

# Ethics in Education: Teaching Moral and Ethical Decision-Making

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the critical role of ethics in education, emphasizing the need for educators to be well-equipped in teaching and modeling ethical decision-making. It argues for the integration of ethics into the curriculum, school policies, and societal practices, highlighting theoretical foundations, ethical dilemmas in education, and strategies for fostering ethical development in students. The discussion underscores the importance of a holistic approach, where ethics is not only taught as a standalone subject but is woven throughout all educational practices, thereby preparing students to navigate complex moral landscapes. Finally, the paper examines methods for assessing ethical competencies, ensuring that students are not only knowledgeable about ethical principles but are also capable of applying them in real-world situations. **Keywords:** Ethics in Education, Moral Decision-Making, Ethical Dilemmas, Teacher Role in Ethics, Curriculum Integration.

## INTRODUCTION

Ethics and ethical decision-making are integral to the goals of education: after all, we aim to teach students to be able to morally and ethically think and behave. Not only is the school setting a moral classroom in and of itself, but schools also have a responsibility to directly educate their students about moral and ethical tenets and how to make decisions based on ethical principles [1, 2]. Qualified staff and faculty are able to lead educational institutions with respect to pedagogy and curriculum, but are they prepared to grasp and lead on the ethical dimensions that exist within? The educators are going to come into contact with numerous moral decision-making opportunities throughout their stint in schools. It is no question of 'if' this will occur, rather it is a question of 'when.' Both within the parameters of their daily tasks to the broader course of their role as educators and mentors, they will be met with opportunities to further moral and/or ethical deliberation. For this reason, it is imperative that our teachers are trained, versed, and competent in moral and ethical education and decisions [3, 4]. This paper will argue that ethical conduct should be made an integral part of educational practice: from school curriculum content, to school policies, and societal practices. The Domain of Ethics: Here I take a broad view of the definition of ethics and, by extension, the ethical, connoting ideas relating to what is morally correct and incorrect, instead of a narrower approach, often associated with an individual, justice versus fairness, virtue, and/or principle or theory [5].

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MORAL AND ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

This book on ethics in education is grounded in certain theories, concepts, and points of view. More than likely, these are familiar, even comfortable, in the main to the reader. Inspection points which have been cited in developing this volume include: the philosophy of education; notions concerning character, virtue, and morality from the field of philosophy; the psychology of moral and character development; the relation of power to morality and ethics. I also used insights from those less frequently called upon in thinking of schools, teaching, or education: feminist theories which set the questioning of power and domination at their centers; the relational notions of resistance and justice which come out of literature, black and feminist philosophy, existential philosophy, and Marxist, radical democratic theories; ethical

perspectives put forth in recent robust debates in jurisprudence, especially in critical legal studies, among first amendment scholars, and in critical race theory; and developments in the practice of psychotherapy and in the teaching of law, notably in clinical education, that have affected our thinking about moral judgment and moral and ethical decision-making. There are also some demurrals: I do not argue for or from an ethical stance that recalls the strands of appropriating and affirmative thinking which accompany the ultra-conservative right today, such as in the preachings of Lynne V. Cheney or William Bennett: I am not needing to seek school predicated on a foreign religious dogma, such as fundamentalism [6, 7]. Similarly, while many in the animal rights and environmentalist movement rightly point out that we should do more to take account of the ecosystem in our thinking about ethics and morality, I have chosen to make this a branch of study, not a stem. I am also not concerned about a postmodern [postmodernism] attack on an authoritative education. Rather, I seek to make readings appropriate or relevant to actual learning communities. The book is inherently coded for a democratic society. Thus, it argues that when students act with virtue we have been fortunate enough to have helped them to act ethically as democrats, persons, and citizens. The field of studying ethics is called "axiologic" and it is a sub-field of "meta-ethics." Axiologic is concerned with the study of values or valuations. When we begin to break down the axiological field, we find that this, in turn, is divided into four divisions: Axiology, Moral Philosophy, Ethics, Social Ethics or Political Ethics. Political Ethics in turn is composed of Business, Professions, and the Professions of Education. Thus, we are now looking at applied social ethics or the study of the "ethics-prevailing philosophy or ideology" of various professional fields [8].

#### **ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN EDUCATION**

An ethical dilemma is a conflict between two or more deeply held beliefs or values. Options, behaviors, or experiences that are desirable but are in conflict with one another or with societal standards are at the center of ethical dilemmas, which can often include moral implications such as fairness, honesty, and respect. As the educational world is governed by laws, public expectations, and witnessing the development of individuals from their formative stages to their maturation, the workplace of the educator is an environment rich in ethical problems that have implications not only for the educator but for the educational institution and society [2, 9]. Examples of ethical dilemmas in education can be found in managing the teacher-student relationship (e.g., should they be friends on social media?), intervention into issues of character and values (e.g., should a student be disciplined for their choice of Halloween costume?), respecting the ethical choices of others (e.g., wearing religious coverings and symbols), the allocation of money and resources (e.g., should a school have photography or physical education?), responding to and respecting the legal rights of students with disabilities (e.g., providing sensory rooms in every educational facility), personal behavior and work conduct (e.g., cheating and breastfeeding in public spaces), to name but a few [10, 11]. Case studies to explore dilemmas in bullying, abuse, standardized testing, cheating, not addressing the negative behavior of others nor joining in, accepting gifts from students, freedom of speech, dress codes for staff, and removing students from education are included. As a collaborative experience, the teachers and administrators share their feelings during the process [5].

#### **STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ETHICS IN THE CLASSROOM**

One way to begin teaching ethics in the classroom is to integrate "ethics conversations" into any class - discussing the recent news related to them and their professions. This can help students see issues in a larger context and integrate their news-reading with deeper discussions about ethics and society. Classroom conversation about ethics cases and issues is important - but they do not encourage students to develop a personal ethic. While some students are ethical in their approach, many students just say what they think the instructor wants to hear. When discussing these issues in class, some teachers split students into small groups to further stimulate discussion. Group work helps harness the life experiences and prior knowledge of the students in the class [12, 13]. Putting students in a group is also a way to give more students an opportunity to talk - and this helps to build their confidence and help them articulate their views more clearly. They will be more likely to speak up in a small group and to have their views heard and considered. Answering the question with a Yes/No can be followed by an explanation. This is also a way to give a broad range of students an opportunity - verbally or non-verbally - to participate. Another interesting exercise can be to repeat the answering in a small group, see if anyone changed their mind, and then invite someone from that group to explain why they have agreed to the "opposite" answer [14, 15].

#### **ROLE OF TEACHERS IN FOSTERING ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT**

We have a growing body of research that shows the ways in which teachers are viewed by students as being the seminal influence in their moral development. These students tell us that they look to teachers for morally evaluative messages; for the way teachers treat students; for the messages they get from the

way subjects are taught; and for the kinds of examples presented by teachers. Teachers serve as upholders—and transmitters—of values in a very real sense. Students suggest that a teacher who is "fair," "honest," "caring," models high standards and clarity of values; the teacher is good at problem solving; and the teacher uses real-life scenarios for the examination of moral and ethical issues. The findings of "moral education" research have implications for a broad range of "ethics" teaching/response across the curriculum. At the very least, these findings suggest that teachers do have an impact on "character" development. More to the point, they suggest that teachers also have an impact on the development of moral judgment [16]. Indeed, teachers take on an ethical role when they impart messages which have to do with character formation and social conduct. But the teacher is also an integral actor in the stories of students, and no less—and no more—responsible for classroom watching. In the Sizer philosophy, relationships matter and the center is students and parents. The teacher's role then is to facilitate the student's personal sense of professional and personal responsibility. When a classroom is comprised of respectful, kind, and empathetic relations, no child health-raising issues are created. We all are of worth, deserve respect. So, respect and the concept of decent relations, then, are the basis of the goals of character and moral education that answer the questions "What kind of person do I want to be?" "Should I care?". It is the teacher's responsibility (ethical) to help students move from caring potentials to actual unfolding by helping the student to perceive that "to love and be loved is the highest standard for human behavior - the lost art of caring." It is caring that requires skills in active listening, internalizing material, and then adapting one's response in speech, reading, writing, and choice of wise actions [17].

#### **INTEGRATION OF ETHICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM**

There is a movement accredited to infuse ethics across various disciplines within an educational framework. This means working with educators from each teaching unit or academic discipline to infuse ethical consideration across a broad range of subjects. This is an intentional strategy designed to ensure that students are provided with ethical perspectives from various disciplines and to ensure that teachers of these subjects are cognizant of the ethical requirements within their field. Infusing learning in relational ethics in real-world contexts allows teachers and students to construct moral concepts to guide their actions. This approach moves beyond the delivery of ethics as a published unit studying theories and ideas about morals and actions to the practice of doing ethics. It also embeds moral learning with a meaning-based learning pedagogy [18]. Teachers help students to construct moral meaning regarding the consequences of environmental decisions and influence students' social habits to play out in particular ways with implications for their relationship to nature. By infusing ethics across the curriculum, educators aim to reinforce the fact that ethical decision making is a consideration to be contemplated throughout a person's entire life - in education and in practice. These opportunities exemplify how an ethical dimension can be included in every area of study regardless of whether the content focus is explicitly on a moral concept/model or a moral 'dilemma.' This reinforces the need for a "whole of course" approach and for all academics to contribute to this process [19].

#### **ASSESSMENT OF ETHICAL COMPETENCIES IN STUDENTS**

Assessment The assessment of ethical competencies is difficult because it is necessary to distinguish between ethical competencies and knowledge. Although good knowledge of moral standards is one of the essential preconditions of ethical-competent behavior, it is not a guarantee of such behavior – because to behave ethically, it is necessary to operate with moral principles, deliberate about them, and possess some inner motive. Ethical competencies can be measured by the following tools [20].

1. Questionnaires that measure readiness for ethical behavior according to ethical decision-making approaches.
2. Objective-test items/products, such as decision-making process, analysis of ethical cases/ethical dilemmas.
3. Self-assessment scales, value determination, and other techniques that measure values.

The correlation of the score for ethical competencies of students to the scores of business executives is useful only if measured on the basis of observation in professional practice [21]. Effective business ethics education – which is intended to produce morally literate graduates with moral courage and the capacity to act well – involves extensive engagement with pedagogy, the development of carefully constructed learning environments, and the application of a range of innovative teaching strategies. This includes assessment/evaluation tools that can measure/evaluate the students' ethical development [22].

#### **ASSESSMENT AND CASE STUDIES**

Case studies cannot be evaluated synchronically as they often talk about development, i.e. they provide a dynamic series of events. Moreover, for example, many highly followed cases, in which failure does not equate to criminality/immorality, culminate in adverse outcomes in unlawful/immoral practice [23].

#### **CONCLUSION**

Ethics education is a foundational aspect of shaping responsible, morally aware individuals who can navigate the complexities of modern society. By integrating ethical considerations across all aspects of the

educational experience, from curriculum design to classroom interaction, educators can play a pivotal role in the moral and ethical development of students. This approach not only prepares students for personal and professional challenges but also contributes to the cultivation of a more just and ethical society. As such, it is imperative that educational institutions prioritize the teaching of ethics, ensuring that all students develop the critical thinking and moral reasoning skills necessary for ethical decision-making in all areas of their lives.

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