Thesis submitted for the award of Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD)

Moral leadership in an age of accountability: reconciling contrasting imperatives. A study of executive headteachers in England.

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Abstract

This thesis explored how moral leadership was understood and enacted by executive headteachers working in an age of high accountability in England. The research investigated leaders' moral frameworks, the moral tensions experienced in their roles and how they sought to reconcile any tensions between the moral and accountability imperative. The focus responded to growing calls for a reassertion of moral leadership in education and amid concerns that the accountability system is having a detrimental effect, constraining leaders and rewarding unethical practices.

A conceptual understanding of moral leadership is provided drawing upon the work of Sergiovanni, moral philosophy and moral development theory. The research adopted an interpretive methodology and phenomenological approach seeking to understand the inner life-world of leaders by means of an autobiographical life-grid and semi-structured interview. A sample of eleven executive headteachers participated in this qualitative study and findings were analysed. Leaders reflected on the impact and importance of the formative years on their moral framework, they discussed the personal, institutional, system and societal aspects of moral leadership and the moral tensions they faced in their roles and schools. Findings showed that a strong sense of moral purpose was evident among executive headteachers, but leaders were pragmatic. Tensions arising from accountability pressures were felt most acutely in schools considered vulnerable.

The major contribution of this thesis is a typology of executive headteacher responses to tensions between the moral and accountability imperative – *compete, conform, contingent* and *conscience.* This typology is described and aligned to Kohlberg's stages of moral development theory. The findings will be of interest to practitioners, policy makers and academics.

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Glossary of terms

Academy – An academy is an independent state-funded school, that receives funding directly from government and is run by an academy trust. It is independent of local authority control. Academies are inspected by Ofsted and must follow the same rules on admissions, special educational needs and exclusions as other state schools and students sit the same exams. Academies have more control over how they do things, for example they do not have to follow the National Curriculum and can set their own term times.

Academy trust – Academy trusts are not-for-profit companies. They employ the staff and have trustees who are responsible for the performance of the academies in the trust. Trusts might run a single academy or a group of academies.

CEO – A Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is similar to the role of executive headteacher and may include responsibility for many schools.

Convertor Academies – Convertor academies are schools previously assessed as performing well who opt out of local authority control and 'convert' to academy status.

CTC – A city technology college is an independent school in an urban area that is free to attend. It is funded by central government – companies can also contribute. City technology colleges emphasise teaching science and technology.

DfE – The Department for Education (DfE) is responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and wider skills in England.

ECDL – European Computer Driving License (ECDL) is a computer literacy certification programme.

Executive headteacher – the term executive headteacher is widely applied to a headteacher who directly leads two or more schools.

Foundation School – A foundation school is state-funded school maintained by the local authority where the governing body owns the land and buildings, directly employs the staff and is responsible for admissions.

GCSE – A General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification taken in a specific subject usually at age 14-16.

GM school – A Grant Maintained (GM) school was a state school in England and Wales between 1988 and 1998 that had opted out of local authority control. GM schools were funded directly by a grant from central government and a reconstituted governing body took over ownership of the school's property and become the employer of the school's staff. It also became responsible for the schools' admissions policy.

MAT - A multi academy trust (MAT) is a group of schools governed through a single set of members and directors/trustees.

Maintained school – A maintained school is a state school that is overseen, or 'maintained' by the local authority. It must follow the national curriculum and national teacher pay and conditions.

Members – In an academy trust members provide oversight of governance arrangements. Members have a similar role to shareholders of a company limited by guarantee.

NCSL – The National College for School Leadership opened in November 2000 and had responsibility for training and developing leadership in England's schools and children's centres. It became an executive agency of the Department for Education in April 2012. Its activities merged with the Teaching Agency in 2013 and it became the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL). NCTL existed until 31st March 2018.

NPQs – The National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) are a national, voluntary suite of qualifications designed to support the professional development of teachers and leaders.

Off-rolling – Off-rolling is the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their student from the school roll, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than the best interests of the pupil.

Ofsted – Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. They inspection services providing education and skills for learners of all ages. They also inspect and regulate services that care for children and young people. They report directly to Parliament.

RSCs – The regional schools commissioners (RSCs) act on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education and are accountable to the National Schools Commissioner to ensure schools are supported to improve and to address underperformance.

Special school – a special school provides education for children with a special educational need or disability.

Sponsored Academies – Sponsored academies are usually underperforming schools. They have sponsors such as businesses, universities, other schools, faith groups or voluntary groups, who have majority control of the academy trust.

Trustees – Trustees are both company directors and charity trustees. Together they form the board of trustees. They operate across all the schools in the trust.

Voluntary Aided school – The majority of voluntary aided schools are faith schools. A foundation or trust inputs a small proportion of the capital costs for the school and forms a majority on the school governing body.

Positional statement

In presenting a thesis on the espoused and enacted moral values of executive headteachers, it seems appropriate to begin by reflecting on the positional lens through which I approached the research.

As a researcher I position myself as an ontological realist. While I believe there are universal truths, as human agents we interpret the physical and social world through our subjective experience. Thus, epistemologically I have taken an interpretivist stance, seeking to explore and understand the 'meanings' of events and phenomena from the subjects' point of view (Morrison, 2012). I understand that as an interpretivist researcher I am also part of the research undertaken, not separate. The thesis presented is an interactive engagement of the researcher with the participants and their accounts, both in the research methods and the analysis of data. In presenting, analysing and problematizing others' views I am aware of the risk of moralising and bias. As Gewirtz and Cribb (2006, p. 150-151) noted:

> The problem is how researchers can both let their value commitments fuel their research, and at the same time, be scrupulous about not simply discovering what it is they would like to find out.

Inevitably, the values and responses of some leaders in this study resonated more with me than others. My upbringing, life-experiences and faith have all contributed to my own values and moral framework. I have been influenced by fellow professionals, the academic literature, philosophy and more besides. As an education professional I have been frustrated by an accountability system that has sometimes recognised and rewarded the wrong kinds of leadership (Hill, Mellon, Laker and Goddard, 2016) - leadership driven by compliance, competition, and performance in a narrow set of measures that fail to address inequities.

I have great admiration for those able to articulate and demonstrate strong moral principles, character virtues and courageous commitment

to action. I do not believe all value positions are equal. However, I have sought to understand and empathise with the challenges experienced by leaders and to represent the views of all participants fairly and respectfully. One of the ways I have done this is through prioritising the participant voice. I recognise that the executive headteachers in this study are doing a job I have not and are working in an imperfect educational and political system. Despite the pressures and tensions school leaders' face, I remain convinced that most are motivated by a moral commitment to do the best by their students.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research thesis investigated how moral leadership was envisioned and enacted by executive headteachers leading in an age of school accountability. It explored the moral frameworks of eleven executive headteachers, the tensions they faced in their roles and the ways in which they sought to resolve these tensions.

In this introduction I outline the research focus and value of the research, before briefly presenting the research aim, research questions and methodology. I then explain the reasons why this area was of interest to me and aspects of moral leadership which are to be further explored in the literature review. At the end of the chapter I provide an outline structure for the remaining chapters in the thesis.

1.2 The research focus

This thesis is situated at the intersection of three key aspects of school leadership in England in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. First, central government reforms of structural systems have overseen the growth of the academies movement and multi-academy trusts (MATs) creating new models of school leadership, with executive headteachers now leading groups of schools. Through their identity as system leaders, executive headteachers have become important instruments for government policy (Cousin, 2019) and for advancing neoliberal ideas which conflate education and business (Hughes, 2020). Second, approaches to accountability and performativity have increasingly measured and compared schools against government set targets, constraining leaders and encouraging an emphasis on managerial leadership. Third, and most importantly for this research, there has been renewed interest (Ethical Leadership Commission, 2019; Greenfield, 2004; Roberts, 2019; Sergiovanni, 2007) in the moral and ethical dimensions of school leadership that recognise leaders' responsibility to act with integrity and pursue the moral good of education. These three developments create moral tensions, as

executive headteachers grapple with new professional roles and inner conflicts between values-based leadership approaches and satisfying high stakes accountability measures.   This research stems from a desire to understand the inner moral life-world of executive headteachers working within the context of scrutinous accountability. As Hammersley-Fletcher noted in her study of headteachers (2015), responses to tensions that challenge values expose overriding moral positions and priorities. What does moral leadership look like in an age of accountability and how do executive leaders reconcile contrasting imperatives?

Executive headteachers are a new tier of system leaders in the English school system. To attain their position, they have already experienced some measure of success in accountability measures, and now have increasing responsibility, influence and impact on the education of ever greater numbers of children. Therefore, it is important to deepen understanding of the moral framework that guides their behaviour. What values do these leaders hold and how have these values been shaped by life-experiences?   If a strong sense of moral purpose is a characteristic of teachers and school leaders (Fullan, 1993; 2003), how do executive headteachers see their role as moral leaders?   Personal values and moral purpose do not operate in a vacuum but find expression and tension in the complex and imperfect world of human experience. As school leaders they must contend with policy making that may conflict with personal values and beliefs. This research was interested in the moral tensions identified by participants, some of these specific to the professional role of executive leader and others common to headteachers. In particular, this research explored any moral tensions for executive headteachers caused by the accountability system, and the different responses to these tensions.

1.3 The value of the research

School leadership is a moral activity (West-Burnham, 2009) that can be at odds with the political agenda and measurement. Unless success in

accountability measures is accompanied and preceded by strong moral leadership, then the very purpose of education has been missed – school learning is a moral activity as well as an intellectual one (Starratt, 2007):

> What our society needs most of all is a fully functioning human being who can participate, contribute and find fulfilment in the various dimensions of democratic public life. That is the special good of learning that should be pursued and cultivated by ethical educational leaders. (Starratt, 2007, p. 181)

With the emphasis on standards, school effectiveness and efficiency, funding for research into the moral dimensions of school leadership has been limited.   Moral, value and ethics-driven leadership has been overlooked in most empirical mainstream leadership research (Biesta, 2009; Day and Sammons, 2013; Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015). This should not come as a surprise as increasing government centralisation of education policy and pressures for accountability have driven the political and research agenda. This thesis sheds further light on this under-researched area, and observes it through the lens of executive headteachers, capturing the inner conflicts of these increasingly influential education leaders.

There is increasing discussion within the profession and professional associations of the need to reassert the place of moral and ethical leadership at the heart of education. Education is not values-free, and the impact of government policy based on ideology requires examination and scrutiny. Fullan (2003, p.60) cites school leaders working from a strong moral imperative as the "sine qua non of societal development". This research encourages both participants and readers to reflect and reengage with moral leadership.   The findings will be of interest to school and system leaders, education professionals, academics and policy makers.

1.3 The research aim, research questions and methodology

The overall aim of the research was to explore moral leadership amongst executive headteachers working in an age of school accountability.

Within this broad aim, there were four key research questions:

1. How has the sense of moral development and moral leadership been shaped by life experiences?

2. How do executive headteachers understand their roles as moral leaders?

3. In understanding the moral dimension of leadership, what tensions are experienced by executive headteachers?

    a. What, if any, are the tensions experienced by executive headteachers in reconciling the moral imperative with the accountability imperative?

    b. Are there specific moral tensions that arise for executive headteachers working in system leadership roles?

4. How do executive headteachers seek to resolve these tensions?

The research methodology was phenomenological, adopting a qualitative and interpretive approach to explore and describe executive headteachers inner life-world.   The research methods of an autobiographical life-grid and semi-structured interviews were selected to enable leaders to provide rich descriptions of their human experience and contribute to our understanding of the field.

1.5 Why this research focus is interesting (to me)

Having qualified as Modern Languages teacher in 2000, I have lived through accountability pressures and structural changes as both a developing leader and leader of professional development. When I left the classroom in 2009 to become Head of Leadership Programmes at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), now the Schools, Students and Teachers network, I was quickly immersed in this rapidly changing national school landscape. My perspective moved from that

of a practitioner in school to system level. In my new role I was working alongside national leaders of education at the forefront of these development, and leading academics, to design and deliver a suite of leadership development programmes. I was visiting schools across the country and meeting leaders at all levels, from newly qualified teachers (NQTs) to executive headteachers.   Through these conversations and interactions, I gained a deeper understanding of the values, experiences and concerns of leaders in a variety of contexts. I developed an appreciation for the moral tensions that leaders face, particularly in a school system with narrow definitions of success that do not adequately reflect the widely differing backgrounds, talents and contexts of children and young people.

My thinking has undoubtedly been influenced by these interactions and my understanding of leadership greatly enriched. This has been expanded and strengthened through wider reading of the literature. A feature of this growing understanding is the importance of moral purpose and the character of leaders. Whilst much policy focus has been on structures, systems, efficacy and efficiency, the significant variable remains the quality (or better 'qualities') of the leader. This is not merely a quantitative question of output, but of qualitative importance - *Who am I as a leader?* I believe education is a moral endeavour, which is value-laden, of more importance than the number of qualifications achieved is the kind of people our schools produce. I have also witnessed how accountability systems - particularly Ofsted and qualification performance tables - have directed and consumed the thinking of many leaders.

My focus on executive leadership stems from my work with current and aspiring executive headteachers and CEOs over more than ten years. Through the SSAT executive headteacher and CEO programme I have engaged with hundreds of these leaders and visited a variety of federations and MATs – both large and small. This is a role that for many feels 'built in flight' as they grapple with establishing clear vision and values, adjusting to new responsibilities and accountabilities, and

leading educational improvement across varying contexts whilst managing financial constraints and policy shifts.

1.6 Moral leadership

For teachers and school leaders a sense of moral purpose is a strong motivational force (Fullan, 2004). School leadership is essentially a moral activity; educating the public's children, deciding what should be learned, by what means and to what ends is a moral consideration (Greenfield, 2004; Starratt, 2007). There is evidence to suggest that amongst headteachers, moral purpose in educational leadership is being reasserted (Stevenson, 2007).

Moral leadership is a complex term as it makes claims on what is right and wrong – which is contested. The language of 'moral purpose' has also become ubiquitous and commonplace, used to argue for differing educational directions. Politicians increasingly seek to co-opt language and assert the moral high ground, justifying their policy decisions through appealing to an argument of moral purpose. For example, Michael Gove, former Secretary of State for Education stated:

> My moral purpose in Government is to break the lock which prevents children from our poorest families making it into our best universities and walking into the best jobs (16 June 2011, speech to the National College for School Leadership).

Whilst this is a laudable aim, many of the policies implemented to achieve this goal have been widely questioned and criticised. It could be argued that policy has widened the educational gap whilst maintaining the outward appearance of seeking greater equity, reflecting a neoliberalist reluctance to see an alternative to the dominating hegemony. The Govian view of education has come under fire for its narrow focus on academic achievement and heavy accountability, amongst other things. Cain, Knapton, McKenzie and Shortt (2015) typified these concerns at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference in saying that schools need a moral purpose beyond exam results, arguing that the principal focus

should be on virtues such as curiosity, critical thinking and respect, with good examination results the by-product rather than the defining mission.

School leaders' actions are driven by personal beliefs and values, based on life experiences (Boon and Stott, 2003). Concepts of moral leadership may derive from religious faith or spirituality, they may also have their philosophical roots in ethics.   Three of the main ethical theories are virtue ethics, deontological ethics and utilitarian ethics. Aristotle asserted the importance of virtues and character as essential components of the good life. Kant (1959) emphasised duty and universal moral laws in the form of categorical imperatives as the basis of morality. Meanwhile, proponents of utilitarianism such as Mill and Bentham (1987) advocated notions of the greater good - maximising utility and happiness for the greatest number. Other positions exist too, such as Dewey, a naturalist and pragmatist, for whom moral meant 'growth' – the ability to adapt, survive and grow.

In addition, psychologists have explored the nature of moral cognitive development and moral reasoning, particularly how this develops through childhood and adolescence.   Expanding on the work of Piaget, Kohlberg described three progressive levels of moral development – pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional – and six stages. Kohlberg and Kramer (1969) argued that the formative years up to the age of 25 are key in moral development with further moral stabilisation and consistency occurring after this time.

Within the field of educational leadership, academic Thomas Sergiovanni has been a principal advocate of moral leadership, describing and promoting value-led behaviours that unite head, heart and hands (1992) and build learning communities (2007). William Greenfield (2004) provided an overview of the genesis of moral leadership [between 1979-2003] and examples of studies, while Langlois and Begley (2005) in Stefkovich and Begley (2007) mapped the moral leadership literature at four levels of analysis – individual

(micro), group/organisational (meso), society/ government (macro) and cross-cultural (mega).   With the growth of system leadership and a focus on the self-improving school system, Hargreaves (2011) has emphasised the moral responsibility for system leaders to act in the interests of all students, not just those in their own schools. Others such as Dantley (2005) have pointed to school leaders' moral responsibilities to deliver societal change and challenge the reproduction of social inequalities.

While empirical research into moral leadership is limited, research into the impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes repeatedly reveals the strong moral dimension of outstanding school leaders (Begley and Johansson, 2003; Day et al., 2009). Moral leadership is at the heart of effective leadership and what it means to be an educational leader. To be successful in an age of accountability, headteachers must have the confidence, courage and conviction to reconcile the moral and accountability imperatives (Gold et al., 2003). Values are under stress and strain. Surviving in an era of accountability that does not allow mistakes, places significant pressures and constraints on headteachers to comply with policy direction (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015). Hammersley-Fletcher's study (ibid) describes the daily tensions and conflict faced by headteachers between intrinsic values and what is valued by external measures of success.

1.7 Conclusion

In this introduction I have set out the basis and rationale for my research thesis, presenting the importance of moral leadership in an age of accountability. Executive headteachers have significant status and influence within the school system. This research seeks to understand the moral frameworks that guide their leadership and the tensions they experience, particularly between the moral imperative and accountability imperative.

1.8 The structure of thesis chapters

In chapter 2 I provide some background that helps to contextualise the research study within the educational landscape of structural reforms and accountability systems.

In chapter 3 I undertake a review of the literature. I situate moral leadership within wider leadership typologies and consider conceptual understandings of morality, including its philosophical and psychological underpinnings. Four levels of moral leadership are explored: micro (individual), meso (organisational), macro (system) and mega (societal). Moral leadership is contrasted with managerialist leaderships which focuses on technical-rational implementation. This section concludes with a review of the empirical evidence of moral leadership within the English school's system and reflection on some of the moral dilemmas faced by executive headteachers.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology for the research undertaken. I begin by presenting my ontological and epistemological position before restating the research questions for investigation. I then go on to explain the interpretivist phenomenological methodology chosen and address issues related to qualitative research. The process of sampling and data collection is discussed, which includes how trustworthiness and validity is established. The choice of research methods – an autobiographical life-grid and semi-structured interview – is presented and justified. Following this, I describe how the pilot study informed my larger research study and the ethical considerations. Finally, I discuss the process of data analysis.

In chapter 5 I present and discuss the research findings. Each research question is taken in turn and explained in depth. The participant voice is given prominence and provides rich descriptions of executive headteachers experiences, moral frameworks and actions.

Chapter 6 describes a four-fold typology for interpreting executive headteacher responses to tensions between the moral imperative and the accountability imperative. The typology emerged from the data, it

takes the findings of this study and abstracts them at a system level. The typology draws upon Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning. Each type is presented and set within the broader context of educational policy and accountability.

In chapter 7 I present my conclusions, this includes: the key findings, a discussion of how the research contributes to knowledge, limitations and recommendations for future research, implications and recommendations for policy and practice.

The final chapter offers some personal post-script reflections, which consider the impact of this professional doctorate research for me and the work I do.

Chapter 2: Background and educational context

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the educational context within which this study is situated. I consider the challenges for school leaders, the growth of academies, multi-academy trusts and executive headships, and the pressures of accountability and performance measures.

The education system places immense value and pressure on school leadership, particularly headteachers. The importance of leadership in improving pupil outcomes is widely accepted as second only to teaching (Bush and Glover, 2014) and is an almost constant focus of attention for policy makers and government inspectorates. According to the Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) of Education and Children's Services and Skills 2012/13, the relative success of a school is directly attributable to the quality of leadership within it "Where we find success, good leadership is behind it" (2012, p. 9). But what do we mean by 'good' leadership? Is this merely instrumental effectiveness in achieving set goals or are we referring to a deeper leadership characterised by moral values?

Despite claims of improvement in school performance and the standard of leadership (Hargreaves, D., 2010; Wilshaw, 2012), it is probably not an exaggeration to say that England's schools are facing a very real crisis of leadership. While government policy emphasises school autonomy, school leaders feel increasingly constrained (Greany and Waterhouse, 2016; Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015; Wright, 2003). Imposed goal setting and tight accountability measures have left many headteachers feeling vulnerable, with the threat of sacking awaiting the next bad result:

> Sacking the head can be a swift and ruthless process… One poor Ofsted inspection – or even the prospect of it – and the head is at risk. (Dunford, 2007 cited in MacBeath, 2011, p.107)

This vulnerability is reflected in the worrying number of headteacher vacancies, early headteacher retirements and the lack of appeal of headship to existing deputies (Smithers and Robinson, 2007; The Key, 2015) culminating in a crisis of headteacher supply (Howson, 2016). A state of education survey report by The Key (2015) found that 87% of school leaders believed headship was less attractive as a career choice than in 2010. The importance attributed to high quality leadership - coupled with the shortage of those willing to step up to headship - has placed increasing pressure on successful headteachers, who are expected to take on responsibility for improving schools beyond their own. This has contributed to the creation of new executive headteacher roles.

Since the first executive headteacher roles appeared in 2004, they have grown steadily in number and are now widespread, a frequent additional tier of leadership in an increasingly academised school system (Hill et al., 2012; Hill, 2015). Successive governments have expanded the academies programme and promoted executive headship of groups of schools in federations and MATs. The Department for Education's introduction of the National Professional Qualification for Executive Leadership (NPQEL) in 2017 attested to the importance of these roles, educationally and politically. This programme is for those who are, "or who aspire to be, an executive headteacher or CEO of a MAT with responsibility for leading across several schools" (DfE, 2017).

2.2 The growth of academies, multi-academy trusts (MATs) and executive headship

One of the most significant structural developments impacting school leadership has been the growth of the Academies Programme and the emergence of MATs. Academies – directly accountable to the Secretary of State, independent of local authority control and with extended financial and curricula freedoms – have ushered in a new

phase in the corporatisation of school leadership (Courtney, 2015). Their origins can be traced to back to the 1980's.

The first City Technology Colleges (CTCs) were established in 1986 by the Conservative government in urban areas of disadvantage, with a focus on technology and business. They required significant private sector sponsorship and whilst only 15 CTCs existed by 1993 (West and Bailey, 2013) they became the forerunner of Grant Maintained (GM) Schools and Academies. GM schools were mainstream schools that were performing well and sought greater autonomy through opting out of the local authority. They employed their own staff, took responsibility for their land and buildings, for admissions, and were funded by central government but were required to follow the national curriculum. The Education Reform Act (1988) enabled schools to opt out of local authority and receive a full grant from the Department of Education and Science (DES).   In 1998, shortly after the Labour Party was elected, GM Schools status became Foundation Schools or reverted to voluntary aided status. By this time there were 1200 GM Schools.

In 2000 David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, announced the introduction of City Academies built on the CTC model in areas of disadvantage. These City Academies replaced schools deemed to be failing, or underachieving, by Ofsted. They were outside of local authority control, sponsored by business, set up as private companies with charitable status and with a funding agreement with the Secretary of State. The Education Act (2002) saw an expansion of academies, which become known as Sponsored Academies, outside of urban areas.

Tony Blair (2005, p. 8) repeated his support for autonomous schools and the growth of academies:

> We want every school to be able to quickly and easily become a self-governing independent state school – an opportunity not just open to a small number of schools but to all who want it.

In 2007 Labour announced that educational institutions or multi-sponsors of academies 'chains' would not be required to a make a financial contribution – some of the largest MATs today came into existence: among them United Learning Trust, Oasis and Harris (West and Bailey, 2013). A MAT is group of schools governed through a single set of members and directors. It is established to undertake a strategic collaboration to improve and maintain high educational standards across a group of schools.

When the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came to power in 2010 there were 203 academies, mostly in inner cities (DfE, 2010). The Academies Act (2010) encouraged schools judged outstanding or good to become Convertor Academies. There was also an emphasis on supporting schools to collaborate in academy chains, MATs and federations. A rapid growth of academies and multi academy trusts followed, further accelerated by the DfE White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (2016) that confirmed controversial Conservative government plans for universal, and forced, academisation. It stated:

> By the end of 2020, all schools will be academies or in the process of becoming academies; by the end of 2022, local authorities will no longer maintain schools. (DfE, 2016, p. 55)

It was in this year and this context that this research commenced. Since 2016 the government has relented on this universal approach to academisation, accepting a continuing mixed economy of schools. However, the direction of travel remained unrelentingly towards academisation and MATs. DfE figures from September 2018 reported that there were 5,476 Convertor Academies and 2,181 Sponsored Academies. Academies represented 29.8% of primary schools and 66.4% of secondary schools. In October 2018 a tipping point was reached – 50.1% of pupils in state funded schools were now educated in academies or free schools (DfE, 2019). This was lauded by the then Secretary of State for Education, Damien Hinds, as evidence of school

leaders' recognition of the benefits of autonomy to innovate offered by the academies programme. The tone of the message from government was both celebratory and threatening:

> In the past, schools that failed were allowed to stay under local authority control for too long. Academies have changed all that – failing schools can now be taken away from local bureaucracies who have not be able to improve them and given to school leaders who can. (Hinds, 2019)

In its bid to 'get tough' on school standards, the majority Conservative government vowed to take a 'zero-tolerance' approach to failure, stating that any school judged to be in need of improvement by Ofsted will be forced to become an academy and taken over by new leadership, unless it can show it is improving. The DfE White Paper (2016) also underlined its commitment to MATs as its structure of choice:

> Most schools will form or join MATs, given the benefits they offer. (DfE, 2016, p. 58).

One of the political drivers of MATs is that they take on responsibility for school improvement under the mantra of the self-improving school system. Statistics released from the DfE in August 2015 revealed that there were 846 multi academy trusts (MATs) in England, this compares to just 391 MATs in 2011 (Hill, 2015). The overwhelming majority of these MATs consisted of small groupings of schools – 729 MATs had five or fewer schools, reflecting a shift in government policy circa 2012 away from larger MATs to lots of smaller clusters of schools. By November 2017, 4,432 of the 6100 academies were in multi-academy trusts, this represents approximately 20% of primary schools and 40% of secondary schools (DfE, 2018). The leaders of these MATs are being increasingly held to account for the performance of academies, both financially and academically, within their trust. Since 2014 the performance of MATs against government targets have been published in comparative league tables.

Accompanying the growth of MATs has been the corresponding growth in executive leadership. Successful headteachers have increasingly taken on, and been asked by government to take on, the responsibility for improving schools beyond their own. It has led to the creation of new roles including executive headteachers/principals and Chief Executive Officers (Boylan, 2016). The first executive headteacher roles began appearing in 2004. By 2010 there were around 450 executive headteachers and by 2016 this had increased again to 621. Executive headteachers are increasingly distanced from their original responsibilities for teaching and learning. With the emphasis on school autonomy and diminished local authority capacity, school leaders have been encouraged and required to reimagine their role, assuming new corporate tasks far beyond that of the traditional headteacher. As Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008) have commented, these roles borrow much from business models with headteachers managing their collection of schools as part of a single business.

There is no blueprint for executive leadership, and each must navigate their way through the complexity, taking careful account of their own contextual circumstances. While the traditional headteacher role is understood and defined under section 35 and 36 of the Education Act 2002, there is currently no such legal definition for an executive headteacher (Buck, Wespieser, Harland, 2017). The term executive headteacher is widely applied to a headteacher who directly leads two or more schools, but other arrangements exist. For the purpose of this research the term executive headteacher is used to describe those who lead formal groups of schools – MATs or federations. It encompasses those using the titles of executive headteacher, executive principal or Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

Making clear distinctions between these roles is difficult and often a matter of organisational structure and personal preference. Some leaders choose to retain the title 'headteacher' preferring this to the more corporate and generic CEO or refer to themselves as both executive headteacher and CEO. Executive headteachers may also

retain the substantive headship of one school while also carrying out an executive leadership responsibility across one or more schools. This is particularly common in smaller MATs and those in the early stages of development.

The pressures on executive headteachers are considerable, with responsibility for outcomes across multiple schools and huge delegated financial resources. Meanwhile, Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs), appointed by the Department for Education, are scrutinising their progress and intervening where MATs or academies are underperforming. This includes the powers to remove schools from one MAT provider and allocating them to another.

The accountability pressures may be felt even more sharply by executive headteachers, as they must manage external accountability that focuses on both the performance of individual schools, and the collective performance of the group. As the lead educational professional, they are expected to hold the position of chief accounting officer (Academies Financial Handbook, 2018) responsible for financial and academic performance. The individual schools often come from a variety of contexts and have widely differing levels of performance and financial positions. Schools required to join a trust may well be in financial as well as educational difficulty.

2.3 The squeeze of accountability and rise of performativity

Successive governments have introduced policies that have radically altered the demands on headteachers, increasing accountability and producing a 30-year period of diversification of school types (Courtney, 2015). The late 1980s and early 1990s became characterised by top-down government, high accountability, performance targets and increased competition between schools. The national centralisation of education policy could be summarised in the management rule of 'expect and inspect' (Sergiovanni, 1992). This period is what Hargreaves and Shirley (2009, p. 8) refer to as the "Second Way of

markets and standardisation" and ushered in an era of new public management.

The 1988 Education Reform Act brought a new national curriculum and assessment system. The Education (Schools) Act (1992) required the publication of school performance information that could be compiled into league tables. These school league tables summarised the percentage of students achieving five or more A-C grades at General Certificate of Secondary Education at each state-funded secondary school in England. This contributed to a quasi-market of parental school choice (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017). Meanwhile, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspectorial regime was introduced with the power to place schools judged to be low performing in 'Special Measures'. These disciplinary systems and performance technologies have generated a wealth of statistical data and inspection evidence by which schools are assessed, compared and analysed – with examination outcomes becoming the proxy measure for a good education. Publishing these data means that the impact of school leaders has become highly visible and publicly scrutinised.

Through the mechanism of Ofsted and comparative league tables, leaders have been encouraged to accept, and then deliver, externally imposed ends through self-surveillance or what Foucault calls 'governmentality' (Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991). Schools have become adept in the technical skills of self-surveillance through; target setting, tracking and monitoring data, self-evaluation, holding staff to account through lesson observations, performance appraisals and work scrutiny. Heightened accountability and performance measures have changed the very essence of what it means be a school leader and how priorities of leadership are shaped, creating what Foucault calls new 'regimes of truth':

> Current regimes of truth, created through everyday school
> discourses and the rituals of educational practice, are generating
> realities in school that recontextualise and produce new

pedagogic knowledge, and which side-line debates about the moral purposes of education. Now uncontentious technologies of hierarchical observation, judgement normalised to an inspector's eye view and the Ofsted 'examination' become, for some teachers, the everyday conditions which mould their professional identities and sense of purpose (Hall and Noyes, 2009, p. 855).

Successful leadership has arguably been reduced to a headteacher's ability to accomplish the translation of students into 'good data' (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). The result has been an unrelenting focus on improving performance outcomes on high stakes tests. This has incentivised short-term quick fixes and interventions at Key Stage 4 aimed improving outcome measures.

One example of the unintended consequence of performance measures is the significant rise in exclusions and pupils being educated in alternative provision since 2012-13. The practice of 'off-rolling' – removing poorly performing pupils from the school's register by moving them to an alternative provision so that they do not count against the school's performance targets – is partly a result of government policy. As the Commons Education Select Committee reported on 25th July 2018:

> An unfortunate and unintended consequence of the Government's strong focus on school standards has led to school environments and practices that have resulted in disadvantaged children being disproportionately excluded, which includes a curriculum with a lack of focus on developing pupils' social and economic capital. There appears to be a lack of moral accountability on the part of many schools and no incentive to, or deterrent to not, retain pupils who could be classed as difficult or challenging.

The pace of change and level of government activity in education has been unrelenting. A combination of centralisation over curriculum and

assessment frameworks has sat, sometimes uncomfortably, alongside greater decentralisation with newly delegated financial powers to schools and their headteachers (Hargreaves, 2010). A study by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) revealed more than 170 policies in play across four case study schools. The prevailing aim of these policies:

> to control, manage and transform education and, in particular, to 'modernise' education and 'raise standards' even if this sometimes involves the appearance of giving away control and enhancing autonomy (Ball et al., 2012, p. 9).

The catalyst for much of this policy agenda has centred on increasing international competition and the economic imperative to compete effectively in the global marketplace, as found in the consultations for the National Curriculum: "We must raise standards consistently, and at least as quickly as they are rising in competitor countries" (DES, 1987, para 6). The discourse of standards and school improvement in policy has articulated a particular view of what schooling is. The 'Standards agenda' (since dropped) became a shorthand expression for improved educational outcomes as seen through the lens of examination performance in national and international measures.

The notable growth in prominence of international comparative measures such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) highlight attention to measurement of education and educational outcomes. These international comparisons afford countries the opportunity to examine their school systems and curricula, providing description and comparison, tracking trends over time and stimulating education reforms.

These comparative measures are not without their critics. Sjøberg (2015, p.111) has critiqued the ideological, economic and political motivations of the PISA project which promote the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) "underlying

commitment to a competitive global free-market economy". Biesta (2009) has noted the profound impact the growth of measurement culture has had on educational practice and questioned whether it has caused decision makers at all levels, from politicians to teachers, to focus on valuing what we (can) measure rather than measuring what we value. League tables both reflect and contribute to a culture of performativity in education which risks "a culture in which means become ends in themselves so that targets and indicators of quality become mistaken for the quality itself" (Biesta, 2009, p. 35). This approach substitutes normative validity – value judgements about what is desirable - for a technical validity focused on measurement. This is reflected not just in international comparisons and league tables, but also in accountability, evidence-based education and effective schooling. Despite the prevailing emphasis on measurement and performativity, Coe (2013) gives a bleak analysis:

> Standards have not risen; teaching has not improved; research that has tried to support improvement has generally not succeeded; even identifying which schools and teachers are good is more difficult than we thought. (Coe, 2013, p. 1)

A consequence of this educational agenda has been growing concern about the emphasis on school leadership and management as a technical skill (West-Burnham, 1997). National education policy, with its stress on performance and public accountability, has encouraged a technical rational approach (Glatter, 1999). Technical rationality relates to behaviour based on what is effective and efficient in order to achieve set goals (Starratt, 2001) and has been associated closely with management. The imposed goal setting and specification from government have pressed headteachers to focus on output and to the achievement of external measures of success.

2.4 Conclusion

Over the past thirty years there has been significant shift in the educational landscape in England, influenced by wider ideological,

political and economic motivations. The changes have brought greater accountabilities for headteachers and new opportunities for those achieving success in performance measures. The establishment of academies and multi-academy trusts, independent of local authorities, has created new structures and contributed to an increasingly centralised model, with school leaders directly accountable to the government. While executive headteachers may experience greater freedoms in some areas, they may find themselves constrained in others. Within this context, moral leadership is both essential and challenging.

Chapter 3: Literature review

3.1 Introduction

Executive headship remains relatively new and the moral dimensions of the role are under-explored in the leadership literature. This literature review therefore focuses on the broader domain of moral leadership among school leaders and headteachers. The aims of this literature review are to explore theoretical frameworks and conceptual understandings of moral leadership in education, to draw out the emerging themes and consider the empirical research evidence on the espoused and enacted values of headteachers.

I begin by establishing the boundaries for the literature review and types of literature included. Moral leadership is situated within the wider leadership typologies, including related types such as *ethical leadership and authentic leadership.* The issue of 'whose morals?' is then addressed along with linguistic and semantic complexities and inconsistencies in the literature. This is followed by a brief summary of some key philosophical approaches to morality and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. This foregrounding helps to set the scene for an in-depth exploration of moral leadership in education and establishment of a conceptual understanding. Moral leadership is explored at four levels – micro (individual), meso (organisational), macro (system) and mega (societal) - as applied by Langlois and Begley (2005, in Stefkovich and Begley, 2007). Once concepts of moral leadership have been established, this is contrasted with managerial leadership. Managerialist leadership has been argued to present a challenge to moral leadership as it focuses on a technical rational pursuit of externally mandated goals. There follows a review of the empirical research evidence for moral leadership within the English schools' system. Findings suggest varied and contextualised headteacher responses to policy and accountability pressures. Finally, I reflect on some moral dilemmas emerging from the empirical literature.

3.2 Boundaries for the literature review and types of literature

The boundaries applied in this literature review reflect the research interest in moral leadership within the education context. The literature review has primarily concentrated on the education literature on moral leadership but also draws upon the wider leadership literature. This has been an iterative process, as the initial reading has prompted questions for further reading, and as I have discovered new connections and contributions to the field. The search and analysis of the literature has prioritised academic journal articles and books, covering theoretical and empirical perspectives. The review of empirical data has focused on research in the English school system since the year 2000. A longer-term view has been applied for conceptual and theoretical perspectives of moral leadership.

An initial literature search included language such as morals, morality, moral purpose, ethics and values as well as variety of related leadership typologies including spiritual leadership, ethical leadership and servant leadership. These search terms have been combined with others such as accountability, managerial leadership, managerialism and centralisation to narrow down the field. Within the empirical literature the combination of moral and values-based approaches to leadership within the context of accountability systems has provided a map of the terrain, within which my research is situated.

3.3 Situating moral leadership within wider leadership typologies

Recognition of the importance of school leadership has given rise to a large body of literature highlighting specific aspects of leadership effectiveness and leadership approaches.   In seeking a space for themselves and in adding their own emphasis, academics have coined a variety of leadership typologies. Bush and Glover (2003, 2014) provide a helpful summary of those labels commonly applied and conceptualised, among them *transformational* leadership, *moral leadership*, *instructional*, *managerial* and *distributed* leadership.

Despite the many volumes written, some academics argue there is still limited agreement and understanding about what differentiates effective leaders from ineffective leaders, or even leaders from non-leaders (Burns, 1978; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Gini, 1997; Sergiovanni, 2007). As an academic discipline "Leadership represents one of social science's greatest disappointments" (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 36). Sergiovanni, an American academic and leading authority on moral leadership, has offered two reasons for this failure. Firstly, we have separated "the hand of leadership from the head and the heart" (ibid) and secondly the overemphasis on bureaucratic, psychological and technical-rational authority to the serious neglect of professional and moral authority. He did not hold back in his criticism:

> The result has been a leadership literature that borders on being vacuous and a leadership practice that is based on this literature than may not be leadership at all (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 36).

Whilst critical of the theoretical literature Sergiovanni (2007) was more optimistic about practice in the field. He observed that successful practice was emerging in schools and there was a need for the literature and dialogue to catch up. As such the moral dimension of leadership must be moved to centre of inquiry, discussion and practice (ibid). Sergiovanni emphasised the primacy of moral leadership asserting that "Leadership as a moral act is a struggle to do the right thing according to a sense of values and what it means to be a human being" (Sergiovanni, 2005, p.115). Leaders need to be concerned with what is good as well as what is effective.

William Greenfield Jnr (2004) mapped the genesis of the moral leadership concept and distinguished further typologies including *ethical* leadership explored by Bottery (1992), Starratt (1996, 2005) and Stefkovich and Begley (2007). Dimensions of moral leadership can be also found in *authentic* leadership (Begley, 2007), *transformational* leadership (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005), *servant* leadership (Autry, 2007; Greenleaf, 1977) as well as *spiritual* leadership (Fry, 2003; West-

Burnham, 1997; Woods, 2007). A summary table is provided below to capture the emphasis of each of these types.

Table 1: Comparing typologies

Ethical leadership	Authentic leadership	Transformational leadership	Servant leadership	Spiritual leadership
Personal and professional conduct	Authenticity	Values-based	Service first mentality	Shared vision and values
Best interests of students	Character and conduct	Engage followers	For the benefit of others	Organisational commitment
Care for the individual	Consciously reflective	Commitment to organisational goals	Concern for the least	Ethics and values-based
Common good	Knowledge based	Collaborative capacity	Community commitment	Calling and membership
Rights, responsibility and respect	Values informed	Increase discretionary effort	Justice and love	Hope, faith and altruistic love

As can be seen from these brief descriptions, there are overlapping and interlocking themes, as well as nuances of difference. One thing they hold in common is a focus on a values-oriented approach. Each typology might be considered as part of a family, sharing DNA but with its own unique features and prints. Moral leadership shares many of these family traits, however, I believe it provides a unifying, holistic and more expansive view, encompassing the whole person and our relationship with the world around us.

Before moving on to focus on moral leadership in greater detail, I would like to pause on an important aspect of ethical leadership raised by Stefkovich and Begley (2007) – that of the guiding ethic in education. They argued that many professions have a guiding ethic, in medicine it

is 'do no harm', in law it is the right to 'zealous representation', and for education perhaps the most cited by school leaders is 'acting in the best interest of students/the child'. While this appears axiomatic, it requires problematising. Achieving consensus about what is in the best interest of students is fraught with difficulties. Sometimes appeals to this ethic can mask personal preference and self-interest. Ethics can also be applied in culturally exclusive ways and can gravitate towards values grounded in rational consequences and consensus in decision-making:

> In some forms, 'best interests of students' is more organizational or policy related rhetoric than a genuine regard for student well-being (Stefkovich and Begley 2007, p. 16)

Beck (1994) suggested that the importance of caring for the individual and the inherent value of persons may be at odds with the spirit of the performative age:

> A caring, community-oriented ethic frees persons from pressuring others and themselves to constantly strive to earn or maintain value [through achievement] (Beck 1994, p. 55)

Furthermore, in determining the best interests of students there is both an individual and group aspect to consider. What is best for an individual might be detrimental to the group. This presents a moral dilemma for leaders - whose needs get prioritised? This is especially the case when resources are limited.

3.4 What is meant by moral leadership? Developing a conceptual understanding

Whose morals?

The term 'moral leadership' requires definition and explanation. Morality comes from the Latin word *mores* referring to character, custom or habit. Fullan (2003) highlights the complexity and problems inherent in the language, as whenever morals are discussed the question follows "Whose morals are you talking about?". There are

multiple conceptions of what it means to act and behave morally. Some argue that all leadership, whether good or bad, has a moral element to it as it is ideologically driven (Gini, 1997). A dictionary definition of the word 'moral' carries with it the meaning of 'right and wrong', 'good and evil' in relation to human character and behaviour (Oxford English Dictionary). Implicit in this definition is the existence of an ultimate morality and moral absolutes. The language thereby takes on additional philosophical and theological gravitas, appealing to a higher authority.

Sergiovanni (1992, 2005) used religious language to describe the role of the principal as a moral leader – referring to sacred authority, covenants and virtues of piety, hope and trust. He appealed for acceptance of sacred authority and emotion as fully legitimate ways of knowing, equal in value to secular authority, science and deductive logic producing a new kind of leadership based on moral authority. It is this kind of leadership that he claimed has the power to transform schools into communities and inspire the commitment, devotion and service required to make schools unequalled among society's institutions (Sergiovanni, 1992). Whilst moral leadership may or may not have a spiritual dimension, West-Burnham (1997) pointed out that many leaders possess what might be considered 'higher order' perspectives. These are often represented by a specific religious affiliation. It is interesting here to note Woods' (2007, p. 148) survey of headteachers in England that found 52 per cent "were inspired or supported in their leadership by some kind of spiritual power".

Morals, principles, values, ethics and beliefs - lexical semantics or significant?

A second, but related challenge, is that words are often used interchangeably even in academic writing and policy documents. Arriving at a common understanding and agreement upon meanings can be challenging (Stefkovich and Begley, 2007). For example, this occurs with terms such as 'morals', 'principles', 'values', 'ethics' and

'beliefs'. Each one carries subtleties of difference in meaning which can become lost. The distinctions can be important. It is relatively easy to provide examples of those who held certain principles, beliefs and values who we would nevertheless argue were immoral or even amoral (e.g., Adolf Hitler). Even dictionary definitions themselves tend to resort to synonyms or use similar words side by side, which exacerbates the difficulty of achieving clarity. An example is given below:

Ethics = noun
1. (Functioning as singular) the philosophical study of the moral value of human conduct and of the rules and principles that ought to govern it; moral philosophy (Collins Dictionary)

Whilst ethical and moral leadership are undoubtedly interconnected, they are distinct. Starratt (1996) distinguishes ethics as making moral decisions, whereas morals go beyond this:

> Morality involves the total person as a human being. It involves the human person living in a community of other moral agents. Morality is a way of living and a way of being. (Starratt, 1996, p. 155).

This holistic interpretation involves the whole person, rather than compartmentalising aspects of behaviour and decision-making. It also emphasises a connectedness with others. Morality does not exist in isolation; it happens in community. It is both personal and collective. It is a shared endeavour worked out through relationships and interactions between people. Bush and Glover (2014) supported this holistic viewpoint, by using West-Burnham's (1997) definition of 'moral confidence' as the capacity to act consistently within a coherent ethical framework over time.

3.5 The philosophical underpinnings of moral leadership

As argued earlier, individual understandings of moral leadership flow from philosophical and/or theological positions, whether the human agents are aware of this or not. This is a vast subject and there is not enough space to explore this in detail within the scope of this literature review. However, it is important to briefly outline a few of the guiding moral and ethical theories that present themselves. This includes Kant's universal moral law, Bentham and Mill's consequentialist utilitarianism, Dewey's naturalist pragmatism and Aristotle's virtue ethics.

For Sergiovanni (2005) human relations provided the foundations for his moral code. To act morally one must place themselves in the shoes of another while not having regard for oneself and always treat others as an end, never a means. Underpinning Sergiovanni's moral position was the Kantian definition found in the treatise Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals ([1785] 1959) that:

> Any action, in order to be moral, must be taken in the belief and because of the belief that it is right – from duty, not because of personal inclination, gain, or love. (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 20)

Kant's moral law was grounded on the principle that you should act in such a way that you would will it to become a universal law. Sandel (2009) provided a helpful discussion of Kant's moral framework (and other philosophical positions) in his book *Justice – what's the right thing to do?*. Kant's framework consisted of categorical imperatives that can be universally applied. For an act to be moral the *motive* must be good, it must be for its own sake and because it is right (duty) rather than out of any other secondary motive, interest or convenience (inclination). Within this framework moral leadership requires that an action must be right of itself – for intrinsic not extrinsic reasons, regardless of whether the consequences are seen to be beneficial.

How does this apply to our focus on moral leadership? It is easy to fall short of Kant's concept of the moral law. Even moral leadership if adopted as a means to an end, rather than because it is the right thing, would not constitute a Kantian definition of moral action. It follows that if moral leadership is advocated on the premise of achieving better student results, then it is no longer of moral worth because it would be contingent.

Furthermore, for a person to display moral leadership he/she must be 'authors not instruments' of the purposes he/she pursues. When we act autonomously, according to the law we give ourselves, we do something for its own sake. It is this ability to act autonomously that Kant argued gives human life its special dignity, marking out the difference between people and things. People should be treated as an end in themselves, and it would be wrong to use people for the sake of the general welfare as utilitarianism does.

By contrast, *consequentialism* is a normative teleological ethical theory that determines the rightness or wrongness of an action based on its consequences or outcomes. *Utilitarianism* is a form of consequentialism that argues moral actions are those that maximise pleasure and benefit of the greatest number. This can be found in appeals to the moral *greater good*. Principal proponents of utilitarianism were 18[h] and 19th century philosophers and economists Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

Another perspective was presented by Dewey (1916) reflecting his position as a naturalist and pragmatist. For him moral meant 'growth' – becoming more able to adapt, survive and grow. This less familiar definition represented a form of constructivism and derived from his relationship with, and critique of, utilitarianism. He identified a moral situation as one that occurs when one is unable to choose between two ends, where the course of action does not immediately present itself, yet a choice for the better must be made.

Finally, Aristotle's moral virtues related not to actions or their consequences but are based on human character. His 'golden mean' advocated the right balance of a characteristic, so that it is neither deficient nor excessive. For example, bravery is a virtue, but an excess is considered rashness and a deficiency cowardice. In *Nicomachean Ethics* (c.300 B.C.) Aristotle outlined his framework for the 'good life' that humans should seek to live. The virtues encouraged were courage, temperance, generosity, magnificence, greatness of soul, even temper, friendliness, truthfulness, wit, justice, and friendship (Roberts, 2019, p. 68). These virtues have influenced much of our western thinking and can assist leaders in analysing their conduct and responses.

3.6 Kohlberg's moral cognitive development theory

As well as philosophical theories of morality, it is useful for us to consider psychological theories of moral cognitive development. This is important to this research as it addresses both the development of a moral framework and the ways in which individuals apply moral reasoning in decision-making, and particularly to moral dilemmas. Psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987), emphasised the importance of schools as moral institutions (Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977) and was critical of their relativistic and ineffective 'bag of virtues' approaches that are particular to a culture or sub-culture. He argued that while the "content of values varies from culture to culture" (Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977, p. 54) the developing structures of moral judgement are "universal in a developmental sequence across cultures" (ibid). He defined moral competence as "the capacity to make decisions and judgements which are moral (i.e., based on internal principles) and to act in accordance with such judgements" (Kohlberg, 1964, p. 425).

Kohlberg's theory of moral cognitive development built on the work of Piaget, who had systematically researched children's development of

autonomous moral judgement (aged 5-12) in relation to rules of children's games (Lind, 2010). Kohlberg explored how moral reasoning develops over time through adolescence and into young adulthood. Through analysis of responses of longitudinal and cross-cultural subjects to hypothetical moral dilemmas he argued that moral reasoning develops through a series of six stages. These stages are hierarchical, within an invariant sequence in which individuals are consistent in their level of moral judgement. Agreeing with Dewey that "The aim of education is growth or development, both intellectual and moral" (Dewey and McLellan, 1964 in Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977, p. 55), Kohlberg maintained that people have the psychological capacity to progress to higher stages of moral reasoning and this should be the aim of education.

The six moral stages are divided into three levels: i) preconventional level, ii) conventional level and iii) post-conventional, autonomous or principled level. These stages are described in the table below, adapted from Kohlberg and Hersh (1977, p. 54-55):

Table 2: Kohlberg's stages of moral development.

i) Pre-conventional level	Stage 1: The punishment and obedience orientation	Good and bad based on avoidance of punishment, deference to power and obedience.
	Stage 2: The instrumental-relativist orientation	Right action based on self-interest, rewards and instrumental values of the marketplace.
ii) Conventional level	Stage 3: The interpersonal concordance or "good boy – nice girl" orientation	Being good is determined by social approval and conformity. Intentions become important.

	Stage 4: The "law and order" orientation	Right behaviour based on obeying rules, respect for authority and duty to maintain the social order.
iii) Post-conventional level	Stage 5: The social-contract, legalistic orientation	Right action is seen in terms of individual rights and laws democratically agreed by society. Apart from the law, right is a matter of personal values.
	Stage 6: The universal-ethical principle orientation	Right defined by self-chosen universal ethical principles which may not align to societies laws or public opinion.

Kohlberg asserted that moral maturity was fully reached by age 25, as far as a person would, and further studies by Kramer among adults found that moral maturity did not increase beyond this age – "high school scores on moral judgement were highly predictive of adult scores on moral maturity" (Kohlberg and Kramer, 1969, p. 94). They argued that *Stage 6 principled thought* tends not be formed until a person's early 20's, if at all. Kramer proposed that in adulthood, rather than moral development, what occurs is moral stabilisation or socialisation – in which an individual's moral reasoning and moral action becomes increasingly consistent. This happens as a result of conflict, as a person's moral view meets the experience of life in a social world. Kohlberg's theory of moral development provides a useful conceptual tool by which to understand and explain the responses of executive headteachers.

3.7 Moral leadership – emerging themes

In the following section, I will explore dimensions of moral leadership evident in the literature. There are four main aspects of moral leadership that emerge from my review: individual, institutional, system and societal. This framework reflects the mapping of existing literature and research on moral leadership completed by Langlois and Begley (2005), cited in Stefkovich and Begley (2007, p. 207) which identified four levels of analysis micro-ethical (focused on the individual level), meso-ethical (focused on group, organisational level), macro-ethical (focused on society and government level) and mega-ethical (focused at the cross-cultural, global level). A similar hierarchy was applied by Fullan (2003) – individual, school, regional, societal. These represent growing spheres of influence which affect transformation (Figure 1). In order to function at the higher levels of system and society, school leaders must be deeply committed to the earlier levels. Fullan (2003, p. 29-30) lamented that:

> It should go without saying that the current system is not conducive to achieving the higher levels of the hierarchy … those individuals most cut out for the higher levels are among those least likely to aspire to leadership roles in schools precisely because their highest moral purposes will be thwarted.
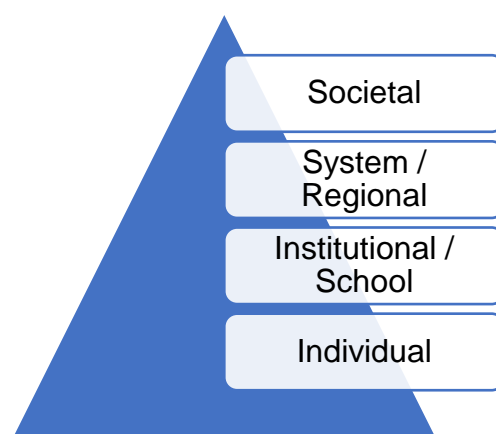
Figure 1: Making a difference – moral leadership, four levels of influence.

3.7.1 Individual level (micro)

Moral purpose and retaining a sense of moral compass is essential to moral leadership in a pressured and sometimes hostile policy environment. The popularity of Simon Sinek's book (and TED Talk) *Start with Why* (2009) attests to the human desire for purpose and has been highly influential for many in education and beyond. To sustain motivation and moral compass it is important for leaders to return frequently to powerful vocational questions: Why did I become an educator in the first place? What do I stand for as a leader? What legacy do I want to leave? (Livsey and Palmer, 1999 in Fullan, 2003)

Dantley (2005) argued that individual morality comes from leaders engaging in critical reflection on their personal journeys and through grappling with their own sense of what is right and just. Leaders must consider their own purpose and meaning within the wider system and contemplate their roles in actualising their beliefs. They may experience tensions between their sense of justice and a system which may perpetuate inequalities and engage in marginalising behaviour. He emphasised too the need for leaders to embrace their spiritual selves. Moral leadership requires acting in accordance with a personal code and "a deep investment of the genuine or authentic self of the educational leader" (Dantley, 2005, p. 45). Bush and Glover (2014) added that moral leadership requires leaders act with integrity, setting goals in accordance with explicit values. Similarly, Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999, p.10) argued "Moral leadership assumes that the critical focus of leadership should be on *values, beliefs and the ethics of leaders* themselves. So authority and influence are to be derived from defensible conceptions of what is right or good". Steare (2011) posits that integrity comprises ten principles or virtues; four inherited from ancient Greek philosophers (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance), three theological virtues (faith, hope and love) and three further modern virtues (honesty, humility and excellence).

While the focus of much leadership training and theory is on personality traits, leadership styles, and management skills, Sergiovanni (2007, p. 83) argued that substance is much more important, particularly in schools where purposes and relationships have "deep moral overtones". When we consider those leaders who are frequently held up as examples, whether it be Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa, it is the things they stand for that mark them out as leaders - their character, convictions and purpose.

For Sergiovanni (1992) leadership is a moral craft, rather than an applied science. Moral leadership is personal and requires a unity of *heart, head and hands*. The *heart* of leadership centres on a person's beliefs, values and vision. A leader may share many conceptions with other leaders, but it is also distinct and personal. The *head* of leadership refers to a leaders' mindscapes – "the mental pictures in our heads about how the world works" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 8). The *hands* of leadership relates to the actions a leader takes, their behaviours, decisions and strategies. Thus, leadership is envisioned as encompassing the emotional and affective, cognitive, personal as well as the ability to act.

Sergiovanni argued against one-size fits all strategies; every leader has their own personality and will need to respond to the unique situations they face. The leader "must find his or her own way, develop her or his own approach if the heart, head and head of leadership are to come together in the form of successful principalship practice" (Sergiovanni, 2001, p.344). Leaders need to be in touch with their own basic values, becoming more authentic with themselves and others (Sergiovanni, 1992). For school life to be more meaningful, we must connect with our own emotions, with what inspires and motivates. He argued that moral commitment is equally as strong as an extrinsic or intrinsic motivation – in other words what we believe in, and what we feel a moral commitment to, gets done.

Stefkovich and Begley (2007) identified three ways values related to school leadership. The first was the criticality for leaders of understanding "how values reflect underlying human motivations and shape the subsequent attitudes, speech and actions" (ibid, p. 209). Leaders should understand both their own values and develop awareness of the values of others. The second way related to the role values play in providing school leaders with a framework for action - a rubric – when faced with ethical dilemmas. The third way values assisted leaders was as a strategic tool for building consensus and agreement which can be harnessed to support shared organisational goals.

Schrag (1979, p. 208-209) outlined four very clearly defined ideas for headteachers adopting a moral perspective:

1. A moral agent must base his/her decision on principles that apply consistently and universally, without partiality or prejudice. The actor must be willing to adhere to the same principles even if his/her role in the moral situation were to be reversed.

2. A moral agent should consider the welfare and interests of *all* who stand to be affected by his/her decision or action, including him/herself.

3. A moral agent has the obligation to base his/her decision on the most complete information relative to the decision that he/she can obtain.

4. A conscientious moral agent's moral judgements are prescriptive. If, after full consideration of the situation, he/she acts counter to the conclusion reached, it is through weakness of will or through failure to take the moral obligation seriously.

Hodgkinson (1991) argued that leadership is a moral art which elevates the actions of the leader above mere pragmatics or expediency, promoting the case for praxis – unifying ethics with action. This resonates with West-Burnham's view (1997) of consistent ethical

action. He described the morally confident leader as someone who can:

- demonstrate causal consistency between principle and practice;

- apply principles to new situations;

- create shared understanding and a common vocabulary;

- explain and justify decisions in moral terms;

- sustain principles over time;

- re-interpret and restate principles as necessary.

West-Burnham (1997, p. 241)

In terms of specific desired values, Leithwood (1999) made a distinction between personal and professional values. He suggested that most personal values of school leaders are ethically desirable but that there are certain professional values on which a school learning community would be dependent. These values might include; caring, respect, equity, inclusion, dependability, a critical perspective and being "sensitively contingent in exercising one's values" (Leithwood, 1999, p. 46). While important he observed these values may not be as evident amongst school leaders as one might hope or expect. Significantly, Greenfield (2004) called attention to this as an under-explored area for study – what is the relationship between the professional values held by the school leader and the type of school community they are seeking to foster? Similarly, Ribbons (1999) called for situated portraits of leaders that take into account context as well as the character and biography of leaders.

3.7.2 Institutional level (meso)

Another dimension of the moral leader highlighted by Sergiovanni (2007) was his or her strong responsibility to help stakeholders define themselves as a learning community:

At root, school leadership is about connecting people morally to their work and to each other" (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 83)

He argued that principals need to shift schools from organisations - technical instruments for achieving objectives, which prize efficiency and effectiveness - to institutions or learning communities which develop over time through embodiment of habits and values. This requires a shift from *doing things right, to doing right things*. To become institutions and learning communities, schools must move beyond concern for goals and embody its purposes. As schools do so, members are transformed from participants to committed followers. They become increasingly self-managing as they are committed through a sense of duty and obligation to shared values. Leaders focus their efforts on establishing the "informal norms that govern behaviour" (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 47):

The assumptions underlying the use of moral authority are:

- Schools are professional learning communities.
- Communities are defined by their center of shared values, beliefs, and commitments.
- In communities what is considered right and good is as important as what works and what is effective.
- People are motivated as much by emotion and beliefs as by self-interest.
- Collegiality is a form of a professional virtue. (ibid)

The moral leader emphasises connectedness with the environment, context and community. One of the ways a school leader can build a moral community is to encourage individual teachers "to nurture the foundational qualities of autonomy, connectedness, and transcendence in their classrooms" (Starratt, 1996, p. 164). This is not always easy in an educational and political culture of high accountability and low trust, where decision-making increasingly takes place at the centre.

The community aspects of moral leadership are important in a school context, where human interactions and relationships are key. Moral

actions are more powerful when they are collective, and morals do not operate in a vacuum, they are acted out in groups and communities. Whilst we each have a personal moral code, morals and values can also be seen as socially constructed. The values of a school are influenced by its context, history, people and norms. For moral leadership to become transformative and fully embedded in the culture of a school, it will need to engage the collective moral purpose.

A distinguishing feature of moral leadership highlighted by Burns (1978) is the significance of the follower:

> Moral leadership is not mere preaching, or the uttering of pieties, or the insistence on social conformity. Moral leadership emerges from, and always returns to, the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations, and values of the followers. I mean the kind of leadership that will produce social change that will satisfy followers' authentic needs. (Burns, 1978, p. 4)

The concept of followership is developed by Sergiovanni (1992), who argued that the aim of the moral leaders is to create followership. This is almost an "anti-leadership" model and is an alternative to subordination in schools. Instead of responding to hierarchical structures and motivation from the leader, followers become self-managing, demonstrating emotional commitment to common ideas and principles based on moral and professional authority. Sergiovanni's argument for self-managing schools was based on moral authority that requires less leadership, one in which schools are transformed "from organisations to communities and when professionalism is viewed not only as a statement of competence but also as a virtue" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. xv).

This conception of moral leadership redefines the leader as the 'head follower'. This *primus inter pares* (or first among equals) is an appeal to moral authority, in which the leader seeks to bring "diverse people into a common cause by struggling to make the school a covenantal community" (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 2). At its heart are shared ideas,

values, commitments and purposes. The principal has the responsibility of being the protector and champion of these purposes, creating the conditions for followers to act in accordance with agreed-upon values. "The embodiment of purpose and the development of followership are inescapably moral" (Sergiovanni, 2007, p.22). Whilst subordinates may do what they are expected to do, followers will typically exceed expectations as they are motivated by shared commitment.

Sergiovanni (2001) reminds leaders of the need to be cognisant of the unequal power distribution inherent in leadership:

> Whether intended or not, leadership involves an offer to control. The follower accepts this offer on the assumption that control will not be exploited. In this sense leadership is not a right but a responsibility … The test of moral leadership under these conditions is whether the competence, well-being, and independence of the follower are enhanced as a result of accepting control and whether the school benefits (Sergiovanni, 2001, p. 346)

Bottery (1992, p. 5-6) posed six fundamental questions to leaders who would lead morally:

1) Does the management of the school promote personal growth?

2) Does it treat people as ends in themselves or as means to ends?

3) Does it foster a rationality that is not only tolerant of criticism, but actually sees it as an essential part of school and society?

4) Does it repudiate the view of human beings as resources to be manipulated, and instead see them as resourceful humans?

5) Does it create an ethos where measures of democracy can be introduced to be replicated within the society at large?

6) Does it foster an appreciation of the place of individuals as citizens within their own communities, states and world?

3.7.3 System level (macro)

In *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership* (2003, p.48) Michael Fullan called for an enlarged moral purpose among school leaders, arguing that "school leadership is the key not only to school improvement but also to system improvement". He advocated a redefinition of "the role of principal as more akin to chief operating officer of a larger corporation" (ibid). His definition of system leader both proceeded and went beyond the executive headteacher roles that we see in MATs in England. The type of moral purpose described is not insular but outward-looking and committed to the whole system (Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves, 2010; Hopkins and Higham, 2007). In short, his argument was that "school principals must be almost as concerned about the success of other schools in their district as their own" (Fullan, 2003). Or as Hopkins and Higham described it, the guiding principle of system leadership can be understood as "working for the success and welfare of students in other schools as well as one's own" (Hopkins and Higham, 2007). This occurs through increased collective moral purpose and endeavour through relational trust, reciprocity, collaboration, building capacity and accountability monitoring. Policy makers have an important role to play in creating an environment that enables such system leadership to flourish, but leaders need not wait to act. System transformation does not only come from the top, but through lateral development – through the giving and receiving of help by peers across schools (Fullan, 2003).

Hopkins (2008) described several system leader roles that express this moral purpose:

- Leading an educational improvement partnership
- Improving a school in a challenging context
- Partnering a low achieving school
- Acting as a community leader
- Working as a change agent

In assuming the roles above, "system leaders strive for equity and inclusion through giving their communities a sense of worth and empowerment" (Hopkins, 2008, p. 34)

3.7.4 Societal level (mega)

The final level of moral leadership extends to a leader's societal role and responsibilities. Leaders at this level will think and act in ways that benefit society, influencing and impacting the context in which they operate (Fullan, 2003). School leaders must have an eye to the key developments in the bigger picture and become "critical consumers" of policy (Fullan, 2003, p. 60). Moral leadership requires leaders to engage in critical self-reflection and the think about the whole social, political and economic context within which schools are mired.

Dantley (2005) criticised the predominance of market-based values in education, which underpin much thinking and decision-making. He argued that "schools often serve as spaces for social reproduction" (2005, p.39), and instead school leaders must be committed to social justice and democracy, prepared to challenge the hegemony of the powerful. They must ask the hard questions about the purpose of schools and who is most ably served by them:

> Schools have become purveyors of the culture that those who wield political and economic power deem legitimate (Dantley, 2005, p. 40).

Schools can solidify the *status quo* or serve to bring societal change. As school leaders they can be agents of change or perpetuate inequities and injustices. Dantley (ibid) proposed that it is immoral for leaders to embrace any form of administration without wrestling with "the societal, political, and cultural contexts in which their schools exist".

Foster (1986, p. 94) posed four questions in this area for school leaders who would act morally:

1) How are society and culture reproduced through schooling?

2) Why are sons and daughters of the underclass apt to be fathers and mothers of underclass children, too?

3) How is a culture of sexism and violence perpetuated?

4) Why can't schools break the cycles of class reproduction?

Dantley (2005) appealed for moral leadership in schools that creates an environment for change that is morally rather than economically driven:

> Principled leadership is initiated when the individual questions the democratic efficacy of administrative decisions and procedures he or she is demanded to implement (Dantley, 2003, p. 187-188).

He described the challenge in education as a crisis of meaning – centred on why we exist and why we are doing what we are doing:

> Meaning causes us to understand that our positions as educational leaders are not simply placeholders or the mechanisms by which we perpetuate commerce and the prevailing economic system but an active ingredient in defining what is significant to us and to what we have heartfelt commitment (Dantley, 2005, p. 40)

3.8 Challenges to moral leadership: technical rationality and managerialism

Sergiovanni (2007) distinguished between normative rationality and technical rationality. Normative rationality emphasises the primacy of shared values based on what we consider to be good. Technical rationality lacks this moral dimension, prizing instead only what is effective and efficient:

> We live, after all, in a technical-rational society where what is considered scientific is prized. But teaching and learning are too complex to be captured so simply (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 45)

It is normative rationality that forms the basis for moral leadership:

> To pass the test of normative rationality, the reasons must embody the purposes and values that the group shares – the sacred covenant that bonds everyone in the school together as members of a learning community (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 26).

The shared values that Sergiovanni described are not imposed but part of an ongoing discussion and dialogue, open to debate and scrutiny. As these values become more embedded in the school culture normative rationality grows in its legitimacy. It becomes guidance for action, an articulation of what the school stands for and why (ibid).

In contrast, technical-rationality is based on logic and scientific management. Dantley (2005) has contended that scientific management suggests the leadership of organisations can be reduced to replicating behaviours that have proved effective and efficient. Efficiency and effectiveness as evaluated by hard data through quantifiable measurement. Whilst scientific management has permeated much practice in schools it does little to address the wider challenges – issues of race, class, gender, poverty - in our communities and world. For some, scientific management – the focus on measurement and efficiency - acts as a catalyst for feelings of alienation and the domination of the individual through bureaucracy.

Scientific management claims authority through an appeal to 'truth'. According to Sergiovanni (2007) where technical rationality is the dominant authority, the following is assumed:

- Supervision and teaching are applied sciences.
- Scientific knowledge is privileged and thus superordinate to practice.
- Teachers are skilled technicians.
- Values, preferences, and beliefs do not count very much but facts and objectives do.

The increasing emphasis on school leadership and management as a technical skill, with high levels of centralised specification and

prescription, has been criticised for contributing to a compliant and conformist culture, stripped of values and diminishing the critical components of leading and managing (West-Burnham, 1997).

In contrast to moral leadership, managerial leadership is predicated on the belief that that "the focus of leaders ought to be on functions, tasks and behaviours and that, if these functions are carried out competently, the work of others in the organisation will be facilitated" (Bush and Glover, 2014, p. 4). It is underpinned by the formal authority and positional power of leaders, formal policies and procedures (Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach, 1999) which are evident in English schools (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005). Managerial leadership poses a threat to moral leadership in as far as it is biased towards rationality, logic, objectivity and the importance of self-interest (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Sergiovanni contrasted the language and terminology commonly applied by moral leadership with that of managerial leadership (1992, p. 81):

Moral leadership	*Managerial leadership*
Leadership purposes	*Leadership strategies*
Values	Goals
Norms	Policies
Visions	Forecasts
Directions	Objectives
Frameworks	Blueprints

Figure 2: Moral and managerial leadership

Greenfield (1991, p. 208) has pointed out that "values lie beyond rationality. Rationality to be rationality must stand on a value base". Technical or scientific rationality does not ask these value questions, it is concerned only with how best to achieve a prescribed end. Bush (1998) highlighted this common distinction between the technical and implementation issues of management on the one hand, and the issues of values and purpose attributed to leadership on the other:

> Managerial leadership is an essential component of successful schools but it should complement, not supplant, values-based approaches. Effective management is essential but value-free managerialism is inappropriate and damaging (Bush and Glover, 2014, p. 5).

At the extreme end of managerial leadership is managerialism. Managerialism, or management to excess (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005), poses a threat to value-based approaches as they are squeezed out in the pursuit of ever greater efficiency (Bush and Glover, 2014). The emphasis on maximisation of efficiency, performance and market success "can stand at odds with the public service ethos of making professional judgements based on equal treatment and assessments of needs" (Stevenson, 2007, p. 770-771).

Wright (2001; 2003) has highlighted the continued influence of managerialism under both the Conservative and New Labour administrations that increasingly focused on economic imperatives and global competition. A feature of the managerialist approach is the belief that managers need to earn the 'right to manage', which contributes to an obedience culture and leads to a two-tier professional system (Helbsy, 1999). Apart from the policies which are mandatory or statutory, leaders in schools that are performing well in national tests and Ofsted inspections will have considerably more freedom to decide which policy initiatives to get involved in and to what extent (Ball, 2012). MATs too may choose to adopt an earned autonomy model with schools joining a MAT given differing levels of influence and decision-making capital based on their Ofsted judgement.

Bush (1998) has argued that the dominant values are directed by government and are imposed on school leaders; schools that do otherwise risk censure from Ofsted. Support for this view is found in Bottery's (2007) portrait of 'Alison', a headteacher who considers every decision through the prism of Ofsted's likely reaction.

Bottery (2004, p. 195-196) expressed this perceived threat to genuine leadership:

> We already have a situation where educational leaders are shorn of any proper leadership. They will hardly be worthy of the name, for if they are incapable, or fail to articulate what education is for they fail to be leaders and become no more than servants of the powerful. There can be no greater abnegation of professional responsibility than to do others bidding without questioning whether this constitutes what they believe to be good education.

In response to these tensions Sergiovanni (2001, p. 351) has advocated the need for both moral and managerial leadership:

> In the principalship, the challenge of leadership is to make peace with two competing imperatives, the managerial and the moral. The two imperatives are unavoidable and the neglect of either creates problems. Schools must be run effectively if they are to survive… But for the school to transform itself into an institution, a learning community must emerge… [This] is the moral imperative that principals face.

This is an important point, whilst managerial leadership may be heavily criticised as technicist it is essential to ensure the implementation of the school's vision and strategy (Bush and Glover, 2014). What is required is a bifocal perspective (Leithwood et al., 1999) which recognises moral and managerial leadership. Managerial leadership is by its nature value neutral, it does not address the issue of whether certain ends or purposes are morally desirable, but rather the efficiency and effectiveness in achieving set ends. Thus, a managerialist would not consider themselves not to be moral. However, those advocating moral leadership would argue that it is incumbent on school leaders to pursue virtue and that the unquestioning application of managerialism may lead to undesirable moral consequences.

It might be agreed then that moral and managerial leadership can coexist but I would argue that the moral must come first, where choices

must be made, it is values and principles that should lead, rather than managerial expediency.

3.9 The empirical research evidence for moral leadership within the English schools' system

As noted in my introduction, empirical scholarly research targeted directly at moral leadership in English schools is limited and has been constrained by the dominating focus on outcomes, efficiency and impact measures, symptomatic of the managerial age. Nevertheless, there is growing recognition of the need for ethical approaches to leadership and decision-making (Bush, 2010). This is reflected in many of the conclusions found in commissioned research by the Department for Education. This research has tended to concentrate on those headteachers already perceived to be successful in accountability measures such as Ofsted judgements and performance in raising levels of attainment. Whilst the initial specification of the research set out to explore outcomes, and why some headteachers are more successful than others at raising achievement, researchers have time and again highlighted moral, value-based leadership as a significant factor and worthy of increasing attention from policymakers (Day et al., 2009; Gold et al., 2003).

From my review of the empirical literature certain themes have emerged. The first is that there is not a uniform view of how headteachers respond to and reconcile values with policy. Some research suggests some headteachers manage these tensions well, whilst others appear heavily constrained. There is also the specific issue of moral dilemmas faced by headteachers, particularly in 'right versus right' choices, how they spend their time and allocate resources. These themes are discussed in more detail in the sections below.

The system leadership roles of executive headteacher and CEO among MATs are still relatively new and consequently reviewing empirical research focused specifically on aspects of moral leadership amongst this group is difficult. What has emerged are examples of moral

tensions and challenges for executive headteachers, such as issues of executive pay, governance, financial (mis)management and student exclusion rates amongst MATs. Opponents of academies and multi-academy trusts have been quick to highlight moral and financial failures of executive headteachers and governance, which have received some significant media attention. Others have raised concerns that system leader identities have become more 'entrepreneurial-competitive' than 'ethical-professional' (Cousin, 2019, p. 533, drawing from Ball, 2008)) and that the moral purpose argument for system leadership – equity and excellence – has yet to be realised. These purposes have arguably been subordinated to neoliberal approaches and centralist government policy.

3.9.1 A varied and contextualised typology of headteacher responses to policy

> The population of headteachers is not filled either with those who are all able to manage in a principled manner, centralist incursions into their practice, nor is it filled with those who simply must comply with such steerage. (Bottery, 2007, p.106)

This is the varied picture painted in Bottery's (2007) portraits of twelve case study primary headteachers. His research takes into account a broad range of headship across three local authorities, with selection not based on high achievement but sampling representing a range of contexts, experiences and abilities; those new to the school, and also long-time holders of the post; male and female; those leading denominational and non-denominational schools; and headteachers of inner-city, leafy suburb and rural schools.

These findings echo those of earlier qualitative case studies undertaken by Day et al. (2000) to explore 'Leading schools in times of change'. Like Bottery (2007), Day et al. (2000) selected 12 case studies, but this time sought to maximise variation of school size, type and location – including small, rural primary schools and large urban secondary schools, and variations in between. They identified three types of

leader responses – *subcontractor*, *subversive* and *values-driven leadership*. The subcontractor was seen as an uncritical implementer of the policy agenda, the subversive leader sought to challenge policy by undermining it, and the values-driven leader was able to mediate the external policy to align it with the vision and values of the school. The first two of these were labelled as problematic as in both cases trust and integrity in the leaders was undermined. Their findings argued that effective leaders were able to assert their agency and retain a strong commitment to educational and professional values even in the face of hostile policy. This view is supported by Hoyle and Wallace (2007) who provide a similar three-fold categorisation of headteachers within the English school system responses to policy; 1) those committed to implementing external policy, 2) those demonstrating minimal compliance, 3) those practicing principled infidelity.

Higham and Earley (2013), in their survey of almost 2000 school leaders across school types and phases (as well as eight in-depth case studies) explored school autonomy, accountability, external support and managing change, and suggested a four-fold typology of *confident, cautious, concerned* and *constrained* schools.   The research highlighted the significance of school size, phase and Ofsted judgement on leaders' perceived capacity to act. Leaders of small primary schools appeared particularly vulnerable to government changes in schools' managerial powers. Importantly, whilst school leaders expected increasing powers of autonomy over aspects of school management, this did not extend to the purposes of schooling. For example, those leading in academy schools may experience greater freedoms over teachers' pay and conditions, making changes to the school day/year and adapting the national curriculum. However, they continue to be driven by external accountability measures and examinations. In reality, many of the important decisions, such as curriculum decisions, are influenced heavily by the mantra of "expect and inspect".

More recently, Cousin (2019) suggested that despite claims of a devolution of power the government's grip had tightened. Her

longitudinal interpretive study (2009-2016) triangulated perspectives of five headteachers working as system leaders, policy leads responsible for policy design or implementation using system leaders, and headteachers working with system leaders. Interviews from 2009 showed high levels of optimism and enthusiasm among system leaders for the work and mapped four distinct system leader traits 1) the protector 2) the collaborator 3) the hero-head 4) the auditor. During follow up interviews perspectives had become more homogenous. A shift towards greater individual alignment with policy and towards centralised governance and directive leadership was evident. By 2013 most had become CEOs of MATs. While first phase interviews emphasised the importance of moral purpose of helping other schools, this was not apparent in later interviews.

In examining the role of system leaders, Cousin (ibid) argued that government policy of partnering with headteachers viewed them as levers for improvement, making state control less transparent and more difficult challenge. This has been achieved through a combination of incentives and sanctions. Headteachers have been enticed with "symbolic capital of national recognition in speeches, honours, higher pay … and by their promotion as the linchpin of school improvement" (Cousin, 2019, p. 524). Headteachers and system leaders judged 'outstanding' received National Leader of Education status and gained influence and power. These rewards deflected attention away from increasingly directive policies and a stronger accountability framework.

3.9.2 The case for optimism

Gold et al. (2003) researched the practice of outstanding leaders in ten case study schools (four secondary, four primary and two special schools), reporting that the successful leaders in their study were driven by a strong sense of mission, personal, moral and educational values and articulated these with absolute conviction, creating a clear sense of institutional purpose and direction. The study reported that the values demonstrated by the leaders in case studies were driven by intrinsic

values rather than any externally imposed values from government or elsewhere:

> The school leaders in our case studies remained committed to a set of strongly held values and a simple shift from 'welfarism' to 'new managerialism' (Gewirtz and Ball, 2000) was not apparent. (Gold et al., 2003, p. 136)

Other studies, such as the large and extensive three-year mixed method research undertaken by Day et al. (2009) into school leadership and its effect on pupil outcomes in the period 2003-2005, support Gold's claim that successful headteachers demonstrate moral and value-led leadership:

> Heads in more effective schools are successful in improving pupil outcomes through who they are – their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences. (Day et al., 2009, p. 195)

The research - one of the largest undertaken - consisting of quantitative and qualitative data gathered from large scale questionnaires resulting in 20 case studies of primary and secondary headteachers, focused on schools with significant and sustained statistical improvement in achievement over the three-year period. Striking characteristics of outstanding contemporary leaders reported in the paper were that leaders are engaged deeply with providing personalised learning for students, strive for equity and inclusion, giving pupils a sense of self-worth and empowerment (as well as eradicating poverty), developing schools as personal and professional learning communities. Furthermore, outstanding leaders fully appreciated the importance of emotional identities and well-being of pupils and teachers, developing individual, relational and organisational capacity and trust (Day et al., 2009).

These two studies (Day et al., 2009; Gold et al., 2003) hint at a possible causal link between moral leadership and improved outcomes. Indeed, Day et al. (2009, p. 195) concluded that:

There are statistically significant empirical and qualitatively robust associations between heads' educational values, qualities and their strategic actions and improvements in school conditions leading to improvement in pupil outcomes.

If these studies are to be relied upon, then moral leadership does exist, and indeed is a central feature of successful school leadership. However, this begs several difficult questions; is it right to imply that, where a school is struggling to meet national external benchmarks, moral leadership is lacking? Would such an assertion be true or fair? If moral leadership is less evident, might there be factors that inhibit leaders in lower performing schools from taking a more value-led approach that would seem to offer better results? Coe (2009) has pointed out that correlation is not causation and has questioned many of the claims made by such studies of school effectiveness which attribute success to characteristics like 'strong leadership'. He argues that these characteristics are often poorly defined and offer generally low correlations.

In addition, the studies of both Gold et al. (2003) and Day et al. (2009) are limited in that their studies are narrowly focused on those headteachers already identified as being successful; as such they are studies of 'special cases' (Bottery, 2007). They cannot begin to answer the questions raised above. Since this time, Ofsted have arguably strengthened their grip on schools' attention and the focus on school performance outcomes has become ever more intense.

3.9.3 Grounds for concern

The optimistic view presented by Gold (2003) and Day et al (2009) has been contested by others such as Bottery (2007), Hammersley-Fletcher (2015) and Wright (2004). Wright's (2004) criticism is that whilst these leaders may exhibit moral values, the first order concern of headteachers is succeeding in a target-based culture and in the end, it is this which drives what is permitted and what is prescribed.

> Principals are (not) necessarily unprincipled people, far from it, but … the system in which they have to operate stipulates the overall framework, values direction and often the detail of what they have to do. (Wright, 2004, p. 1-2)

Whilst Bottery (2007) presents a varied picture, most case study headteachers interviewed conceded that much day-to-day decision making, as well as the contemplation of new initiatives, was framed by assessing the potential reaction of Ofsted. This research too has its limitations, as it concentrates solely on primary headteachers, which may or may not be reflective of headteachers in secondary schools.

Hammersley–Fletcher's (2015) study into value(s)-driven decision-making based on written responses of ten headteachers (eight primary and two secondary) concluded that "despite a strong support for the pupil being at the heart of education, there were indications that these headteacher also felt it imperative to meet the external targets set for them" (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015, p. 211). Thrupp and Lupton (2006) highlighted that that the 'one size fits all' criteria applied to school improvement, which takes scant account of context further exacerbated the pressure in meeting accountability agendas. As a relatively new primary headteacher in the study commented "If I'm honest I'm terrified of failure and the punitive approaches that the government set for school inspection/improvement" (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015, p. 204).

Hughes' (2020) ethnographic study of the practices and position of the CEO illuminated differing concerns. While it considered only one CEO, it compellingly highlighted how executive headteacher roles are being reconstituted as business leaders. The CEO - who led a MAT of five secondary schools, three primary schools and a teaching school - was portrayed as personifying the "neo-liberal agenda of privatising education in England (Hughes, 2020, p. 491). He was self-made, embodying the successful executive, with a strong sense of agency, not necessarily championing government policy and enjoying relative freedom from public pressures of accountability (he was not named on

any Ofsted report).   He was described operating interchangeably as "street-level bureaucrat, a street-level professional, a street-level policy entrepreneur and as a policy networker, entrepreneur and broker" (p. 490).   He moved freely at school level, modelling and monitoring expected behaviours; his status as lead professional and credentials as a National Leader of Education allowed him access to other networks; he advised on government policy and acquired significant networking capital; finally, he was entrepreneurial, using his influence to broker lucrative commissions and sell products. Hughes concluded that his values were epitomised in the question "How do we run this organisation in such a way that the brand and data are protected?" (p. 480) and his praxis was depicted as "pragmatic, perpetuating the brand, simultaneously winning bids and interfacing with the market" (p. 491). This conceptualisation of the CEO role poses a threat to moral leadership in that it blurs boundaries of influence, promotes self-interest and elevates market concerns over educational purposes.

Another moral issue that has provoked much debate is executive pay. In March 2018, Schools Week (Staufenberg, 2018) reported its annual analysis of the salaries of chief executive pay in the largest MATs. It revealed significant variations between trusts, men and women, pay per pupil and per school. The highest paid CEO in 2016-17 received a minimum salary of £440,000, an increase of £20,000 on the previous year. Of the 24 MATs with more than 20 schools two-thirds of CEOs received a pay rise. Across this sample the average CEO pay for trusts headed by men was £174,756 compared to £139,800 for women.

These salaries should be seen in the context of increasing school budget concerns. The Education Policy Institute's report *School funding pressures in England* (Andrews and Lawrence, 2018) revealed that amongst both primary and secondary local authority maintained schools a large proportion spent more than their income in 2016-17. For many, this was more than a one-off, with balances in decline for two years or more. In 2016 the National Audit Office reported that:

The Department estimates that mainstream schools will have to find savings of £3.0 billion (8.0%) by 2019-20 to counteract cumulative cost pressures, such as pay rises and higher employer contributions to national insurance and the teachers' pension scheme.

As such, executive headteachers are increasingly having to make difficult decisions about cost reductions, including staffing, and at the same time deliver rapid school improvement. This is particularly the case in many schools judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted and which have been required to join a MAT. These schools may often suffer from both educational and financial difficulties.

The moral authority of executive headteachers has been further damaged following high-profile cases of financial irregularity amongst MATs. This includes Perry Beeches Academies Trust, a MAT previously praised by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron and Education Minister, Michael Gove (BBC News, 2016). It was the subject of an investigation by the Education Funding Agency and accused of serious financial failures – with accounts showing it had a net deficit of £2.5million in 2015-16 (George, 2017 February 14). Its chief executive was found in breach of the Academies Financial Handbook for payments received on top of his £120,000 salary as executive head.

3.9.4 Moral dilemmas

In decision-making headteachers may weigh up their duty to do what is right by pupils, alongside a strong desire to meet external agenda and be judged favourably (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015, p. 207). Identifying how headteachers respond to issues that challenge their values is a good way of exposing what they see as the overriding position (ibid). To cope with moral dilemmas faced, some headteachers engage in 'doublethink' (El-Sawad et al., 2004) allowing contradictory values to operate within themselves, enabling them to 'play the game' and separate personal action from wider political drivers. One primary

headteacher in the study summed it up - "I think it is easy to forget what your educational values are with the maelstrom of decisions that we have to take all bound up with legalities and the threat of Ofsted" (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015, p. 208).

Stevenson's (2007) qualitative case studies of five secondary school headteachers working in multi-ethnic contexts, highlighted that the most problematic decisions for headteachers in promoting social justice were 'right versus right' moral dilemmas. A characteristic of these dilemmas was their 'either/or' nature where an opportunity cost results from whatever action is not pursued. For headteachers in the study, the clearest manifestation of this was in their daily decisions about the allocation of their time. As Stevenson said, "How we allocate our time, what we choose to do, and not do, are tangible signals of the values we hold – what is important to us" (2007, p. 776). Whilst principals were found to be committed to social justice, equity and inclusivity – these values were sometimes in tension and conflict with central policies such as the promotion of school choice, the impact of high stakes testing, league tables and quasi-markets for school education. For example, headteachers taking a more inclusive approach to student intake may risk a dip in school performance. Perhaps unsurprisingly the study concluded that:

> The reality is that in some of the most challenging schools, facing the most difficult circumstances, these issues for school leaders are likely to be posed most sharply (Stevenson, 2007, p. 779).

3.10 Conclusion

The renewed interest in moral leadership comes as a response to increasing prescription from policy makers that has determined the ends of education and set up rigorous accountability frameworks to hold school leaders to their delivery. Headteachers can find themselves caught in the tension between doing what they believe is right, from a moral and values perspective, and doing what is

measured. School leaders must navigate these competing moral and managerial imperatives.

The review of these selected empirical studies suggests that some school leaders - those confident enough, and usually operating from a position of relative safety with good examination outcomes and a favourable Ofsted judgement - may be better able to reconcile these imperatives than those in more vulnerable contexts. They do this by filtering policy directions through their own value systems. If, as Day et al. (2009) argued, there is an overwhelming positive correlation between moral leadership and educational outcomes for pupils, then what constitutes 'moral leadership' needs to be explored. Policy makers should create the conditions that will enable moral leadership to flourish, one which moves from *prescription* to *professionalism*:

> The policy implication here is this more morally centred approach to leadership rather than the commonplace instrumental view of the role should be at the forefront of public and policy debate (Day et al., 2009, p. 195)

Furthermore, as successful school leaders take on executive headteacher and system leader responsibilities the way these increasingly influential leaders manage these tensions and enact leadership takes on greater significance. Are these leaders able to provide strong moral leadership and resist external pressures to compromise principles to meet targets? Do executive headteachers experience particular or different moral tensions as a result of their increased responsibilities? Do these leaders have a clear understanding of themselves as moral leaders? This new and under-researched area is the focus for this study.

Greenfield (2004) recommended that in order to understand moral leadership further *'in situ'* descriptive field studies of leadership practice should be conducted. By studying leaders and leading 'up close' new perspectives can be gained which will inform and refine the field's understanding of how executive headteachers make sense of a moral

framework. Through this developing understanding, moral leadership can be encouraged to enable all schools to succeed, not just in following government prescriptions but in adopting a values-based approach linked to the needs of the school community.

This research seeks to understand the moral frameworks of executive headteachers, the tensions they experience and the ways in which they respond to these tensions. The research questions enable further investigation of executive headteachers, as an increasingly important and influential group of leaders at the sharp end of accountability, with growing responsibility for ensuring pupil outcomes for all schools within their MAT and for leading the self-improving system.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present the research methodology for my study. I reflect on my ontological and epistemological position and demonstrate how the methodology aligns to the research aim and questions. I discuss sampling, data collection, the selected research methods, learning from the pilot study, ethical considerations and the process of data analysis.

With the desire to transform education into an evidence informed profession, increasing value and funding has been assigned to positivist quantitative research, with large scale experimental studies – randomised controlled trials - termed the 'gold standard' (Biesta, 2009; Goldacre, 2013). Such large-scale data analyses contribute to the 'what works' agenda in education, seeking to quantify the impact of particular inputs on outcomes with a focus on effectiveness (Biesta, 2009). This represents one end of the research continuum where mathematical models and analyses are used to underpin a narrative and point to generalised associations between different variables, such as prior knowledge, teaching strategies and student achievement, for example. However, these studies reveal little about the fine-grained lived experiences, the views, underpinning values and beliefs of students, their teachers or school leaders. Rather than taking an instrumental view of leadership, this research seeks to explore the moral framework that guides and informs headteachers' leadership and decision making.

4.2 Ontological and epistemological position

I position myself as an ontological realist, I believe there are realities that exist outside the mind. However, as human agents we interpret the world through our subjective experience and knowledge is socially constructed by individuals in groups. This is particularly the case in the social world and in the study of human behaviour "where the immense complexity of human nature and the elusive and intangible quality of social

phenomena contrast strikingly with the order and regularity of the natural world" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p. 9). This reflects an anti-positivist approach.

This research is rooted in the interpretive paradigm. The primary concern of the interpretive model is with "an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she finds himself or herself" (ibid, p. 7). The interpretive researcher begins with individuals and sets out to understand their interpretations of the world around them, discovering the underlying meaning of events and activities. The focus of this study is on understanding the value systems of executive headteachers and the impact of the high accountability system in which they work. Through discovering and sharing the 'lived lives' of executive headteachers this research aims to bring a vivid narrative to the reader, whether researcher, policy maker or practitioner. The power of these personal stories lies not in their scientific replicability but in the quality of tangible "undeniability" that can be difficult to establish in abstracted numerical studies (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014).

The research adopts a qualitative data approach aiming to provide "well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human processes" (ibid, p. 4). The research is idiographic in nature and through focusing on the individual moral frameworks and behaviours of research participants, it enables readers to theorise about the experiences of executive headteachers.

The research recognises the work of Habermas (1972) in providing a framework for worthwhile knowledge and modes of understanding structured around three cognitive interests:

1. Prediction and control (technical)

2. Understanding and interpretation (practical)

3. Emancipation and freedom (emancipatory)

The focus of enquiry in this research is located in the second of these fields, the 'practical' of understanding and interpretation. Such practical research methodologies aim to clarify, understand and interpret the communications of "speaking and acting" subjects (Habermas, 1974, p. 8). It is concerned with hermeneutics, understanding others' perspectives and views. This 'Verstehen' method of interpretation is contrasted with the objective scientific method and is in the tradition of Weber (1864-1920) who argued that no understanding is complete without understanding the moral, political, and religious dimension of the concerted activities of human agents (Blackburn, 2008).

The research seeks to understand the formation of executive headteachers' moral framework and how conceptions of moral leadership are enacted whilst working within a culture of high accountability. It documents significant experiences and influences in the lives of executive headteachers that shape their moral framework, their understanding of themselves as moral leaders and system leaders. Its concern is to observe how and to what extent executive leaders are guided by moral leadership in this context, and to understand the way in which they seek to manage any perceived tensions between the moral and the accountability imperatives.

The research questions emerge from the researchers concern that existing power structures, specifically the accountability systems imposed by central government, are having a detrimental effect on the nature of school leadership, elevating the importance of satisfying externally imposed measures above all others and resulting in the neglect of moral leadership (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015; Wright, 2001). In this way, the research connects with the work of Habermas (1979) and Bernstein (1971) on exposing the operation of power and control which seeks to restrict individual and social freedoms.

4.3 Restatement of the research questions

The research questions are restated below:

1. How has the sense of moral development and moral leadership been shaped by life experiences?

2. How do executive headteachers understand their roles as moral leaders?

3. In understanding the moral dimension of leadership, what tensions are experienced by executive headteachers?

   a. What, if any, are the tensions experienced by executive headteachers in reconciling the moral imperative with the accountability imperative?

   b. Are there specific moral tensions that arise for executive headteachers working in system leadership roles?

4. How do executive headteachers seek to resolve these tensions?

4.4 Methodology and alignment to the ontological and epistemological position taken.

The research methodology follows a qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a form of interpretivism which emphasises the way "human beings give meaning to their lives" (Morrison, 2012, p.16). It encourages acceptance of agent's direct experience and perspectives, seeking to "see things from the person's point of view" (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, p. 14).

> Phenomenology allows us to understand and appreciate educational issues by exploring the unique experiences and perspectives of individuals involved in the process. (Hopkins, Regehr and Pratt, 2020, p. 20)

This aligns to the aims of the research to investigate how executive headteachers build understandings of their world (Morrison, 2012). Albert Schutz (1967), one of the pioneers of phenomenology, argued that meaning is imputed to lived experiences retrospectively, by looking back on oneself and reflecting reflexively on what has been happening (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). In this study the research

methods chosen - an autobiographical life grid and semi and semi-structured interview – engage and encourage participants in this reflexive process of sense making. Where does their moral framework come from? How do they understand their roles as moral leaders?

Bernstein (1974) in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) has cautioned that interpretive methodologies and the use verbal accounts are subjective, sometimes incomplete and misleading. They may not take full account of the circumstances in which the individual is situated, such as the power of external forces to shape behaviour and events. This research goes some way to addressing this issue in encouraging participants to reflect on the wider policy and accountability environment that acts upon them, and any tensions that may arise between the moral and accountability imperative.

Subjectivity is a common criticism of interpretive and qualitative approaches. It is important to acknowledge from the outset the potential for observer bias and take steps to guard against it. Frequently the framing of the research question belies personal assumptions about a given situation or perceived problem that needs addressing.

On the subject of partisanship and personal motivations for research Troyna (1995, p.403) observed that:

> All research, from its conception through to the production of data, its interpretation and dissemination, reflects a partisanship which derives from the social identity and values of the researcher.

In confronting this, the researcher must be aware of this tendency, demonstrating reflexivity and allowing the facts to speak for themselves. This is particularly important in research with a 'moral' focus where the personal beliefs and experiences of the researcher are brought to the process. Whilst being a practitioner researcher has its challenges, Miles, Huberman and Saldaño (2014, p. 42) highlight the benefits of a savvy practitioner as a research instrument in a qualitative study, as:

"sharper, more refined, more attentive, people friendly, worldly-wise, and quicker to hone in on core processes and meanings about the case".

4.5 Sampling

Sampling considered both access and typicality. My professional role at SSAT involves regular communication and engagement with school leaders, including those working as executive headteachers and CEOs. These professional networks provided convenient access to the sample of participants. In addition, the sample was purposive and participants were selected on the basis of their typicality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000) of the wider population of executive headteachers with leadership responsibility across more than one school. Considerations such as size of MAT/federation, school phase and type, as well as participant gender were accounted for.

The sampling reflected the national data. At the time of undertaking the research executive headship was more commonly associated with secondary school leaders, although the number of primary executive headteachers has increased as a result of the government agenda, headteacher recruitment problems and financial pressures. Most executive headteachers led MATs/federations with between two and ten schools (Bernardinelli, Rutt, Greany and Higham, 2018; Simon, James, Simon, 2019). Following a notable lack of school improvement capacity highlighted in a number of national and cross-regional MATs, the government strategy has been to encourage greater numbers of smaller academy groups, rather than very large chains (Hill, 2015).

In all a sample of eleven executive headteachers was taken, seven from secondary backgrounds and four from primary. Six of these consisted of mixed phases with primary and secondary schools. Both male and female headteachers are included in the sample, as well as those from faith schools (one Catholic and one Church of England) and non-religious schools. The sample size is appropriate for a small-scale study and manageable for a single doctoral researcher. It enabled me

sufficient participant numbers to be able to theorise about the formation of executive headteachers' moral frameworks, their ability to enact values and identify any tensions experienced between the moral imperative and accountability imperative. The findings contribute to the existing knowledge base and generate propositions for testing in further research.

The relationship between researcher and participants

The eleven executive headteachers who participated in this study are known to me through my professional role at SSAT. They have either been involved in SSAT leadership programmes or within the wider SSAT membership network of schools. This prior knowledge of participants is both a strength and potential weakness of the research. The advantages are that participants are known the researcher to the extent that it assisted in the establishment of trusting relationships and rapport, but I do not work with participants so issues of power, or insider-researcher are not present. The disadvantages are that claims to generalisability may be weakened due to prior knowledge of participants and it is open to criticism of selection bias. To counter this, I would argue that although participants share a connection to the researcher or employer, they include leaders from a range of backgrounds, positional perspectives and school types. Their responses do indeed shed light on moral frameworks and moral tensions that can be seen in a broader context.

Table 1.2 Table of participants

Participant (pseudonym)	School types and phases within the group/MAT	Number of Schools*	Gender
1 Fiona	Secondary, primary and special	1-5	F
2 Ruth	Secondary and primary	1-5	F
3 Peter	Primary and special	6-15	M

4 James	Secondary and primary	1-5	M
5 Maria	Primary	1-5	F
6 David	Primary	1-5	M
7 Sally	Secondary and primary	1-5	F
8 Abdul	Primary	1-5	M
9 Martin	Secondary	1-5	M
10 Angela	Secondary and primary	6-15	F
11 Debbie	Secondary and primary	6-15	F

*This follows the categorisations used by Sir David Carter, National Schools Commissioner (ASCL, 2016) to distinguish between phases of growth within MATs – Starter Trusts (1-5), Established Trusts (6-15), National Trusts (16-30), System Trusts (30+)

4.6 Data collection – reliability, validity and ensuring trustworthiness

Within the interpretive paradigm there are some common data collection methods, e.g., semi-structured interviews and open interviews, observation, narrative accounts, documents and diaries (Adelman, 1980). In order to answer the research questions this research uses two forms of data collection; an autobiographical life history grid followed by a semi-structured interview. These methods have been chosen for a variety of practical and epistemological reasons. They give voice to participants, enabling rich and authentic descriptions of their lives and experiences within the confines of the capacity of a single researcher.

The concepts of reliability and validity, which are key in positivist surveys and experiments can be problematic in qualitative research (Bassey, 1999). As an alternative, Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocate

the concept of *trustworthiness* which supports the ethic of respect for truth. Rather than claiming replicability of data the task for naturalistic researchers is to provide sufficiently rich data and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of participants' lived experiences for readers and users of research to assess whether comparability and transferability is possible (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). As such, the validity of any life history depends upon its ability to represent the participants' subjective reality authentically, that is to say his or her definition of the situation.

In qualitative research the prime instrument of validity and reliability is the person conducting the research. Miles, Huberman and Saldaño (2014, p. 42) offer five markers of a good qualitative researcher-as-instrument:

- good familiarity with the phenomenon and the setting under study;

- a multidisciplinary approach, as opposed to a narrow grounding or focus in a single discipline;

- good investigative skills, the ability to draw people out, and meticulous attention to detail;

- being comfortable, resilient, and non-judgmental with participants in the setting; and

- a heightened sense of empathetic engagement, balanced with a heightened sense of objective awareness.

In conducting this research, I have sought to establish validity and trustworthiness through:

- maintaining ontological and epistemological congruence

- aligning the methodological approaches to the research questions

- a deep understanding of the subject matter

- being aware of researcher bias and seeking reflexivity

- sampling

- triangulating life-history grids and semi-structured interviews

- using pre-prepared questions and prompts

- allowing participants voices to speak for themselves

- providing copies of transcripts for checking and validation

- an ethical approach

4.7 Research methods

4.7.1 Use of an autobiographical life history grid

Leadership, like teaching, is an interactive relationship-based activity and as such it is critical we know about the person the leader is (Goodson, 1981). Leaders' values, motivations and understandings are significant to understanding their professional practice. As Sikes and Goodson (2001, p.71)) emphasised "professional work cannot and should not be divorced from the lives of professionals" and to understand educational events we need to address biography (Bullough, 1998). Life history studies are well aligned to qualitative research methodologies in sociological disciplines and are increasingly common in educational studies, providing insight into how individuals understand their identities and make sense of the rules and roles of the social worlds they inhabit (Sikes and Goodson, 2001). This study seeks to understand the inner world of executive headteachers, how their life experiences have contributed to the formation of their moral framework, their way of seeing the world and to leadership decision making in their professional lives.

There are many benefits of life history work. Through generating a greater understanding of leaders' priorities professional development can be tailored more personally. Life history work has been considered as a strategy for personal and professional development for furthering

individuals' own self-understanding. Potential benefits for participants include engaging in self-reflection, having space and time to reflect and therapeutic and cathartic benefits in times of challenge (Sikes and Goodson, 2001). Goodson (1983) highlighted how life histories can provide valuable insights into the way in which educational personnel come to terms with the constraints and conditions in which they work. It is a reflective interpretive device with a view to understanding who and what we are and the things that happen to us (ibid). As we construct and retell our personal stories, to ourselves and others, we seek to make sense of our lives and attribute meaning. As Kirkegaard famously said, we live our life forwards but we understand it backwards. This retrospective sense-making was articulated by a participant during the interview phase commenting on the experience of completing the life-grid:

> It helped me sort of make sense of some of the things that have happened and also to revisit some of the things that have happened that you forget, you know when you're trawling back and you're thinking about why certain things have happened and how you have reached the point you have reached so I found that really interesting. (Abdul)

This is not to say that recollections and attributed meanings are complete or unerring. Life stories as told are a partial, selective commentary on lived experience. They are recollected in fragments and arranged in a way that imposes order, where "narratives select the elements of the telling to confer meaning on prior events that may not have had such meaning at the time" (Josselson, 1995, p. 35). The opportunity to tell your life story is an explicit opportunity to create an identity. When participants tell their story, they are telling it in a particular way, for a particular audience, informed by their assessment of the situation and the self they want to present. Participants may be keen to please the researcher, anxious to ensure the relevance of what they are saying to the research and seek reassurance of relevance. The life story narrated is likely to vary, dependant on the 'self' we are

referring to, in reality there may be more than one self – the public self, the private self, the profession self, the familial self and others. Plummer (1995) describes this projection process of turning themselves into 'socially organised biographical objects'.

It can be helpful to consider accounts in three separate ways, the *life story* as told, the *lived reality* and the *life history* as interpreted and written down (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). The life story is the story we narrate about the events of our lives, the inner dialogue and 'our reflexive project of selves' (ibid, p. 61). The life history is collaboratively constructed – drawing upon the researcher's interpretation and wider contextual understandings. Life historians are looking for patterns of language and discourse which are indicators of characteristics of a participant. It is acknowledged that some individuals possess greater linguistic sophistication than others and that may impact their ability to successfully create a narrative of their lives and experiences.

Those undertaking life history research are likely to be curious, with a strong interest and fascination with the minutiae of others' lives, how people make sense of their experiences and the world around them. It is not an approach that suits everyone. Life history researchers should possess certain qualities such as being a good and attentive listener, asking pertinent questions in a non-threatening manner and ultimately being the sort of person people want to talk to (Sikes and Goodson, 2001).

The use of the life grid was central to answering the following research question:

> 1. How has the sense of moral development and moral leadership been shaped by life experiences?

The life grid was provided to participants to complete in preparation for the interview (appendix 1). Designing a life-grid requires careful consideration of what data are needed, how they will be organised and what will be compared at the end (Abbas et al., 2013). The purpose of this autobiographical and retrospective life history grid was to

understand the experiences and influences that have shaped the respondents' moral framework and leadership approach. As such the life grid was arranged under four column headings – 1) timeline/life stage 2) life experiences 3) your morals (personal values) 4) your leadership approach. Brief summary guidance and examples were provided to clarify the sort of information being sought. The fields for the timeline/ life stages were selected to highlight key phases of personal and professional development and to enable comparisons to be made across participant responses. Participants were asked to complete the life grid in as much detail as they were able and felt comfortable with, with the understanding that information provided would form the basis for follow up in the interview. The detail to which participants completed the life grid varied from those including short 'factual' information to those revealing significant personal events and life influences, one of the pilot studies even included a poem. The life history grid provided a framework for encouraging reflection on the research focus and acted as a stimulus for further exploration during the interview itself.

There were several advantages in support of the use of life-grids. Firstly, they are less resource intensive than recorded and transcribed biographical interviews and their succinctness enables larger sample sizes to be gathered relatively easily (Abbas et al., 2013). The content of the life-grid was used to inform the interview process, enabling the researcher to tailor interview questions and follow up on emerging themes of interest, such as social justice, disadvantage, significant life events, competition between schools and the impact of Ofsted. Gathering life-grid data provided the researcher with more holistic sense of the participants, their backgrounds, formative influences and experiences, their values and morals. This helped to establish a relationship between the researcher and research participant prior to interview. Participants reported finding the reflection of their own lives and values an enjoyable and rewarding experience. The use of life-grids also allowed participants a high degree of control, self-defining

key events and timeframes (Horsdal, 2011). The visual nature of the life-grids orientated participants to the timings of events and experiences by facilitating cross-referencing between columns (Wilson et al., 2007). This facilitated the identification of significant experiences and times in participants lives, such as critical incidents.

Feedback from the pilot study had highlighted the potential for a sense of vulnerability amongst participants in disclosing personal information about themselves and how this might be interpreted, but also enjoyment in being asked to be reflective and for someone taking an interest in their personal inner world, which is usually hidden from sight.

4.7.2 Use of semi structured interviews

Interviews are the most frequent form of data collection in qualitative research (Punch and Oancea, 2014) as it is one of the most powerful tools we have of understanding others.

> In order to understand other persons' construction of reality, we would do well to ask them…and to ask them in such a way that they can tell us in their terms (rather than those imposed rigidly and a priori by ourselves) and in a depth which addresses the rich context that is the substance of their meanings. (Jones, 1985, p. 46)

This research made use of semi structured interviews (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992) to build on understandings gained through the life-grid, exploring how moral leadership is perceived and how accountability measures impact on and pose a challenge to the first order practice of values and morals. Whilst interviewing is more time consuming than a questionnaire approach, it provides for greater richness of information and depth of response.

The four main research questions were used as the foundation for interviewing, enabling executive headteachers to speak freely. In order to make effective use of the semi structured interview, careful consideration was given to prompts and probes (Morrison, 1993).

Within this approach, an interview schedule was created with topics and open-ended questions prepared a priori but with the freedom to alter the precise wording, questioning and sequencing as appropriate with each respondent (appendix 2). A personalised set of interview questions was produced for each interview based on the information provided in the life-grid. Prompts provided an opportunity to clarify topics and questions, whilst probes enabled the interviewer to ask respondents to "extend, elaborate, add to, provide detail for, clarify or qualify their responses" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p. 278). This facilitated richness, depth and honesty in the interviewing process.

An interview schedule was produced (appendix 2) along the lines of that outlined by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p. 278):

- the topic to be discussed

- the specific possible questions to be put for each topic

- the issues within each topic to be discussed, together with possible questions for each issue

- a series of prompts and probes for each topic, issue and question.

The interviews were audio recorded and recordings were later transcribed for checking by the participant, and further coding and analysis.

4.8 Pilot study

In order to test the selected research methods, ethical approval was obtained for a pilot study taking place in the spring of 2016. Ethical approval was granted in accordance with the ethical approach and research methods as already described. Two consenting participants, one headteacher and one executive headteacher, completed a life history grid followed by an interview of approximately 45 minutes. The pilot study provided the researcher with valuable feedback on the appropriateness of the research instruments in preparation for the full

study. In particular, the researcher was able to assess whether the design of the life history grid produced useful and desired information that contributes to answering the research questions and as preparation for interview. Likewise, the pilot interviews also provided an opportunity to assess the appropriateness of the interview questions, manage timings and practice interviewing technique. The pilot study demonstrated the effectiveness of the selected research methods and no significant changes were made. The data from the participating executive headteacher - the life grid and semi-structured interview - are included in full sample analysis. Data from the participating headteacher (non-executive) are not included in the data analysis and findings, as they did not meet the criteria for the research.

4.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Nottingham ethics committee prior to undertaking research. Bassey (1999) divided research ethics under three headings; respect for democracy, respect for truth and respect for persons, while the Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC] (2005, p. 23) stated "Research should be conducted so as to ensure the professional integrity of its design, the generation and analysis of data, and the publication of results". More recently, BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational research, last updated in 2018, outlined five key areas of responsibility:

- Responsibilities to participants

- Responsibilities to sponsors, clients and stakeholders in research

- Responsibilities to the community of educational researchers

- Responsibilities for publication and dissemination

- Responsibilities for researchers' wellbeing and development.

Within these guidelines there is recognition that any ethical code cannot adequately cover the range of possible ethical considerations or moral

dilemmas, as such "ethical decision-making becomes an actively deliberate, ongoing and iterative process" (BERA, 2018). Ethical approaches reflect a range of philosophical approach (e.g., virtue ethics, deontological ethics) and "researchers bring to the world of social research a sense of rightness on which they can construct a set of rational principles appropriate to their own circumstances and based on personal, professional, and societal values" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.71). Hammersley and Traianou (2012) cautioned against excessive moralism and overdoing ethics in research (p.136) advocating the values of objectivity, independence and dedication.

Applying the principle of learning communities advocated by moral leadership, Busher and James (2012, in Briggs, Coleman and Morrison, 2012) suggested that, as part of their ethical responsibilities, interpretive researchers should seek to create a collaborative and participatory culture. This involves building trust with participants and demonstrating an ethic of respect. One of the ways this is achieved is through clearly explaining the purposes and processes of the research project, ensuring that participants understand what is involved and how data will be used. Potential research participants in this project were approached via email and the nature and purpose of the research was explained (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). An invitation to participate letter was sent via email, along with an information sheet and consent form. The information sheet made participants fully aware of the purposes of the study, the means of data gathering, how data would be safely stored and reported. Voluntary informed consent was obtained in writing by participants in the research process prior to commencing. It was made clear that participants had the right to withdraw from the research project at any stage. The consent form also covered permission for the publication of the research. This was signed and returned by participants.

In compliance with ethical guidelines, all necessary and possible steps have been taken so that the research causes no harm to participants and to reduce any sense of intrusion. I have been mindful of the

responsibility to present findings that are trustworthy and of interest to the research community, whilst also respecting participants. I recognise that the nature of this research involves scholarly critique of leadership practice, and in doing so risks the appearance of moralism and idealism. Executive headteachers in this study have shared personal experiences, values, beliefs, and experiences. Participants chose the most appropriate spaces for the interview to take place, in most cases this was in their office. While full anonymity is difficult to guarantee in face-to-face interview research, all reasonable steps were taken to protect participants' (and their schools') rights to confidentiality and non-traceability (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Personal and identifying markers (individual or institutional) were removed from the data or anonymised using pseudonyms. Completed transcriptions of recordings were shared with participants to ensure that they formed an accurate record of the interview and to allow for further clarification of points if necessary. One participant made amendments to their transcript and these changes were fully accepted and respected.

Participants' personal data was stored and protected in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998 and 2018) and General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR] (2018). All data generated by the research were used purely for the research purposes agreed and stored in secure locations using appropriate password protection. The contact details of the researcher and supervisors were provided to participants as well as the University of Nottingham School of Education Research Ethics Committee.

4.10 Data analysis

The analysis of rich qualitative data, such as reported in this study, is open to diverse approaches and "there is no single right way to do qualitative data analysis" (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p. 218). This absence of clear conventions presents challenges for qualitative researchers for establishing credibility and reliability. In addition, qualitative methods can be labour intensive and result in data overload

(Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). However, there are distinct benefits: "well-analyzed qualitative studies have a quality of 'undeniability'… words have a concrete, vivid, and meaningful flavour that often proves more convincing to a reader" (ibid, p. 4) than pages of numbers. Qualitative data is arguably "the best strategy for discovery, exploring a new area and developing hypotheses" (ibid, p. 12). I share the pragmatic realist position of Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014, p. 7) that social phenomena exist both in the mind and the world, and that we can determine meaningfully patterns in social and individual life. This interpretivist stance affirms "the existence and importance of the subjective, the phenomenological, and the meaning making at the center of social life" (ibid).

Watling, James and Briggs (2012, p.381) described six key elements of qualitative data analysis:

- defining and identifying data

- collecting and storing data

- data reduction and sampling

- structuring and coding data

- theory building and theory testing

- reporting and writing up research.

Meanwhile, Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) simplified this into three concurrent stages 1) data condensation 2) data display 3) conclusion drawing/verification. The first of these stages required focusing, selecting, abstracting and simplifying data from the written autobiographical life grids and interview recordings. The raw data contained significant amounts of interesting material which required processing and preparing for analysis. The interview recordings were transcribed into text and checked for accuracy and to ensure subtleties of meanings were preserved as faithfully as possible (such as appropriate punctuation). Some speakers communicated their

thoughts more fluently than others, and some required further cleaning up (incomplete sentences, "erms", etc.). As a student researcher I experimented with different coding methods as early transcripts were completed, particularly In Vivo codes. This choice - to use participants own words – in initial coding was made to retain the authenticity of participant own voices and language and avoid imposing my own meaning. It highlighted interesting repetitions of speech and language that provided an insight into individual participants worldview and values. However, in the final data analysis I decided against fully embracing In Vivo coding, opting for a first cycle of descriptive coding that enabled meaning to be more easily captured and compared.

In the early stages of concurrent data collection and analysis, I briefly experimented with NVivo software, but decided against use of this less familiar technology, preferring a more natural hands-on approaches to data analysis using handwritten notes in the margin, and use of the more familiar MS Word and comments.

To avoid data overload, I focused on selecting the data that related directly to the key research questions. Within the interview transcripts colour coding was used for each research question and relevant text was highlighted. This both reduced the amount of data that required coding and simplified the process of finding relevant data for analysis. Whilst this removed extraneous data, it inevitably also limited the scope of the findings.

Once this initial data condensation/reduction was completed, the process of coding continued. As Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014, p. 72) reminded us "coding is analysis" and is a "researcher generated construct…for the purpose of pattern detection, categorisation, theory building and other analytic processes". Saldaña (2016) divided coding into two main stages: first cycle and second cycle coding. The first cycle took place during the initial coding of text, along the elemental methods described by Saldaña (ibid). Descriptive coding ("topic

coding") consisting of a word or short phrase was used for life-grids as this provided basic categories for further analytical work.

4.10.1 Analysis of life-grids

The data in the life-grids specifically addressed the research question "How has the sense of moral development and moral leadership been shaped by life experiences?". The analysis of these data subsequently provided provisional codes for analysing responses in the written interview transcripts. These data were later combined and analysed together.

The life grids for each participant were read and first cycle coded responses consolidated in a single table (appendix 3) using the same column headings as the original life grids (e.g., Timeline/life stages, life experience, moral (values), leadership approach). The participants' own language was retained as far as possible to ensure authenticity, or short paraphrased descriptive codes. This allowed for further groupings and classifications to be made at a later stage, as described by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014, p. 73):

> Coding is also a condensation task enabling the retrieval of the most meaningful material, assembly of chunks of data that go together and condensing the bulk into readily analysable units.

Next to each response/code the identifying participant number was recorded to enable easy reference and cross-checking, e.g., Equality (3). Once all the eleven participant responses were collated, these were then grouped thematically under headings using emerging identifiers, following patterns and repetitions. For example, within participants' early life experiences, many referenced family, socio-economic status and school. Where further sub-categories were readily identifiable, these codes were also created. For example, within the unifying theme of 'family' sub-categories included 'family', 'parents', 'mother', 'father', 'brother', 'grandparents', 'grandmother'. Next to the theme were recorded the numbers of each participant and a tally of total responses. For example, Family (2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11) = 8. This frequency

analysis provided an overview of regular recurring ideas/subjects for consideration. At times making clear distinctions between codes and categories was very challenging, such as distinguishing between participant references to equity, equality and social justice.

Summary analysis evidenced increasing variety and reducing consensus among participants from left to right (below).

Life experience	Morals (values)	Leadership Approach
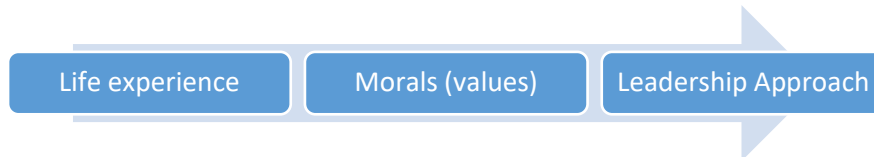
This indicates that despite many common life experiences through childhood and education and professional career, and some evidence of shared morals (values), there was much greater variation in how this is expressed in their own leadership approach.

The detailed data analysis was followed by further condensation into responses addressing the two parts of the research question. Part A covered the influencing factor (life-experience) on moral development and moral leadership, while part B covered the corresponding influence on moral values. This could be approximately equated to a separation of cause and effect. The aggregated data across columns were collated into a summary frequency table (appendix 4) and this table is reproduced in the findings. This removed the chronological distinctions of moral development but enabled a summative overview of influences and moral values.

4.10.2 Analysis of written interview transcripts

The initial stage of coding involved identifying and highlighting portions of text in participant's transcripts in six different colours that mapped against the key research questions and sub-questions (appendix 5), in some cases this involved making a best fit judgement. Once all transcripts had been highlighted/coded in this way, then chunks of text were coded assigning a short phrase or word (appendix 6) that captured the essence of the portion of language (Miles, Huberman and

Saldaña, 2014).   The codes were written as comments in the margin of participant transcripts and then copied into summary tables. I approached each question in sequence, preparing this first cycle coding before applying second cycle codes to detect recurring patterns. Condensing first cycle codes in comparable tables was important in being able to observe and detect patterns within and across participants.

For research question 1 where pattern codes already existed from the analysis of life-grids, these codes were applied to the second cycle coding of transcripts, and additional codes being added as required as further patterns emerged. Alphabetical and numerical labels were applied to chunks of condensed text for codes (appendix 7) – letters for life experiences (e.g., B = family), numbers for moral values (e.g., 2 = equity). The analysis of these two sources – life grids and interview transcripts - were then combined to provide a condensed high-level view of data in the form of frequency tables illustrating the most common codes.

Once second cycle coding was completed and frequency tables produced, this provided the foundation from which to describe and then critically analyse key findings. To do this, I returned to the original transcripts to compare and sort responses, revisiting the depth and meaning that lay in the thick descriptions provided by participants that become lost in the condensation process.   Example quotations were found to illustrate key points and describe findings.

For the remaining research questions a similar approach was adopted using first cycle and second cycle coding. Descriptive codes of words or short phrases were applied to chunks of transcribed text and copied into summary tables of participant responses. These tables were read and re-read to identify themes and patterns within and across participant responses using second cycle codes. This was done using handwritten notes on hard copy versions, and later typed up. Frequency tables captured the themed codes, total references across

participants as well as individual participant identifiers. For research question 2, "How do executive headteachers understand their roles as moral leaders?" the four-level categorisation outlined by Fullan (2003) and Stefkovich and Begley (2005) - individual, organisation, system and society level - was used to group responses. The decision was taken to code in this way due to the diverse range of participant responses which initially presented difficulties in identifying patterns. It also provided an insight into how executive headteachers viewed the scale/breadth of their responsibilities as a moral leader.

Research question 3 addressed the tensions faced by executive headteachers in their role, "In understanding the moral dimension of leadership, what tensions are experienced by executive headteachers?". In this case, the data were coded as a series of opposing values or 'versus' themes – e.g., inclusivity vs exclusion, holding on versus letting go. This is what Saldaña (2016) describes as Versus Coding. Once initial Versus Codes were observed in the description of executive headteachers' dilemmas and tensions, further Versus Codes were visible throughout responses, e.g., forgiveness vs. an unforgiving system.

Research sub-question 3a explored the potential causes of tensions specifically as a result of the accountability system, "What, if any, are the tensions experienced by executive headteachers in reconciling the moral imperative with the accountability imperative?". Rather than Versus Codes, identifiers were used that represented the potential cause of the tension (e.g., Ofsted, performance tables). Some of these codes were predetermined, being key features of the accountability system, others emerged from the data analysis (a system that rewards unethical behaviours/gaming). Some themes elicited diverse views, such as the positive and negative views expressed towards Ofsted. These views were compared and contrasted to provide a more nuanced review of individual comments.

Research sub-question 3b addressed the specific moral tensions that arise for executive headteachers working in system leadership roles. At first some repetition of previous Versus Codes were evident, e.g., holding on (retaining control of individual schools) vs. letting go (releasing control to headteachers). However, further examination and reading led to regrouping codes as thematic issues, e.g., managing heads, executive leader identity.

Finally, research question 4 addressed the critical question of how executive headteachers sought to resolve tensions, principally those that related to the accountability system. A holistic reading of responses generated quite a variety of codes (appendix 8). Some of these were unique to individuals, (e.g., bravado, performance-driven implementation), others recurred frequently (notably 'pragmatism').

4.10.3 Moving from data analysis to writing up research findings

The research findings outlined in the next section emerged from the detailed data analysis. The process of writing up findings was iterative – moving from description to analysis. At first my writing was mostly descriptive, detailing the key findings with examples and quotations to illustrate them. Until this descriptive phase was complete, analysis was difficult. I was comforted by Miles, Huberman and Saldana's observation that "A solid descriptive foundation of your data enables a higher-level analysis and interpretation" (2014, p. 162). Once I had sufficiently described the data I was able to analyse and interpret it with an increasingly critical eye, problematising some of the views expressed and connecting ideas with the literature. This ultimately enabled me to draw conclusions and establish an emerging typology of executive headteachers responses to moral tensions using cross-case comparison.

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to explain the methodological approach taken and its appropriateness for addressing the research aim. The interpretive methods of an autobiographical life-grid and semi-

structured interview provided rich data for analysis. In the following chapter I present and discuss the research findings.

Chapter 5: Findings and discussion

5.1 Introduction

This findings chapter is structured according to the key research questions. Themes identified through the data analysis are presented in frequency tables that foreground the discussions and provide an initial focus on which to elaborate. The tables offer a simple overview and emerging themes are then explored in more detail, giving attention to those of particular interest. The frequency tables were useful to me as a researcher, particularly in the early stages of data analysis. It supported the identification of patterns, facilitated comparison across responses and enabled an at a glance summary of the data. The tables have been retained in the findings to provide the reader with this additional perspective. Whilst the frequency tables provide a helpful indication of reoccurring themes, this is not intended as a quantitative analysis, but rather as a useful signpost for investigation. Some less frequent themes were significantly more developed within participant responses and are consequently given greater attention. There is also an overlapping nature to the research questions which means distinctions can be porous. As far as possible direct quotations are used in order to retain the authenticity of the participant voice and richness of the data.

5.2 Research question 1: How has the sense of moral development and moral leadership been shaped by life experiences?

It was apparent that for leaders the process of reflecting on their formative life experiences had afforded them a chance to better understand themselves and make sense of their moral development. In the busyness of professional life, such opportunities for personal reflection are both rare and precious.

> *Going back over my life and going back over some of those experiences…helps to make sense of why I've ended where I've ended up and why I am the way I am. (Abdul)*

Through the life-grid and interview each participant considered significant experiences and influences, noting the impact on their moral development and leadership approach. This section has been divided into two parts in order to seek to separate cause and effect, the life experiences from their impact. Of course, the two are interconnected and at times these lines blur.

5.2.1 Shaping and influencing factors

Table 4: RQ1 Shaping and influencing factors upon moral development and moral leadership.

Theme	Frequency across participant life-grids (/11)	Frequency across participant interviews (/11)	Total frequency across life-grids and interviews (/22)
Family (upbringing)	8	11	19
Professional school experiences	11	8	19
Own schooling (childhood)	7	6	13
Socio-economic status	6	5	11
Faith and religion	5	6	11
Critical incidents	5	5	10
Teachers	4	5	9
University	5	4	9
Marriage and family (own)	7	2	9
CPD and professional learning	5	3	8

The frequency analysis of recurring themes across participants (Table 3) captures both data from the life-grids and interviews. Only the most frequent are displayed.

As Boon and Stott (2003) affirmed the formative years are pivotal in shaping headteacher values and beliefs, even impacting leaders' capacity to survive and thrive in headship. The family, school and religion all contribute significantly to life-long values that in turn guide headteacher actions. Concepts of 'self' and their 'leadership character' can be traced to these formative influences (ibid). Whilst this may be unsurprising, the deep roots of moral values should not be understated. Participants also expressed an understanding of the part that their childhood socio-economic status and ethnicity played in their moral development.

Beyond childhood experiences, leaders cited the significance of other important life events and changes, such as going to university, getting married and having a family of their own. Almost half of all participants referred to a critical incident that impacted them. All participants referred to professional school experiences, influenced in part by the structure of the life-grid, with a smaller number referencing the importance of professional development and influential colleagues. Finally, there was recognition of the contribution of literature to moral development, both fiction and biographies.

Family (upbringing)

It was evident that participants attributed much of their moral framework to the influence of their family upbringing, particularly parents. Mothers were mentioned most frequently, followed by fathers, siblings and grandparents respectively. Formative family values provided a moral framework that would remain largely unchanged through adulthood:

> I'd put my moral framework firmly in the hands of my parents and my upbringing, with some modification rather than any great zigzags of enlightenment. It's been a gradual process of shaping

and reforming, but I believe most of the shaping was done quite early in my life. (Martin)

My mum was a very loving person, but she gave us a very strong moral code … Actually, those things that my mum prioritized, I cannot get rid of even if I wanted to, I can't. (Debbie)

Whilst most comments on parental values were positive, some issues of parental prejudice and racism were identified, reflecting societal attitudes at the time. These parental values required some unpicking and challenging as they came into consciousness during adulthood:

My parents brought me up to be a 'good girl', but they were racist, because people were in those days, they're not anymore but they were then, and so I had to change a lot of my values and beliefs. (Fiona)

Professional school experiences

All participants referenced the impact of professional school experiences as a developing teacher and leader in refining values and shaping their leadership approach. For some spending time early in their career working in an area of disadvantage had contributed to a sense of moral purpose which had become career defining:

[My] first teaching job was … right in the centre of London, split site school, [it] probably had the most impact on me in terms of my teaching career, very multicultural, very needy children, fabulous staff and I suddenly realised why I had become a teacher. (Fiona)

[I] did a year in this school … it was phenomenal. It was such an eye opener to the challenges that children face in their lives every day - the challenges the community faced, challenges the teachers faced. It was one of those places that was either going to completely put you off … or to make you fall in love with the profession and for me I fell in love with the whole thing.   And here we are now. (Abdul)

Own schooling (childhood)

Participants' own experience of schooling had a significant impact in shaping their values and beliefs about education, for better or worse. In its broadest sense this included the type of school attended, educational experience and values promoted. More specifically this involved the impact of memorable teachers. These teachers were memorable because they went 'the extra mile', they took time to get to know the students holistically and give them individual support. For Peter this literally changed the course of his life:

> Teachers have a tremendous impact. My 6th Form teacher filled the UCAS form out for me as I was not going to attend University – she made me do it – That was life changing as I was not expected to go to university. (Peter)

Through inspirational and aspirational teachers Abdul experienced the positive transformational power of education:

> [Education], as it was for me, [is] the thing that could make that life changing difference for that child, that child's family for generations to come. (Abdul)

Not all experiences of schooling were positive, for others negative experiences had become a guiding influence on the way they chose to lead so that others would not experience the same. Maria was particularly critical of the learning experience she received:

> My parents had high expectations of me and gave me aspirations, I had the opposite message from my teachers ... I wanted to change the system that I had been part of and make sure education for young people created learners and had a positive impact on their lives. I felt very strongly about this from the age of nine. (Maria)

The form and style of formative education was also critiqued. Martin spoke of his "life-long contempt of didactic teaching" following poor schooling experiences of rote-learning and corporal punishment. Sally

reflected on her experience at a girls' grammar school and how this impacted her views of selection:

> I suppose the fact that I went to a grammar school sort of made me think around the best type of education and I don't agree with selective education. (Sally)

Socio-economic status

An area of interest was the impact of socio-economic status on leaders' worldview. For those who experienced poverty, social disadvantage and low socio-economic status their reflections suggested this had shaped their moral development and leadership significantly:

> What I've reflected on is relative poverty played a part in that [my sense of moral development] … a constant underlying theme at that time was don't look at people who are more fortunate than you, look at people that are less fortunate and be thankful for what you've got. And that was a way to see the world. (Abdul)

In the interview Peter described his experience of poverty, not as a deficit model as something to be compensated for, but as free and adventurous - of no lesser value than any historic literary middle-class notion of childhood:

> I grew up in a really poor household on a really sort of challenging run-down council estate, but it made me the person I am. It was a good experience for me. I had a lot of freedom, adults were generally absent from my life because from a very early age I was allowed to go out and be with my peers. We learnt to make decisions and manage our lives at a very early age, it was very adventurous. If you think about Enid Blyton novels, which are very sort of middle-class adventure, we had those adventures but in very working-class poor context. So poverty in itself I think is conceptualised as quite a deficit model that is something to be compensated for, but it's not. We must not confuse poverty with what a working-class household is and

> we must not assume that middle-class values and principles are the only thing that's missing so I think it's quite confused. (Peter)

If this home context was portrayed as largely positive, his experience of socio-economic status at school was far less so:

> I used to be really angry when I queued up and had my free school meal ticket and queued up at the back of the line because I could see where I was placed in society. I could see the absolute injustice of that and in the schools that I run, we would not organise anything in a way that segregated or separated children on background [or] ability. (Peter)

This passage also makes clear the participant's view of the damaging causal relationship of labelling and separating those in poverty as a cause of social injustice:

> Segregation in education is 'at odds' with the development of a just and equal society – the way we organise for education is more important than the content of education. (Peter).

Faith and religion

Just over half of executive headteachers identified spirituality as playing a part in their moral framework. This supports the findings of Woods (2007), who further suggested that spiritual experiences show a strong connection to ethical behaviour:

> Spiritual experience helped to strengthen a focus on ultimate ethical values, underpinned a sensitivity to higher needs and the well-being of others, and encouraged a special value and priority to be placed in the educational life of the school on that which engages, enhances and respects higher feelings. (Ibid. p.149)

Executive headteachers in this study held a variety of spiritual beliefs. Two were leaders of faith schools; one a Catholic MAT and another a Church of England MAT. A further four acknowledged the importance of spirituality in their moral framework; a practising Muslim, a Catholic,

and two others who acknowledged the importance of spirituality whilst not identifying with a specific religion.

For Ruth her catholic faith was a private matter, not something that was brought into school:

> I think any religion, you live your religion don't you. Most people would know I'm a Catholic, [however] I won't bring religion into school. I won't have any religious group within school because I have chosen not to work in the Catholic sector. (Ruth)

By contrast, James, had chosen to express his faith publicly through his professional role as the executive headteacher of a Catholic MAT. He described a strong sense of inherited mission which placed him as a custodian of the Catholic faith with a responsibility to pass this on to the next generation. His faith provided a moral lens by which to interpret the world, routed in a view of humanity created in the image of God:

> It's not a faith we have made up. It's a faith we have inherited and in some ways the mission of the Catholic school is an inherited mission … I'm just custodian for a certain period of time in which I must do good. (James)

Similarly for Angela, the leader of a Church of England MAT, her Christian faith was an overt and public matter. She described the Christian concept of love as the guiding moral principle, citing the well-known biblical passage found in 1 Corinthians 13 (The Bible). During the interview she referred to an ornament on display in her office saying:

> It's a quotation from Corinthians, and for me that's what shapes my framework. That's the start and finish of it all too. To love people for who they are - and I don't mean love in a very soppy way or a romantic way… sometimes I think it can be quite tough. (Angela)

Abdul, a practising Muslim, leading in a non-faith MAT also understood his faith to be characterised by love and compassion. He described

how his faith empowered him and provided a touchstone in difficult times:

> My faith too has contributed hugely to my professional success (Abdul)

He drew strength and guidance from his parents' faith and his own:

> One of the things I will do when things are difficult is kind of tap into those experiences and into my own faith to see me through. Because ultimately my faith tells me this life's a preparation for the next, so whatever happens, no matter how bad, how difficult there's always that light at the end of the tunnel … And you've just got to look to that light for guidance. (Abdul)

The religious beliefs of parents had impact on participants' own spirituality although not all considered themselves as practising a faith:

> I no longer believe in God and haven't done since my teens, the framework for most major religions is a framework for behaviour and for honestly treating people and behaving properly, that is fine for me … I'm a spiritual person but I don't believe in a specific God. (Martin)

The significance of spirituality without directly attributing this to religion was discussed by Peter. He identified spirituality as playing a large part in the way he conceptualised the world, in what he described as a "post truth era" in which science no longer provides sufficient answers for people:

> I feel that we need to have a very strong spiritual sense of what it is to be a human, what it is to be a good person and what it means to live with others. Some of the things we sense as individuals can't be explained scientifically … I think we need to develop a spiritual sense to enable us to centre ourselves, particularly in times of great insecurity and times when we question the goodness of humanity. I think we have to return to

some of those deeper spiritual sorts of understandings and some of those leaders of the past. (Peter)

Critical incidents

Critical incidents were significant events that participants identified as turning points in their lives and that shaped their moral framework. These incidents overlapped with other themes including influential teachers, family and professional relationships. Three participants cited bereavements, either on a personal or professional level, that were particularly impactful.

Ruth explained in detail the impact of the sudden and expected death of a young staff member:

> There was a young 40-year-old woman, a healthy teacher, we'd had our disagreements, her and I had disagreements. We had an open evening, it was until 8.30-9.00pm. She went home and dropped down dead. (Ruth)

These three short lines of the interview indicate a weight of moral responsibility. Until this time Ruth had regarded her staff in a professional way, as part of the school, but not necessarily as individuals. Amidst of the trauma of losing a staff member, Ruth described the challenge of managing personal emotions and professional responsibilities:

> Had I put too much pressure on the woman? So you question what you have done at the same time as having to appear as a leader to the staff whilst you might feel a bit crumbly inside. (Ruth)

Ruth described how this incident had impacted her moral framework and leadership approach:

> I think it taught me one of the most important lessons; a conversation you have with somebody could be your last, so you have to make sure what you say to people is as fair and

honest as it can be and that you can go to sleep at night knowing that if you don't wake up in the morning then, you have done as well as you can do. (Ruth)

Angela was affected by the death of her younger brother whilst they were teenagers, following illness as a small child:

He'd had meningitis which meant that he got physical handicaps … but also because he'd spent three years of his life in hospital, he was deemed special needs. [He] just hadn't had time to catch up with progression. His actual learning ability had not been impacted on. (Angela)

Her experience of how her brother was treated had "a profound effect on my desire to support the most vulnerable in society."

A different type of critical incident described by Ruth gives an insight into the moral blindness that can occur when a practice becomes normative, despite the regulations. Ruth had become a high profile headteacher and been recognised for her success in turning around failing schools. However, she was found to have falsified registers:

That's one of my weaknesses, when you think your right, you go and go and go and being told you were doing it wrong, and it was wrong, was like a life blow … It wasn't a minor thing, but it was a minor thing because the children would achieve, the school was outstanding, the staff got promoted, the people bought houses in the area, house prices went through the roof because everybody wanted to go in, admissions were like 100+ appeals a year. We were doing the right things, but we got one thing wrong. (Ruth)

Whilst Ruth realised it was wrong, she also felt a sense of being wronged. She believed it to be a small error in comparison to positive impact she had had. Feelings of being made an example of were also apparent:

> I feel it was taken that far … and made such a big thing because you were being held up because of the name, because of the way you were, because of the status you had, it could have been said it was a hammer to crack a nut. (Ruth)

She also indicated that the practice was widespread:

> I was in front of the National College … for doing something I thought everybody did … They said it was falsification of registers because we had been coding "S" for study leave which they said wasn't allowed … When Year 11 go, you hold on and you hold on to them and you don't want to put them out on a permanent exclusion, we coded them as educated elsewhere. I know other people did that, I know that was common practice, it was found to be not accurate, inappropriate … We had done it in other schools, other schools had done it. The number of headteachers that wrote to me saying my god, that would be me, I kept them because there were a load. (Ruth)

Such moral self-justification is not uncommon and similar appeals are made in relation to other forms of gaming in the education system. In articulating what she had learned, she said:

> I learnt a lesson from that, and the lesson was that you might believe you're doing right, and you might know that everyone else does it but you double check the print, you double check everything because if things are happening that you believe have always happened, [it] doesn't mean they are right.

5.2.2 The influence of these factors on moral development and moral leadership

Table 5: Emerging themes in terms of the influence of factors moral development and moral leadership

Theme	Frequency across participant life-grids (/11)	Frequency across participant interviews (/11)	Total frequency across life-grids and interviews (/22)
Equity (fairness)	9	10	19
Equality	7	9	16
High expectations	9	6	15
Social justice	5	8	13
Children first	7	5	12
Building relationships	7	5	12
Doing what's right/moral decision making	4	5	9
Respect	4	3	7
Hard work	3	3	6
Social mobility	2	4	6

What impact have these life experiences had in shaping executive headteachers' sense of moral development and moral leadership? There are strong emerging themes from the data. The most notable is the predominance of conceptualisations of equity, equality and social justice – with social mobility also referenced. Distinguishing between the usage of these terms can be problematic. They are inter-related and sometimes used interchangeably; distinctions can be nuanced, important and contested. For example, an Aristotelean understanding of equality of treatment was dependent on subjects being equal in the relevant aspects - allowing for considerable interpretation - whilst a Kantian morality has at its foundation the equal right of all human beings to be treated as an end in themselves (Blackburn, 2008).   In *The inequality delusion* Sheskin (2018) argued there is also a difference between 'fair inequality' and 'unfair inequality', suggesting

that most people would choose fair inequality over unfair equality. The issue of fairness is central to discussions of this type around justice. Mann (2014) distinguishes between equality as 'levelling the playing field' whilst equity is 'more for those who need it'. The Department for Work and Pensions paper *Social justice: transforming lives* (2012) proposes social justice is about giving people with multiple disadvantages the support they need to turn their lives around.

These values can apply at both a personal and societal level. For example, equity relates to the ways participants themselves behave towards others, being just and fair, but also to how schooling impacts more broadly to increase or decrease fairness within society. Fairness corresponds with justice, one of four ancient Greek philosophical moral virtues (Steare, 2011). Other values visible in participants' responses included courage, love, honesty, and humility. However, the most frequently cited was 'excellence', particularly in the form of 'high expectations'.

Equity

Equity was a recurring theme within both the life-grids and interviews and across each of the life-stages, from early childhood through to headship and beyond. This reflects an increasing realisation of the ways in which our society and schooling is inequitable.

Angela described the impact of her own childhood and education on her understanding of the need to address inequity:

> As a student in a school where the population was divided very simply into those who received the dole and those who gave it out, [it] has led me on a career long quest to ensure that all students have aspiration at the root of their school experience and all they learn. I believe profoundly that it is for schools to inspire students such that all have self-belief in themselves as individuals and not as a victim of birth and starting points. (Angela)

This understanding of inequities and desire for children not to be 'victims of birth and starting points' was a repeated message. There was firm belief in the importance and responsibility of education to overcome barriers to learning. One of the facets of this being ambitious leaders and teachers with high expectations and aspirations for all, not just a few:

> All children can achieve highly but the starting points are so different that education must address this … All children deserve ambitious leaders and teachers – especially children who come from challenging contexts. (Peter)

> You know, they are poor, it doesn't mean they can't learn. It means we have got more barriers to overcome. High standards are not a debate, they are a good thing. (James)

For Angela her early experiences of teaching amongst first generation immigrant families identified multiple factors in disadvantage – including racism, poverty and English as an additional language (EAL) – as well as a system failure to recognise ability and address literacy and English language proficiency:

> Teaching students who were largely first generation Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants helped me focus on the need for literacy as a basic right for all students. Many of my students who were bright and able in their own language were being denied the opportunity to develop and fulfil ambition and potential because their ability was directly equated to their English language skills by others who were judging them. Given their need to deal with racism, poverty and other disadvantage this became a very strong motivator for me in developing equity and justice in all my classrooms and underpinned my very early leadership positions. (Angela)

Drawing upon his experiences of schooling, Peter explored the theme of inequity and social justice in significant detail. He argued that the ways schools organise for education is more important than the content

– as it reinforces hierarchies of power and social status. This extends to forms of setting by ability groupings, views on rewards and sanctions, control, motivation, agency and curriculum. He contended that separation is at odds with an equitable society. This had significantly influenced his leadership:

> If we continue to separate children by ability, we teach them that you can only socialise and have meaningful relationships with those of a similar ability and outlook to you which reinforces the idea that class is an important way of organising our society. If we continue to give children rewards for doing good learning or behaving well, we continue to make them think that they only do things if there is a reward at the end of it, that actually this is not about an intrinsic self-determining process and that the agency and the locus of control sits with you as an individual. We teach them that it is all about people in power that if we behave well the people in power will notice us and they will bestow a reward on us. If we continue to organise schools so that we narrow down children's access to the arts, we teach them that the old grammar curriculum where academic subjects were premium is the way that we organise the world as well and we will continue to have policies that underfund the arts, that give low status to some of those more creative, innovative professions. (Peter)

The point is children learn more from what we do than what we say so our leadership actions must act in congruence with our values. Whilst verbally we may appear to promote equity, if we behave in ways which are contradictory our good words fail to have meaning or power.

Martin acknowledged the need to address inequity, combined with the need for human effort and the personal responsibility of individuals to seize the opportunities available to them:

> If some of the injustices of upbringing can be reversed by education that's fabulous because obviously children from more caring and nurturing backgrounds we know succeed far better

through school and through life. So, if we can redress that through education that's great. The challenge sometimes is motivation. (Martin)

He emphasised agency and the ability of individuals to succeed despite the odds. He reflected on his own frustration that in our culture education can be viewed as a hand-out and therefore not valued:

I have a huge frustration with our own culture and hand-out culture. And I think education in our culture is viewed as a hand-out and therefore not valued. (Martin)

Equality

Linked to equity, value statements such as "equality for all", "treating all equally", and "equality of opportunity" were frequent amongst participants. Reflecting on the schools she had worked in, Fiona identified an emerging realisation of the inequalities in society that she had been closeted from in early life. This recognition led to a feeling of leadership responsibility to ensure equality of opportunity for children:

I think the biggest thing is the inequalities that children face and our job is to make sure they all end up with the same opportunities and I think it wasn't until I started teaching that I ever even thought about that one tiny bit. I thought I was quite well educated, I listened to the news, you did your studies … but you don't have a clue until you see it for real. (Fiona)

Sally echoed the importance of equality of opportunity and achieving this through facilitating an "inclusive and choice-based curriculum". For James his Catholic faith shaped his view of equality, with every person being created in the image of God. Whilst advocating equality, Martin argued for privileging the status of children, paraphrasing the well-known passage from Animal Farm (Orwell, 1945) and arguing that some in education are disingenuous in their claims of putting children first:

Everyone's equal and children are more equal … Putting children to the fore. So many people in education talk about that, but they don't mean it, they just like to grab the moral high ground. (Martin)

He also emphasised the connection between equality and personal humility, maintaining that equality is about the way you view yourself and how you relate to others:

I've never seen myself as a more important human being than anyone who works for me or with me, or around me. So that I never try to elevate my personal status above someone else's. (Martin)

Social justice

Issues of social justice evoked strong feelings and occupied considerable space in the interviews with several of the participants. It was evident social justice was at the forefront of thinking around moral frameworks and values. As previously explored, this often stemmed from personal experiences of social injustices of one kind or another. Peter, who had grown up in poverty himself, challenged the arrogance and ignorance of prevailing narratives around poverty:

Poverty is a social injustice. It absolutely is a damnation on society, and I think a lot of the prevailing narrative is that people are poor because they have either chosen to be poor or they are poor because they can't pull their socks up and get themselves out of it ... Having grown up in poverty I know most definitely that is not the case, that we are not born equal and that society is calibrated in a way that makes it very difficult to lift themselves out of poverty … but poverty in itself doesn't affect the goodness of you as a human being so it is not something that needs to be looked upon with sympathy either. (Peter)

He contested that those in poverty do not have equality of opportunity and that society reinforces and perpetuates inequalities. He also

stressed that schools cannot resolve all the issues of social injustice and challenged notions of meritocracy, that success is due to our talents and hard work alone:

> Schools cannot do it all alone – education sits within a broader policy framework. Success in education is dependent on much more than the quality of the teacher and the school. We have not sufficiently grasped this and continue to perpetuate common sense notions that 'social mobility' and educational success are the results of hard work alone – they are most definitely not. (Peter)

Angela's view of social justice was informed significantly by her own childhood experiences and her parents. Her father had fled social injustice and despite being very highly educated arrived in the country with no money. Her parents were also in a mixed-marriage, and she experienced the challenges this brought as a child. However, her parents were highly supportive of her education and through learning a musical instrument she was able experience life beyond her context. She observed that:

> What my parents had tried to do, particularly through music, was allow me to experience, life outside of [town name]. So, being with other teenagers that had lived very privileged lives or very middle-class lives … And what sort of quite shocked me was that my friends at school weren't benefiting from that sort of home background. Their parents didn't really even think about encouraging them to do anything outside of themselves. And that I found that very sad. (Angela)

The impact this had on her moral framework and leadership approach was clear:

> It's incumbent on us to open eyes of students that have a very narrow view … Sometimes we just take for granted that children have had those experiences and they just haven't. (Angela)

This represents a broader understanding of the means to achieving social justice, not simply through improving examination performance amongst disadvantaged children but by widening experiences and opportunities. She described this using the metaphors of 'opening doors' and a 'bus journey':

> I think if we just equate diminishing gaps to being about GCSE passes then we've missed a trick. Because having those GCSE passes, yes, does open a door. It gives you a bus ticket that takes you on a bit of a longer journey. But, if you don't know where that journey's taking you to, if you don't know what places to stop off at, what places to head to on that journey, who could be your companions on the journey, what experiences you might have? Then then that's not enough. So, I absolutely think that we ought to work on disadvantage to support children to achieve those passes because it opens doors for them. But you can't just open the door you've got to show them what's beyond the door, what you're going into, what's possible when you go through that door. (Angela)

An alternative perspective was presented by Debbie who described her experience of social injustice and inequity through her growing understanding of privilege through marriage:

> My husband went to independent school, his family were quite privileged. I began to understand through interacting with those social circles - even more than I had ever understood before - that privilege begets privilege, it's the Matthew effect if you like. So, people were studying medicine without the A levels to be able to study medicine because their father knew his father and then he was the Dean of medicine at this university. The more that I began to understand, the more that I felt that if we don't prioritise social mobility then this country will not be the country it could be. That passion doesn't diminish, it only gets worse the

more that I understand the way the politics happens in this country. (Debbie)

This description reinforces arguments put forward by Peter, that privilege and social capital perpetuate existing social hierarchies, making it more difficult for those in poverty to break the cycle. The Social Mobility Commission's report *Elitist Britain* (2019) reported that the 7% of the population who attended independent schools continue to dominate the country's power structures including politics, media and public service.

Children first

The need to put children first emerged from a variety of influences, childhood experiences of school, professional roles as a teacher and leader and parenthood. For Fiona becoming a mother herself caused her to see the children in her school in a different light:

> Then I had children and it changed me completely as a teacher, and I was surprised, I was gobsmacked because I suddenly realised how precious people's children are ... my kids were so important to me, and I thought everyone in our school is somebody's baby and it changed my outlook massively and I cared about the kids even more. (Fiona)

This had resulted in a personal mantra which was reiterated by other participants – everything that happens should be good enough for your own children:

> Are they good enough to teach your children? (Fiona)

> Every exchange between an adult and the child has to be good enough for your own children, whether it's the lunchtime supervisor supervising kids in the playground or a teaching assistant walking past a child in the corridor… We encourage staff to look at it through the lens of "if that was my child, how would I feel about that?" (Abdul)

This was a touchstone for moral decision-making, including holding staff to account and managing underperformance:

> Holding people to account to the extent that they may lose their jobs takes a heavy emotional toll. Morally this is equalised only by knowing that I have always acted in the best interests of the children I serve. (Abdul)

Executive headteachers' own experiences of schooling as a child and as a teaching professional had shaped a commitment to put children first. For Maria, this involved a personal responsibility to better understand the learning process and to finding the light of every child:

> Finding the light in every child and, as a leader, every colleague, has been central to everything I do. (Maria)

Sally had developed a child-centred approach influenced by her first teaching experience:

> The school that I first taught at … was all very, very child centred about developing children's talents. So that's translated into the curriculum that we offer here now. (Sally)

She expressed her joy in nurturing children and seeing them grow:

> I love seeing children grow. I love seeing people grow. So, for me, what I get a greatest satisfaction from, is seeing children developing confidence and academically. (Sally)

Finally, she recognised that in her CEO role it could be easy to lose sight of the child within the wider responsibilities:

> [Child] centred decision making has been very important, in an oversight role that could lead to a loss of focus on this. (Sally)

As we have seen already, Martin suggested that whilst many leaders speak about putting children first, this is not always the case.

High expectations / excellence

Of the ten moral values described by Steare (2011) – wisdom, fairness, courage, self-control, trust, hope, love, honesty, humility and excellence – excellence was the most frequently referenced by participants, often described in terms of high expectations.   Peter encapsulated this combined emphasis in the statement below:

> Excellence is an ethic that empowers all to believe "they can".

For some participants high expectations are inextricably linked to notions of equality, equity and justice:

> High expectations always and for all. For me this underpins a true approach to equality of opportunity for staff and students alike. (Debbie)

> Mediocrity is an injustice – all children deserve ambitious leaders and teachers – especially children who come from challenging contexts. (Peter)

High expectations of *all* students applied not only those who may be disadvantaged and experiencing difficulties in their learning but also to "Stretch and challenge the most able" (Sally).

These comments reflect the *National Standards of Excellence of Headteachers* (2014, p. 6) which requires that headteachers:

> Demand ambitious standards for all pupils, overcoming disadvantage and advancing equality, instilling a strong sense of accountability in staff for the impact of their work on pupils' outcomes.

It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that excellence and high standards featured so frequently in the written and spoken responses of executive leaders. The term 'high expectations' is ubiquitous in government accountability documents for teachers and school leaders.   The first strand of the *Teachers' Standards* (2011, p.10) sets out that "A teacher must: Set high expectations which inspire, challenge and motivate

pupils" whilst a government press release of Sir Michael Wilshaw's first speech as HMCI was entitled *High expectations, no excuses* (2012).

The concept of excellence was also influenced by the wider reading of participants. James referenced his under-graduate reading of *In search of excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and how his understanding of excellence had been strengthened through his professional career:

> The other thing that I always balance with it [equity] is this kind of striving for excellence, the being the best you can be. Being fully alive became a powerful driver in a lot of thinking from personal drive very early on in my career to a much kind of wider perspective, each time you get promoted, it's almost like the blinkers go a bit wider. (James)

Debbie acknowledged the influence of writings such as Berger's *Ethic of Excellence* (2003) and Gawande's *Better* (2007):

> Continuous improvement or betterment is an essential component of strong leadership. I have shaped a lot of our work on leadership around the work of Atul Gawande, 'Better'. (Debbie)

5.3 Research question 2. How do executive headteachers understand their role as moral leaders?

The analysis of responses to this key research question included both answers to the direct question "How do you understand your role (as executive headteacher) as a moral leader?" and follow up questions seeking to draw out deeper understandings. Executive headteachers' responses provided varied personal conceptions of their role as moral leaders. These were framed by the unique life history of each participant, which shaped their moral framework and view of the world, based on the contexts they have lived and worked in. For some a religious belief was important to their conception of themselves as a moral leader, but not for others.

A recurring theme was that of acting in the 'best interests of students' or doing the 'right thing for children'. As Stefkovich and Begley (2007) pointed out what constitutes 'best interests' can be highly contested, as can the conceptions of the 'right thing'. As we have seen a common way this was addressed by participants was ensuring the education provided would be 'good enough for my child'. This represented the litmus test for decision-making:

> "The kind of non-negotiables would be things like is it good enough for my child?" (James)

Despite the various ways executive headteachers expressed their understanding of their role as moral leaders, it is possible to categorise them into four levels: the individual, the institution or MAT, the system, societal or universal. This reflects the four levels of analysis – micro, meso, macro and mega - referred to by Langlois and Begley (2005) in their mapping of the existing literature and research on moral leadership. The first two – individual and institutional – might be characterised as internal spheres of influence, whilst system and societal/universal are external.

For clarity a brief description of each is provided below:

1. The individual – this relates to leaders' perceptions of themselves and their personal morality, incorporating key moral values such as integrity, fairness, courage and excellence (Steare, 2011). It is the way in which leaders conduct themselves.
2. The institution – this refers to leader's responsibilities to foster moral behaviours and impact at an institutional level, such as creating an agreed set of values and nomenclature. It encompasses organisational norms, both within individual schools and across the school group/MAT. Whilst this may include wider stakeholders, for example parents' and local community interests, the focus here remains at the institutional level. It concerns those internal to the MAT/school group.

3. The system – this aspect is leaders' understanding of their system responsibilities beyond their own context and institution. It includes how they seek to engage with and contribute to the wider education system, their sense of responsibility to and for other children in other schools (Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves, 2011)

4. Society or universal – this is leaders' conception of the moral responsibility to impact at societal level. There is a transformative aspect to this, which recognises the role of education and school leadership to shape society and challenge inequities and injustices. This includes emancipating people from prejudices and poverty, promoting equity and social justice. It is universal in the sense that it makes claims on what should be within the rights of all people.

Below is a summary table showing the areas referenced by participants and highlighting those given greater emphasis (**bold**).

Table 6: RQ2 Categorisation of executive headteachers' understandings of their role as moral leaders

(1= the individual, 2= the institution, 3 = the system, 4 = society or universal)

Participant	Areas referenced (1, 2, 3, 4) with those in bold indicating greater emphasis	Best fit categorisation of responses
Fiona	1, **2**, 3	Institutional level
Ruth	**1, 2**, 3, 4	Individual and institutional level
Peter	1, **2**, 3, **4**	Institutional and societal
James	1, 2, 3, 4	Mixed (equal distribution)
Maria	**1, 2**, 3, 4	Individual and institutional
David	1, **2**, 3, 4	Institutional level
Sally	**1, 2**, 3	Individual and institutional level

Abdul	**1**, **2**, 3, **4**	Individual, institutional and societal level
Martin	**1**, 2, 3, 4	Individual level
Angela	**1**, **2**	Individual and institutional level
Debbie	1, **2**, 3	Institutional level

The table highlights that executive headteachers gave greatest emphasis to internal aspects of their moral leadership responsibility, whilst many also displayed a consciousness of their external responsibilities to the wider system or society. Each level of responsibility will be considered in more detail below, drawing out the responses of participants and identifying emerging themes.

1. The individual level

Significantly, all participants identified the individual level as being central to their ideas about moral leadership, understanding their personal responsibility to act in accordance with a set of values. West-Burnham (2009) argued that moral leadership in education and being a moral person are not separate. Although the word may not have been used explicitly, it was clear that *integrity* was central leaders' understanding personal morality. Steare (2011, p. 38) describes integrity as "the principle that defines all our other principles". It encapsulates honesty, trustworthiness and an understanding and practical application of what is right. It is the congruence between our espoused values and lived out values, it is the foundation of trust. As he points out "We have integrity, if we live according to principles. If, however, we act against those principles, then we lose our integrity" (ibid).

For Angela integrity and role-modelling were central to her conception of moral leadership:

> First of all, you've got to live what you espouse. You can't tell people that … For me, it's about people's experience of what you

do…I hate the term role model, but effectively modelling that behaviour. (Angela)

Similarly, Sally spoke about the 'face of leadership':

So the face of leadership is around being very out and about … I don't ask anybody to do something that I don't do. Everything I ask people to do, I model. I just think that's what you do. I don't sit in an ivory tower. (Sally)

Martin summarised a range of moral virtues – humility, kindness, hard work, wisdom and integrity – in the imperative statement:

Make sure all the decisions you're making and behaviours you're displaying are those you would applaud in others. (Martin)

His understanding of moral leadership focused very much on the importance of demonstrating integrity, particularly when your principles are tested or challenged:

Moral leadership is having the strength to do the right things instead of the popular things or what is being demanded of you. (Martin)

This requires moral courage. As Schrag (1979) pointed out, the challenge lies often not in knowing the right thing to do, but rather having the courage to do it. Martin described an example of when he had turned down a very lucrative international contract because it conflicted with his principles:

We were offered an opportunity to run a number of schools in a country that I honestly don't believe in. I don't believe in the way they behave. So we said no. (Martin)

Moral courage also requires an inward and outward focus to challenge and confront unethical practice and behaviours:

Moral leadership as an executive leader is about ensuring that you hold mirrors up to people, not least yourself. (Angela)

Abdul highlighted 'fairness' as a key feature of his role as a moral leader and his faith:

> It's also about not letting personal feelings about individuals cloud your judgment when you're making decisions ... I've got a very strong belief that I've got to be fair to people in order for me to feel good about myself in terms of my faith. And when I die, face my Lord and be judged. (Abdul)

More than any other participant, Martin's responses centred on this level of personal morality, drawing out core values at the heart of his leadership and providing examples in action. For Martin, providing wisdom, acting as a guide and coaching others in moral decision-making had become increasingly important as an executive headteacher. Using the metaphor of the family he likened his relationship to the headteachers within the MAT to that of a grandparent:

> The closest an analogy I can come up with really is that I'm a grandparent now, they're the parents, and the schools are the children, and the parents bring the children up. I can offer advice and guidance, and occasional wisdom … but that has to be taken rather than given that's my view and that's how our trust is moving forward.

This passing on of wisdom and guidance included moral correction if headteachers appear tempted to take short-cuts. He described how this played-out with one headteacher within the MAT:

> It's been quite a journey to coach her and work with her to prevent short cuts which I know will have long term moral consequences. Because there was an imperative to get things done and get kids in. And we had to make sure that it was for the right reasons, and it wasn't ego driven and that the children would be served properly. [Moral short-cuts like] short term incentives using people, so just using people for your convenience rather than explaining fully what they're involved in,

taking the time and having the patience to make sure they understood it properly. Making crafty appointments occasionally. (Martin)

He also argued for fortitude and perseverance in the face of challenge and disagreement. While recognising the challenges within the education system this included not modelling an excuses culture that we would find difficult to accept in others, this meant:

Not cowering, whimpering and whingeing about things that are done to us and that there isn't enough money. (Martin)

However, it also meant taking hold of educational agenda as a professional:

Stay at the table. When it's really horrible, keep staying there and in the end, you get to a solution. (Martin)

An interesting dimension of moral leadership raised by Ruth was whether, as someone nearing retirement age, her personal moral values were out of sync with the current generation of children in her schools? She understood moral leadership as "Somebody who does something because they believe it's right" but related the difficulties in schools of discussing moral issues such as 'sexting'.

Am I trying to enforce them [my moral beliefs] onto 12-year-old children because I believe that is wrong or has society changed so much that my moral beliefs, the sort of moral compass that steers me is so out of sync with other people that maybe I am passed it? (Ruth)

Dewey (1916) emphasised a view of morality as growth and a sense of becoming. In all our thoughts, decisions and actions – who is it I am becoming? Ultimately, from a moral perspective this is more significant than what I have achieved or accomplished. James reflected this thinking in referencing the impact on him of a new building project:

People might remember what I have done but they will remember the person for good or bad more through it, who did I become? I keep referring to the build, through the build what I was doing was fabulous, who I became was just absolutely exhausted and empty. (James)

2. The Institutional Level

All participants talked about their roles as moral leaders at the institutional level, covering the individual schools and their role as executive headteacher of a MAT or federation. Angela argued strongly for moral leadership as a collective endeavour. Whilst previously describing the importance of modelling as an executive headteacher, there was recognition that everyone in the institution has a shared responsibility:

I don't think that you can be a hero leader and be a moral leader, because it would only ever be very shallow. I think that if you're going to properly morally lead, then you need to be able to show every level in the organisation - from parents and students, the cooks, and the cleaners, and TAs [Teaching Assistants], to your NQT [Newly Qualified Teacher], to the IT person… All of them will have a part to play.

And so moral leadership is about ensuring that everybody understands what it is as an organisation we're trying to deliver on, and be part of that, and take part, and share in that responsibility for it. (Angela)

The idea of moral leadership as a collective endeavour was also emphasised by Debbie, who contended that achieving institutional clarity around values was paramount. To achieve a common ethos required a shared and consistent nomenclature amongst staff:

I meet with the principals in the Trust, we talk about moral leadership a lot, having moral clarity … When people talk about values and ethos that can become quite vague if you haven't

given them a framework to hang it on. I think a consistency of nomenclature helps people think about what they are doing in the way you want them to. We spent quite a long time thinking about our values, the ethos within the organisation and what could this framework be, and I wanted to distil it into three words … Clarity goes back to the truth and honesty. Everybody should know the function that they are being asked to perform within an institution, the role that they've got to play, the contribution they make - down to the caterer who works three hours a day, the cleaners. Leadership at every level. If they've got clarity, they will be more confident. Equally, if they got clarity the more difficult conversations are not so hard because you gave them real clarity to begin with. (Debbie)

This clarity of values and ethos were felt to be equally important for children:

Equally with the children. Children like to know what's going to happen if they do something wrong. Clarity of boundaries. Clarity in teaching and learning. Clarity in the lesson as to what we are going to achieve, where we are in that journey. So we said that clarity was actually a real focus for us, a priority. (Debbie)

She subsequently described understanding her role as a moral leader as a check and balance, ensuring that the organisation acts and behaves in line with espoused values:

I need to know that people are operating within that values framework. Yes, I provide the check and balance. If I see something that isn't perhaps in keeping with our values, I have to address it and that's part of my role and that's what I will do. (Debbie)

An interesting feature of responses was a discussion of whether the values of the individual executive headteacher became the values of the institution? There was a certain tension evident here. On the one

hand, leaders maintained that their personal values should not be imposed on the school community, but there was recognition that their values and those of the school(s) tended to become synonymous over time. To some extent schools and trusts become formed in the image of the lead professional. Sally's response demonstrated this point:

> [Moral leadership is] Not pushing particular personal values. It's the values at the school that you want to be driving. And it's about being professional. It's about accepting the values of the school and being professional. (Sally)

When asked how far her values were the same as the school values and whether those values came from her? She responded:

> I don't know, really. I suppose I've been here long enough, it's probably the same thing, isn't it now? (Sally)

Martin, when asked how he sought to determine what is right in any given situation, articulated his response to this tension between his individual morality and institutional morality:

> By referring to two things. First of all, the explicit beliefs you've laid out in the organisation, because if not, all you do is enacting prejudice. So those belief systems must be agreed and explicit within your organisation. And then using my own moral compass when I get into deep water. (Martin)

This answer reflects the interplay between personal and organisational values. However, the strength and force of personality of leaders may make it even more difficult to distinguish.

The reality is values belong to individuals and some individuals are more powerful than others in determining the values of the school. The headteacher within a school is likely to be the greatest influence on, and carrier of, values within the school. With most MATs growing from a single successful school, the executive headteacher starts to exert these values over a wider sphere of influence. A resulting tension becomes 'how much power do individual headteachers have to shape

values in their schools relative the executive headteacher?' What is the relationship between the values of the executive headteacher, the headteacher and the schools within the MAT?

Another issue arose between the separation of personal beliefs from politics and religion. Ruth asserted:

> We don't do political, I don't want any involvement in politics, I don't want any religious involvement.
>
> I couldn't care less what orientation people are, what gender they are, what religious group they come from, if they are a good teacher or a good member of staff that is what I want… some people find that very difficult to deal with. (Ruth)

The appeal to being apolitical is highly contestable. Education is wrapped up in politics, with policy, curriculum and accountability measures being driven by central government. Policy is not value neutral, so responses to policy are an indicator personal values – silence may be interpreted as acceptance or at least acquiescence. Similarly, not having religious involvement is not a neutral position. Whilst the underlying philosophical position demonstrated by Ruth is intended to express neutrality, inclusivity and equality, it is nevertheless an expression of a personal values and belief system that could be considered political and exclusive of religion. The tension between 'we' (institution) and 'I' (personal) is also evident in the first quote, where the pronouns are used interchangeably. The institutional position is that of the individual.

3. The System Level

During the interview participants were asked what they felt was their moral responsibility to the wider education system beyond their schools. Fiona described a shifting culture away from focus as institutional level, to a collaborative city-wide approach and sense of system responsibility for all the children in the city. James echoed this sentiment of a

growing understanding of moral system leadership as leadership for the benefit of the greatest number beyond his schools:

> Do good for as many people as possible for as much time as possible. So that kind of moral dimension sits within the fact that are you doing good and are you doing good for the community, and you have got to see it wider. You know one time I was just worried about my classroom, then I was worried about my department and then I was worried about my school, but now actually you are worried about the system … It is the worry that lives with me through leadership that actually if [school 1] is massively successful for example or [school 2] or [school 3] or any of the academies that I work with, that cannot come at a cost to another school. (James)

He elaborated further on the kind of system leaders should be aspiring to create:

> It is about how do you create a system where actually all children can thrive and flourish, because that is fundamentally the world class system that people talk about that we want - where you do have strong academic standards, where you do have good vocational provision, where children are safe guarded, where they are well cared for, where they grow up to be the kind of people that we wish them to be and to be the contributors that we wish them to be. (James)

James also recognised that his position had given him the profile and platform to be an advocate within the school system and to assume a system responsibility:

> As I say the executive headships, CEO, whatever we call it has given me almost the permission or the ability in terms of some capacity to go out and do things whether it is chucking a blog up … or engaging with various people out and about, all of that and you just want it to be good for everyone because if not, then maybe we are judged by the weakest because it wasn't good

enough for my children and so why should somebody else's experience it. (James)

Another manifestation of moral system leadership was the importance of supporting other schools through sharing of expertise and practice:

> We support lots of schools beyond our group…and we do that genuinely because we like working with others and learning from others and we do feel that schools are best placed to help each other. If people can learn from what we do and take something away from what we do then I think that is a really good thing. (Peter)

> I have a great sense of responsibility, wider than our trust. I always have done actually. I think that probably came from when I was a school improvement advisor, but I think it probably more comes from the fact that I like developing people. We've been part of school-to-school support work for over 12 years now. Even before that concept sort of came about really. It's within the DNA of this school. Everybody who works here at leadership level knows there is a social responsibility whether we get paid or not. (Sally)

These comments reflect the reciprocal benefits of sharing practice, as those who support often gain as much from the experience as those being supported. Martin argued the importance of sharing not just successes, but failures, openly and quickly so that these too can be learned from. He put forward the moral argument for there being no intellectual property in education:

> It's sharing good stuff immediately, so there should be no intellectual property in education... This is public money being spent for public good, it should all be out there. You know, if people exploit that then they're diminishing themselves. So it's sharing both good practice and also mistakes really, because if you can get your mistakes out there quick enough … then other

people can avoid them. So it's really that communication and it's not an easy landscape to communicate in. (Martin)

The suggestion that some people may be exploiting intellectual property reflects the 'businessification' of education in which education services are increasingly commercialised, with schools selling and exporting successful school or MAT practices and tools to others for a price.

Finally, Peter addressed the connection between MAT growth and a moral system responsibility to work with those in areas of greatest need and failure, not shying away from taking very challenging schools within the trust:

> One of our underlying principles is that our decisions around growth will not be based on economics, they will be based on need. So we won't shy away from those schools that are in really difficult circumstances because I guess I sense that we live in increasingly fractured society and if we are going to make a difference, we have got to make a difference to more children than we are. (Peter)

This was not a view that was universally shared. David expressed reservations about taking into the MAT schools in serious weaknesses, and questioned the motivations of some MAT leaders:

> Everyone is saying that they want to take on special measures schools and they're saying, "We love special measures schools." I personally wouldn't touch another school in special measures … I want good and outstanding schools to join us, because my ego isn't large enough, it doesn't allow me to think for one minute that I can take on X number of special measures schools and just flip them because we can't…but a lot of executive heads will take on loads of special measures schools because that's how you grow. (David)

4. Societal/universal level

For some executive headteachers there was a further sense of societal responsibility beyond their schools and the education system. It addressed the need for greater agency and equity for young people and within society at large. For Peter this broader goal permeated conversations and was rooted in his own childhood experiences:

> Moral leadership very much fits in with the paradigm within which I operate which is around building organisations and schools that actively promote equality and social justice - that whilst they celebrate and nurture the individual, they enable that child to operate within the community … My moral purpose is very much to ensure that all children get the very best education they can and that they learn to live with the world and change the world for the better. That is my moral purpose, and I will work tirelessly to remove barriers in terms of access, opportunity and outcome for all children and their families. (Peter)

This idea of changing the world to create a more equitable society was endorsed by James, for whom addressing disadvantage was a tenet of his catholic faith:

> Moral leadership goes right back to the common good routed in faith about how do we look after our people, particularly some of those who are the most disadvantaged? … That is part of the common good because if we become more equitable as a society, I genuinely believe we will become happier… It is about using education as part of that kind of social change for a more equitable society. (James)

Abdul expressed a similar sense of social responsibility whilst focusing on community needs of families of children within the schools he led. This required practical help and support for families such as paying for food, transport and ensuring children have a place to stay:

> The other side of moral leadership is making sure that you are doing everything in your power and in your organisation's power to support children in their families, particularly in times of

difficulty … We've got staff for example who have gone and spent their own money to put food in people's cupboards, because their cupboards are bare or have put their own money, put their in hands in their pockets to ensure that children can get from A to B sometimes when they are in difficulties or stay up at the police station with the child until 12.00 O'clock until emergency foster care has been found.

It's about understanding that we are not just educating a child from 9.00a.m. until 3.00p.m., We've got a moral responsibility to that child, that child and their family. Because that child spends more at home than they do with us. (Abdul).

In November 2019 The Trussell Trust, the UK's largest provider of food banks, published a research study of poverty and food insecurity in the UK called *State of Hunger* (Sosenko, Littlewood, Bramley, Fitzpatrick, Blenkinsopp and Wood, 2019). The report found that 11% of children under 16 live in food insecure households (1.4 million children). Leaders like Abdul recognise this need in their communities and share feelings of responsibility to support children's families.

5.4 Research question 3. In understanding the moral dimension of leadership, what tensions are experienced by executive headteachers?

This section explores the moral tensions experienced by executive headteachers, as discussed during interviews with participants. It is here that espoused values are exposed to the challenges of real-world dilemmas. The findings are presented in three parts; a) responses to this initial open question b) any tensions identified in reconciling the moral imperative with the accountability imperative c) specific moral tensions that arise for executive headteachers working in system leadership roles.

a) Moral tensions

Participant responses have been coded and grouped thematically as a series of tensions between two competing forces (see table below). This seemed the most natural and appropriate way of representing the lived tensions for leaders. Only those referenced by more than one participant have been included. There are strong connections and relationships between these tensions, which might be considered interlocking and interweaving. For example, in a system considered unforgiving of leaders deemed failing, there was perceived pressure to behave in survivalist ways, focusing on short term gains rather than in a principled manner for long-term benefits. The tensions identified reflect the wider educational climate in which executive headteachers work. Interestingly the two most frequently identified moral tensions address the same issue; removal of a person from the school community, either a staff member or pupil/child.

Table 7: RQ3 Moral tensions experienced by executive headteachers.

Tension	Participants	Total frequency
Inclusivity vs exclusion of pupils	4, 7, 9, 10, 11	5
Developing staff vs sacking/ redundancies	4, 5, 6, 8, 9	5
Individual vs group (greater good)	7, 10, 11	3
Holding on vs letting go	2, 3, 5	3
Forgiving vs unforgiving system	3, 4	2
Equity vs selection and parental choice	4, 11	2
Curriculum breadth vs performance measures	2, 4	2
Limited resources vs need	10, 11	2

1. Inclusivity versus exclusion of pupils (the individual versus the 'greater good')

The tension of how long to persevere with a child/student whose behaviour is considered damaging, dangerous or disruptive to others, was connected to the tension of the needs of the individual versus the needs of the group – or 'the greater good'. It is also a consequence of performance measures and school finances that do not incentivise desirable ethical behaviours. The Timpson Review of School Exclusion (2019, p. 11) acknowledged this concluding that:

> While the vast majority of schools are motivated by doing the best for all pupils, the current performance and funding system does not incentivise or reward schools for taking responsibility for the needs of all children and using permanent exclusion only when nothing else will do. It cannot be right to have a system where some schools could stand to improve their performance and finances through exclusion, but do not have to bear the cost of expensive nonmainstream provision these children then attend, nor be held accountable for the outcomes of the children they permanently exclude.

Martin took a clear anti-exclusion viewpoint:

> I've never excluded anyone because I believe that when you take a child into a school you take them in, and you make it work. (Martin)

A similar view was expressed by James for whom inclusion was a matter of equity, faith and forgiveness. He described the tension in terms of the biblical parable of the lost sheep, maintaining that "You are there for the 100 sheep not just the 99 … somehow you have got to keep bringing them back into the fold". Nevertheless, he did not go as far as ruling out exclusion, recognising the challenges faced by schools like his in areas of disadvantage:

> How long can somebody damage your community before you have to say actually it's a failure, but we can't cope and so the issue around that kind of inclusivity really sits at the root of a lot of issues around equity.

> In essence it becomes a series of tensions that you work with; whether this child is not behaving well, how long can I stay with them on the journey to try and turn the corner because sometimes time is important, sometimes it is various interventions that you do and at what point do I make that decision where you can't? (James)

This view sees exclusions as an acknowledgement of failure and expresses concern about the impact this has on disadvantaged children. Children in need, those supported by social care, with special educational needs (SEN), eligible for free school meals (FSM) or those from certain ethnic groups are significantly more likely to be excluded than their peers (Timpson, 2019).

The difficulty in managing the tension between individual and group needs is exacerbated by a lack of resources, as expressed by Angela:

> How do you continue to support the individual and their needs whilst upholding the needs of the bigger group? And I think because of lack of resource or facility in terms of provision that's where I find that I'm most challenged, that regardless of what I'd wish to do for an individual I've got a responsibility to the whole and there's that tension there with how do you deal with that?

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (Britton, Farquharson and Sibieta, 2019) reported there have been cuts of 8% in real terms between 2009–10 and 2018–19 on per pupil spending and 5% since 2015-16, as well as continuing unequal funding across local authorities.

For Debbie, the greater good justified decisions taken to exclude a high number of children during a period of instability whilst taking over at a new school. Her response showed a personal assurance that the decisions made were right, based on thorough analysis and deep reflection on the situation. Despite this, the personal sense of internal conflict is evident; in the self-questioning, in the acknowledgement that

a high number had been excluded and in efforts to track what happen to those affected:

> When we began at [school], I did have to exclude a high number of children and I still think about that a lot. I know we've been tracing what has happened to those children, but I still think I was focused on doing the right thing. (Debbie)

> Lots of children had suffered at that school for a long time. It was a dangerous place to be. A lot of children weren't attending school because they felt so frightened. All of the factors that we analysed led me to say we can't actually cope with this level of significant volatile violent behaviour. I have to remove that in order to try and rescue this. Does that mean we have gone to every school and done the same? No. We've reflected and refined, we have where we think we can't keep people safe. But it's about being deeply thoughtful, challenging ourselves all the time - is that the right thing? Do we have to do that? Is there something else we can do? Are we stronger than that now? But I suppose focusing on the greater good. (Debbie)

Debbie described feeling compelled to do something she didn't want to do – exclude children. Leaders have a duty to ensure the safety of children and adults within the school, but is it reasonable to claim that exclusion is the only option, or might other more inclusive behaviour management solutions be found? Whilst exclusion might be perceived as taking a *tough* stance on behaviour, it is arguably the *soft* option. Debbie does not allude to what happened to tracked students or how she sought to ensure that excluded children remained meaningfully and positively engaged in education. Outcomes for excluded children are poor. In 2015/16 only 7% of permanently excluded children achieved good passes in English and maths GCSE qualifications (Timpson, 2019).

2. Developing staff vs sacking/redundancies (forgiveness in an unforgiving system)

A similar moral dilemma occurred when making decisions regarding the jobs of staff. Whilst leaders expressed the desire to support colleagues' development, pressures to secure rapid school improvement do not necessarily allow the time required. Executive headteachers, particularly those responsible for one or more schools in challenging circumstances may feel this pressure to secure short-term improvement frequently and sharply. This includes making decisions about whether to retain headteachers in post. Retention rates of headteachers have fallen since 2012 (Lynch et al, 2017) with lower retention apparent in sponsored academies, larger MATs and those judged Inadequate by Ofsted. More broadly, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) reported that whilst school leaders progress faster in MATs than elsewhere, there is a higher turnover of staff, including those leaving the profession (Andrews, 2019). Peter described the tensions he faced and the moral dilemma this caused:

> I naturally want to see the good in people and I think people make mistakes and what I have noticed recently is that our system has become very unforgiving of that and there is a desire to deal with things really quickly and so there is a tension between supporting leaders and sticking to the principle that I have around giving people another chance and that is something that keeps me awake at night a lot. (Peter)

David recognised that his action to remove a hard-working deputy might be considered ruthless but justified the decision through viewing it as in the best interests of children. He felt she was a barrier to the school becoming outstanding and his decision had created quite a lot of upset:

> I had to make a decision whether or not we're going to develop her further…or whether we're going to take her out of there … we've taken her out. The way I have equated that in my mind is this is the right thing to do because that's around what the children need. I suppose that might be a little bit ruthless, but my

> moral compass is that we can't get that experience with the kids, so we're going to move her out. (David)

For Abdul the sense of moral responsibility and concern for a staff member losing their job weighed heavily. He recognised that his decision could have wider consequences for the individual and their family. However, if the support offered was not having impact, he concluded his role must be to put the interests of children first.

He reflected that this moral dilemma was particularly acute when strong personal relationships exist. He also cited this as a reason why, in some schools, mediocrity may be accepted – in essence, the interests of adults are put above those of the children.

> I think sometimes schools struggle because a certain level mediocrity is accepted … because the needs of the adults take priority over the needs of the children, and people probably wouldn't necessarily frame it in that way or understand it in that way … Certainly from what I've seen, particularly in schools that we've gone into that are failing schools that's absolutely been the case where the interest of the adults actually have slowly become prioritised over the interests of the children.

Some would argue that such views are influenced by the excellence mantra which has reframed good enough as mediocrity, and unacceptable. The risk is that this creates unrealistic expectations of staff, that unless they are 'outstanding' they are not doing a good enough job. Whilst the accountability system may be unforgiving, leaders have a responsibility to create a culture of psychological safety in which staff are valued, nurtured and developed - one that does not discard people, but shows a commitment to a sustainable system. A moral commitment to acting in the best interests of children, does not mean that the interests of staff are ignored or side-lined. In moral terms, it is important that staff are not seen instrumentally, as means to an end, but are valued in their own right. Interestingly, some practising

school leaders themselves are beginning to address this point, for example: *Putting Staff First: A blueprint for revitalising our schools* (Tomsett and Uttley, 2020).

3. Holding on versus letting go

Whilst the issue of staff dismissals, redundancies and pupil exclusions were most frequently identified as causes of greatest moral tension, they are not unique to the executive headteacher role and would be concerns for the headteacher of a single school. The tension of 'holding on versus letting go' is particularly pertinent to executive headteachers. Most of those interviewed had been headteacher of the 'lead' school within the group and at the point of participating in the research; some retained their status as substantive headteacher of this school alongside the wider responsibilities as executive headteacher. Having achieved success as a headteacher, moving into the new world of executive leadership was unchartered and uncertain territory. There was hesitation in embracing the new role fully and letting go of a role that was better understood and perhaps carried less risk. Consequently, some executive headteachers had retained a foot in each camp. Executive headteachers shared that they found it very difficult to let go and not to want to step in and run the schools themselves:

> I just want to go "Let me do that, let me be the head, I can do that. I can go in now, I can sort that" ... You have to stop, you say "It's not my job. That's not what I do." And if I don't enable my heads, the whole thing would fall apart because I'm not the head. And sometimes, the decisions they're making I don't agree with, but I have to let them run with it … As a head of your school, you're the one morally guiding it … As an exec head, it's not you doing that, you're trying to enable somebody else to do that. (Maria)

This shift in role, from doing to enabling through coaching is reflected in this comment from Peter:

I don't always agree with how the heads run schools at times, but I don't interfere I just ask questions so there is some tension there. (Peter)

There was acknowledgement that inexperienced leaders and heads need the opportunities to gain those experiences themselves and that this is necessary as part of effective succession planning:

If you are El-Supremo the people who are going to take over from you, or who you are showing it to, will never learn what it's like to hear about and to deal with a child and tell the child their Mum has died or to sit with a member of staff whilst he or she goes for chemo or to have a person suffering domestic violence … All those little personal interactions as a leader, in a way you give up by becoming an exec leader because people have to feel that, they have to live it and then they have to bounce back for the next day. (Ruth)

5.4.1 Research question 3b) What, if any, are the tensions experienced by executive headteachers in reconciling the moral imperative with the accountability imperative?

This question really lay at the heart of the research. It was apparent that reconciling the moral imperative with accountability pressures presented very real challenges for executive headteachers:

That [the tension between the moral imperative and the accountability imperative] is one of the trickiest lines that we walk. (Debbie).

I have existed and lived and be honed and damaged in this decade of excessive accountability. (James)

Unsurprisingly Ofsted and performance measures featured prominently in executive headteacher responses to this research question. Whilst all participants discussed the role and impact of Ofsted, it was a subject that divided opinion with some leaders expressing cautious optimism for the future and others highly critical.

Perceptions of excessive accountability and scrutiny, combined with a lack of trust from school leaders are reported as a significant factor for teachers leaving the profession (DfE, 2018). According to the DfE study *Factors affecting teacher retention* (ibid), teachers both recognised the pressures on leaders from Ofsted, pupil performance and progress, but also felt leaders did not provide sufficient support.

It is worth noting that four executive leaders upheld the need for public accountability and political involvement in education. These leaders recognised that schools, and school leaders as public servants, should be held accountable as a "public institution, funded by public money for the public good" (Peter). Education is a "massive wealth distribution" of taxpayers' money" (James) and the only real way for government to improve society (Martin). Furthermore, the accountability system provides a check and balance, ensuring leaders are ambitious and aspirational for the children (Debbie). Nevertheless, whilst recognising the need for accountability, concerns were raised about the efficacy of the current system. One participant voiced an opposing concern of a lack of accountability due to significant reductions in resources in inspection services, as well as in schools.

> At the moment there's a danger of unaccountability, because there's less resource going and so more excuse will be provided. (Martin)

In 2018 the Public Accounts Committee expressed its own concerns about Ofsted, including the number of school exemptions from re-inspection and acknowledging funding cuts.

> In 2017–18, Ofsted spent an estimated £60 million on inspecting the schools sector, a reduction of 52% in real terms since 1999–2000. (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2018, p.3)

The table below summarises the emergent themes from participant interviews.

Table 8: RQ3b Tensions experienced by executive headteachers in reconciling the moral imperative with the accountability imperative.

Theme	Participant	Frequency
Ofsted	All (1-11)	11
Performance measures, tables and results	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	9
A system that rewards unethical behaviours/ gaming	4, 7, 9, 10, 11	5
Testing and assessment	3, 5, 6, 8, 9	5
Short term vs long term	2, 3, 5, 10, 11	5
DfE and RSCs	2, 6, 9, 11	4
The recognised need for public accountability vs the system we have	3, 4, 9, 11	4
Curriculum	1, 2, 9, 10	4
A system that favours the advantaged	4, 7	2

Before exploring views on individual aspects of accountability, it is perhaps helpful to reflect on the overall impact that these combined factors have on the education system and lived experience of executive headteachers. A recurring theme was how the system rewards unethical behaviours.

1. A system that rewards unethical behaviours

James spoke passionately about negative consequences of the accountability system and its conflict with the moral imperative of education. He concluded that whilst leaders are not exempt from taking personal moral responsibility, the system fails to drive desirable behaviours and rewards unethical practices:

> In England the accountability system is all pervading, it's pernicious, it's damaging and dangerous. It doesn't force people

to do bad things, but it actually rewards them for doing bad things. The decision to do something that is wrong an individual takes, but you have a system that rewards you for it, where in fact, what you want is a system that promotes and supports people to make ethical decisions. (James)

A prime example of an unethical practice was 'off-rolling':

If you want to be seen as highly successful in education, if you can get rid of as many disadvantaged children, particularly those who are not doing well…if you can make sure that you can get rid of as many difficult pupils as you can before you get to year 10 or before you get to year 6, that don't half help you look good. (James)

A House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (Long and Danechi, 2019, p. 3) recognised "Unintended incentives through school performance measures such as Progress 8 to remove lower-performing pupils from a school's score" were fuelling the increase in off-rolling. According to the paper, 11% of teachers surveyed in a YouGov poll (July 2018) revealed they had seen off-rolling happen at their school.

Whilst this might boost a school's position in the performance tables, James could not reconcile such practice with his conscience:

But the measure of the world's view of success and your ability to live with who you have become are two different things. So that becomes a fundamental moral issue, the world thinks that I am successful, but I know I damaged children along the way, you can't do it. (James)

Martin was highly critical of leaders who seek to game the system and engage in unethical practices, acknowledging the victims are those who play by the rules. This is contrary to the kind of system leadership advocated by Hargreaves (2011):

It feathers their [school leaders'] ego to either manipulate the statistics, in exceptional circumstances cheat, and generally to

try and crawl up the tables, but without the honest recognition that if they crawl up, someone else is going down. (Martin)

Debbie reflected on how this had caused her to question whether she was in fact disadvantaging her schools by not gaming the system, especially when facing inspection:

> When you're sitting in front of an HMI and you've got monitoring inspections, I do sometimes think have I done the wrong thing by the staff because they're being judged on the decisions I've made. I've been disheartened… I'm constantly thinking about, "They are a similar school they've done far better than we have." And I've said to the head, "Phone that school, go and see that school, look at their curriculum." The initial conversation is, "Ah, well, my mate runs the PRU [Pupils Referral Unit] down the road and they had 25 spaces and I'm sorry but that's why our results shot up last year."

A similar dilemma was recounted by Angela. When a MAT take responsibility for a school in special measures, the pressure to prioritise short-term interests was considered particularly acute. The 'wolf at the door' is Ofsted:

> We've just got a new school in our trust which is the bottom of the league table on progress 8 and every accountable measure that you could possibly think of in school… It's a very tricky one to sort of ensure as now the accountable body for that school that we make progress there so that we can keep the wolf from the door and so that we can be allowed to continue to work with those children, because the journey that that school is on is going to be a very long one. There would be some very quick wins there in terms of managing behaviour for instance, excluding children … the ways in which you could manoeuvre curriculums to create slightly better outcomes in the short term but that would always be at the expense of a more medium- and longer-term approach. (Angela)

The accountability system also presented tensions for curriculum choices, including decision-making around the merit of courses such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), which in league tables was the equivalent of a GCSE (level 2). *Schools Week* (Staufenberg and Dickens, 2016, October 14) reported a 350% pass rate increase of the ECDL fast track IT qualification in 12 months, prompting concerns that the rise was at the expense of other curriculum subjects such as art and drama. The widespread use of this qualification has been described as 'gaming' and changes have since been made to which qualifications are accepted at level 2 and the GCSE equivalence in league tables:

> We have done other courses in the past but ECDL always struck me as really a game play, some schools think it is very valuable and it is not that the course isn't valuable, it just isn't equivalent to a GCSE and so what would be interesting now is that they are no longer doing the ECDL will loads of schools stop doing it or will they still maintain it is a valuable qualification? (James)

Debbie had taken a similar decision not to adopt ECDL and other courses, despite advice from an external advisor to be more 'tactical':

> We haven't done ECDL. We've not done anything that's been tactical, if you like, sometimes to our detriment. Again, at [school] we have been told we should absolutely be more tactical to address that situation and get ourselves out of the hole they perceive we're in. (Debbie)

Sergiovanni (1992) contrasts *tactical* situational leadership approaches with strategic leadership that is based on beliefs and commitment. There is palpable tension here in these responses caused by a system that appears to reward unethical practices and the need to preserve and protect the school from punitive accountability systems that expect quick fixes.

2. Ofsted

Ofsted elicited strong views and to some extent polarised opinion. Those expressing greater positivity and optimism reflected on reforms taking place within Ofsted under the new HMCI leadership and a new Ofsted inspection framework. These leaders also recognised the challenges for Ofsted as the regulator:

> Ofsted were demonised, then they moderated, now Amanda Spielman says we've got to do all the important things and not worry about Ofsted. It's challenging for Ofsted too. If you inspect something generally it will lead to it getting better, if there are consequences. So you need to expect-inspect something else." (Martin)

Some executive headteachers cited a mantra of "We never do anything for Ofsted" reflecting a confidence gained from prior successful judgements (David and Maria) - and from being an Ofsted inspector themselves (Abdul). Meanwhile, Ruth believed that "Doing the right thing should satisfy Ofsted" because you can tell your story.

This confidence had not always been present but had developed over time and with experience. Maria admitted that previously she had done a lot of quick fixes to satisfy Ofsted that she did not now believe in:

> We did a lot of quick fixes that are ridiculous … we got the 'outstanding' [judgement], at that point we said "right, now let's really be outstanding. That's not my kind of outstanding". (Maria)

Leaders critical of Ofsted cited it as the "proxy policy maker in our system" (Peter), they held it responsible for driving fear and for the damaging impact its categorisations have on schools and leaders. Ruth bemoaned judgements about MATs that do not always consider the journey and starting points of schools. The importance of achieving a positive Ofsted outcome was paramount for schools and MATs, which James and Sally argued was much more difficult if you worked in a disadvantaged context:

You are far more likely to be put in a category if you work in a disadvantaged community … Ofsted reports are a con trick for parents. I don't think they talk about school effectiveness; they talk about a school's intake. (James)

We're not in a school where the results are always going to be good, because it's a challenging community, and it's a very, very fragile school. Within a half a term this school could go from good to special measures. (Sally)

It was clear that when executive headteachers were making decisions about schools in a category they felt greater pressure to take actions that were contrary to their values and beliefs about education. The implications of a negative Ofsted judgement were criticised for incentivising short termism (Peter and Maria). This came from the threat of sacking and having schools taken away from the MAT. The moral dilemma was presented by Angela:

We've potentially got an Ofsted inspection coming to a school that we thought was going to be good when we inherited it. And now we're in there, it's not. We know it's not.

So, how do we share the information that we now know? Are we completely honest and do we bare our soul about it, or do we do things that aren't covering it up but manage the situation so that it's not as big an issue? And I think in the end we are having to compromise around some of those areas - and it's around curriculum delivery - that perhaps we wouldn't wish to do but we are having to do because I think if there is an inspection, and it does dip then the school's got a longer journey to get back to where it should be. In the community it's serving at the moment that would pose real threats to the school. So I think we've had to make some compromises around curriculum for the long-term benefits of the school. (Angela)

The format of inspection, lack of capacity at Ofsted and variability of inspection judgements were also challenged (James). They were also

accused of not being strong enough at "holding outside forces as accountable as the schools they are inspecting" (James).

3. Performance measures, tables and results

As Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) have argued, the measure of effective school leadership has become the ability to translate students into good data. Executive headteachers recognised that, as well as a favourable Ofsted judgement, securing strong outcomes in examination results and performance tables was critical to their survival and continuing ability to lead the school:

> If you're honest you live and die by your results…I can't lie those league tables and Ofsted are really important to me. That's what people judge us on. (Fiona)

Maria was equally clear about the consequences of failing to achieve performance expectations:

> I need my results to be good enough, as otherwise I won't have a school to lead anymore, and I won't have any impact. (Maria)

David, who recognised his own highly competitive nature, acknowledged that he'd like his school to be top of the league tables but argued that this was not the driving force of his actions, rather it would be 'a great by-product':

> I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't want us to be number one in the league table … My life would be a lot easier if it were. (David)

Meanwhile, the competitive nature and inequities of performance tables were critiqued by Martin, who drew comparisons with football. Just as Premier League teams do not compete with equal resources, schools also receive different funding allocations, serve different communities across a spectrum of contexts and face different challenges:

> It's absolutely brilliant when you're on the top of it [League table]. Everybody wants to be Manchester United, Man City or Chelsea … And that's what performance tables are. So it's for people are

doing well, for people who are going to fail, is that the education system we want? No. (Martin)

The high-stakes nature of the headship has drawn previous comparisons to being a football manager (MacBeath, 2011) and John Howson (cited in MacBeath, 2011) described this as 'football managers syndrome' with headteachers 'facing being kicked out or relegated' (*Maghull and Aintree Star*, 18 February 2010).

As already highlighted, for schools not performing well in accountability measures there is a greater vulnerability and pressure to conform to government direction and performance measures (Higham and Earley, 2013). James expressed his concern about the need to take school context into account and the detrimental effect on headteacher recruitment in areas of disadvantage:

> You have to contextualise progress 8 and primary school progress measures, otherwise all you do is measure a school's intake … The number of people prepared to play Russian roulette with their career working in schools with significant levels of disadvantage will become fewer and fewer. (James)

However, he was positive about the new 'Progress 8' measure being introduced at Key Stage 4:

> I like progress 8 as a school effectiveness measure because it's over 8 subjects, about every child and every grade. (James)

At primary level, there were concerns about the detrimental labelling of children based on performance at Key Stage 2:

> 47% of our year 6's didn't meet the standard [age related expectations]. We are sending kids into secondary school saying you're a failure before you've even begun. (David)

It was noticeable that some of the executive headteachers of primary MATs interviewed had been affected by recent changes to assessments at Key Stage 2 and had experienced dips in results,

prompting them to make decisions to alter practice to avoid a repeat. This was particularly striking as these leaders had expressed high levels of moral confidence in their practice. Poor performance in high stakes tests appeared to be considered a greater risk than an Ofsted inspection.

Finally, for MAT leaders the opportunity to grow the MAT, to take in new schools, is contingent on the ability to produce results. There is also the risk that existing schools will be taken from them and rebrokered to another MAT as outlined in the White Paper '*Educational Excellence Everywhere*' (DfE, 2016). This was recognised by David:

> We're being moderated for writing, now I know that if our writing results aren't great, it's going to hit our reading and writing combined. And if the MATs going to be expanded then our results have got to be great. (David)

4. Department for Education and Regional Schools Commissioners

One further accountability is worthy of mention. MAT leaders are accountable to the Regional Schools Commissioner's (RSC) office as representatives of the DfE. The RSC posts were created in 2014 to act on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education, and they are supported by Regional Headteacher Boards of up to eight members, set up to advise and challenge on academy-related decisions. The role of RSCs includes intervening with under-performing academies, sponsors and multi-academy trusts (DfE, 2016). Executive headteachers expressed strong criticism of RSC's offices due to inconsistencies, a lack of rigour and predominance of civil servants with limited relevant knowledge of education:

> I think it's a really poor system at the moment. We're across two regions and we see the real difference in the way that the regions run the RSC's office and the competence inside the RSC's offices. I have the same conversations over and over and over again. They're not diligent conversations they're really

broad brushstroke. They're with people who are civil servants too often and have never really been in the education system and I find that difficult. It means that their questioning is not very robust. I could get through those conversations and not reveal anything of the things that I'm concerned about. I don't see it as being rigorous at the moment. Each time we have a conversation with the [regional office] they have restructured again. Nobody's in post long enough to actually get good at their job, they're not focused on betterment. They're just constantly recognising their own issues but having a kneejerk reaction to those issues and yet that's what's driving decisions about which MATs are strong enough to support and which aren't. I don't have a lot of faith in the system at the moment. (Debbie)

A similar viewpoint was expressed by Martin:

Having worked in the Regional Schools Commissioner's office and experienced it through academisation. I think it's a complete mess. I think this is a lot of people trying to make something work, that most people don't care about. (Martin)

Particularly strong views were expressed by David following pressure from DfE to take a struggling school into the trust:

They shouldn't have 'education' in the title. The Department for Education. They genuinely - a lot of them - don't know what they're doing. They genuinely haven't got a clue. They'll exert massive pressures. We were put under massive pressure to take [name] primary school … And then they said to me, "You've gone down in our estimations." I said, "How?" "Because we offered you this school, you said you've got capacity and you turn it down." (David)

5.4.2 Research question 3c) Are there specific moral tensions that arise for executive headteachers working in system leadership roles?

Table 9: RQ3c Specific moral tensions arising for executive headteachers working in system leadership roles.

Theme	Participants	Total
Identity and role	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11	7
MAT identity	1, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11	6
Managing heads	1, 5, 7, 8, 11	5
MAT model	1, 5, 7, 9, 11	5
Leadership styles	1, 2, 7	3
MAT growth	6, 7, 8	3
CEO/executive headteacher pay	9, 11	2

Issues of identity sit at the heart of leadership and morality: who am I? Who are we? What are our responsibilities to each other? These were the specific moral tensions that arose for executive headteachers working in system leader roles. This related to the individual identity of executive headteachers themselves and their relationships with the headteachers they managed. It also concerned the identity of the group of schools/MAT and managing the inter-relationships between schools. This connected to dilemmas regarding how to lead and the most appropriate leadership styles. Decisions about MAT growth presented further tensions, posing questions such as: what is the motivation for growth? What moral responsibilities do we have to support other schools in difficulty? Finally, CEO/executive headteacher pay raised moral tensions, with no national benchmarks or scales published, leaders experienced challenges in assessing their value and worth.

1. Identity and role

Executive headteachers reported struggling to adapt to their changing role and to no longer being the headteacher. Whilst headship is well understood, and leaders may have many years of experience and success behind them, executive headship is still relatively new and

includes a variety of roles and interpretations (Buck, Wespieser, & Harland, 2017; Lord, Wespieser, Harland, Fellows and Theobald, 2016). Executive headteachers found themselves in a moral quandary, seeking to understand what an executive headteacher does and how they add value:

> A personal challenge that I have is trying to locate my worth in the organisation and I think when you have come up through education and you have become a deputy and a head - and again I think this is a common-sense notion that prevails in society that if you work in schools, you're only worth being there if you are actually involved with children and in teaching and doing that stuff. As an executive head, you can't be - so therefore when you are trying to locate your worth in an organisation and people are rightly saying 'why are we paying you the salary we are paying you'? I find that really difficult at times and the only answer I can give is that I know it wouldn't be the organisation it is if I wasn't here. And at the moment that seems to be okay, but it doesn't help me personally. (Peter)

As executive headteachers they were increasingly working behind the scenes and recognised the need to allow headteachers to lead the schools on a day-to-day basis:

> I do feel more like wallpaper than I ever did as a head…because we have got headteachers, they must be allowed to lead their schools and really I am sat behind beavering away on culture, almost the intangible stuff (James)

> The inability to intervene directly is quite frustrating and the fact that I have to allow each of the schools to grow in their own identity under their own leadership means it's not mine. (Martin)

A moral dilemma this presents is understanding what a CEO or executive headteacher does in the education context; what should I be doing? How should I be spending my time? What am I not doing? This can invoke a sense of self-doubt:

> I meet a lot of CEOs that are not in and out of their schools a lot, they're very remote from the schools actually and they see it very much as running a business and I worry about that. I think maybe I'm not doing my job properly. Then I think it's a necessity that the leader absolutely sees that it's important to go and see what's happening to the children in lessons, but I could fill my days without doing that very easily. That's a tension I'm always thinking about. And the policies perhaps aren't up to scratch as much as they might need to be and I'm scrambling to recover it, so there's that sort of tension. (Debbie)

The businessification of education (Hill, 2002, 2015) has transformed the role of school leaders. Whilst the CEO position in education is no longer unusual, it is not well understood, even by those in post. For some executive headteachers in schools there is still something rather alien and uncomfortable about the title and responsibilities this brings. Their knowledge and experience reside in schools, not business. Without well-established job descriptions for school CEOs, forging a new identity and understanding of their role is difficult.

2. Managing heads

Closely connected with this change of identity and role is the difficulty of managing headteachers. The tension felt by some executive headteachers is captured by this statement:

> In terms of autonomy, I'd like to run the schools myself if I'm honest. I'd like them to do everything that I want them to do and I'd like them to do it tomorrow, but you can't work like that. (Fiona)

This distinction in responsibilities is complicated by the various titles and relationships that can exist; whether the school leader has the substantive headteacher post, or if the executive leader retains the substantive headship of a school and appoints an 'associate headteacher' or 'head of school' (Buck, Wespieser, & Harland, 2017). It can also make a difference whether the person is promoted from within

or externally appointed, potentially with prior experience of being an autonomous headteacher:

> Letting go here is probably the hardest, [I] still haven't got that right but me and [associate head] work well together … I think the other challenge has been trying to work with people that are headteachers, proper headteachers of school, and holding them to account in a way that they have never been held to account by someone like me before and getting that right. It is easier, as soon as you start making your own appointments it is easier. (Fiona)

In many cases executive headteachers are working with inexperienced headteachers. Finding the balance between headteacher autonomy and executive headteacher accountability is a tension:

> It's about saying, "Well, you want to be autonomous, you want to be the head of your own school, so you have to head-up and take that responsibility." But if they haven't got the skills and the experience at that point in time, it's about guiding them … I think the tensions with being a chief exec is the external pressures of outcomes and of Ofsted.   You don't always see that immediately. You have to say, "[What] is the cost of developing that headteacher?" You have to balance it about the good of the influence that person is having on the staff and the children. It becomes a balancing point when you know you have to step in because it's not having the impact on the children that you need, and children only get one chance at it, don't they, really? (Sally)

3. MAT identity and resources

Executive headteachers faced moral tensions around preserving and fostering the identities of the individual schools versus creating a sense of shared MAT or group identity. This a further example of the individual versus group tension. Which interests should come first, those of the school or the group? Are people prepared to put personal interests aside for the benefit of the whole? To what extent do staff in a

school feel a sense of responsibility to those in other schools within the group/MAT? Executive headteachers must manage these tensions and persuade colleagues to collaborate and share resources. Fiona, who held the substantive headteacher post of the lead school whilst also being the executive headteacher, articulated the tensions between the competing interests:

> Do we need to help the other schools to become better if they haven't got enough money? We are using our strong staff at [school] to go and support the staff in the other schools that need help … I actually do get the big picture, I will do anything for those other schools … but I don't think I have quite cracked that across the MAT yet.

> I thought 'would I put our best Maths teacher in at [school]?' ... I don't think I am quite there yet because our Maths results are so important to us here as well but where you can share, you share. You know, it's a test of true love, 'Would you give someone your last Rolo [chocolate]? Would you give someone your best Maths Teacher?' (Fiona)

How should resources be shared amongst schools? Is it right to take the resources or financial reserves of one school and give them to another that may be in greater need?

> We've only got a finite amount of resource and we've got to be able to direct that to priorities. We'd be foolish not to, but we can't do that at the expense of others who deserve our attention and those individual children in there. So there is that additional tension I think, when you're leading the MAT about how do you make sure that one school's priority … isn't delivered at the expense of all the others … It's about making sure that everybody feels that they're valued, everybody's seen as important. (Angela)

The question of standardisation versus individual school autonomy is at the heart of many discussions within MATs. To what extent should policies and practice be the same, aligned or autonomous?

> I'm always battling with "do I make it more consistent?" ... I've always got that tension when … heads and I meet and I go "Let's get teaching for learning policies" because the pedagogy in some of the schools it's quite different … We're not a trust that have a blueprint of how things should be done. (Sally)

Debbie argued in favour of actions that support the greater good, above individual school interests:

> At times I have taken a resource out of one school in order to support a school that I've thought needs it more. The greater good question becomes different. This school likes its autonomy, "we're successful, don't change what we're doing, don't fix something that isn't broken" - I hear that a lot. But actually, the greater good is that…we're going to a shared curriculum, we're going to shared assessment points because I need that clarity for the other schools to improve more quickly. Those are the tensions that I deal with all the time. (Debbie)

4. Growth

Executive headteachers experienced tensions around MAT growth particularly when considering taking on schools in significant difficulty. DfE policy requires failing schools to become academies and join a MAT. The moral responsibility to support other schools is balanced by the responsibility to serve the needs of schools already in the MAT and not to put them at risk. David described the pressure placed on him by the DfE to take on a failing school, judged to be in special measures and with a significant six-figure projected budget deficit, and his approach to MAT growth. He contrasted his reluctance to take on failing schools with other executive headteachers within his network:

> Running a MAT is tough, because there are moral questions around growth of the MAT … are you pushing the teaching or are you pushing the economy? The government wants you to push the economies of scale, and to do that you need to grow quite quickly…what I'm seeing from a lot of MATs is that their first thing is growth strategy, and then their school improvement strategy is the thing that comes a little bit later. They just want to get to 10, 15, 20 schools … As long as the budget isn't collapsing, I'm not going to push on the numbers, because the minute you push just on numbers you compromise values and the moral compass of the MAT. (David)

These comments address the impact declining budgets are having on schools' ability to survive financially, without achieving economies of scale through joining or growing a MAT. Consequently, motivations for growth may be financially driven rather than for educational or values-based reasons, according to the axiom 'grow or die'.

A different perspective was presented by Abdul who had taken in his former primary school that was in special measures. Whilst there were very strong arguments in favour of not getting involved, he reasoned that morally he could not walk away:

> It was a massive risk … and there was a very very good argument to give it a wide berth. But morally we couldn't walk away, so as an executive head I had to convince people who actually quite rightly were saying "this could finish us, this could sink us, do we really want to take this responsibility, maybe in a couple of years, but now we're just not ready for this" … And in the end, we did take it and it did nearly kill us, but we are stronger now.

> Morally it was probably a bad decision, I mean it looks like a good decision now, but it was probably a bad decision at the time … because we probably risked too much and it did weaken

the other schools for a time, it worked out okay in the end.
(Abdul)

5.5 Research question 4. How do executive headteachers seek to resolve these tensions?

Table 10: RQ4 executive headteacher responses to resolving moral tensions.

Theme	Participants	Total (frequency)
Pragmatism	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11	9
Principles and conscience	3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11	7
Compromise	5, 6, 7, 8 ,9	5
Preserve the school community	3, 4, 5, 7, 10	5
Authenticity/ Open dialogue about tensions	3, 5, 9, 10, 11	5
Work within the parameters/confines	2, 5, 7, 9	4
Reflection and introspection	3, 7, 9, 11	4
Collective decision making	3, 9, 10	3
Greater good/ utilitarianism	10, 11	2

In the face of moral tensions resulting from external accountability measures, how do executive headteachers respond? The overwhelming majority identified a pragmatic approach, accepting that some compromise was necessary. The justification for this pragmatism was predominantly the need to preserve and protect the school community from external forces that might disrupt, delay or jeopardise perceived progress being made. This utilitarian approach was founded on the premise that pragmatic decisions are for the 'greater good' of the school community. Leaders expressed a belief that they needed to

work within the confines of the accountability system they operated in, at times this meant necessary compromise.

The government policy maxim 'Expect and inspect' has been effective in creating an educational climate in which executive headteachers feel compelled, even if somewhat reluctantly, to deliver on accountability measures. The 'Deliverology' approach advocated by Michael Barber (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009)) of top-down targets continues to prevail. Pragmatism and compromise were particularly likely when leaders felt they, or their schools, were vulnerable to external accountability – such as following a dip in results or impending Ofsted inspection of a school considered at risk. Repeated themes amongst participants were the need to 'play the game enough' and 'keep the wolves from the door'. Executive headteachers, despite previous successes, are not impervious to the inherent risks if they choose to ignore the high stakes tests or inspections by which they are judged. Steare (2011) observes that schools are often characterised by an ethic of obedience. This applies not simply to how we expect people to work internal to our organisations, but also influences how we respond to external accountabilities.

What distinguished executive headteacher responses from each other were the ways in which they wrestled with, shared and resolved moral tensions.   More than half of leaders referenced personal and organisational principles that served to guide responses. This was accompanied by an openness and transparency with governors and staff about the very real decisions, challenges and potential consequences involved. In some cases, this resulted in collective problem-solving and decision-making. Trustees and governors have an important role to play in supporting moral decisions by providing wisdom and cover from understood risks arising from actions.

Fuller's (2019) study of 10 headteachers resistance to neoliberal reforms showed there are various ways in which leaders express resistance through everyday actions - covertly, overtly and through a

third space of *mimicry* and *sly civility*. Such resistance was evident amongst executive headteachers, particularly in overt emotive and critical language of accountability agents indicating a lack of deference to power and in covert behaviours giving a semblance of compliance such as *game playing* and *selectivity*.

Performance driven implementation

Before moving on the look at the most frequently cited responses to tensions, there was one example of a more performance driven approach and this is interesting to explore further. It reflected both the highly competitive nature of the participant and incentives within the accountability system. Fiona recognised that she would not have the courage to ignore accountability measures and that a desire to be ranked well in performance tables was a strong motivation. Her approach is redolent of the game playing headteacher described by Fuller as a 'consummate player' (Fuller, 2019, p.42):

> I'm competitive, I want our school to be the best. I absolutely want our school to be the best. We've got that banner outside 'top 6%' in the country'. Our goal one year was to be top 1%. (Fiona)

There is an honesty and self-awareness in recognising these human behavioural drivers. This was not perceived as being immoral, if anything the reverse - performing well in accountability measures is seen as evidence of doing a good job for the children at the school. Whilst this type of comment was not evident in responses of other participants, the prevalence of similar banners outside schools across the country indicates that she is not alone:

> The reality is, if you have got a league table, somebody is going to do better than somebody else so if we are going to have league tables, I feel great if we are at the top. The first thing I do when performance tables come out is I go into similar schools and see where we are. (Fiona)

The emotional response "I feel great" is likely to be mirrored by the opposite feeling for those at the bottom. As she correctly highlights, our accountability system is calibrated in ways that mean not all schools can be successful. League tables rank schools and leave some proudly at the top and others adrift at the bottom, often without necessary contextualisation. The 'norm referencing' of presenting data of Progress 8 and Key Stage 2 results will always result in half of all of schools being below average. This system pits schools in competition with each other, disincentivising collaboration and cooperation whilst promoting self-interest and incentivising leaders to act in ways that improve their position. If a school leader, or teacher, supports another to perform better they consequently make it harder for themselves to be judged successful.

This desire to "be the best" as judged by accountability measures encouraged Fiona to quickly accept and implement policy changes that might impact performance. For example, policy changes to curriculum and early entry to GCSE examinations:

> As soon as the EBacc came in as a measure a few years ago we changed our curriculum the next week … once you know it's real and it is happening, we respond, because we care about what people think about us as much as we care about the kids. (Fiona)

There are two important motivations referenced here. The first is a concern for reputation, strong performance in high stakes tests and Ofsted judgements are understood as a shorthand for a school's quality and necessary in the quasi-market of parental school choice. The second justification is care for the children. The moral argument that getting results and qualifications is a, if not the, primary goal for schools:

> We learnt in the early days it's pointless moaning about it … Do whatever you can with what you've got, with the staff you've got, what's best for the kids. But actually, what's best for the kids is

that they get the qualifications they need to get onto the next stage and if people are looking for children now that have got high English grades and high Maths grades and good Ebaccs then that's what we're going to do, because that's going to help them. (Fiona)

As previously discussed, what is in the best interests of children is contested (Stefkovich and Begley, 2007). Fiona was not alone in the belief that achieving strong examinations outcomes is important and in the best interests of children. However, as Angela articulated, opening the door to the next stage (of education) is not enough, they need to be able to navigate their way beyond the door. There is a further potential tension between what is best for the reputation of the school and what is in the best interests of children.

Fiona's comments clearly expressed the feeling that opposing policy is futile, it is better for everyone to accept policy change and get on with it. A consequence of the focus on performance measures has been a narrowing of the curriculum, something that Fiona recognised as wrong:

If I'm honest our arts curriculum has been reduced and reduced and reduced and I know that's wrong in many ways. (Fiona)

Ofsted and government have provided conflicting messages here. Government has made the EBacc a key measure in school performance with a target of 75% of year 10 pupils studying EBacc subjects by 2022. Ofsted have been critical of schools for not providing a broad and balanced curriculum, whilst at the same time supporting the government EBacc target which has seen a narrowing of the curriculum.

2. Pragmatism

The case for pragmatism was strong and consistent across executive leaders, supporting previous findings of Hammersley-Fletcher (2015). There was not a single leader who argued for being able to ignore or completely resist external accountability pressures.

The need for pragmatism and self-preservation against the perceived threat of accountability measures was conveyed by metaphors such as 'keeping the wolves from the door':

> One of my non-negotiables is that you have to keep the wolves away from the door, you don't do your school any favour by putting it in a category. You are far more likely to be put in a category if you work in a disadvantaged community. (James)

The Department for Education's own social action mobility plans recognised this challenge:

> At present, a child in one of England's most deprived areas is 10 times more likely to go to a requires improvement or inadequate secondary school than a child in one of the least deprived areas. (Greening, 2017, p.16)

Regional inequities are apparent too, whilst "nearly nine in ten children in London attend a good or outstanding secondary school, in Blackpool and Knowsley it is only one in five" (ibid). This is a conundrum for leaders. Schools in more disadvantaged communities are statistically more likely to be put in a category and being in a category is seen as something that must be avoided. The potential consequences include reputational damage, loss of staff jobs and school re-brokerage.

Whilst executive headteachers expressed tensions and frustration with the accountability system, a sense of responsibility to serve and protect the school community took pre-eminence. Ultimately pragmatism was argued to be in the best interests of stakeholders:

> I tend to rant and rave to the people that I work with. I make my views on it really clear to anyone that will listen to them, but I am also pragmatic. I know that in the current climate ultimately as a leader my responsibility is that the schools are there for our communities and that they deliver for our communities so therefore I have to ensure that they survive and that they do well

because those communities deserve it. And so therefore there is a constant tension. (Peter)

Sally argued that it would be morally wrong to jeapordise staff jobs and the school's reputation by putting her values before the interests of all those associated with the MAT. This argument represents a deontological sense of duty:

While I don't particularly agree with some of the policies, I have a responsibility across the trust for hundreds of people's jobs and the reputation of the schools within the trust. The outcomes that are being judged at national level, you can't completely turn a blind eye to. I wouldn't just put my moral standpoints at the odds of everybody that works for the trust. (Sally)

This argument is understandable, but what if teachers and parents agreed that taking a moral stand was justifiable or necessary, even if it risked jobs and reputation? Is greater individual and collective courage required when addressing issues of moral conflict?

One of the concerns highlighted by leaders was the limited amount of time given to demonstrate effective turnaround and the threat of re-brokerage of a school to another MAT:

I've got enough humility to know that I must always be questioning myself because there are real implications for the decisions I make, including a very real implication that school will be re-brokered to somebody else because it's perceived I haven't done enough of a job with that school. In which case, I then haven't got the control over that school that I need for the 10-year journey - because I've got every faith in myself that within 10 years that school would be fine. (Debbie)

This realisation resulted in the feeling that "I've just got to play the system enough". The same metaphor was used by executive headteachers of primary only MATs. Following changes to Key Stage 2

testing and a dip in results Abdul articulated the need to respond to pressures to raise performance:

> We've had to play the game to some extent this year … some of those changes have been simply because we need to improve results. (Abdul)

The impact for the school was an increase in testing, not just in year 6 but also across other year groups, in order to prepare children for high stakes tests. Maria expressed the tension she felt between her pedagogical beliefs and the assessment system, articulating a sense of powerlessness to resist external pressures. The threat of having schools taken from you, or losing your job, contributed to leader prioritisation of compliance with accountability expectations:

> Assessments, assessments, assessments … I truly don't believe that the way we assess children now makes them the best learners and the people that will access all the jobs that will be out there for them in 10-15 years' time. That's a massive, massive issue for me. I need my results to be good enough, as otherwise, I won't have a school to lead anymore and I won't have any impact. So, I've got no choice, but to ensure that that happens. (Maria)

A further example of "playing the game" came from David who felt it was necessary for a leader to be successful;

> Sometimes in any walk of life, to get really far and to do great things, you do have to be strategic, and sometimes being strategic is playing the game when you've got to nod in the right places. (David)

Arguably, this demonstrates an approach that is tactical and short-term, rather than strategic (Sergiovanni, 1992). It suggests that ambition requires an acceptance of compromise and level of complicity in order to achieve desired outcomes.

The response of many executive headteachers to tensions between the moral imperative and accountability is summed up by Martin in his reaction to Key Stage 4 performance measures:

> You always try to do what's right for the pupils, but sometimes you have to give in. We got a low progress 8 because I didn't believe having gone through the agenda of a language for all … I think I'm doing a disservice to children, but also it will disadvantage the school in terms of its position, so I have to give in on that one. It's an example of pragmatism ... It's somewhere between a moral compromise and pragmatism. (Martin)

3. Principles and conscience

The perceived necessity for pragmatism does not mean that participants did not uphold strong principles or moral conscience. Despite repeated changes in government policy emphasis that had directed leaders' attention to focus on a plethora of issues, they claimed that their principles have remained unaffected. One participant stated that in his view the 'best' schools - and not those necessary judged outstanding by Ofsted - do resist. They do so because they are clear that the policy in question will not benefit the learning of children. There was evidence to suggest that these principles provided a firm foundation against the changing winds of policy, but that leaders also were acutely aware of the risks if accountability measures were not satisfied:

> Through the past 9 years that I have been a leader, a headteacher, we have gone through a whole range of frameworks… in all of that time, changes to assessment system and the way we analyse data, I can honestly say our principles have stayed the same, they haven't changed. (Peter)

> You have to believe fundamentally that good teaching is everything. I try not to let pressures from outside rule fundamentally what's right for education in this school, across the trust. Fundamentally, it's about really clear vision and values

> …You have to be canny, but you can't keep moving with every government initiative that comes along. (Sally)

However, executive headteachers have adapted to accommodate government policy. Several leaders spoke of sticking to their principles whilst at the same time making compromises to accommodate accountability pressures:

> Have we had to completely change our philosophy and our outlook? No, not completely. Have we had to compromise a little bit? Yeah, absolutely. (Abdul)

Hammersley-Fletcher (2015) has argued that whilst double-think (El-Sawad et al., 2004) or bracketing (Giddens, 1991) amongst school leaders may be understandable in order to survive, it also "enables the marketisation of education to survive" (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015, p. 205-206).

Whilst concessions to the testing regime were acknowledged, these were reconstituted as necessary 'additives' to ensure children are able to achieve on high stakes national tests. There were also repeated references to upholding the need for a broad and balanced curriculum, with opportunities for children to experience the creative and performing arts:

> We stuck to our principles in terms of children still absolutely had a broad balanced creative curriculum as professionals we just had to add some elements that better prepared our children to show the world what they could do. (Peter)

4. Open dialogue about the tensions and collective decision-making

A striking feature of a principled approach was leaders' honesty and openness in sharing the tensions faced. Peter, who struggled with much of current policy, felt leaders should not be politically neutral, and this presented a means by which he was able to manage his internal conflict with accountability imperatives. Debbie cited the importance of

emphasising her personal authenticity and credibility with staff when guiding them through periods of change. She would appeal for their trust using positive examples of the impact of previous decisions on individual children.

The involvement of staff in a collective approach to problem-solving and decision making was evident in the use of the first person plural pronoun 'we'. Peter described the process he led following disappointing Key Stage 2 assessment results. This began with his own analysis of results and was followed by instructing each school to forensically analyse why the results might have dipped. Once this information gathering was complete leaders gathered together to collectively problem solve:

> *We* collectively problem solved but the underlying principle was that *we* stick to our principles. So *we* find a way of challenging ourselves because I am also aware *we* have to challenge the way *we* think, *we* can't assume it is always right just because *we* think it is…so I asked leaders to go out to other schools that had done well to find out what they are doing, were there things that challenged the way *we* did things? … then *we* came back and *we* shared all of that and *we* decided on our strategy. (Peter, emphasis mine)

Within this response is an example of professional humility and willingness to learn from others, to challenge current thinking but also to respond to the accountability imperative whilst upholding the moral imperative.

Governors and trustees have an important role to play in enabling leaders to resolve moral dilemmas and in sharing decision making. Where trustees provided a clear vision, values and guiding principles for action this gave confidence and direction to the leader. They also acted as a source of support and protection that reduced leaders' feelings of isolation and helped them to manage the pressure of accountability:

We made a decision as a trust board that we have to do not only the right thing, but we have to do it in the right way … I believe quite strongly that you've got to do it for the long term sustainable good. And I think in the end that sort of helps me deal with that pressure of accountability - knowing that there are trustees, behind you saying, "Yeah, that's the right thing to do and we will support that vision and that view of how to work" means that I don't feel so isolated in making those decisions. (Angela)

Angela emphasised the need for leaders to be honest and open with trustees about the tensions faced from the outset, and to have conversations about the choices that need to be made and their possible consequences for both the short and long term. The Governance Handbook, (DfE, 2019) outlines the core functions provided by governors in supporting leaders and holding them to account. Consequently, boards may grapple with many of the same dilemma facing executive leaders, particularly where vision and ethos conflicts with national accountability measures. Governors/trustees too are held to account to external objectives set by the DfE to drive up educational standards and financial health though 'rigorous analysis of pupil progress, attainment and financial information with comparison against local and national benchmarks and over time' (ibid, p.11).

One significant difference is that boards are made up of volunteer trustees of various professional backgrounds and expertise. This can bring a valuable external perspective when facing difficult situations and moral decisions:

You've got to think them through, but also they are the points at which I turn to governors or trustees or both to look to get beyond the school environment, because we get too close and governors provide us with the ability to look with common sense at what we're doing, rather than from within a professional world. We had a very complex situation … and the governors were

absolutely vital in helping me to keep a perspective and to understand where my responsibilities began and ended and where my moral values began and ended in relation to the law and the school's purpose. (Martin)

However, candidness with governing bodies about the situations found in schools was not universally welcomed. One leader described taking over a school previously judged outstanding by Ofsted, but where systematic cheating had been uncovered and safeguarding concerns existed:

I was open with governors. "We don't understand why our results are dipping?" "Well, it's because we've stopped cheating." It's a message I just said over and over again… [I was] really open with the local authority, really open with the governors ... Governors tried to vote me out at one point because of the messages that I was giving them. (Maria)

Confronting systemic issues of malpractice or failures of leadership requires courage, and there is no guarantee that your honesty will be well received.

5. Confidence through insight and experience

Finally, it was clear experience and success played an important part in giving leaders the confidence to face accountability pressures. This resulted from previous positive Ofsted judgements on their leadership, holding National Leader of Education (NLE) status and from better understanding the accountability system, sometimes through being an Ofsted inspector themselves. For some this is considered an effective form of professional development:

We didn't have the experience back then, [I was] very nervous about the whole thing. I can drive an Ofsted now … I've got experience, I'm an NLE now. I support other schools … all that experience makes you less scared. (Maria)

We've got two inspectors in the organisation, one a lead inspector, myself, so we know what the requirements of Ofsted are. We know what that accountability framework is and that's quite liberating. I think often schools don't know that accountability framework well enough to be able to operate in a way that meets the needs of that framework but actually allows them to do what they want to do, what they need to do. (Abdul)

This raises an issue – in taking on inspectorial roles are leaders demonstrating complicity with the system? Whilst there are advantages for those who do so, such as greater confidence through an internal understanding of the process and criteria for judgements, this insider view is not available to all. It also enables an inspection process to continue that some school leaders would like to see radically reformed. The Ofsted inspection process is reliant on serving headteachers and school leaders who make up 70% of inspection teams (Harford, 2018). Without this the current system would not function.

5.6 Conclusion

Findings from the four key research questions attest to a strong moral purpose among executive headteachers. The formative childhood years and early professional experiences contributed to values of equity, equality and social justice – underpinned by high expectations for all. The outworking of espoused valued differed according to personality, character and context. Executive headteachers confronted tensions between the interests of individuals and the group, in decisions to remove members of the school community and in adjusting to the executive role. External performance measures and the accountability system created tensions between the moral imperative and accountability imperative and were criticised by some for rewarding unethical behaviours. Executive headteacher responses to these tensions varied but revealed a high degree of pragmatism.

Chapter 6: A typology of moral leadership in an age of accountability

6.1 Introduction

In the following section I use the findings to abstract a typology of leadership responses to moral tensions experienced by executive headteachers in a system of high external accountability. The archetypes described seek to characterise an approach to moral reasoning and the extent to which leaders accommodate accountability measures. The abstraction of a leadership typology enables findings to be applied more broadly to observable behaviours at system level and facilitates some opportunity for generalisability or typicality.

6.2 Leader typology – Compete, Conform, Contingent, Conscience

Within the pragmatic approach evident among executive headteachers, differentiated degrees of accommodation and compromise are visible. In managing tensions between the moral imperative and accountability imperative, have executive headteachers been too pragmatic? The findings point to an emerging typology of leader responses, I have called these; 1) compete 2) conform 3) contingent 4) conscience. This four-fold typology derives from a pragmatic analysis of the data, taking the findings of this study and abstracting them at system level. It builds upon existing typologies which address school and school leader responses to government policy and accountability (Fuller, 2019; Higham and Earley, 2013; Hoyle and Wallace, 2007) and connects to Kohlberg's moral cognitive development theory. The emerging typology contributes a new theoretical model that considers moral and accountability tensions through the lens of executive headteachers. It provides a framework for understanding how school leaders' respond to moral tensions with the accountability system.

The types are not prescriptive or comprehensive but describe a generalisable 'best fit' within which patterns of thinking and behaviour may be observed. It is recognised that school context plays an important part in leaders' moral reasoning and the extent to which they

feel that they have the latitude pursue preferred actions (Stevenson, 2007). This is particularly pertinent to executive headteachers as within the group of schools they lead, it is likely that they will feel the accountability pressures differently according to the school's context and relative performance. Leaders may display aspects of more than one type within a criteria dependent on school context and may also show traits of different types across criteria.

The four-fold typology, or archetypes, are described in more detail below using executive headteacher examples from the data as illustrations. These are contextualised within the literature and field.

Matching the data and typology - *Compete, Conform, Contingent, Conscience*

Compete

The first leader type is the *competitor*. In this study, Fiona and David displayed characteristics of the competitive leader. These leaders are competitive by nature, as was evident in the life-grid and interviews. Like Fuller's (2019) *consummate player*, they understand shifts in rules of the game and viewed game-playing as necessary to be judged successful. By this I do not mean to imply an illegal gaming of the system, the accountability system incentivises and rewards permissible forms of game-playing that maximise performance outcomes. What is distinctive about competitive leaders is the strong competitive instinct that drives responses. However, in some cases competition may lead to rules being bent or broken, as in the case of mis-coded attendance registers described by Ruth.

For Fiona, performance in accountability league tables and Ofsted judgements mattered deeply. Competitive leaders respond quickly to changes to the rules of the game or external targets. This is encapsulated by Fiona's responses to accountability measures:

> As soon as the Ebacc came in as a measure a few years ago we
> changed our curriculum the next week … we care about what

people think about us as much as we care about the kids … I care, I'm competitive, I want our school to be the best. I absolutely want our school to be the best. (Fiona)

Concepts of 'being the best' are competitive and comparative, derived from external measures of success.   Competitive leaders compare themselves to others, place high value on league tables and are proud when at the top.   There is significant evidence of this competitive behaviour across the system, such as in schools display of public banners celebrating when the school is ranked favourably. This competitiveness does not mean leaders do not hold strong values, but competition drives behaviours. Moral 'best interests' arguments for this type of leader may be articulated as maximising performance outcomes is in the best interests of students, giving them the best chances and options for the future. It also protects and enhances the reputation of the school, with success bringing further rewards and status. This has become the conditioned external culture since the 1990s when Ofsted and performance tables were introduced. It is consequence of quasi market system in which approximately one third of students nationally are judged to fail in GCSE examinations and labels of judgement are readily applied to schools having reputational and financial consequences.

Conform

Other leaders do not necessarily agree with education policy or the accountability system but perceive a need to *conform*, at least to some extent. In some areas of school leadership, they confidently assert their values and educational beliefs, but in aspects of accountability they feel constrained. They may reflect on their roles as public servants of a democratically elected government whose policies are expressed and voted upon. The policy makers establish the agenda, accountability system and they have a duty to deliver. This sense of duty extends to the community and students, to work within the parameters set. They may argue, as Sally did, that taking a strong personal moral stand

would be irresponsible as it might jeopardise the stability of the school and the jobs of staff:

> We're not in a school where results are always going to be good, because it's a challenging community … so you've got to conform to some extent because we're not secure enough to be completely maverick and take that many risks. (Sally)

This position reflects other research findings (Higham and Earley, 2013) that schools in more vulnerable circumstances are likely to be more cautious, concerned and constrained than those that are secure and performing consistently well in accountability measures. With a new Ofsted framework and the decision to reinspect schools previously graded outstanding, it is likely that more school leaders will feel this pressure to conform.

Contingent

Closely related to the conformist position is the *contingent* moral leader. Executive headteachers' confidence and courage to resist external pressures became contingent on contextual circumstances, principally their performance in accountability measures. Under strain even leaders communicating strong moral principles felt it was necessary to compromise, or adjust their approach, in order to safeguard outcomes which might otherwise jeopardise the position of the school and their ability to lead improvement. This itself was articulated as a moral decision.   For these leaders cognitive dissonance was apparent, as they wrestled with reconciling the push and pull of values and accountability measures. At times this was accepted as a pragmatic reality, but at others pains were taken to justify the actions taken in moral terms or to assert that values were upheld despite compromises. Many examples of this were evident in the data, such as Abdul's response to performance dips in Key Stage 2 tests, Angela's moral dilemma around the forthcoming inspection of a vulnerable school and Debbie's justification of levels of high exclusions:

Have we had to completely change our philosophy and our outlook? No, not completely. Have we had to compromise a little bit? Yeah, absolutely. (Abdul)

In the community it's serving at the moment that [a dip in Ofsted judgement] would pose real threats to the school. So I think we've had to make some compromises around curriculum for the long term benefits of the school. (Angela)

When we began at [school], I did have to exclude a high number of children and I still think about that a lot … but I still think I was focused on doing the right thing. (Debbie)

Conscience

Despite the predominance of pragmatism, a strong moral conscience was evident in executive headteacher responses, as reported in previous empirical research of headteachers (Day at al., 2009; Gold et al., 2003). A feature of Kohlberg's definition of stage 6 moral cognitive development is that reasoning is based on self-chosen universal ethical principles and categorical imperatives, such as the Golden Rule (Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977). Similar foundational ethical principles were found in some executive headteacher responses, such as:

Make sure all the decisions you're making and behaviours you're displaying are those you would applaud in others. (Martin)

The kind of non-negotiables would be things like is it good enough for my child. (James)

Further examples of moral conscience were evident in James's rejection of gaming and off-rolling to boost your position because "the world's view of success and your ability to live with who you have become are two different things".   For Martin, exclusion was a 'red line' he would not cross. In relation to MAT growth Peter recognised a responsibility to base decisions on need not economics and not to "shy away from those schools that are in really difficult circumstances".

For Abdul, James and Angela moral conscience was strongly connected with a higher authority or spiritual belief:

> I've got a very strong belief that I've got to be fair to people in order for me to feel good about myself in terms of my faith. (Abdul)

> Moral leadership goes right back to the common good routed in faith about how do we look after our people, particularly some of those who are the most disadvantaged. (James)

Abstracting the data at system level

Each of the four types described above can be aligned to one or more of Kohlberg's three levels of moral cognitive development - *Preconventional, Conventional, Postconventional* - and six stages (Kohlberg and Hersch, 1977). These progressive stages of moral cognitive development within childhood and adolescence are applied here to adult reasoning amongst executive headteachers. Kohlberg's theory developed from responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas, whereas executive headteachers in this research described concrete real- world dilemmas.

The following table (Table 11) outlines four discernible positions of moral reasoning from executive headteacher responses, applying Kohlberg's theory of moral cognitive development. The presentation of the types is sequenced in a continuum using Kohlberg's stages of moral development. It represents a move from high degrees of accommodation of accountability, to one in which moral conscience take precedence. For each type I have set out eight criteria and provided descriptors to present the position an executive headteacher may take in relation to moral reasoning and accountability.

Table 11: Leader typology: moral tensions and the accountability system

	Leader Type			
Criteria	1. Compete	2. Conform	3. Contingent	4. Conscience
Descriptor	I do what is necessary to get ahead	I do what I'm told	I do what I can	I do what I believe is right (even if it costs)
Relationship to Kohlberg's six stages of moral cognitive development	Preconventional level (Stage 1) Punishment and obedience orientation. (Stage 2) Instrumental relativist orientation.	Conventional level (Stage 3) The interpersonal concordance or "nice boy – good girl" orientation. (Stage 4) The "law and order" orientation.	Postconventional level (Stage 5) The social-contract, legalistic orientation.	Postconventional level (Stage 6) The universal-ethical principle orientation
1. Attitude to measurement by metrics	Performance tables really matter. What is measured is valued. Strong competitive drive to compare favourably	Performance tables are part of an agreed system of accountability which sets priorities for schools. School leaders have a	Performance tables provide one measure of success, but there are other values that are as, if not more, important.	External measures of success (performance tables) are less important than internal values based on self-chosen ethical

	against other schools. Leaders focus on achieving a narrow set of performance measures. Success is celebrated publicly (e.g., banners).	duty to deliver because they have been agreed by policy makers.	The school/group has its own performance metrics. Performance measures only become the focus where a school/group is vulnerable.	principles. Conscience not performance tables guide behaviour. Performance tables may be considered unjust and a disincentive to moral action.
2. Attitude to external inspection	Achieving an 'Outstanding' inspection judgement is the goal and proof of excellent leadership. It is a badge of status, worn with pride. It confers a sense of superiority. The inspection framework drives behaviour based	Inspection provides an important accountability role in determining an agreed understanding of what a good school looks like, as well as basic legal obligations such as safeguarding. It cannot be ignored.	The inspectorate offers one definition of an outstanding school. An inspection judgement is seen in the context of its impact on the community. A vulnerable school may need to adjust short term priorities to satisfy external inspection.	The inspection criteria for judging schools is seen as relatively unimportant compared to self-chosen accountability measures based on consistent universal principles.

	on a desire to be seen favourably.			
3. Attitude to organisational growth	Growth is based on self-interest and ego. It is competitive and market-driven, either by size (How big is your organisation?) or by performance in accountability metrics (league tables/inspection). Growth may be rapid and aggressive.	Growth follows current policy direction. It is desirable for educational and financial reasons. It is what is expected by the system of schools judged to be performing well.	Growth is linked to a moral educational responsibility to the local/regional community. There is a commitment to the greater good, that puts individual school needs aside, in favour of collective interests.	Growth is based on a strong responsibility to support schools, especially those in need and difficulty. This may be risky at times. The identity of each school is recognised and valued.
4. Response to power	Submission to power. Seeks to gain power to enhance position and	Obedience, sometimes reluctantly. May push back in some small ways	Interprets and filters directives of those in power to match personal	Respectful and humble but acts in accordance with own conscience and values. Answers to a

	influence. Maintains the status quo.	but largely conforms and complies.	values. Under pressure feels necessity to comply.	higher power or moral authority. Openly confronts power when moral conflicts arise.
5. Response to changes in the accountability framework	Responds quickly to align practice to changes in policy to ensure performance in accountability measures. Competition drives behaviour	Adapts practice to meet accountability frameworks in most cases, as this is the expected norm and requirement.	Continues to pursue practice according to vision and values, accommodating changes where aligned. Weighs the impact of changes on the community, may compromise values for the perceived greater good.	Reflects carefully on any changes and interprets them through the lens of moral values. The response is guided by what is understood to be morally right.
6. Attitude to 'game playing' (e.g.,	There is nothing wrong with 'playing the game' if it's legal and you won't get punished. You may	You need to follow the rules and behave in socially acceptable ways. You may have to 'play	Game playing is wrong and to be avoided. However, you do have to keep the wolves from the	Categorical imperatives govern moral attitudes to 'game playing' and it is avoided (e.g., it is always

exclusions, qualifications)	be rewarded if it strengthens your position in the accountability system. This attitude is likely to be implicit, rather than explicitly stated.	the game' to meet new expectations and accountability measures. Everyone else is doing it so it's okay.	door. In some cases, game playing may be justified to protect individuals/the school). Cognitive dissonance and 'double-think' may exist.	wrong to permanently exclude as it fails that child/student).
7. Responsibility to the system	My responsibility is for our schools and students to ensure they compete successfully/favourably with others.	I have a role as a system leader and try to work with other schools to support the school led system. This requires balancing collaboration with competition.	Our schools are part of a bigger education system, and I/we have a moral responsibility to help others, as long as it doesn't affect us negatively.	I have a strong sense of responsibility to the wider system. I would not act in a way that knowingly has a detrimental impact on others. I contribute altruistically to the system in a variety of ways (e.g., sharing practice, experiences, learning, mistakes, advocacy).

8. 'Best interests' position	'Best interests' (of students) are maximising performance outcomes and competitive advantage for the individual and our schools.	'Best interests' are those priorities set out as desirable by society and government (e.g., qualifications, employability, empowerment, citizenship).	'Best interests' are holistic, considering the individual as a complete person. They encompass individual and collective best interests (greater good arguments). Elements of social justice are present.	'Best interests' are determined by justice, agency, beneficence, non-maleficence.

Whilst this typology presents an increasingly desirable state governed by higher level moral reasoning, it is acknowledged that at times some pragmatic accommodation of accountability measures may be necessary. Schools are heterogeneous and sites of complexity, and moral dilemmas are 'wicked' rather than 'tame' problems (Wright, 2011) to which simplistic universal responses are not possible.

6.3 Conclusion

Schools are places where compliance, order and obedience to rules are expected, reinforced by systems of rewards and sanctions. Likewise, politicians and policy makers seek to manage school leaders through authority and compliance. The government accountability system exerts significant influence on leader behaviours towards pre-conventional and conventional levels. This is characterised by punishment and rewards, obedience and conformity to the social order. However, there is evidence that some executive headteachers demonstrate moral maturity and make decisions at the postconventional, autonomous or principled level (stage 5 and 6). Examples are found in utilitarian concepts of acting for the greater good such as putting the interests of others above personal values and in decisions of conscience based on self-chosen ethical principles like justice.

Education is a moral activity and those who become teachers and school leaders often have a strong sense of moral purpose. The challenge is that the atmosphere in which leaders work results in moral tensions and following your conscience may swim against the tide of accountability and performance culture.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter summarises the key findings of this research in relation to the research questions investigated. It is structured in four parts: 1) a review of the research aim, research questions and main conclusions 2) a discussion of how this research and the emerging typology contributes to knowledge 3) limitations and recommendations for future research 4) implications and recommendations for the field. This is followed by a final post-script reflection on how this research study has developed me as a researcher, academic and professional, and how it sits alongside other developments.

My research explored eleven executive headteachers' self-concept as moral leaders and tensions experienced in reconciling the moral imperative and accountability imperative working within the English schools' system. The study identified life experiences and influences that were significant in shaping executive headteachers' moral frameworks and how they enacted these values within their professional roles. Executive headteachers shed light on the moral tensions they faced, those posed by accountability mechanisms and those arising from holding responsibilities for groups of schools/multi academy trusts. They further described the ways in which they sought to resolve these tensions. This was achieved through the methods of an autobiographical life-grid and semi-structured interview.

Research aim

To explore moral leadership amongst executive headteachers working in an age of school accountability.

7.2 Summary of research questions, findings and main conclusions

Research question 1: How has the sense of moral development and moral leadership been shaped by life experiences?

It is important that leaders engage in critical reflection of their personal journey and in grappling with what is right and just (Dantley, 2005). Moral leadership is distinct and personal, as such leaders need to be in touch with their own values to become more authentic with themselves and others (Dantley, 2005; Sergiovanni, 1992, 2001). For executive headteachers in this research moral values were largely well-formed early in childhood with relatively few significant adjustments in adulthood. This affirms the importance of the formative years in moulding headteachers' beliefs and influencing how they carried out their roles (Boon and Stott, 2003). The strongest influences came from family upbringing, personal and professional experiences of schooling, and the socio-economic context in which they grew up. Growing up in relative disadvantage and/or early professional experiences in disadvantaged contexts appeared to contribute to a sense of mission. For approximately half of leaders in this study, as in Woods (2007), spirituality and faith were significant in shaping their moral framework and in their moral purpose as a leader.

The resulting moral framework provided a guide for moral action and leadership behaviour. The principal values emerging were equity (fairness), equality and high expectations (excellence). It is noteworthy that *high expectations* or e*xcellence* are key terms in both the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2012) and National Standards of Excellence for Headteachers (DfE, 2015). Whilst there was greatest consensus around values related to a societal context - equity, equality, social justice - values relating to individual character appeared more individuated. Respect, hard work and honesty were most cited.

Research question 2: How do executive headteachers understand their roles as moral leaders?

Moral leadership requires a unity of head, heart and hands (Sergiovanni, 2001). Professional expectations for the conduct of (executive) headteachers are provided in the National Standards of

Excellence for Headteachers (DfE, 2015) and the seven 'Nolan Principles' for public office (1994) – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. These documents offer standards that can be applied by school leaders to their 'work self (the public servant) and personal-self (the exemplar') (Roberts, 2018, p. 71).

Executive headteachers' understanding of themselves as a moral leader emanated from their unique life-history, moral framework and sense of moral purpose. Langlois and Begley's (2005) four levels of analysis (micro, meso, macro, mega) for mapping the moral leadership literature was applied to interpret the research data. Whilst there is evidence some leaders attested to their moral responsibilities at system (macro) and societal (mega) level, responses were predominantly located internally at the personal (micro) and institutional (meso) level.

At the micro-level, moral leadership cannot be separated from being a moral person (West-Burnham, 2009), as it involves the total human being (Starratt, 1996), and requires authenticity in the character and conduct of the leader (West-Burnham and Ireson, 2005; Woods, 2007). All research participants discussed the importance of their personal morality, key aspects cited included integrity, role-modelling, moral courage and fairness.

At meso or institutional level, participants acknowledged their role as a moral leader in establishing moral leadership as a collective endeavour. Sergiovanni (2007, p. 83) argued that "At root, school leadership is about connecting people morally to their work and to each other". For executive headteachers this involved shaping school culture, developing and embedding shared organisational values and responsibility at every level. An explicit statement of institutional values, as well as a shared language was presented as helpful in achieving clarity and consistency, but also as a reference point in moral dilemmas. Whilst leaders showed concern for staff, tensions were apparent between the interests of staff and students. Primacy was

given to acting in the 'best interests' of students (Stefkovich and Begley, 2007) and staff were held to account using shorthand interpretations such as "Would this be good enough for my child?".

Looking beyond themselves and their institutional roles, many executive headteachers recognised a wider system responsibility (macro level). Hargreaves (2011, p. 20) points out that leaders ought to be "committed to the success of all schools and their students", working collaboratively for the benefit of the whole system, not just those in their own schools. Evidence of this were found in school-to-school support, sharing practice (including failures as well as successes) and a growing sense of moral commitment to students across a local area. Another example was in the willingness to taking into the MAT schools in very difficult circumstances, even when this presented risks. On occasions, the status of executive headteacher afforded them an advocacy role on behalf of the system.   Despite considerable support for system moral leadership, comments indicated such motives were not system-wide, a possible consequence of the 'businessification' of education.

Lastly, some leaders articulated a strong moral mission to mega level societal transformation (Dantley 2007), to addressing through education social disadvantage, equality, equity, issues of justice, agency and empowerment. This was particularly prominent among those who had experienced poverty themselves in childhood, and those expressing a deep spiritual faith (Woods, 2007).

Research question 3a: In understanding the moral dimension of leadership, what tensions are experienced by executive headteachers?

The most striking tensions were in decisions regarding the inclusion and exclusion of students, and of whether to stand by staff or move them on. This in-out conundrum was characterised by discussions of utilitarian perspectives of the 'greater good' verses the needs of the individual. These tensions were exacerbated by what was described by one participant as 'an unforgiving system'. The pressures of performance have contributed to the exclusion and off-rolling of

students, predominantly affecting those already disadvantaged (Timpson, 2019), and failed to incentivise schools to take an inclusive approach. Similarly, the government mantra of excellence has arguably led to unrealistic expectations on teachers' and leaders' performance, in which good is no longer good enough. Falling retention rates of headteachers (Lynch et al., 2017) and increased turnover of staff in MATs (Andrews, 2019) including those leaving the profession are evidence of this. This should be seen against the backdrop of a recruitment and retention crisis in education in England.

Research question 3b: What, if any, are the tensions experienced by executive headteachers in reconciling the moral imperative with the accountability imperative?

School leaders work within a system dominated by accountability, under the political mantra 'expect and inspect'. Ball (2003) described the excessive focus on testing as the 'terror of performativity' whilst Loveday (2008) lamented the 'tyranny of conformity'. The pressure to perform in a target-based culture (Wright, 2003) of high stakes testing, league tables and school inspection, can be at odds with the broader moral purposes of education and moral leadership. As in Hammersley-Fletcher's study of headteachers (2015), the executive headteachers in my research felt these tensions acutely as they struggled to reconcile the moral imperative with the accountability imperative. This moral tension was encapsulated by James's reflection that "the measure of the world's view of success and your ability to live with who you have become are two different things". Whilst, as state funded institutions, there was acknowledgement of the need for public accountability, the current system was criticised for rewarding unethical behaviours and gaming, such as off-rolling difficult students. Executive headteachers spoke of the need to 'keep the wolves from the door' and to protect their school communities from external accountability, particularly if the school was perceived as vulnerable.

The school inspection service, Ofsted, elicited polarised views. Some leaders expressed confidence based on previous positive inspection judgements and cautious optimism that Ofsted reforms underway would lead to a better system. Others remained critical of an inspection regime that left disadvantaged schools in greater risk of being judged inadequate, and leaders feeling constrained (Higham and Earley, 2013). Executive headteachers recognised that performance measures, examination outcomes and league tables were critical to their survival and any hopes of growing the MAT. Accountability measures were viewed as divisive, promoting competitive and sometimes manipulative behaviours to improve your position relative to others. However, it was clear that leaders in this study felt the pressure to adopt and adapt practices to respond to changing performance measures.

Research question 3c: Are there specific moral tensions that arise for executive headteachers working in system leadership roles?

Executive headteacher roles are still relatively new to education (Boylan, 2016), interpretations of the role vary (Buck, Wespieser, & Harland, 2017) and need to be worked out by leaders in their context. Participants expressed challenges of identity and purpose, as they sought to transition from the familiar headteacher position to an unfamiliar executive role. Uncertainties included, what does a CEO do? How do I add value? Do I need to become more business-like? Leaders experienced tensions in locating their worth, letting go and managing headteachers. At a MAT institutional level, they faced competing tensions between the needs of individual schools and developing an increasing sense of belonging and commitment to the greater good of the group. They also had to make difficult decisions around future growth and risk management. This presented moral tensions as taking a school with deep educational and/or financial challenges could jeopardise the survival of the group but may be viewed as a moral or a financial imperative.

Research question 4: How do executive headteachers seek to resolve tensions between the moral imperative and the accountability imperative?

The empirical research literature shows there is not one uniform view of how headteachers reconcile values with policy and accountability pressures (Bottery, 2007; Day et al, 2000; Fuller, 2019; Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015; Higham and Earley, 2013; Hoyle and Wallace, 2007). There are leaders who assert educational and professional values, even in the face of hostile policy and others whose thinking and decision making is dominated by external accountability. The context of the school – its size, phase and performance in accountability measures significantly impacted leaders perceived capacity to act (Higham and Earley, 2013). This has led to various typologies of leader and school responses (Fuller, 2019; Higham and Earley, 2013; Hoyle and Wallace, 2007).

The findings of this study of executive headteachers revealed similarly diverse responses, that owed much to leaders' personal values and convictions. It also affirmed the increased pressure to compromise values when a school is considered vulnerable due to poor performance on accountability measures. The dominant and overwhelming response to the tension between the moral imperative and accountability imperative was pragmatism. Pragmatism was necessary to 'keep the wolves away from the door' and to protect the interests of the school community that could be damaged by adverse judgements or performance outcomes. Despite evidence of strong moral conscience amongst executive leaders, tensions were clear and concessions made. Leaders felt the need to 'play the game enough' to survive.

7.3 Contribution to knowledge

This research contributes to our understanding of the life-world of executive headteachers. It builds on moral leadership theory

(Greenfield, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1992) and previous empirical studies exploring school leader responses to government policy and accountability (Fuller, 2019; Hammersley-Fletcher, 2015; Higham and Earley, 2013; Hoyle and Wallace, 2007). It contributes a typology for understanding the responses of executive headteachers to tensions in reconciling the moral imperative and accountability imperative. In viewing these tensions through the lens of executive leaders - experienced headteachers leading small groupings of schools - it constructs a picture of the moral framework and decision-making of these increasingly influential leaders within the system.

It is both different from previous typologies and goes further to reveal the internal moral reasoning that drives behaviour. Higham and Earley's (2013) typology of *confident, cautious, concerned, and constrained* observed hierarchies between individual schools, and made connections between a schools' inspection status and their sense of freedom to respond to external policy and accountability. This research focused on executive headteachers with responsibility for groups of schools across inspection judgements categories, with specific interest in understanding the development of their moral frameworks and self-concept as moral leaders. As such the different response types to emerging tensions are attributed to the values, beliefs, and moral reasoning of individual leaders themselves.

The emerging typology represents *archetypes*, that are aligned to stages of Kohlberg's moral cognitive development theory (Kohlberg and Hersch, 1977) and are set against example criteria of observable patterns of reasoning and behaviour. This new typology of *compete, conform, contingent and conscience* represents a continuum of influence, from one in which decision-making is dominated by the competitive drivers of accountability to one where moral conscience reigns. It derives from the character and values of leaders themselves and is shaped by upbringing and life experiences, however it is also heavily influenced by the pressure of external accountability. Whilst patterns of thinking are evident, it is likely that leaders will display

elements across the typology, with their confidence to act according to conscious affected by situational context and perceived vulnerability.

Adapting the words of Sergiovanni (2001, p. 351)

> In the **executive leadership** [principalship], the challenge of leadership is to make peace with two competing imperatives, the **accountability** [managerial] and the moral. The two imperatives are unavoidable, and the neglect of either creates problems. (My adaptation in bold)

The typology is significant and useful because it supports self-reflection on the kind of school system, leadership and moral behaviours that we have, those we want to encourage, and those to discourage. It is thus relevant to policy makers, inspectorates, school leaders, academics and all those invested in schooling. If the system is based on competition and compliance, it promotes and rewards moral reasoning at lower stages of moral development and creates barriers for leaders operating at the higher stages of moral reasoning (Kohlberg's stage 5 and 6). This may result in losing many morally focused current and future school leaders, as they become disillusioned, marginalised or feel their moral framework is incompatible with the accountability system and policy making. A compliant authority-driven profession is unlikely to change the status quo. It is also ill-equipped for the complex moral issues and wicked problems that face us in the 21st century such as social injustice, pandemics, poverty and environmental disasters.

A further contribution to knowledge has been through the publication of a journal article based upon my review of the literature:

Belcher, D. (2017). Moral Leadership in an Age of School Accountability. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *11*(2), 60-62.

7.4 Limitations of the research study and recommendations for further research

This research has viewed moral leadership through the lens of the executive headteacher, seeking to better understand their moral

framework and enacted values within the wider context of school accountability. This has been achieved through the methods of an autobiographical life-grid and semi-structured interview. Whilst this is an important leadership perspective, it does not account for the experience of others within the school community. Leadership is socially constructed, based on connections and interactions between the leader(s) and the led. Greenfield (2004) describes this as the leadership dance. Further research into alternative viewpoints would enrich our understanding of the experienced reality of moral executive leadership for the followers. What does it feel like to be led by the executive leader? What is the lived experience of other leaders, teachers and staff within the school community? How does the executive headteacher's interpretation of reality compare with these alternative perspectives?

Further *in situ* field-based studies would shed light on the extent to which moral leadership takes place and means by which it is achieved. This would allow opportunities for phenomenological description of collective experience. For example, this might include shadowing the executive headteacher over an extended period to see what leaders say and do on a day-to-day basis – observing meetings, staff interactions and decision making in real time and space. Of interest would be the relationship between the executive headteacher and headteachers/heads of school and their leadership teams. Executive headteachers in this study described the tensions they experienced in letting go, becoming more strategic and 'hands-off' and in managing the relationship with the headteacher. One question to explore is whether the relationship between executive leader and headteacher in a MAT is made easier if there is a pre-existing professional relationship (such as an internal promotion) and conversely, more complex if the headteacher is externally appointed with previous headship experience independent of the MAT.

Leadership influences school culture and the ability to create institutional morality. Moral leadership is not the preserve of one

individual but lies in the ability to achieve collective moral character. How effective are executive headteachers in fostering a community which works together with shared values, beliefs and moral purpose? An investigation of institutional moral culture through a tool such as the cultural web model (Johnson, 1988) would examine how various factors (stories, symbols, power structures, organisational structures, control systems, routines and rituals) contribute to the cultural paradigm.

7.5 Implications and recommendations for future policy and practice

There are clear implications arising from this research for school leaders, governors/trustees, policy makers and training providers. For school leaders, it is important that they examine the underlying values and beliefs that guide their practice. Leaders securely anchored in their core values, are better able to weather the changing waves of policy (Day, 2000; Gold et al., 2003). This study highlights that executive headteachers felt a need to be pragmatic in their responses. Reflection is needed on when pragmatism becomes moral compromise, and how complicity with the system results in a perpetuation of the status-quo (Dantley, 2005). In seeking to protect and preserve internal interests, the greater good may not be served. Game-playing can take many forms, some of these are permitted and even incentivised by the accountability system, but are they morally and educationally beneficial?

This is where governors and trustees have a key role to play. Governors and trustees can work alongside executive headteachers to establish collective moral purpose and values, providing support and challenge in addressing moral dilemmas arising from accountability pressures. Their one-step-removed position and experience of other contexts offers executive headteachers a valuable alternative perspective and a different lens through which to view decisions. They act as sounding board and confidant, reducing the sense of isolation

that may arise, and impart collective confidence and reassurance in pursuit of agreed moral purpose.

Many of the tensions highlighted by executive headteachers derive from a high stakes accountability system which fails to incentivise moral behaviour, instead it rewards and recognises the wrong type of leadership (Hill et al., 2016; Timpson, 2019). Policy makers and government could reflect upon the intended and unintended outcomes of accountability measures. Quasi market conditions, competition and league tables inevitably result in winners and losers, reinforcing inequalities and social divisions. Do we want a school system that is predicated in this way? Alternative models of accountability could be considered, those that promote moral action and a more inclusive approach, that may be more in keeping with the interests of all students. Further political consideration of the systemic issues that perpetuate societal and educational inequalities is also needed. Schools find themselves expected to solve a myriad of societies' problems, while operating in an unequal playing field where success is narrowly defined.

Finally, for those involved in advising on and establishing professional standards for school leaders and those leading professional development, greater attention could be given to values, morals and ethics. An over-emphasis on standards, excellence and a competency-based leadership model has led to technical-rational compliance which has neglected the importance of the moral dimension of leadership (Sergiovanni 1992, 2007). This is true of the Content and Assessment Framework for current Department for Education National Professional Qualifications (NPQ's) for leadership. I do not recommend a set of predetermined values imposed on leaders, but an open and reflective discussion that explores what it means to be a moral leader and how to navigate tensions. All providers of professional development, including schools themselves, should encourage dialogue about values, vision and moral purpose.

Enriching the processes of leadership learning and development would facilitate the enactment of moral leadership in the contemporary educational environment. This might include dedicated development time for leaders to focus on the moral and ethical aspects of school leadership. Critical self-reflection and reflexivity among leaders could be encouraged through engaging with the literature, applying theory to real-world scenarios. Practical case studies and empirical research offer rich examples for stimulating discussion. Through examining the foundations of their moral frameworks leaders could shape their philosophy of education, become more self-aware and more intentional in their practice. As professional conversations about moral leadership increase, leaders may be empowered individually and collectively to act according to conscience and resist political pressures to deliver externally imposed ends.

Post-script reflections

How has this research affected me and the work I do?

I started this part-time Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) in October 2013 with a desire to better understand the inner life-world of school leaders and the practical realities of leading in a highly accountable education system, in which values and policy collide. It has been quite a personal and professional journey. I have learned much about myself and leadership.

As a person, I have reflected on my own values and moral framework, developing an appreciation of differing ethical perspectives, and examining my moral reasoning. Kohlberg's stages of moral development have made me more aware of my tendency towards observing rules and authority whilst also desiring to live by universal ethics driven by moral principles.

As a professional, I have incorporated much of my learning and reading into the design and delivery of SSAT's suite of school leadership programmes, emphasising the importance of principled, values-based leadership for leaders as all stages of their development.   This is captured in the SSAT Leadership Framework and in content such as the 'Vision, values and moral purpose' module for middle leaders. I have found Sergiovanni's (1992) emphasis on the *heart, head and hands* of leadership a simple unifying message. I have also explored the philosophical underpinnings of ethics with groups of leaders, applying this to real-world dilemmas.

In addition, I have developed my ability to communicate with different audiences.   For example, I contributed an article on 'Principled Leadership' to SSAT's *Deep Leadership for Social Justice* (2019) pamphlet and to a round-table discussion on the role of ethical leadership and organisational culture in fraud prevention, resulting in white paper *Leading to Loss (2020)*.

Perhaps the most significant learning opportunity came from being invited to join the board of trustees at a small but growing MAT. This provided an insider view of the practical realities and moral dilemmas of executive headship, giving me a greater depth of understanding and enabling me to participate in the decision-making process.

How might it affect me in future?

Looking ahead, my research interests continue to lie in the personal and collective aspects of leadership, in culture formation and the ways in which leaders create moral institutions that promote justice, kindness and equity. I believe there is a need for this not only in our schools but across society. Recent experiences of coaching encourage me to believe that the transformation begins with a journey of self-awareness and sense of agency. If we are to transform our institutions and society, this will happen through transformed individuals.

I continue to enjoy learning and sharing this learning with others through designing and delivering professional development. I have valued opportunities to contribute to teaching for EdD and MA cohorts at the University of Nottingham. Finally, I hope to continue writing and publish further articles on the findings presented in this research and themes which, due to the limits of the doctoral thesis, I have not been able to fully explore.

How might this research sit alongside other emerging developments?

Since starting this research, the spotlight has increasingly shone on leadership and the moral challenges faced by leaders, in schools and in wider society. Gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students remain stubbornly entrenched, and the coronavirus pandemic has increased concerns that the most vulnerable will be impacted most. SSAT's campaign for *Deep Social Justice* (2019) is one response to the inequity in the system, meanwhile the Association of School and

College Leaders (ASCL) has launched its own *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System* campaign (2020).

The pandemic has impacted school leadership and the accountability system, with school closures, routine Ofsted inspections suspended (March 2020) and public examinations cancelled. This hiatus has presented an opportunity to revisit the purpose and process of assessment and school inspection, as we also contemplate how schools and society adapt and function following the coronavirus outbreak.

One final significant development has been the work of the Ethical Leadership Commission, commissioned by ASCL in 2017. It published a report *Navigating the educational moral maze* (Roberts, 2019) which included a *Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education (FELE)* aimed at establishing a set of principles, personal characteristics and virtues to support leaders in decision making and calling out unethical behaviour. This move to unite the profession with an agreed ethical framework is a positive step forward. Further work will be needed to embed principles into practice, to effectively challenge unethical behaviour and game-playing and to create an accountability system that promotes moral decision making. Herein lies an opportunity for all those involved in education – school leaders and teachers, policy makers, academics and researchers, providers of professional development and professional associations - to play their part in shaping a more virtuous and equitable society for our children. One that is better able to face the moral dilemmas of the future.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Life-grid

Please complete this life grid as far as possible documenting the experiences and influences that have shaped your moral values and leadership approach. (Please expand the boxes in the grid as required).

Your leadership journey

Timeline /life stages	Life experiences	Your morals (values)	Your leadership approach
Childhood and education			
Your early career as a teacher			
Your leadership development			
Your first headship			
Any subsequent headship positions			
Other work, relationships and life experiences			

Life experiences	Significant people, experiences, events, environmental factors, interactions. These might include faith/religious influences, books you may have read, inspirations, those who have shaped your views e.g. other people/leaders you may have worked with or for, etc.)
Morals (values)	How these experiences have shaped your moral development (e.g. values about behaviour, equity, justice, beneficence)
Leadership approach	How these experiences have shaped your leadership approach (e.g. the role of a leader, the way you seek to lead, the purpose of leadership)

Appendix 2: Example of interview preparation, prompts and probes.

Questions:

Reflecting back on the life-grid activity…

How did you find the process of completing this?

How has your moral development and sense of moral leadership been shaped by your upbringing and life experiences? Looking back is there anything particular that stood out as significant?

You refer a number of times in the life-grid to social injustice, social policy and inequality – including the way we conceptualise poverty and segregation. Would you be able to say some more about this? How has this come to define your moral values?

I'm interested by your comment 'the way we organise for education is more important that the content of education'. Could you elaborate on this?

You refer to your 6th form teacher who changed the course of your life. How did this experience change you? What did you study at university?

(One of the words that reappears is diligence?)

You say 'rewards are toxic', what do you mean by this?

Is there anything else since that on reflection you feel is/was significant in shaping your moral framework (that you haven't mentioned)?

What does the term moral leadership mean to you?

(What difference do you understand between morals, ethics and values?)

What are your core guiding values?

What's your moral purpose?

What role, if any, does spirituality play in your moral framework?

How do you understand your role (as Executive Headteacher) as a moral leader?

How do you make sense of morals and a moral framework as an executive headteacher?

How do you seek to enact (live out) moral leadership in your daily role and decision making (as a school leader)?

Could you give any examples of leadership decisions you have taken recently that would exemplify your moral values?

Do you have any 'red lines' in terms of educational beliefs or values that you would not compromise on?

What do you see as the central purpose of your schools?

What, if any, are the moral tensions and dilemmas you experience as an executive headteacher? (difficult moral decisions)

How do you weigh up the duty to do what is right for pupils, alongside the demands of the external agenda from policy makers and accountability measures?

Do you experience any tensions or conflicts between the moral imperative and the external government accountability imperatives/measures (e.g. Ofsted/ league tables)?

How do you respond if/when there are policies that conflict with your own sense of right and wrong for pupils?

Can you give any examples?

How confident do you feel as a leader in making education decisions that may not align with central policy or accountability systems?

What, if any, are the specific moral tensions you face in being an executive headteacher, that are perhaps different from leading a single school? (e.g. how you deploy staff, resources, your time, preserving the cultural identity of schools within the federation)

How do you try to resolve or manage these tensions?

What do you see as your moral responsibility to the wider education system beyond your schools?

How would you like to be remembered as a school leader?

Appendix 3: Life grid analysis of emerging themes (grouped)

Extract of collated table analysis

Life experience: Morals (values): Leadership approach

Question 1: How has a sense of moral development and moral leadership been shaped by life experiences?

	Life experience	Morals (values)	Leadership approach

Childhood and education	Ethnicity (1,7,8) = 3
	   • Parents 1st generations immigrants (8)
	Faith and religion (2, 4, 9, 10) = 4
	   Religion (2, [4], 9, 10) = 4
	      • Catholic (2, [4], 9)
	      • Baptist upbringing (10)
	      • Church of England (10)
	   Faith (4, 10)
	Socio-economic status (1, 3, 5, 9,10, 11) = 6
	   Class (1, 3)
	      • Middle class (1)
	   Poverty (3, 5, 9, 10, 11)
	      • Council estate (3, 10)
	      • Unemployment (5)
	      • High rise flats (11)
	      • Housing association (11)
	      • Council house (11)
	      • High deprivation (11)
	Family (2,3,4,6,8,9,10,11) = 8
		Value of hard work/work ethic (2, 3, 9) = 3
		   • Hard work is not enough (3)
		   • Is good for us (9)
		   • Work ethic (2)
		Equality, social justice/mobility (2, 3, 4, 7) = 4
		   Equality for all (2, 3, 7) = 3
		      • Of opportunity (7)
		   Social justice/just society (3, 4) = 2
		      • Role of social policy (3)
		      • Poverty is a social injustice (3)
		   Social mobility (3) = 1
		Equity (4,9, = 2
		   • Dignity and value of every person (4)
		   • Everyone deserves a fair chance (9)
		
		Kindness (10) = 1
		Charity (4, 8) = 2
		Honesty/never lie (8, 11) = 2
		Inspire/give students aspirations (5, 10) = 2
			Equality (2,7,11) = 3
			   • Providing opportunities for children (2)
			   • Treating all equal (2)
			   • Inclusive (7)
			   • Inclusion (2)
			   • Respect and value everyone (11)
			
			Expectations (2,3) = 2
			High expectations (2)
			Ambitious for everyone (3)
			
			Hard work (2,3) = 2
			Determination (2)
			Hardworking (3)
			
			Eradicating injustice (2, 3) = 2
			   • Social (2)

Appendix 4: Life-grid themes frequency tables

Life experiences influencing moral values and leadership approach (column one)

Rank	References	Themes	Participants
1	11	School (professional experiences)	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11
2	8	Family (parental)	2,3,4,6,8,9,10,11
3=	7	School (own childhood)	2,3,5,7,9,10,11
3=	7	Family and children (own)	1,2,3,4,8,9,11
5	6	Social economic status (poverty)	1,3,5,9,10,11
6=	5	University	2,3,5,10,11
6=	5	Critical incidents (bereavements)	2,5,6,8,10
6=	5	Faith and religion	2,4,8,9,10
6=	5	CPD/professional learning	1,3,4,6,10
10=	4	Teachers	1,3,4,8
10=	4	Wider professional roles	6,7,9,10
12=	3	Ethnicity	1,7,8
12=	3	Influential colleagues	3,4,6
12=	3	Social life	3,9,10

Life grid analysis – emerging themes: Morals (values) and leadership approach.

The below are themes emerging from an analysis of columns two and three, looking at leaders' morals (values) and leadership approach. The two columns have been considered together as participants had covered themes across both, with some elements of repetition.

Themes are listed in order, with those with most mentions appearing first. Participants are identifiable via their numeric reference.

Rank	References	Themes	Participants
1=	9	High expectations	1,2,3,4,5,7,8,9,11

1=	9	Equity (fairness)	1,2,3,4,7,8,9,10,11
3=	7	Equality	1,2,3,4,7,10,11
3=	7	Child centred	1,2,5,6,8,9,11
3=	7	Building relationships	1,2,3,8,9,10,11
6	5	Social justice	2,3,4,7,10
7=	4	Doing what's right/moral decision making	3,5,6,11
7=	4	Respect	2,3,9,11
9	3	Hard work	2,3,9
10	2	Social mobility	3,11
10=	2	Honesty/integrity	8,11

Appendix 5: Colour coding of research questions

Portions of interview transcripts were colour coded (highlighted) in the text to identify aspects of the research questions addressed.

1. How has the sense of moral development and moral leadership been shaped by life experiences?

2. How do executive headteachers understand their roles as moral leaders?

3. In understanding the moral dimension of leadership, what tensions are experienced by executive headteachers?

   a. What, if any, are the tensions experienced by headteachers in reconciling the moral imperative with the accountability imperative?

   b. Are there specific moral tensions that arise for executive headteachers working in system leadership roles?

4. How do (executive) headteachers seek to resolve these tensions?

Appendix 6: Excerpts of participant interview transcript

Interview transcripts: first cycle coding

PARTICIPANT 3: Erm...I guess...I guess there are certain things that happen throughout your life that require you to go back to the things that anchor you in terms of your sort of values and your morals erm...so I think I probably revisit those things quite a lot, particularly when erm new government policies come out, new systems, procedures, structures, we are trying to understand and make sense of, I think I do go back to some of those early experiences that made me make me look at those things in a certain lens but certainly my early childhood was a very happy one erm...but we we grew up in quite extreme poverty, I grew up in a single parent household, erm with older siblings, one of whom got into quite a lot of difficulty with the law and so I think I grew up in a household that had very meagre resources that was dominated by a very strong matriarch but also had quite a hard view of life in general and so the expectation very early on in my life was just get on with things. There were you know, my Mum showed very little interest in my education, I could have been doing anything at school and anything in the intervening period of time but there were certain points at which she would check in with me which was generally you're back at 5 o'clock for dinner and you go to bed at this time and that was it. So therefore, I think I have probably at times got quite an unforgiving view of people that can't seem to just get on and do things and I have to temper that but also I know that two things fundamentally effected the course that my life has taken. One of those is a sense of injustice and a sense that I grew up with good people but society didn't necessarily treat them as good people and secondly great teachers can make a huge difference because I still remember very vividly both in terms of smell and emotion the moment my sort of sixth form tutor sat me down assuming that I was going to apply for university and I wasn't. it was made very very clear to me by my Mum that I could not go to university and that I needed to go out to work but erm she sat me down and filled the form out for me and said I am going to send it off, you don't need to go for it but I think you should. Erm, if she hadn't have done that I would never have done it. I may have returned to it later but I do think it is very difficult once you set out on a certain path in life it is very difficult

Daniel Belcher	Formative early experiences
Daniel Belcher	Very happy early childhood
Daniel Belcher	Quite extreme poverty
Daniel Belcher	Single parent household
Daniel Belcher	Older siblings in trouble with the
Daniel Belcher	Strong matriarch
Daniel Belcher	Hard view of life
Daniel Belcher	Just get on with things
Daniel Belcher	Mum showed little interest in my
Daniel Belcher	Lots of freedom
Daniel Belcher	Unforgiving view at times that ▼
Daniel Belcher	Sense of injustice
Daniel Belcher	Society (mis)judging good people
Daniel Belcher	Great teachers make a huge ▼
Daniel Belcher	Critical incident – intervention of

PARTICIPANT 3: That is a good question..[pause]...well, ==moral leadership isn't necessarily the right leadership because you can hold a whole range of different morals and principles erm, there are certainly leaders in this world whose morals that I certainly do not agree with so for me, moral leadership very much fits in with the paradigm within which I operate which is around building organisations and schools that actively promote equality and social justice erm...that are very much focused on the child, erm...that whilst they celebrate and nurture the individual they enable that child to operate within the community and that ultimately we communicate to children that they are the agents of change and that the locus of control sits with them. So for me that is what moral leadership is. It's doing the right thing for children.==

RESEARCHER: I can probably come back to that, erm...so in terms of differences between morals, ethics and values, this can be quite a difficult one but I just wondered whether you had a view on what the difference between those three things are?

PARTICIPANT 3: [Pause]....well I guess ==some peoples morals are not always ethical, I guess ethics for me as a concept is more associated with doing the right thing, erm...in terms of what we as a community both locally and nationally agree are ethical principles so if you think about stance in public life I would say they are founded on ethical principles that you may morally hold very different. Your morals may clash against those at times, mine don't I don't think. In terms of values, your values I guess are much more routed in your life because they are very much things that you hold dear and are part of your life script and are part of the filter through==

Daniel Belcher	People can hold a range of ▼
Daniel Belcher	Personal moral leadership ▼
Daniel Belcher	Child focused
Daniel Belcher	Celebrate the individual child ▼
Daniel Belcher	Children as agents of change
Daniel Belcher	Empowerment of children
Daniel Belcher	"It's doing the right thing for ▼
Daniel Belcher	"Some people's morals are not▼
Daniel Belcher	Ethics – collectively agreed ▼
Daniel Belcher	Values - more personally held, ▼

Appendix 7: Example of a collated table of participant responses with second cycle coding.

Interview Analysis – participant data. Initial codes based on interview transcripts. Where a good quote exists this in marked 'Q' with a page reference.

Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
• White middle-class upbringing – thought everyone's experience was similar (L, E) • Didn't think about values as a child – took things for granted • Values came once started work – first teaching job in very mixed multi-cultural school (A) • Make a difference (B) • Parents' racism • Growing appreciation of the inequalities children face (3)	• Early life shapes you– choices made for you. (Q. p1) (B) • Shaped by values of parents (B) • Religious beliefs (H) • Where your family came from – poverty (Q. p1-2) (E) • Parental support and aspiration of 'what could be' (B) • The power of education • Hard work and education the way to a better life (9, 10) • Social ability • How to treat	• Formative early experiences (B) • Very happy early childhood (N) • Quite extreme poverty (E) • Single parent household (B) • Older siblings in trouble with the law (B) • Strong matriarch (B) • Hard view of life • Just get on with things • Mum showed little interest in my education (B) • Lots of freedom (N) • Has contributed to	• Family (B) • Faith (H) • Coherent loving family, relationships mattered (B) • Sense of responsibility to each other (5) • Faith development (H) • Common good (7) • Social justice (6) • View of humanity created in the image of God (H) • Professional influences – people you meet who challenge your thinking, values, what is right, what you should be doing	• Poor experience of teaching for learning at primary and secondary (C) • Poor experience at university (F) • One or two memorable pastorally (J) • Determined no-one would experience what I experienced (at school) (C) • Promotion straight from class teacher to head (primary) (A) • Forced to sit next to naughty boy whole school career (C)	• Death of grandad due to stroke whilst present age 10, critical incident. (G) • Trauma and distress (G) • Developed a steeliness • In leadership your core being gets tested...because you can't please everyone • Tight-knit family (B) • Dad – head of drugs squad (B) • My dad and mum have always had strong moral values (B)

Coding 1-11 (themes), A-N (influences)

Ref	Theme	Ref	Theme
1	High expectations	A	School (professional experiences)
2	Equity (fairness)	B	Family (parental)
3	Equality	C	School (own childhood)
4	Child centred	D	Family and children (own)
5	Building relationships	E	Social economic status (poverty)
6	Social justice	F	University
7	Doing what's right/moral decision making	G	Critical incidents (bereavements)
8	Respect	H	Faith and religion
9	Hard work	I	CPD/professional learning
10	Social mobility	J	Teachers
11	Honesty/integrity	K	Wider professional roles
		L	Ethnicity
		M	Influential colleagues
		N	Social life

Appendix 8: Example of collated and coded tables of participant interview responses to question 4.

Data analysis Q.4 How do executive headteachers seek to resolve (these) tensions?

Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Changed curriculum immediately (the next week) following Ebacc introduction as a measure 1-PDI First entry (examination) change Once we know it's real, we respond [justification] "because we care about what people think about us as much as we care about the kids" We learnt it's pointless moaning about it 2-PR [accountability pressures] Just get on with it Do whatever you can with what you've got, what's best for the kids What's best is that they [kids] leave with the qualifications to get onto the next stage If that's high English, Maths and Ebacc grades then that's what we'll do We don't tell We sell it to them	"Ofsted is there to look at what you're doing, if you have to get ready for it, you ain't doing it" Make sure what we are doing is legally compliant and in the best interests of the children, some of the policies are not in the best interests of children. 5-WWP	Disappointed with KS2 results last year Forensic analysis of why across the schools 6-RI Gathered them all together We collectively problem solved Underlying principle – we stick to our principles We have to challenge the way we think, we can't assume we are always right You can easily become arrogant, self-congratulating *We came back, we shared… we decided our strategy* 10-CDM Open and honest that we weren't great at getting children to national standard or high score 9-Au Stuck to our principles around a broad balanced creative curriculum 11-PC As professionals realised we needed to add	Lots of ways that with creativity you can do good for children and not "leave yourself open to the wolves" 2-PR "One of my non-negotiables is you have to keep the wolves away from the door, you don't do your school any favour by putting it in a category 7-PSC [and you are far more likely to be put a category if you serve an area of disadvantage.]	[Managing Ofsted – from compromise to confidence] Evidence of progress Big focus on books. That was a compromise 3-Co Didn't have the experience back then I can drive an Ofsted now I know my school I'm an NLE Experience makes you less scared I'm not scared. I don't need to do things. [Justification for compromise] I needed that Ofsted [judgement]. I needed more kids in here because I needed the money…to fill up, to do the stuff that we needed to do with the school for the community. Open with local authority and governors Delivering the message over and over	Disagree with government stance on education Three choices: comply, walk away or stand up and fight. 4-BR We're trying to build a culture A broad rich curriculum Do things that don't always impact on data and standards I have to believe that if we're doing the right thing, that manifests itself in good results 11-PC Scary in a flawed assessment system Some great schools and great leaders took a dip last year You need a steady hand Innovative Friday afternoon one hour per week following alternative curriculum – e.g. radio club. The reality is to get the MAT to a certain place,

Theme	Participants	Total
1. Performance driven implementation	1	1
2. Pragmatism	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11	9
3. Compromise	5, 6, 7, 8 ,9	5
4. Bravado	6	1
5. Work within the parameters/confines	2, 5, 7, 9	4
6. Reflection and introspection	3, 7, 9, 11	4
7. Preserve the school community	3, 4, 5, 7, 10	5
8. Greater good/ utilitarianism	10, 11	2
9. Authenticity/ Open dialogue about tensions	3, 5, 9, 10, 11	5
10. Collective decision making	3, 9, 10	3
11. Principles and conscience	3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11	7
12. Resistance	7	1
13. Know the system	8	1