed by staff members?