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# MAKING TOUGH CHOICES



Left: Sheila Bloom, chief executive of the IGE

Right: Lorna Robins, education officer of the IGE

**Lynne Bianchi** talks to **Sheila Bloom** and **Lorna Robins** about how children's personal responsibility can be developed through ethical discussions in science

The focus on science and ethics in this issue of *Primary Science* prompted me, Lynne Bianchi, to explore more fully the work of the Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust (IGE). Sheila Bloom, the UK Trust's chief executive, and I have known each other for a number of years through the Comino Foundation, a charitable trust that encourages the development of personal responsibility, while Lorna Robins is the education officer for the IGE.

Encouraging children to have an opinion on contemporary scientific issues, such as, in England, the smoking ban, healthy eating, our impact on the environment, congestion charges, etc. is increasingly important. The notion of equipping young people with the personal skills for life and learning is also

receiving much more attention, through the infusion of social and emotional aspects of learning and personal learning and thinking skills into the school curriculum. Teachers in any UK classroom are likely to be focusing on enabling children to make informed decisions, underpinned by ethical and moral thinking.

Until now our work has been quite separate; however, the opportunity to discuss science and ethics in detail has now shown us the power of forging stronger links. I spoke with Sheila and Lorna to find out how their work could benefit primary science and particularly how the Institute's research and ethical decision-making frameworks may help us in teaching such issues more effectively. The headings below

reflect the questions we discussed.

### Why is ethics important?

Most of our public discourse, it would seem, is conducted either through the language of politics or of economics. The IGE is primarily concerned with raising awareness of the moral and ethical dimension, and supporting ethical behaviour by individuals, institutions and nations through research, public discussion and practical action. In the UK we deliver programmes in education, and in the private, public and voluntary sectors.

Last year we consulted representatives of the prison services in Scotland and England about how to promote ethical literacy and sensitive care in prisons through engaging staff, and potentially prisoners, in

exploring values and ethical decision-making. This has led to a series of pilot seminars.

We have also delivered some training to Scottish head teachers, which is perhaps of greater relevance, as we have worked with them to explore how our frameworks can assist the development of an ethical language and promote shared values and ethical decision-making across the school community.

At a Five Nations conference we convened last year on 'Teaching controversial issues and values', among the main findings that educators from England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales agreed upon were the needs both to help teachers handle discussion and debate about controversial issues in the classroom, and to equip them with the confidence to do so through training and resources.

At IGE we seek to support individuals – be they teachers, students or prisoners – in learning to use the lens of ethics, by suggesting approaches, or frameworks, for handling the dilemmas that inevitably arise when values come into conflict. We hope this in turn encourages ethical action.

### How can we support learners in analysing ethical dilemmas?

Teachers tackling controversial issues in the classroom can avail themselves of tools that help both teacher and students analyse science topics from an ethical, rather than a political or economic, viewpoint and lead to discussion about possible solutions, particularly when two conflicting choices seem 'right'.

Research by the IGE, backed by our experience of training in ethical decision-making, suggests that decisions in which a 'right' challenges a clear 'wrong' offer a simpler choice than those where the choice is between a 'right' and a seemingly equally 'right' decision. These latter decisions are more complex but generally resolve themselves into one of four 'dilemma paradigms':

#### Four Dilemma Paradigms:

- **truth** versus **loyalty**
- **short term** versus **long term**
- **individual** versus **community**
- **justice** versus **mercy**

### How might these dilemma paradigms be used in a primary context?

Let's take a look at a 'big question' a science teacher encountered in her school and how the paradigms relate to it:

Is the ban on smoking in public places unfair on smokers? What about their rights?

This is a classic **right** versus **right** dilemma: it is right to protect the health of everyone but it is also right to respect the freedom of the individual to choose his or her lifestyle.

Looking at the paradigms to help analyse the situation:

Using the **individual versus community** paradigm, we need to weigh up what is right for one person, or a small group, against what is right for another, larger group. In this case, the smokers are in the minority compared with the non-smoking population, so we have to weigh up the rights of the smokers to exercise freedom of choice against the rights of the wider community to breathe in clean air.

Another way of looking at this might be **short term versus long term**; that is, choosing between what is best for the present time and what is best for the future. In the short term it may be preferable to allow the smokers to smoke wherever and whenever they wish, but this needs to be weighed up against the longer-term health consequences.

In the case of **truth versus loyalty**, one truth is that smoking can kill. On the other hand, loyalty might be to the right of every individual to make his or her own choice.

With the **justice versus mercy**

paradigm, the fair (or just) thing to do might be to consider the freedom of the individual smoker as opposed to compassion for the health risk to the non-smoker. For argument's sake, you could even turn this paradigm around to consider that the fair thing to do might be to consider the health risk to the smoker versus compassion for his or her needs (where there is a dependency, for example). This could generate a lot of debate about whether this is pushing the argument too far!

### How can we enable learners to reach an ethical decision?

The IGE's paradigms do surely add greater clarity in how we explore contemporary issues, and provide teachers with an understanding about how discussions play out in the classroom and in life. Making an informed decision is the next step. I questioned Sheila as to how children can then reach an ethical decision so that they can find a resolution; otherwise we may just find ourselves confused by all the different viewpoints that could be taken on this real-life issue.

Whilst selecting paradigms is helpful, problem analysis is not decision-making and teachers and students may want to 'try out' these three 'resolution principles' to compare what they would do:

#### Three Resolution Principles:

- ends-based
- rule-based
- care-based

### How might the resolution principles work in a primary context?

Let's take a look at other 'ethical questions':

You are in charge of setting up a tuck shop at your school for morning break. Some parents have asked you just to sell fruit because it is healthy; other parents are worried that their children will not eat anything at break because they don't like fruit and would like there to be more

choice, including crisps and sweets. What is the best thing to do?

There is the chance to build a fantastic climbing frame in the school playground. The only thing is that you will need to cut down a big tree to do this. How could this affect the habitat and the living things that are dependent on that tree? Could the loss of the tree affect us? Which is more important – the tree or the climbing frame?

**Ends-based thinkers** make decisions on the basis of what results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In the case of the tuck shop, the board of governors and pupil council may find it helpful to weigh up which group (those that like fruit or those that don't) make up the greater number – and then cater for the majority. **Rule-based thinkers** make decisions that are firmly rooted in a sense of duty, taking completely the opposite stance to that of the ends-based thinkers. Governors and children would settle on a course of action based on a standard they felt was right, irrespective of the consequences to either the fruit- or the crisp-eaters. They would wish to set a precedent that other schools would follow in similar circumstances and decide either that healthy eating is the standard they want to uphold or, alternatively, that it is more important to offer choice so that everyone has something to eat at break.

**Care-based thinking** asks the decision-maker to put themselves in the other's shoes as if they were the recipient, rather than the perpetrator, of the action. So, in the case of the climbing frame, who is the 'other'? Is it the children? Or is the wildlife? In weighing up potential outcomes it is useful to remember that we may not be satisfied with any single option. In the case of the school tuck shop, for example, it may be that a creative combination of two principles is

the most satisfactory conclusion to the dilemma. Could we combine the maxim of 'schools should be encouraging healthy eating' with also having one day per week, or per month, when there is a broader range of choices?

Any closer to making that decision? Maybe not, but hopefully this has given you 'food for thought', and potential tools for practising ethical decision-making in your primary science classroom. Try the questions and apply the framework in your classroom and see how the children respond.

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The Comino Foundation, along with the Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust and the Centre for Science Education (Sheffield Hallam University), are interested in exploring this area of work further, and have invited the Editorial Board members of *Primary Science* to attend a half-day seminar on Friday 3 October 2008 at ASE headquarters in Hatfield. The purpose of the day will be to discuss critically whether these frameworks could be translated effectively into the primary classroom and what it would take to do so. If any readers would like to come along the Comino Foundation may be able to assist with supply cover. Please email Lynne Bianchi by no later than 12 September 2008 if you wish to attend on [l.m.bianchi@shu.ac.uk](mailto:l.m.bianchi@shu.ac.uk)

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#### Find out more

The Four Dilemma Paradigms and Three Resolution Principles quoted in this article come from *How good people make tough choices: resolving the dilemmas of ethical living* by Rushworth M. Kidder (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). Copies of the book are available from the Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust (see above).

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