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Educative Ethics: Lessons for Teacher Preparation Programs

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Abstract

We contend that the role of “educative ethics,” teaching and learning about ethical practice in education, is one of the most untapped, yet, potentially necessary and influential elements of educational experience, for students and teachers. This paper explores some of the relevant literature, cites examples for the need for educative ethics and presents a tentative framework for the inclusion of educative ethics in teacher preparation curriculum. The inclusion of this type of framework would allow such programs, and other educational organizations, to incorporate educative ethics into teacher preparation practices. Over time, a larger framework involving a critical pedagogy designed to consistently monitor the “ethical pH” of teacher preparation programs may emerge from considerations such as the one presented in this paper.

Does a need exist in educational settings for exposure to and experiences with ethical and moral decision-making? If so, is there a place in educational experiences for an ethical frame of reference? What would such practices involve? How could teachers be prepared to engage in and support such instructional practices? These issues guided this inquiry into the role of educative ethics in educational practice and training. If we view schools as places that respond to and shape social behavior, that is, socio-cultural microcosms, we may agree that learning about ethical and moral behavior can, and should, be part of school-based instructional experiences.

If we to view learning experiences as a banking system, with teachers depositing knowledge into the students’ brains, the merit of incorporating ethics in educational experiences becomes obscured, if not impossible to recognize; there would be no recognition because there would be no acknowledged purpose for such experience. The ramifications of educative ethics are clearly discernable if you view education as a dynamic interaction among a variety of individuals and groups in which teachers, students, and other individuals participate in a variety of interpersonal experiences in which each member potentially influences the lives of any or all the other participants (Freire, 1998). As such, the potential importance of an ethical frame of reference in education becomes apparent, but concerns regarding what kind of framework, how it will be experienced and by whom remain unanswered questions. Ethics is an often-addressed topic within the context of education, an indication that considering ethical frames of reference in education is an important goal (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Herring, 1988; Keith-Spiegel, 1993; Keristead & Wagner, 1993; Kimbrough, 1985).

Teaching teachers about and within a framework of educative ethics begins to address such concerns. Educative ethics is a decision making process that requires ongoing reflection before, during, and after instruction to create positive academic, social, and intrapersonal effects within learning situations. Formal instructional situations present many opportunities for the use of ethical principles and engagement in ethical practice, the absence of which may have negative effects on participants in these situations as well as experiences outside formal instruction.

The events of the late 1990s and early 21st century have shown that contemporary society has come to tolerate what should be an intolerable level of violence; such behavior has become routine and therefore apparently expectable. This defacto acceptance of interpersonal violence is especially problematic when it occurs in our schools. Increasingly, school-aged children find themselves engaged in or confronted with extreme experiences of aggressive and violent behavior (Gaughan, Cerio, & Myers, 2001). Though schools are relatively safe places to be, the experience of violence has increased rapidly, especially in the 1990s. Gaughan, Cerio, & Myers (2001) cite statistics from the U. S. Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center which indicate that of the 37 identified incidents since 1974, at least 20 have been reported in the national media since 1992, with eight since 1999. Greg Toppo published a report in USA Today (June 28, 2004) highlighting the alarming statistics for the 2003-04 school year, citing 48 deaths in or around US schools.

Apparently, a new cultural norm has been established for handling interpersonal disputes through the use of physical violence. Increasingly, American schools have become settings for such violent "solutions" to interpersonal dilemmas. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported in "Drugs and violence on school property," that in 1999, on average, 7.7% of students responding to a national survey had been threatened or injured with a weapon and 14.2% had been in a physical fight, each one or more times in the 12 months prior to the survey (Infoplease.com, Feb. 1, 2002). Even more challenging examples have occurred as demonstrated in these events: Santana High School, Santee, CA, May 26, 2000: 2 dead, 13 wounded; Columbine High School, Littleton, CO: 15 dead, 23 wounded; Jonesboro, AR, May 21, 1998: 5 dead, 10 wounded; and Heath High School, West Paducah, KY, December 1, 1997: 3 dead, 5 wounded; all are schools that have captured the attention of our nation as scenes of extreme violence as young people apparently found no other alternatives available to address their problems.

Many teachers work diligently to provide positive learning environments that discourage such "solutions." We believe that by understanding, accepting and adhering to an ethical framework teachers may be able to get at the roots of such interpersonal conflicts or problems and provide alternative and non-violent problem solving strategies. As a framework such as this becomes systemic and therefore consistent, all participants in teaching/learning experiences stand to benefit from the use of such practices, even those already working toward this goal. For such as systemic change to occur, a systematic exposure to and training of prospective educators should include a framework of educative ethics.

Physical violence as a method of problem solving is only one of many situations that point to a need to include an ethical framework in educational practice; other effects of educative ethics may also occur. The growth and severity of school violence simply presents a concrete example as a point of reference or starting point. Current events such as school-related violence serve as a reminder of the many outcomes that could occur in America's schools, including the potential for highly positive and beneficial outcomes. Few in our society would have ever believed that the extreme cases of school-related violence of the past decade could have ever occurred, but media reports of school violence reflect a growing trend of intolerance and inappropriate responses towards others in educational settings. Educative ethics in practice can also address the less extreme but potentially damaging conflicts that fill the daily experiences of many students and others involved in educational settings. The taunts, jeers, and harassments, the indignations of inequality and misuse of power, the vast variety of interpersonal insults that harm individuals rather than uplifting and helping everyone in educational situations to reach their potential, experiences such as these have also become routine and expectable parts of school. Gaughan, Cerio, & Myers (2001) reported some of the daily context for such behaviors, such as: 86% of surveyed students said bullying and harassment causes teenagers to turn to lethal violence at school; 61% said they knew students that could bring a gun to school; 37% said they believed kids at their school would shoot someone; 20% have heard rumors about plans to shoot someone; and 20% reported actually hearing kids talk about plans to shoot someone. And there's more, but this is enough to see into the daily experiences of kids at schools, whatever the causes might be. Daily experiences of

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singular solutions to interpersonal problems; violent solutions to interpersonal conflicts. How can this be altered; how can schools become places to learn, including about appropriate problem-solving processes?

Educators are often described as decision makers required to make decisions in many different types of settings. Educative ethics, as reflective decision-making, relates to a particular type of decision making that could become the principal means by which educators make many decisions. Reflection, the essential component of this process, will be explored.

The goal of ethical reflection is *reflective equilibrium*. Strike and Soltis (1985; 1992) define reflective equilibrium as,

...reaching a point in our deliberations where we feel that our moral intuitions and the moral theory that accounts for them are satisfactorily consistent and where the decisions we reach and actions we take can be justified by our moral theory. Of course, as with scientific theory, new facts, events, and hypotheses can force us to reconsider and reformulate our moral theory and to alter our decisions and actions.

The “deliberations” refer to the decision making and reflection that comprise a significant proportion of education and educative ethics. The equilibrium lies between intuition and theory, as it becomes the basis for decision and action. In the context of educational practice, this requires an awareness of both current theory related to educational practice and awareness of one’s own intuitions about teaching and learning. Balancing the two for the ultimate benefit of all those engaged in the teaching/learning process is the task at hand. Reflection is the means by which the balancing takes place. Keep in mind that, according to this definition, reflection occurs before, during, and after instruction; reflection is therefore ongoing.

Ethical reflection can be conceptualized as a cycle. In this interpretation of reflective equilibrium, reconsideration and reformulation stand out. They can occur before, during or after instruction. Theoretically, reflective equilibrium may yield positive effects for those involved in instructional situations by allowing for opportunities for analysis of any and all aspects of teaching/learning situations. Such analyses allow for potential modifications or adjustments in any aspects of teaching/learning situations intended to support any and all participants. However, those involved in the learning situation must make these deliberations, reformulations, and reconsiderations that form the reflective equilibrium to achieve these positive effects.

Such positive effects can be demonstrated in many ways. The effects that Strike and Soltis (1985) anticipate are reflected when Paulo Freire (1998) writes,

In our view, growth as a moral agent, as someone who cares about others and is willing and able to accept responsibility for one’s self, is the compelling matter. Promoting this kind of development is what teachers ought to be fundamentally about, whatever else it is that they are about. We are first and foremost in the business of creating persons. It is our first duty to respect the dignity and value of our students and to help them to achieve their status as free, rational, and feeling moral agents.

The use of educative ethics as reflective equilibrium is centered in the learning situation, therefore, many positive outcomes are student-centered; students benefit directly from these positive effects. Theoretically, the teacher striving to achieve these effects will also benefit by acting as a “moral agent,” in Strike and Soltis's terms. Teachers are therefore contributing to the ultimate benefit of all involved in educational settings. In addition, teachers would potentially be contributing to greater social good by both developing students as appropriate moral agents as well as acting as moral agents themselves. So, if students are experiencing positive effects, everyone in the learning situation may potentially benefit.

Thomas Lickona (1997) asserts that ethical reflection is not reserved for the teacher but should be taught to students as they bring meaning to the educational situation through a reciprocal or shared participation in the teaching/learning process. His definition of ethical reflection suggests some of the goals of ethical reflection. “This strategy focuses on developing several qualities that make up the cognitive side of character: being morally alert; knowing the virtues and what they require of us in concrete situations; taking the perspective of others; reasoning morally; making thoughtful moral decisions; and having moral self-knowledge, including the capacity for self-criticism.”

Teaching students about “virtues,” Lickona’s version of goals (1997), points at the accountability of teachers and students to create positive effects in learning situations. But teachers must initiate such ethical experiences by teaching their students the virtue, or value, of learning. This idea can be represented as a cycle, illustrated in the following diagram.

Figure 1. Values-based interactions and potential influences.

SHAPE * MERGEFORMAT

Lickona (1997) also speaks of a work ethic that serves as an example of this cycle. He says that teachers must take their job seriously if they are going to expect students to take their schoolwork, their work in school, seriously. Once virtue, or valuing, enters the cycle, the line that distinguishes many of the students’ and teachers’ experiences as processed through an ethical educative framework becomes permeable and their relative roles begin to intersect and merge.

A model of reflective practice such as Lickona's suggests both what we're calling the student-teacher cycle and the practice of educative ethics. Through the process of defining educative ethics, establishing the need for reflection in ethical learning situations, and identifying the student-teacher cycle, we have established an initial context for examining the place of educative ethics within the coursework of prospective educators.

Strike and Soltis’s (1985; 1992) *The Ethics of Teaching* serves as an example of ethics in teacher preparation coursework. The practice of educative ethics is not an attempt to construct specific empirical answers to particular ethical questions in education. Rather, their work helps to establish a professional context for the consideration of ethics relative to professional practice, including the training of future educators, and therefore is worth considering as part of this discussion.

As a text for teacher education coursework, *The Ethics of Teaching* presents a logical flow of content and could serve as a framework for course-related experiences in educative ethics. (We will focus on the structure of the first edition in this discussion; the second edition, though structurally changed, retained the same essential content and purpose.) The first five chapters develop the principles of ethics in education. Strike and Soltis discuss such topics as ethical inquiry, ethical theory, punishment and due process, intellectual freedom, equal treatment of students, and reflective equilibrium. The last two chapters present case studies that could be the basis for class discussions (Strike and Soltis, 1985; 1992). These case studies are based on the National Educators Association (NEA) Code of Ethics developed in 1975. The topics of punishment and due process, intellectual freedom, and equal treatment of students are drawn directly from the NEA code, which served as a framework for the Strike and Soltis text.

The essence of educative ethics presented in this paper is based on the Strike and Soltis (1985; 1992) example of adapting a code of ethics for teacher preparation coursework, which encourages reflection, but takes this practice to another level. Educative ethics involves decision-making. Academic experiences with educative ethics

within teacher preparation programs go beyond knowledge of codes of ethics to application and practice. Such experiences should facilitate ethical decision-making within coursework by exploring the potential ethical nature of decisions made within learning situations; pedagogical or instructional decisions should be a particular focus of such reflection.

The Strike and Soltis book (1985; 1992) does have limitations. One such limitation relates to pedagogy. Strike and Soltis do not put pedagogy under an ethical microscope. Instead they look at the non-pedagogical aspects of education. However, the NEA code (NEA, 1975), the basis of their book, reflects the pedagogical realm of educative ethics. The first principle of the NEA code is called “Commitment to the Student.” This principle presents several significant pedagogical statements. Of the nine points, the following four are relevant to this discussion. The NEA codes state,

“The educator . . .

1. Shall not unreasonably restrain the student from independent action in the pursuit of learning;
2. Shall not unreasonable deny the student’s access to varying points of view;
3. Shall not deliberately suppress or distort subject matter relevant to the student’s progress;
5. Shall not intentionally expose the student to embarrassment or disparagement.”

Pedagogical references are clearly evident from these statements. These issues underscore the importance of student-centered learning situations that are non-restrictive. The first statement directs teachers to allow students to pursue learning independently (NEA, 1975). Any teachers’ obstructions could be interpreted as potentially causing negative effects within learning situations.

Also according to this principle, teachers should allow students to have access to varying points of view (NEA, 1975). An example of this would be the contemporary debate about how to teach evolution and to what extent the theory of creationism should be included. This statement suggests that appropriate practice would be to allow students to have access to both points of view with respect to the origin of earth and its inhabitants. This statement leads to a goal of creating learning situations that are not exclusionary with respect to point-of-view. By adding this dimension to coursework, prospective educators will be reminded of both the “beauty” and intellectual necessity of multiple perspectives in education.

The third statement from the first Principle of “Commitment to the Student” (NEA, 1975) guides teachers away from attempts to “suppress or distort subject matter that is relevant to the student’s progress.” In essence, teachers should in no way misinform or misdirect students with respect to subject matter that will have an effect on their progress. This may be best exemplified through an example of student assessment experiences. In some of the past academic experiences of the first author, examinations appeared to have been designed without clear connections to instruction, in effect misrepresenting the instructional content that was intended to be assessed. The instructional content was not clearly or adequately represented as part of the assessment. In the opinion of the author, this lack of correspondence between instruction and assessment was deemed as an attempt to “trick” students. It was the author’s experience in teacher preparation courses that many students, believing they’d prepared for an examination did poorly because assessment was not aligned with instruction. In other words, information was suppressed.

Even if not intentionally used for misdirection, assessment should not be interpretable as “trickery.” McMillan (1997) states in *Classroom assessment: Principles and practice for effective instruction*, “. . .Credible assessment information, procedures, and techniques can be used by teachers to improve student learning.” and “. . .Good teachers continually assess their students relative to learning goals and adjust their instruction on the basis of this information.” According to McMillan, assessment should guide instruction. It should not serve as a “booby trap” for students.

The NEA code considers the emotional atmosphere of learning situations when issues of embarrassment and disparagement are addressed (NEA, 1975). Though such considerations should be obvious to educators, ethical pedagogy that creates positive effects within learning situations should not result in embarrassment to or disparagement of anyone involved. Creating a caring environment that supports learning should be an essential value of teachers within learning situations.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) also has a code of ethics (1971) worthy of inclusion in this inquiry and discussion related to teacher preparation experiences. The AFT code presents two statements that are similar to the NEA code in intent but demonstrate somewhat different methods of representing such guides for practice. One method is termed “beneficence (promote human welfare, prevent harm, remove harm)”; the other method is termed “non-maleficence (do no harm, risk no harm)” (Campbell, 2000). The NEA code is an example of non-maleficence and the AFT code (1971) is an example of beneficence.

The AFT (1971) code contains a section entitled “Teacher-Student Commitment.” The following statements are similar in intent and orientation to the NEA principle previously presented but are important to consider with respect to educative ethics.

Statement number 2 says, “The Teacher works objectively to stimulate the spirit of inquiry, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and the thoughtful formulation of worthy goals in each of his students for their advancement. Statement number 3 says, “The Teacher works to develop and provide sound and progressively better educational opportunities for all students.” These statements are directly linked to the working definition of educative ethics presented earlier in terms of working within a context of reflection before, during and after instruction with the goal of enhancing the educational experiences of the students, in particular, as well as all participants in this process. The idea of “worthy goals” is a significant addition that makes this code stand out as an example of educative ethics and is directly aligned with the ideas in McMillan’s (1997) text about goals of assessment with respect to instruction. These two codes of professional practice, similar in intent though different in language, can serve as an organizational framework for developing a systematic model of educative ethics.

Educative ethics is a decision making process that requires ongoing reflection before, during, and after instruction to create positive effects within learning situations. The idea of reflection addressed by Strike and Soltis (1985; 1992) has been expressed in terms of the concept of “reflective equilibrium.” Such practice is ongoing and pedagogical in nature. The moral intent involved in reflective equilibrium (Strike and Soltis, 1985; 1992) as well as instruction guided by assessment (McMillan, 1997) provide a context for positive effects within educational settings. The principles from the NEA code (1975) and the AFT code (1971) serve as examples of educative ethics in professional context.

In conclusion, educative ethics should be embraced and included in professional education programs if our society values ethical educational experience for all participants in the teaching/learning process. Teacher preparation programs increasingly involve guided reflection as an element of professional training; educative ethics could easily be incorporated into teacher preparation programs through coursework and other experiences that may already be based on expectations and applications of reflective practice.

How can this be accomplished? Teacher preparation programs should include an exposure to reflective equilibrium through reflective experiences and requirements within coursework. The case study approach suggested by Strike and Soltis (1985; 1992) is an example of one method to address this goal. These programs should also include knowledge of the student-teacher cycle presented in this paper. In our opinion, this cycle that connects the teaching/learning processes and teachers and learners in these experiences, is essential for educative ethics to occur and develop. Finally, teacher preparation programs should adopt existing codes of ethics or develop codes for participants in these programs to serve as frameworks for practice and benchmarks for reflection.

The following quote from Paulo Freire (1998) serves as a reminder of the value and importance of educative ethics, especially with respect to the preparation of future educators.

This adventure was always for me something profoundly linked to people. To people who were as yet unfinished, curious, intelligent, and capable of knowing. Capable too of breaking an ethical code because they are humanly capable of not being ethical. Although I never idealized educative practice as something fit only for angels, I was always totally convinced that it is worthwhile to struggle against the derivations and prejudices that prevent us from being something more than we are at any given moment.

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