TEACHING ETHICS TO EDUCATORS: SOME MODELS AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

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The role of direct instruction in ethics is increasing somewhat in programs leading to teacher and school administrator certification. Revisions to the certification requirements established in the various states have provided the primary impetus; by calling for the integration of ethics into the education curriculum, they have compelled teacher and administrator educators to add ethics units to their courses, at least on paper. The difference this has made to instruction is probably not as great in practice as on paper, however, for education faculty are on the whole no more prepared to teach ethics than are faculty in other professional schools, and materials suitable for teaching education ethics are few. Equality, social justice, and respect for diversity are touchstones of educational instruction and theorizing, and a heartfelt commitment to such values may gain converts, but confidence about where the moral high ground lies does not in itself enable one to teach ethics. Educational theorizing is highly value laden, but dominated by a theory-practice model that treats theory choice as something akin to a declaration of political party affiliation, and all too often treats the practices to be illuminated as afterthoughts. Educational theory rarely yields any principled guidance for action, because no action-guiding principles are articulated, and the particulars of practices and choices are not examined. So instead of a literature of education ethics, one finds a literature that is for the most part preemptively political, excessively theory-driven, and oblivious to the need to articulate principles, discern particulars, and bring principles and particulars together in a well-reasoned whole.

As a field of study, education ethics is thus in its infancy, and very much in need of models that illustrate the ways in which education students and professionals can engage in ethical analysis. What follows is a
modest step toward providing such models. In the school of education in which I am jointly appointed, I guest teach the one-hour ethics units now included in a course on decision-making for school administrators and a seminar on issues in teaching taken by pre-service teachers during their semester of student-teaching. I also teach a course, “Ethics and Educational Leadership,” which is designed to meet the certification standards in ethics for advanced programs in school leadership, while doubling as an ethics course for teachers, counselors, and college and university administrators. An hour is barely enough time to give students a *taste* of what is involved in thinking through an ethically sensitive situation — not much more than an advertisement for the course — so I’ll confine my remarks to the course.

Standard 5.0 of the *Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership* reads: “Candidates [i.e., candidates for certification] who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner” (NPBEA, 2002, 13). The gloss on this standard refers to respect for the rights and dignity of others, honesty, impartiality, sensitivity to diversity, and ability to “make and explain decisions based upon ethical and legal principles,” “examine personal and professional values,” and “serve as role models” (NPBEA, 2002, 13). The emphasis in this standard is on what can be taught, namely “knowledge and ability,” and the expectation seems to be that coursework that promotes ethical knowledge and ability will also contribute to ethical conduct. Another feature of the standard is that it calls attention to the ethical complexity of the educating professions. Like other professionals, educators must make ethically-responsible decisions, and must be prepared to at least occasionally explain and justify those decisions. Unlike most other professionals, educators have a responsibility to promote the sound moral development of the young people they supervise *in loco parentis*. They are expected to serve as role models who display both ethical conduct and sound ethical thinking and sensibilities. In that capacity, they need to be able to articulate with moral clarity the reasons for their actions, for their judgments, and for the policies they impose. They must be able to “explain decisions” and “examine” values, with “impartiality” and “sensitivity to student diversity.” Preparing educational leaders to *display* these traits, to *model them publicly*, is a tall order. How might a course in education ethics best proceed?
GENERAL METHODS

An anomaly, which must be noted at the outset, is that although school administrator programs may be held accountable to the standard noted above, there is no corresponding code of ethics for school administrators that can be relied upon as a tool or focus of instruction in the ethics of school administration. Educational leaders are to “examine personal and professional values that reflect a code of ethics,” but there is no prescribed code of ethics they are to examine or refer to in examining their “personal and professional values.” The idea that professions are governed by canonical formulations of principles and the public ends they serve is important, however, and I have found it useful to devote some time at the beginning of the course to discussing the idea of a professional code of ethics and examining codes of ethics for teachers and for educational researchers (NEA, 2001; Strike, et al., 2002). Both provide some indirect guidance for school administrators, and the latter provides, in its section on proper assignment of intellectual ownership, a principled basis for discussing plagiarism, cheating, and copyright infringement.

The indirect guidance provided by these codes is quite limited, however, and the course aims to fill the void somewhat by introducing non-authoritative ethical frameworks that can usefully inform a practitioner’s conception of educational administration generally, as well as some more specific aspects of educational practice, such as the teacher’s authority in her classroom. Thomas Sergiovanni’s book, Moral Leadership (1992), provides an overview of different models of school leadership and makes a case for one that relies substantially on the moral aspirations and sense of professionalism that teachers typically bring to their work. This is valuable in providing an ethical orientation to the larger ends and means of school administration, though it does not address matters that one would expect a code of ethics to cover, and its forays into moral theory are unreliable at best. The second half of the course concerns higher education, not primary and secondary education, but the similarities are strong enough to enable school administration students to benefit from Paul Olscamp’s book, Moral Leadership (2003). Olscamp provides an overview of the university president’s responsibilities to various constituencies, and provides thoughtful and probing discussions of ethically rich cases from his own experience. As a Philosopher-President, he is able to offer case analyses that are both revealing and principled. He is explicit about the principles on which decisions and judgments about decisions rest, and he provides models of analysis culminating in well-reasoned guidance for
Peter Markie, a Philosopher-Vice-Provost, provides an ethical framework for professor-student relationships in higher education, which is similarly helpful in clarifying some aspects of teacher-student relationships in schools (Markie, 2003). As a model of ethical argument, it is exemplary in the way it makes explicit the grounds for the ethical framework it advances. It marshals some uncontroversial facts about professor-student relationships, and demonstrates that the author’s framework can accommodate those facts, while neither of two alternative frameworks can.

A central message of the course is that it is important to make the principles explicit, because doing so is foundational to making principled decisions and adequately explaining one’s decisions. The development of skills and habits of ethical analysis and sound decision-making involves both perceptual and calculative aspects: attunement to the morally salient aspects of the situations likely to be encountered in professional life, as well as the ability and disposition to fully articulate ethical premises and examine the logic through which ethical and factual premises together support or fail to support a decision. Hence, the course devotes much attention to the analysis of cases, but also to the identification and appraisal of ethical arguments. The opening chapter of James Rachels’ book, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (2003), provides models for identifying and evaluating ethical arguments, and we attempt to emulate those models throughout the course as we examine a series of cases and related readings on ethically laden aspects of schooling: the exercise of authority in the classroom, grading, commercial activity in schools, the inclusion of students with disabilities, moral education, service learning requirements, and restrictions on parental fund raising. Because the literature on these topics seldom provides the models of careful analysis and argument I would like students to emulate, I introduce some readings from other domains that provide helpful clarity and analytical strategies. For instance, I have used Benjamin Freedman’s paper, “Equipoise and the Ethics of Clinical Research” (1987), in connection with discussing the ethics of teaching experimental curricula, and Ann Cudd’s paper, “Taking Drugs Seriously” (1997), in connection with campus drug policies.

The NPBEA Standards call upon school administrators to not only “make and explain decisions based upon ethical and legal principles,” but also “examine personal and professional values,” and “serve as role models” (NPBEA, 2002, 13). In order to thoughtfully examine values and respond to student queries about the basis for rules and requirements, administrators require some understanding of the kinds of reasons that
may be brought to bear on the selection of rules, principles, and ideals. In
order to serve as role models with responsibility for the moral develop-
ment of students, administrators require a reasoned basis for advocating
a moral point of view. Pursuant to these requirements, the course pro-
vides an introduction to moral philosophy, through Rachels (2003) and
Foot (2001). Philippa Foot’s *Natural Goodness* forms a compact and rela-
tively accessible addendum to Rachels’ *Elements*, and its defense of moral
objectivity is a useful antidote to the facile social constructivist views that
are common in schools of education.

A pitfall that I have found it necessary to guard against in introduc-
ing moral theory is that education students, many of them already well
schooled in the *theory-practice model* referred to above, are tempted to treat
the theories not as accounts of the nature and structure of morality, but
as alternative decision-procedures that can be applied more-or-less
mechanically in specific circumstances. This results in *pro forma* exercises
of the theory-driven sort they are already too familiar with, so I encour-
age instead the idea that moral theories are attempts to make sense of
morality and explain its value: that it embodies respect, secures mutual
advantage, promotes happiness, enables us to obtain goods that are natu-
ral to the human life form — claims that are all at least approximately
ture. By focusing on the rationales for specific moral principles provided
by Rachels and Foot, I encourage the idea that moral theories should not
enter as premises in ethical reasoning about what should be done in spe-
cific circumstances, but instead may enter — along with consideration of
examples and counter-examples — into the selection and refinement of
the action-guiding principles that do enter into such reasoning.

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

The methods of ethical analysis that I teach in this class are elemen-
tary and thoroughly familiar to philosophers, but they are largely
unknown in schools of education. Many students, even at the doctoral
level, find them difficult to master, but most are very receptive and make
progress. A few students are positively excited by the idea of morality as
“the effort to guide one’s conduct by reason,” and accept the corre-
sponding challenge to reason carefully (Rachels, 2003, 14). I build into
the course as much practice as possible, through weekly short writing
exercises and in-class practice, sometimes in small groups, often by develop-
ing case and argument analyses through discussion and suggestions
from the class. My most frequent comment on the writing assignments is
that the student has not fully articulated the argument or made its normative premise explicit. They get better at that as the semester progresses. What is perhaps most difficult for them is simply identifying the ethical issues at stake, when they must address a topic that has not been mapped out for them. This becomes evident in their work on class presentations and major papers, which I monitor and coach.

We read an article about commercial activity in schools (Manning, 1999), which refers to corruption of some aspects of the curriculum, computers that are given in exchange for advertising displays on the computer screens, an incident in which students were required to wear shirts advertising the school's exclusive soft drink vendor, and an incident in which a principal directed that soda machines be placed, and class rules be changed, to enable students to buy drinks between classes and drink them during class, in order to meet sales targets. Students find it difficult to formulate what might be wrong with any of the decisions and practices described. One idea suggested is that the students in these schools are "a captive audience." Out of school they are also bombarded with commercial messages, but there they can escape the messages, more or less, by turning away from them. But in school they can't. Ah, but the same is true of schoolwork, we note. So it can't just be a problem of captivity or avoidability. Perhaps the problem is with the content of the messages, or that the school becomes beholden to commercial interests. We try focusing on content. Does the volume of commercial messages distract students too much from what they are in school to learn? Does corporate influence undermine the role of schools as public spaces in which students learn to engage in the public work of citizenship, able to freely investigate matters of public interest, including matters of corporate conduct? We end up focusing on soft drink consumption and the principal's actions in trying to meet sales targets, and succeed in generating this argument:

1. School officials should not encourage unhealthy habits in students.
2. By accepting and pursuing soft drink sales targets, school officials encourage unhealthy habits in students.
3. Therefore, school officials should not accept and pursue soft drink sales targets.

Here's another illustration. A principal faces a student who refuses on principle to accept the school's service learning requirement for graduation. How should she handle that? The standard referred to above sug-
gests that she should handle it by being a model of moral thoughtfulness. She should take the student’s arguments seriously, and in doing that treat the student with respect, whatever decision she must ultimately make. We use an editorial by a student published in the *New York Times*, which argues in part:

Students would have to show that they had done 60 hours of [community service], or they would not receive their high school diploma.…

That forced me to make a decision. Would I submit to the program even though I thought it was involuntary servitude, or would I stand against it on principle? I chose principle, and was denied a diploma.…

[President Clinton] … has called for high schools across the country to make community service mandatory for graduation — in other words, he wants to force young people to do something that should be, by its very definition, voluntary.

That will destroy, not elevate the American spirit of volunteerism.…

In a country that values its liberty, we should make sure that student “service” is truly voluntary (Steirer, 1997).

Students working in teams can usually see that there are three arguments here, and that none of them is very good: an argument from definition (volunteer work is voluntary), a causal argument (imposing service requirements will undermine volunteerism), and an argument from liberty. The key in assessing the argument from liberty is to ask what specific principle of respect for liberty could sustain this argument. Once students realize this, they do not have a hard time seeing that schools require many learning experiences that are not voluntary, because we have reason to believe those experiences will benefit students and society. It’s not clear why service learning experiences would be any different.

The following case provides a third illustration:

*The Gifted Screw-up.* Dr. Read is surprised by how poorly Janus Sleeper has done on her final exam, but she is one of the better French majors in his department at Wish University, and he does not want to ruin her GPA in her concentration. She is talented but unfocused, and he hopes for her sake that someday she will decide to make a success of herself and go on to
graduate school. Although her score is only a 79% and there are two scores above 90%, he sets the cut-off for an “A” at 78% so he can give her an “A” and keep her graduate school hopes alive.

This is an interesting case, because the decision is ad hoc, but there is no obvious violation of equity. Janus is not given a higher letter grade than anyone with an equal or higher score. So if there is a problem of equity, it is because the scale of letter grades is not sensitive enough to capture differences of merit that it ought to capture. But how fine-grained should the scale be? One needs to articulate a principle in order to answer this question, and the principle must accommodate the fact that we often see no problem in recognizing few if any distinctions of merit below the cutoff for a failing grade. Like other quandaries about grading, the case also suggests the importance of recognizing a distinction between equity (i.e., a principle that better performances deserve better grades), and the harshness of the grading scale or quality of the performance required to earn a given grade. Having distinguished these, the case prompts one to consider what kinds of factors may legitimately enter into determining the harshness of a grading scale and what kinds may not. The issues here are complex, perhaps surprisingly so, and exploring them with a class serves to nurture habits of ethical reflection, even in the likely event that no consensus is achieved.

CONCLUSION

The combination of case and argument analysis in this course is designed to encourage students to not only think through the ethical dimensions of situations they may encounter in professional life, but also make explicit the ethical premises on which they would act. In doing this, the course attempts to satisfy the expectation that school administrators be prepared to make and explain decisions on the basis of ethical principles. The course has been well received by students. They often report that they were pleased to learn that ethics is not the thoroughly subjective enterprise they imagined, and that they found the topics, readings, and discussions worthwhile. The underdeveloped state of the literature of education ethics makes this for now a harder course to replicate than it would otherwise be, but those with substantial background in other areas of practical and professional ethics will find that some of the materials
they have used in other domains can be readily adapted. As schools of education continue to shed their “foundations” faculty, they appear to be looking increasingly to philosophy departments to provide philosophy and ethics of education courses. In doing so, they may create a sounder institutional basis for the proliferation of education ethics courses and the development of an associated literature.

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NOTES

1 Presented at the Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the Association for Practical & Professional Ethics, February 26-29, 2004, in Cincinnati, Ohio.
2 For a now somewhat dated study of where things stand, see Beck and Murphy, 1994.
3 For present purposes, I mean by “education ethics” the study of the ethical aspects of schooling (K-12), as opposed to higher education. The study of the ethical aspects of higher education is often referred to as “academic ethics,” as in the series of books on academic ethics published by Rowman & Littlefield under the general editorship of Steven Cahn. The education ethics texts that come closest to observing the norms of practical and professional ethics are Strike and Soltis (1998), and Strike, Haller, and Soltis (1988), but neither provides adequate models for how to analyze ethical problems or frame and arrive at decisions. Strike distances himself from his approach in these books in Strike (2003).
4 The NPBEA Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership are used as accreditation standards by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council.

REFERENCES


