Ethics and Ethics Education: Professional and Curricular Best Practice

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Differences in Ethical Assumptions

Ethical thinking can be done in a variety of ways and draw quite different conclusions. People of upright intention disagree about the 'moral ought' associated with particular issues, and difference is evident along several lines, including, most importantly, those of culture. Taylor (1985) contrasts the values positions of ancient and modern cultures, while King (1976) spoke eloquently of the challenge of drawing the various cultures of contemporary USA together in a common push for justice. Charlesworth (1993) suggests that, beyond the most primary values related to autonomy and justice, it is impossible for the modern multicultural society to come to a consensus on most of the practical values that guide everyday living. These are important issues for teachers, especially in multicultural settings. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full analysis of cultural difference in values perspectives, it may be helpful to identify a number of clearly different ethical cultures which, history shows, have managed to survive and thrive even in the same society. Here I will draw deliberately on the most prominent ethical cultures of the most important ancient society for those searching out the roots of Western thought, namely, the society of ancient Greece. In this sense, the analysis is limited to a Western perspective. The exemplar nonetheless underlines the point that different ethical cultures have existed and competed throughout recorded history, and have done so even within apparently homogeneous societies. In other words, multi-ethnicity is only one feature of multi-culture, albeit a particularly defining one in our own time.

One ethical culture is seen clearly in the platonic world view. In Plato's Republic (1987), the picture of society is one of hierarchy and unevenness. According to the will of God, some are born to superiority and others to inferiority. All knowledge, including knowledge of the Good, the Right and the Just, originates in the divine realm, and is communicated to legitimate societies of people by a properly ordained ruling class. Legitimate societies themselves originate in the mind of God and so are good in and of themselves. Ethics and the morality of practical living must be assessed in this context: good is that which contributes to the system, while bad is that which detracts from it. Individual morality is judged almost exclusively in the terms of its contribution to the greater good of the whole, the whole being conceived as a perfect society. In this scheme, there is clearly little room for oppositional thought.

We find a clearly alternative ethical culture espoused in the philosophy of the ancient Athenian sophists, and especially in the work of Protagoras (cf. Plato, 1989). This latter sophist railed against the dominant systemic thinking of his day by proposing a relativism which placed control in the hands of each individual. He was intent on deflating the claims of the privileged few to be the guardians of all knowledge. In this thinking, ethics is essentially something decided on by individuals. Here, the 'common good' can only be the one which serves the good of the majority of individuals. In many ways, this kind of thinking was suppressed by the dominant institutions of pre-Enlightenment times for some 2,000 years. It began to re-assert itself in the period known as the Enlightenment, wherein we find a strong move towards individual rights and notions of justice which are individually rather than systemically oriented (Locke, 1962).

In our own time, there appears to be a new ethical culture emerging. While incorporating the
strengths of the cultures outlined above, it offers the potential to move beyond them to a vision of human responsibility which is genuinely global in its outlook. It resembles platonic ethics in its concern for the whole, rather than individual parts, and in its compliance with the world view of major religions. On the other hand, it is like the sophist view in that it urges a response from each individual and, when it does make use of religious injunction, it is a multicultural and multi-faith religious urge, rather than an ethnocentric version, to which it gives voice. The ecological ethos of Hinduism thus becomes at least as important to the Christian as anything to be found in the home tradition. In a word, this is an ethical culture that synthesises the social and individual consciences of the other two cultures and brings them together in an ethics of action for the global community and environment.

The new ethics highlights that it is possible to live a life of self-respect and respect for others, and to be socially correct in all things, while the wider world of which one is a part can be suffering. It is a cultural ethics that stresses the inter-connectedness of each part of the globe, animate and inanimate. One cannot merely look to one's own individual good, nor even to the good of a particular society. One must look to the total and overall good of the globe, its physical infrastructure and its various communities, animal and human. This is the only truly ethical 'common good'. This ethics has radical implications for such moral issues as sexism, racism, ageism and faithism, as well as all aspects of bio-ethics and eco-ethics, including animal rights and the ethics of inanimate nature (cf. Beauchamp & Walters, 1994; Birch, 1993; Birke, 1994; Brody, 1993; Bytheway, 1995; Charlesworth, 1993; Clark, 1990; Fraser, 1994; Freire, 1993; Healey, 1992; Hughes, 1995; Jolly & Holland, 1993; Jupp, 1991; Mellor, 1992; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Mitchell, Kerridge & Lovat, 1996; Singer, 1994; Thomasma & Kushner, 1996).

Exploring this latter example serves to remind us that while many of the differences of ethical culture have coexisted and continue to coexist, even in the same society, over a long period of time, there is always the possibility of something entirely new developing. The wise teacher will be alert to both the fact of age-old differences and of newly evolving possibilities. The shrewd teacher will likely detect these cultural differences even within the same class. This is especially likely in the classrooms of a multicultural society. Lacking this perspective may render a teacher overly rigid, too obviously aligned to one ethical culture and intolerant of another. In turn, this will render them less effective in the specific teacher roles associated with ethics education, those of life mentor and curriculum practitioner. It is to these latter roles that the paper now turns, in the first instance to the role of life mentor and the requirement to model in an explicit and formal way the attitudes and behaviours targeted in an ethics education program.

A Professional Code of Teacher Ethics

In an age of increasing professionalisation, it has become common for specialist areas of public service to develop codes of appropriate conduct by which professionals in a particular field should offer their service. The need for this has increased with the growth of individual-oriented rights legislation of the types mentioned above. These have rendered professionals in service of the public far more liable to civil and legal action if their service is not conducted properly. Codes of conduct, and the entire phenomenon of a professional ethics, are therefore also protective of the profession. The best example we have of a fully developed code of conduct based on classical ethical principles is that of biomedical ethics (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994).

Within biomedical ethics, four age-old ethical principles have come to be definitive. These are autonomy, justice, non-maleficence and beneficence (cf. Mitchell et al., 1996). When these four principles are applied to practices within the medical profession, they serve to guide proper conduct and action for the profession. It seems a reasonable line of argument, therefore, to suggest that these principles may also serve to guide conduct and action in the teaching profession. I will attempt to outline below what these might mean in this context.

In the broadest sense, autonomy is contrasted with the notion of heteronomy or, literally, 'rule by others'. In ethical contexts, the concept of autonomy connotes independence and self-determination. It is a principle which assumes that the individual is responsible for, and most properly should determine the direction of, his or her own life, being essentially free of undue pressure or manipulation from external sources (Langford, 1985).

Cultural shifts in thinking have elevated the importance of the autonomy of the patient in medical practice over the past few decades (Mitchell et al., 1996). Similarly, the implications for teachers have been recognised for some time (Crittenden, 1978; Peters, 1972). Teaching was once regarded as a prescriptive craft, with the teacher possessing all knowledge and transmitting
it through teacher-centred, student-disempowering curricula. Coupled with this, the teacher possessed liberties to engage in such heavy-handed discipline practices as were considered necessary for good management of these curricula, including the practices of corporal punishment. There has been a shift which recognises far better the subtleties and complexities of learning and, consequently, much of the weakness of heteronomous modes of learning (Biggs, 1987; Costa, 1981; de Bono, 1970; Salomon, 1994; Stenhouse, 1975). There has also been a shift which rejects violence as appropriate to solving social problems, including the violence of corporal punishments. More modern forms of classroom management stress the need to deal with the autonomous individual (Cumming, 1981; Gordon, Arthur & Butterfield, 1996).

Other aspects of autonomy which impinge on teaching and schooling practice include the raft of new privacy laws which tend to highlight the autonomous rights of the clients of public education (who are firstly students themselves) rather than the paternalistic rights of teachers and educational bureaucrats. These laws would seem to render practices which were common in the past, such as open access to student files, or the unlicensed use of students for curriculum experimentation, to be ill-advised and possibly illegal.

In the general sense, justice refers to expectations which a society holds concerning relations between the members of that society and, furthermore, concerning that which is considered to encapsulate ‘due rendering’ to any member of that society (Benn & Peters, 1959). Quite beyond the laws which govern any society, there are standards and mores which suggest how people should live up to their obligations to one another. The Aristotelian notion of ‘justice as fairness’ is central in establishing that the just person is one who treats all persons as equal (Urmson, 1988).

Within the context of the teaching profession, ‘justice as fairness’ is not meant to bind the teacher to offer every student identical service and treatment. It does, however, usher in the notion of ‘due care’ to ensure that all students are offered the maximum of that proper service which accords with their educational needs. Furthermore, it promotes the idea that this service should be available to all at the same rate and within the same reasonable time, irrespective of wealth, power, status, religion or other affiliation. Such a notion militates against such teacher practices as favouritism, overly casual preparation and non-validated grading, as well as ethnocentric and biased curriculum design and implementation.

Non-maleficence establishes a duty on all who would be ethical not to harm or injure, or impose risks of harm or injury on, others. In biomedical ethics, it has taken on central importance (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994). Within the Hippocratic medical tradition, the dictum primum non nocere (’above all, do no harm’) is regarded as the virtual cornerstone of all ethical guidance for the medical practitioner. It sets clearly before the practitioner the role which society expects she or he should play, that of someone who scrupulously avoids any action which might lead to the harming of others. Such actions might include invasive treatment for the purposes of science, rather than for the benefit of the patient, all forms of malpractice and any lack of proper attention to the patient’s real needs.

If Hippocrates’ great interest had been education rather than medicine, he might well have uttered the same caution. Though the care rendered by teachers is of a different kind, it has the same capacity to build up or tear down. While much of the physical and health care proper to a doctor is actually shared by the teacher, the teacher’s responsibilities go beyond this to the intellectual sphere as well. In that sense, the teacher is in a position to inflict a wider array of harm. Like doctors, teachers can inflict physical harm on their clients by imposing unwarranted or unwise requirements on them in curricular and extra-curricular situations. This is especially the case in areas of teaching where physical safety is in question, such as physical education, outdoor education and science. More peculiar to the profession, however, is the fact that teachers can also inflict intellectual harm through a variety of means, including poor preparation and implementation of curriculum, unfair assessment and evaluation practices, and through general lack of due care.

Like all the other principles, beneficence has a general ethical sense, proposing that every person who hopes to be ethical has a duty to engage in conduct which contributes to the good and well-being of others. In biomedical ethics, beneficent action is considered to be a mandatory minimum in terms of the professional’s duty (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994). Similarly, when the principles of bio-ethics are applied to teaching, it should be considered as part of one’s duty that all efforts be made to advance the good and well-being of the students in one’s care (Peters, 1972). This goes beyond the duties implied by non-maleficence to include those related to promoting the physical and intellectual well-being (and guarding the reputation) of the teacher’s clients, both pupils and their parents.
Consideration of a more highly developed professional ethics for teachers can only assist in the overall growth and enhancement of the profession. Endorsement of such a code of conduct would signal a new maturity for the profession and bring it into line with other high status professions, both in terms of its inner conduct and in terms of its responsiveness to new ethico-legal parameters in public service. It also denotes the kind of ethical base that must be in place if any effective school-based values education is to proceed. Ethical training, more than most training, requires consistency of theory and practice, ideas and action. An effective teacher of values must be one who speaks of values in every public word and action. One would go so far as to say that a teacher who displayed no sense of professional ethics in public conduct would be incapable of effective teaching in the area of values education. In turn, it is the grappling with issues of values, and the public recognition of this, that will inform the quest of classroom-based ethics education. It is to this highly vexed and most practical aspect of ethics education that the paper now turns. The vexed question is precisely this: However carefully defined by cultural difference, and however carefully prepared for by practitioners with high personal moral sense, can we actually teach in this area in a way that makes a difference (Straughan, 1988)?

Ethics in the Curriculum: A Case Study

In contrast with earlier times which saw many Western public education systems caught up in a form of secularist social science which has tended to exclude the importance, if not the possibility, of ethics education as an appropriate element of the public curriculum, the past decade or so has seen a marked emphasis being placed on such an education. For instance, the New South Wales (NSW) Department of School Education document *The Values We Teach* (NSW Department of School Education, 1991) states:

> Public schools are not value free. They aim to inculcate and develop in students entrusted in their care those educational, personal, social, moral and spiritual values which are shared by the great majority.

(p. 55)

Here we need to recall the earlier proposition of Charlesworth (1993) that consensus on anything but the moral fundamentals is not possible in a multicultural society. In this light, it was a bold and potentially highly contentious move that saw *The Values We Teach* set out a core of values for the practical attention of schools. The core revolved around values to do with personal commitment to education (focusing on the inherent value of learning, knowledge, curiosity, logical and critical thinking, truth, and life-long learning), personal integrity (focusing on values such as self-acceptance, responsibility, cooperation, honesty, respect for others, health and fitness) and with civic consciousness (concerned with values such as respect for the rights and property of others, as well as, to social justice and the elimination of discrimination). These are said to be central to school-based ethics education. Indeed, the document goes so far as to say that public schools should ‘work actively and consciously to help their students acquire [these] values’ (p. 4). Clearly, these values would need to be dealt with everywhere in a way that is sensitive to the cultural differences identified above.

A recently conducted Australian Research Council funded project (Lovat & Schofield, 1996) has used *The Values We Teach*, and a resultant ethics education program, as the basis for determining whether a school curriculum can modify and change perceptual awareness in relation to ethical matters. The ultimate aim of the study was to determine whether it was possible to change the stated values held by children in a positive direction by means of direct curriculum intervention. The project involved a number of discrete elements, the first of which was the need to devise a reliable and valid scale to measure the values held by primary school-aged children. The second element, the actual intervention, was in the form of an 'ethics education program', devised by the researchers following the guidelines established by *The Values We Teach*. Finally, an attempt was made to evaluate the 'felt' effects of the program, and to determine from both students and staff the perceived value of the program. I will address each of these in turn.

First, an instrument was trialed over a number of months on approximately 500 students in Years 5 and 6 of primary school. In the actual project, 1050 students from the same age range (approximately half each in experimental and control groups) were pre- and post-tested across a six-month period. The instrument highlighted 33 stated values (for example, 'I never take things that are not mine.' 'I like having people from other countries living in Australia.') which reflected the values set in each of the three categories identified in *The Values We Teach*. Each item was measured on a six-point Likert scale. The items also reflected the types of items which one would expect to characterise a professional code of conduct for teachers. Hence, one finds across the three categories items which speak of personal commitment in education ('I like to do my best in
variety of teaching for ongoing program was not so obviously successful in school/educational environment. By contrast, the to education, with the experimental group registering a significant shift over the intervention period. This would seem to indicate that the intervention program was most successful in relation to those issues that related to the specific part of students, and confirmed the general view about overall levels of enjoyment, both their own and those perceived in the students.

Third, the ‘felt’ effects of the program were measured by an evaluation instrument in the case of students, and logs and anecdotal feedback in the case of teachers. In the case of the students, feedback from the evaluation not only confirmed very high ratings for general enjoyment (4.51 on a scale of 6) and belief in the worthwhileness of the program (5.05), but very positive reporting about the impact that the program had had on a range of issues, including those associated with a multicultural society (for example, ‘I am now more aware of problems that people from other cultures have when living in Australia.’ = 4.64). Student feedback also spoke about the importance one should place on values (5.4), their willingness to discuss such issues in class (4.73) and the levels to which such discussion assisted in resisting peer pressure (for example, ‘In class discussions, I usually agreed with my friends, even if I didn’t really believe in what they were saying.’ = 2.73). Anecdotal teacher feedback reported perceptions of effectiveness and changes of behaviour on the part of students, and confirmed the general view about overall levels of enjoyment, both their own and those perceived in the students.

Results of the project were mixed. The primary aim of the study was to determine whether the intervention program produced significant movement in the attitudes and values of the intervention group. A notable main effect was observed for the first factor, personal commitment to education, with the experimental group registering a significant shift over the intervention period. This would seem to indicate that the intervention program was most successful in relation to those issues that related to the specific school/educational environment. By contrast, the program was not so obviously successful in relation to the other two factors, which may represent more generic and perhaps remote issues of personal integrity and civic consciousness. Even here, however, while no truly significant factor differences were observed, there was identifiable movement in individual items, especially in those which accorded with the more significant discussions identified by the teachers. These discussion tended to centre on items to do with such topical issues as sexism and racism (for example, ‘Women should be able to do any job they want.’ ‘I like having people from other countries living in Australia.’). This may indicate the possibility of effective intervention, provided the intervention is sufficiently strong.

The issue of education versus indoctrination needs to be entered into to some extent at least. It could be said that the test merely tracked the extent to which certain values were pursued and, in effect, mandated by the teachers, and that the reality of personal values integration on the part of the students may not have been effected at all. There are two pertinent responses to such a charge. First, the program from which the teachers drew their material was at pains to stress an interactive, problem-solving pedagogy. Granted the sensitivity of the subject matter, and conscious of the variety of home values which might obtain in relation to many of the items, teachers were tutored to ensure that there was no imposition of singular values positions. Second, the results were inescapably related to student perception, rather than indicating, much less proving, true values positions. Rather than being characterised as a weakness not shared by other areas of curriculum, this should be seen as the type of limitation which is imposed on most, if not all, formal curricula in school situations. Be it in history or personal development class, formal tests of the ‘pen and paper’ kind search for perceptual data, rather than indications of integrated belief or values positions. A test for the latter would need to be constructed in a totally different way and, even if able to be effected, would probably be judged to be beyond the normal intentional bounds which encase public education. Like most tests in the public curriculum, these tests indicated that perceptual awareness can be affected in the area of values as well as in other areas.

In terms of the second instrument, that of student evaluation, pupils were generally very positive about the course, were strongly of the opinion that values were important in their lives, and believed that they were able to resist peer pressure in the formulation of their values. They were also strongly of the view that all pupils should be given the opportunity to discuss these
issues in their class. In very general terms, Year 6 students were more positive in their support of the course than Year 5 students, suggesting an added factor of greater maturity.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the modest success of the intervention study. The first and most important is that a curriculum intervention in the area of morals and values can produce a statistically significant change in stated attitudes with regard to both broad groupings and specific issues, and so would appear to comprise an important adjunct to the ethical training responsibilities of teachers described above. The second conclusion is that for an intervention to maximise its success, it must focus on the very basic school-related environment and real-life experience of the child, and/or be sufficiently strong in its impact to break through the boundaries created by the natural interests and concerns of a particular age group. Third, and perhaps most significantly, students enjoyed, valued and endorsed the experience of learning and discussing in this area. This latter point was endorsed by the anecdotal evidence obtained from teachers who, by and large, reported positively on the experiences they had had during the course of the intervention, both for themselves and in terms of their perceptions of pupil experience. They also reported positively on the assistance the intervention had afforded them in enlivening the injunctions of The Values We Teach.

Conclusion

The article has proposed that effective ethics education must begin with some exposure to the many and varied ways in which ethics can and has been conceived and acted upon in history. Even if the teacher of values lacks a full socio-historical theory, at least understanding that there are fundamentally different ethical positions will presumably enhance tolerance and greater acceptance of difference in ethical cultures. In turn, the article has proposed the need for the development of professional ethics for teachers, whether by formal code or informal acceptance, on the basis that such public accountability and recognition is a necessary artefact for a profession charged with responsibilities for values education in the public curriculum. It is recommended that this development might be enlightened by recent developments in other professions with similar public service profiles. Finally, the article endorses the possibility of enhancing pupils' knowledge about and perceptions of moral matters through direct curriculum intervention. As suggested above, the rhetoric and modelling pertinent to ethics education implied in the first

two sections of this article can amount to nought if the matter of effective curriculum implementation remains unaddressed. The argument is that these three dimensions need to be attended to in concert for the teaching profession truly to advance in ethics in its self-understanding, its public face and its effective curriculum practice.

References


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