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talk2learn highlights

Inspiring leaders;
improving children's lives

Issue 3b

In case you missed it...

Recent highlights from NCSL in Dialogue, talk2learn's
online community for national education debate

Also available as a podcast

What does moral leadership mean to me?

Moral purpose is one of the foundations of school leadership today but is it easier to espouse than to practise? In a talk2learn discussion on the topic, heads described how a wide variety of issues tested the courage of their convictions on a daily basis.

The decision to exclude a pupil, in particular, raises moral conflicts for leaders, as one head described in her turmoil over how to cope with one problem child:

"I want to keep the child in school – he's a delight when he is not hurting other children or staff. I want to keep the other children in class safe and I want my staff to be able to feel comfortable and not as if they are walking on a knife edge.



"I have lots of agencies involved but have come to the end of myself in terms of any new resources to put in. I don't want to have to justify every move but feel I have to. It's a dilemma!"

Moral purpose is one of the foundations of school leadership

Knowing that you take the ultimate responsibility can make headship a lonely place, she added –

"We have to make decisions, be able to live with ourselves afterwards and offer our support to all of those involved." ►

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Justifying every step – at least to one’s self – is, perhaps, the crux of moral leadership, agreed Michael Gallagher:

“As heads, we have a great deal of power and there is a temptation to think that our colleagues should just accept the decisions we make simply because we hold that position. Is it not better to constantly check out our decisions in a “moral” way?”

The need for true moral purpose to take account of the views and values of all school stakeholders was captured by Jayne Franklin in her contribution on inclusion:

“The key for me is building the capacity in our community to discuss these issues and not take it for granted how our values present themselves in reality.”

On a wider perspective, Iain Gilmour described how a new approach with parents diverted attempts to question his moral authority:

“A parent complained about a child and my usual approach would have been to say that I’ve done a, b and c and I hope that the problem should be solved. More often than not, the parent often says that a, b and c have been tried before and didn’t work and if it was their child they would have done x, y and z.

“So I simply said I had dealt with it. Interestingly enough, the parent said ‘OK, thank you’ and we went on to discuss some other issues. My thinking is that this is saying to the parent ‘trust me, I’m a professional’ with all the moral implications that I now know that brings.”

In support, one contributor said heads and teachers often lamented the fact that the role did not command the trust and respect evident a generation ago.

“Are we so entrenched in the current focus of accountability that our courage and confidence in our own professional judgement

is eroded? By justifying everything to those we feel accountable to, are we actually jeopardising the trust we are trying to build?” she asked.

Many seemingly everyday operational decisions had strong moral elements which are sometimes overlooked, she added.

“For example, should I let the after school club have a Halloween party? Should I favour the painter’s quote who happens to be a parent of a child at the school? The list goes on. I think we become very adept at using our value system to make decisions often without realising.”



Andrew Evans agreed – “I had not considered before that how we assess students, track their progress or group them had a moral element. I can see now that practical systems can say a huge amount about our commitment to helping every individual succeed and achieve their personal best – a key moral educational principle.”

Linda Stott said heads’ decisions would always be challenged and that although this took its toll, schools would be poorer places if leaders did not question themselves and their colleagues. ■

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