

The Ethical Imperative in Education

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It goes without saying that ethical conduct is a fundamental expectation of all involved in public education. However it should be not only a necessary quality of our behaviour as educators but also a foreground topic for discussion in classrooms, staff rooms and board rooms. We should bring an overt ethical lens to bear on everything that we do so that we not only attempt to behave ethically, but also learn how to do so more thoughtfully and skillfully, and in the process both encourage and teach others to do likewise.¹

Ethical conduct is not a yes-no matter; it is a quality of behaviour that varies in its consistency and sophistication. Ethics involves not merely adherence to a moral code of required actions under specified circumstances, which would be quite a straightforward matter, but the application of values and moral principles to all aspects of life. That is anything but straightforward and inevitably involves thoughtful deliberation, a skill that must be honed through practice.

Ethics, therefore, is not only an ideal to pursue but also a skill that can and should be refined through experience. It is akin to wisdom and emerges through struggle with vexing issues that tax our ability to understand and apply moral principles in our lives.

At the most basic level ethics involves “doing the right thing,” which requires us first to know what that is. This is often less than obvious because there are diverse perspectives, interpretations of the facts and understandings of the implications of moral principles. Sometimes there are also two or more conflicting core values to be upheld, which leads to a “right versus right” dilemma.² Perhaps the archetypical example, which arises frequently in schools, is the dilemma created by simultaneous commitment to justice and compassion. Upholding the rules but applying them in light of unique circumstances requires ethical judgments that can be disturbingly ambiguous.

Different people with equally sincere intentions to conduct themselves ethically often disagree on “the right thing” and even when there is a strong consensus an ethical person will listen with interest to minority dissenting views knowing that ethics is complex and subtle and s/he should consider every possibility before coming to a decision. Even with such care, however, ethical people often regret their actions and would conduct themselves differently in hindsight.

It is perhaps the complexity and contested nature of ethics that often tempts us to avoid placing ethical intentions and analysis in the foreground when talking about educational practice. Whatever the reason in the past, this should change in the future. There are at least two reasons to do so: public confidence and our students’ development.

¹ Ethics and moral values may seem like inappropriate topics for a secular school system. However, ethics should not be equated with any particular religious code. In *How Good People Make Tough Decisions* Kidder shows that there are human values that are common to all religions. See www.globalethics.org/.

² Ibid

The public will forgive us many errors if our “heart is in the right place” and we are truly trying to “do the right thing.” The expectation of character is more fundamental than the expectation of competence. Both are, of course, required but the latter is understood to be emergent while the former is expected to be a reliable foundation. Often the issues that we face in education are presented and discussed in pragmatic terms when their true nature is ethical. Budgets, for example, are not simply a matter of balancing the bottom line, they are an exercise in ethical professional judgment about how best to use resources that will always be inadequate to achieve everything that we desire. What we choose to do, and not to do, and for whom, is a matter of ethics, not merely economics. What goes into the curriculum and what does not, how we teach, how we evaluate, how we communicate and with whom—and every other decision we make—is an expression of our values. Even if our society were not extremely pluralistic these decisions would be contentious. Denying or ignoring ethical complexities in education undermines public confidence by obscuring ideals and purposes that are constant while shining the spotlight of public discussion on methods that often seem to be arbitrary personal preferences, each having its advocates and its evidence. We would form a stronger bond with the public, and achieve more mutual accountability, by talking about ends as well as means and ethical dilemmas as well as practical strategies.

In addition to increasing public confidence, we could enhance our students’ development by including more overt discussion of ethical issues in the curriculum. Dewey first advised us to be aware that our work with students has both present and future consequence and both inner and outer aspects. The vast majority of our attention and resources are focused on outer consequences, primarily in the present with only the occasional node to the future. Yet, many of the most enduring and important consequences of K-12 schooling involve inner aspects of students’ experience and will have their most important consequence in the future. Developing the attitudes, dispositions and self-concept that will enable students to be personally fulfilled individuals and contributing citizens of the local and global community after they leave school requires that we engage them in such inner experience while they are with us. The inner aspects of students’ development include metacognition and self-regulation as well as ethics—all of which are generally sadly neglected. Using ethical dilemmas as a lens for understanding the urgent social, political, economic and environmental issues that challenge Canada and the world would engage students in personally meaningful ways and thus allow us to affect their inner experience, both now and in the future. Since the most pressing issues of our day (such as war, hunger, economic globalization and environmental degradation) are more ethical than technical, failing to introduce students to their ethical dimensions is to do them an enormous disservice that may doom both them and us to the consequences that ensue when power exceeds wisdom.

Therefore, rather than quietly keeping our ethical aspirations and issues to ourselves, we should make ethics one of the primary ways of viewing and understanding everything that we do in schools. Educators should surface and present for public consideration the ethics that underlie their own actions and introduce students to the ethical challenges that pervade the classroom, the community and the world in which they live. Bringing ethical deliberation into the foreground of all aspects of educational practice is “the right thing to do,” both morally and strategically.