Summary

This thesis addresses the question: What is the contribution of moral case deliberation for students’ and professionals’ way of dealing with moral challenges in caring for young people? Moral case deliberation (MCD), a methodically structured form of deliberating on moral questions and dilemmas, aims to support professionals to deal with moral challenges. In order to answer this question, four sub-questions were formulated: (1) Which moral dilemmas do professionals experience in caring for young people (16–24 years old)? (2) How do professionals caring for young people experience moral challenges? (3) How do they deal with those moral challenges? (4) What is the contribution of moral case deliberation (MCD) towards professionals’ and future professionals’ way of dealing with moral challenges? Several quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to answer the questions.

The introduction (chapter 1) describes the relevance of the research question in the current Dutch context of care for children and young people that is characterized by a professionalization program, which started in 2008. Furthermore, the chapter explains the Aristotelian, hermeneutical, dialogical, and Socratic background of MCD. In MCD, participants have an equal say, and jointly investigate, reflect and deliberate on moral questions or dilemmas in dialogue with each other. In a dialogue, participants ask open questions and empathize with each other in order to become aware of their own and others’ presuppositions. In this way they get insight in and reflect and deliberate on different perspectives. By starting from experience, MCD focuses on the lived meaning of concepts and principles instead of focusing on hypothetical cases or abstract reasoning. In this way MCD connects theory and practice, and fosters critical thinking.

Chapter 2 presents professionals’ experiences when facing moral challenges in their work with young people (16–24 years old). In addition, the moral dilemmas that have a large impact and the factors that contribute to this impact are described. The findings show that professionals describe and experience moral dilemmas differently. Some moral dilemmas seem to be related to moral distress, which refers to the inability to implement actions one considers morally appropriate. Professionals dealing with young people indicate that moral challenges related to professional collaboration, for instance with colleagues from another institution, have a large impact. Furthermore, they report the impact of moral challenges concerning the restriction of a youngster’s autonomous choice in order to prevent harm. In addition, moral challenges related to stopping or continuing care and choosing whether to initiate an out-of-home placement, are considered to have a large impact. Several factors appear to increase the impact of moral challenges. Professionals’ strongly-held beliefs that conflict with rules and methodical guidelines contribute to moral challenges. Professionals also report that cases involving uncertainty
about what to do because of serious risks and pressure increase the impact of moral challenges.

Chapter 3 presents an example of an MCD with students, preparing themselves for their job in care for children and young people. Reflections of three facilitators, involved in the teaching programme, are described. First, the relevance of participants’ professional experience is addressed, since students do not have the experience professionals usually have. Furthermore, the role of supervision and MCD in learning to deal with moral dilemmas is discussed. Finally, the added value of the step of making an individual judgment and the value of the dialogue in MCD for reinterpretation of the concept of safety are investigated.

Chapter 4 presents the moral dilemmas professionals in care for the (young) homeless face, the way they deal with them, and their need for support. Professionals in care for the homeless experience three kinds of moral dilemmas. Professionals experience moral dilemmas related to rules and methodical guidelines. They also experience moral dilemmas during their endeavor to respect the clients’ autonomy, or while trying to procure and keep their trust. Finally, professionals experience moral dilemmas during their cooperation with colleagues from their own or other institutions. Professionals caring for young people say they deal with moral dilemmas in several ways. Institutional or professional rules and guidelines can support professionals in dealing with moral challenges, but can also be the cause of moral challenges. Respondents discuss moral dilemmas with peers or superior colleagues in formal and/or informal meetings, or make decisions individually. Some report they explicitly justify their choice by referring to specific norms or values, such as the importance of the client’s right to autonomy or the importance of ensuring the safety of clients or colleagues. Some consider their personal intuition to be an important advisor, whereas others emphasize that decisions should be based on objective grounds, unaffected by personal meanings. A substantial portion of the respondents caring for the homeless showed interest in learning from others and having the opportunity to question ingrown habits in MCD.

Chapter 5 presents an implementation and evaluation study of a pilot MCD project in an institution for care for the homeless in the western part of the Netherlands. Professionals report that the MCD sessions generally influenced their ability to deal with moral dilemmas positively. Participants in MCD said they were highly involved in the process of reflection and deliberation, and reported that MCD touched the essence of their work. They described MCD as having a substantial effect on the way they dealt with their moral dilemmas. Some said they recognized moral dilemmas better and felt supported in unraveling norms and values when discussing a moral issue. They stated that MCD helped them become aware of perspectives other than their own. MCD helped them
to reflect on the norms and values at stake and to formulate underlying reasons for their final opinion. Although participants said MCD affected their way of dealing with moral dilemmas in practice, no conclusions could be drawn concerning the question to what extent MCD really affected their decisions.

Chapter 6 presents an evaluation study of the contribution of MCD to the ability of students in education for care for young people to deal with moral dilemmas. Students report they felt highly involved in the process of reflection and deliberation, and considered MCD valuable. However, some had difficulties with the moral uncertainties that came with this method. Respondents indicated that, during the project assignment, they felt moderately supported in their ability to justify decisions by explicitly considering values and norms. Many students became aware of alternative perspectives and valued the challenge of thinking critically with MCD. Analysis of the findings suggested that, after attending four MCD sessions, one-third of the students proved able to recognize moral dilemmas as distinct from other dilemmas such as methodic choices, and proved able to explicitly justify their decisions by considering values and norms.

Chapter 7 presents the discussion of the data against the background of the current Dutch professionalization debate and the theory of normative professionalization of the Dutch sociologist/philosopher Kunneman. Kunneman’s analysis of and view on the concepts of lifeworld and system, derived from Habermas, are explained. The concept of system refers to the control-oriented economic and political organization of society. The concept of lifeworld refers to the experienced world in which people’s actions are organized by an orientation towards meaning and joint agreement. The system tends to ‘colonize’, i.e. to increasingly imbue professionals’ language and actions with efficiency-oriented ways of problem solving, marginalizing lifeworld-related meanings. Colonization of the lifeworld may be, Kunneman argues, counterbalanced by culturalization, i.e. influencing the system by culturally articulated, lifeworld-related embodied experiences. According to Kunneman, horizontal morality may provide opportunities to vocalize and investigate slow and existential questions, and foster moral sensibility, reflection and deliberation on meanings, valuing diversity and plurality of truths. He argues for training of horizontal morality in order to foster normative professionalism, i.e. the ability to deal with interferences between system and lifeworld.

Reflecting on the results of the study, it is argued that MCD may foster horizontal morality, and therefore support normative professionalization. Normative professionalization may enable professionals to take on and bear their normative responsibilities in an increasingly complex world in which system-related rules and regulations interfere with lifeworld-related, individual, contextual assessments by making use of professionals’ experiences of conflict. MCD therefore provides opportunities for learning, for dealing with interferences
between system and lifeworld. In conclusion, MCD should be implemented and further developed in education for the care for children and young people in order to foster future professionals’ normative professionality.