

Applied Ethics as a Foundation in Early Childhood Teacher Education: Exploring the Connections and Possibilities

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Abstract This project explores how one early childhood preparation program integrated applied ethics in introductory coursework. Recognizing that students enter teacher education with well-formed values and beliefs regarding children and teaching, carefully planned learning experience and encounters in real life learning contexts expand their understanding of the complexity of ethical decision-making in early care and education programs. This project documents students' perspectives toward their role as meaning-makers through the analysis of assignments intended to promote reflection on values. As students engage with course content and gain practical experience, their knowledge and beliefs regarding teaching evolve together demonstrating the power of ethical thinking in enhancing early childhood teacher education. The findings indicate that students draw on their image of children, social justice, and self-awareness in their development of a professional ethical identity.

Keywords Ethics · Early childhood teacher education · Early childhood education · Values · Professionalism

Introduction

Ethical professionalism involves the development of a strong self-identity characterized by the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for confidence and competence in making sound ethical judgments (Newman 2002). Hostetler (1997) explains that teachers apply ethical

judgment daily as they consider the complex choices regarding their actions and attitudes in which certainty regarding justice, care and respect are unclear. Arguably, early care and education settings are sites for ethical practice, where teachers in the course of everyday activities often make judgments about and for the individuals to whom they are professionally responsible (Cummings et al. 2001; Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Dunn 2003; Vasconcelos 2006). Therefore, it is essential to understand if and how teachers connect theory and practice when making decisions regarding children, families, and colleagues (Lyons 1990; Tirri 1999; Tirri and Husu 2000).

The limited focus on ethics in both early childhood research and policy impedes efforts by the field to develop a strong professional identity for its teachers. The current research documents the influence of an applied ethics component to an introductory early childhood education course on pre-service teachers' understanding of responsibility to others and self as central components of quality practice. The purpose of embedding ethical reasoning early in the teacher education program was to provide a strong foundation for future learning that can be drawn upon during later coursework and practical experiences.

Early Childhood Professional Ethics

Generally, early childhood practitioners frame professional ethics through two distinct dimensions: the justice-oriented approach and a relational ethic of care (Dunn 2003; Woodrow and Busch 2008).

Justice-Orientated Ethics

In response to the call for greater accountability in education, early childhood leaders, striving for increased

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professional identity for the field, urge practitioners to adhere to the principles and ideals presented in the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct (NAEYC 2005). The framework of the Code reflects a commitment to distinctive responsibilities and rules for professional behavior that draw from a traditional ethical perspective applied to educational contexts (Ungaretti et al. 1997). This current early childhood discourse of professionalism infers that much of what defines good practice and quality care reflects a justice-orientation to ethics in which individuals find support for their decisions and actions in a shared understanding “applicable universally, to everyone” (Grayling 2003, p. 152).

The justice-oriented paradigm to early childhood education involves promoting equality and fairness in ethical decision-making with the intent of protecting children’s rights (Howe 1993). This approach implies that ethical professionals follow objective and rational core values, ideals, and principles that define appropriate behavior and decision-making processes (Strike and Soltis 1985). Dall’s (2008) research regarding practitioners’ views of professional behavior indicates teachers most often define their professional responsibilities by prioritizing fairness to children, knowledge of regulations and policies, and practices that reflect the ideals and values central to the early childhood. In this view, teachers reflect upon external expectations in addressing a wide range of situations and dilemmas that arise related to children, families, colleagues, and communities. Because many teachers share the goal of creating just and equitable classrooms, they find comfort and satisfaction in having a clearly delineated framework for quality of care and children’s well-being (Fenech 2006). However, ethical action grounded in justice, rules, rights, and traditions is also impacted by individual backgrounds and experiences that shape interactions.

Ethic of Care

Noddings (1984) argues that ethical practice reflects a natural sentiment toward others and desire to create, maintain, and enhance relationships. Applying an ethic of care includes caring about, taking care of, care giving, and care receiving as components for interpreting dilemmas and determining actions (Tronto 1993). Noddings (1984) asserts:

What we do depends not upon rules, or at least not wholly on rules— not upon a prior determination of what is fair or equitable—but upon a constellation of conditions that is viewed through both the eyes of the one-caring and the eyes of the cared-for (p. 13).

This perspective reflects a process entrenched in the unique contexts in which dilemmas arise. Ethical practice

is characterized through interdependence, cooperation and reciprocity in decision-making (Fleer 2003). Professionals who act ethically respect individuals, honor difference and multiplicity, care for oneself and recognize the power in determining justice for others in making judgments (Castle 2004; Dahlberg et al. 1999). Therefore, being an ethical teacher involves consideration of the perspective of others and the cultural complexity of situations of practice in and evaluating the consequences of their actions.

It is becoming clearer that today’s complex situations of practice call for a new ethical professionalism that merges “expert knowledge with sound judgment and thoughtful action” (Goodfellow 2003, p. 49). Considering that both justice and care orientations emphasize the importance of relationships to ethical professionalism (Johnston 2008), it is understandable how early childhood teachers apply both approaches when addressing dilemmas in their practice (Fenech 2006). Dahlberg and Moss (2005) identify the preschools of Reggio Emilia as a powerful example of teachers connecting ethical and technical practice as complementary ideals. In this approach practitioners are meaning makers, co-constructors, critical thinkers and researchers who explore new ideas and knowledge grounded in a strong image of children and teachers. Educators are challenged to consider themselves in relation to others as they develop an ethics of autonomy that incorporates consciousness, freedom and responsibility in determining a course of action in the best interest of oneself and others (Freire 1997). Through this process teachers create a professional ethical identity that combines their personal values and the core values and ideals of the field in a manner that builds on theories and structures believed to be central to all early childhood practice.

Ethics and Teacher Education

Despite the importance of understanding how teachers perceive and apply ethics, teacher education literature primarily focuses on the methods utilized to integrate ethics content into coursework. Frequently, preparation programs address the potential role of the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct in creating socially just and equitable classrooms through the use of case study analysis and role-play (Brophy-Herb et al. 2001; Dorsey 1999; Fassler 2000; Feeney et al. 2000; Newman 2002). Consequently, students perceive ethical thinking as a “rational and logical, clean and flawless” theory, rather than the “messy, dirty, unorderly” reality of everyday practice with children, families, and colleagues (Taguchi 2007).

Freire (1997) questions, “Why so few teacher preparation programs include serious attention to the issue of ethics and why a fundamental focus on ethics is such a small part of today’s educational dialogue” (p. 314).

Therefore, to deepen student understanding it is essential that teacher education move beyond ethical practice as content that can be directly related to quality of programs and good teaching. Rather, the teaching of ethics should prepare students for their role as meaning-makers who interpret policy and practice based on context (Newman 2002; Newman and Coombe 1999). Students need opportunities to bridge their understanding of professional ethics gained through coursework to real life situations involving ethical action in the classroom (Clawson and Shinn 2000; Hostetler 1997; McNair et al. 2002).

This study responds to the current need to identify the potential role of early childhood teacher preparation in promoting autonomy of thought and action indicative of new ethical professionalism (Dunn 2003). The goal of this work is to examine how pre-service teachers enrolled in an introductory early childhood education course articulate an understanding of ethical thinking as it applies to practices and judgments in the best interest of themselves and others (Castle 2004).

Methods

Context and Activities

The current project documented students' sense of professional responsibility when enrolled in a freshman level Introduction to Early Childhood Education course. The course focused on the interwoven nature of ethics and early childhood practice rather than quality as a standard to be achieved. The course content and goals related to professional ethics emerged from faculty participation in the Kaiser Ethics Project, a program designed to bring faculty from various disciplines together interested in infusing ethics content into courses. This program inspired faculty to intentionally expose students to care and education of young children as a complex and critical ethical endeavor grounded in relationships, local experiences and contexts. Recognizing that students enter our teacher education program with existing experiences and understandings about teaching and learning, this course utilized a curricular framework and methods for supporting pre-service teachers in merging their beliefs and values with their new knowledge of early childhood education. Assignments intended to engage students in autonomous ethical reasoning and judgment as a foundation for future experiences and learning.

Participants

Sixty students enrolled in two different Introduction to Early Childhood Education classes participated in the study over 2 semesters. All students selected to concentrate their

teacher education program in Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education, leading to state endorsements in teaching children from ages 3–5 or 3–8. Students were primarily majoring in Elementary and Early Childhood Education with 10% majoring in other disciplines related to early childhood, such as Professional Child Development. Students were instructed that the course was employing a new curricular framework and that changes in content and instruction would be documented throughout the semester. Students were asked if their assignments could be analyzed for purposes of the researcher and instructor gaining deeper understanding of students' perceptions of professional ethics. Following the completion of the semester, students determined if they would like to participate and submitted papers for inclusion as a data source.

Data Sources and Collection

Three assignments provided documentation of students' perspectives regarding professional ethics. First, students created an "Image of the Child" that reflected their beliefs about children in a creative way. Second, students presented materials to children during their fieldwork in the form of an "invitation to learning" (Curtis 2004). They documented this experience by writing a Learning Story that analyzes how teachers and children are co-constructors of knowledge from various personal, developmental, and learning perspectives. Third, students identified an ethical dilemma observed during their 8 week fieldwork, analyzed this situation from various ethical perspectives, and assumed the complex role of meaning-maker in determining a possible course of action and the implications for children, teachers, families, and the community. The three written assignments analyzed for this project focused on students' understanding the multiplicity of perspectives that should be considered when engaged in ethical practice in early childhood education. A data set for each student included all three assignments.

Data Analysis

All data were read and re-read to identify instances of ethical thinking by students. Any statements included in the papers relating to ethics were coded. Data were separated and organized by general themes related to components of ethical responsibility, such as decision-making, responsibility, personal values, code of ethics, rights, relationships, professionalism, justice, equity, and caring for others. All data were compared and collapsed into broader categories reflective of more general perspectives that could be tied to a particular ethical orientation. The constant comparative method utilized led to the identification of three broad themes within the data.

Findings

Data indicate that students construct a complex ethically based definition of quality care and education grounded in their recognition and commitment to respecting the rights of all. Three themes regarding students' ethical perspective emerged from the data: (1) a strong image of the child (2) a focus on social justice, and (3) a personal and professional self-awareness.

Image of the Child

In many situations, students applied an ethic of care based on responsibility to and consideration of individual children in decision-making. By viewing the classroom community as a "family" for children, the ideas of love, respect and compassion were seen as foundations of teaching. When applying this perspective in their reflections, students concentrated on the positive aspects of childhood, strong characteristics of individual children, and the potential of every child, reflecting Noddings (1984) view of the caring professional. Many students articulated their image of young children as unique individuals while also recognizing childhood as a distinct period of life. One student commented,

Children are in many ways alike, and in many ways different. Each child has their own personality and their own way of perceiving the world. A child is a unique addition to the world.

The focus on the image of the child influenced students' view of teachers and their responsibility to children in their lives. One student reflected on the complex process of developing her own image of a child through interactions and reflection that can serve as a cornerstone of her practice.

Through interaction with a child, as well as looking back on my own childhood, I am able to form an image of a child that seems to portray who they are to me. Not only does it help to see the way a child is individually, but also their role in relationships and society.

Typically, students recognized children's powerful role in caring reciprocal relationships toward their own learning and development. One student noted,

Kids are part of families, classrooms, schools, communities, cities, states, countries. They are sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, grandchildren, friends, neighbors, listeners and thinkers. A child's role in each of these relationships is one only they can define. Each child will learn how to love, grow and dream together through their relationships.

In particular, reflections indicated how students' perspectives toward the education of young children changed over the course of the semester through interactions with peers and the instructor during class as well as with teachers and children during fieldwork. One student reflected on her emerging perspective,

I once imagined a child as just that – a child, small, helpless and fragile. I like feeling needed... Now, I see things differently. I don't want to hold a child back or limit them. I want to draw more from their own environment and culture in my teaching. I don't just want to educate them. I want to be educated by each child.

During the semester students developed a sense of the importance of context in making decisions for and with children. This group of pre-service teachers frequently commented on the value in taking the child's perspective when engaged in ethical dilemmas. One student wrote,

It is most important for teachers to put themselves in the child's position and base their actions on how it would make them feel. This can always help guide your decision-making when ethical situations are concerned. I think that some teachers may not even notice the effect of their behavior on children. The most important thing is just to always be mindful of your surrounding and how you are affecting the child.

Overall, students connected a strong image of the child as an individual and in relationships with practices reflective of an ethic of care.

Social Justice

Students also demonstrated a strong belief that teachers were ethically responsible for promoting children's rights and a positive image in our society. As advocates for equality and fairness in early childhood institutions they demonstrated a social justice orientation focused on an image of children as valuable members of groups. One student shared,

A child is first and foremost a citizen. A human being with life, rights, and the capability and potential to do great things. A child is our future, someone who will contribute to society thriving. Children, while being extremely wise in the way they live...provide a much needed balance in our world. Adults and children go through life learning from each other and taking from each other.

These pre-service teachers shared a common value toward childhood as contributing to the betterment of the society and the world, which impacted their understanding of how adults should teach children.

Students recognized the challenges facing teachers and the profession in creating quality programs that balance responsibility to individuals while ensuring equity for a classroom group. As students developed an understanding of themselves as professionals, they struggled with how to prioritize their ethical responsibilities. A student questioned,

We need to consider what is best for the child and try to meet those needs without taking away from the other children. This is where the dilemma presents itself. We need to consider the wants of [the family] for [the child] as well as the responsibilities of the teacher to the class as a whole...Teachers are very busy and have a responsibility to ALL children in the classroom. Can you ethically do your best to help one child when it negatively impacts the experience of the other children?

In response to their practical fieldwork experience, the real challenges facing teachers every day were at the forefront of student's thinking about ethical decision-making. The pre-service teachers recognized their responsibility in addressing the complex factors that impact programs in an ethical manner in order to ensure a quality education for all children.

There are many things that need to be taken into consideration in dealing with situations. The teacher and staff need the highest quality education and preparation because ultimately decisions about the classroom come down to the teacher. They must ask if all of the children are receiving equal opportunities and the best possible education. After looking at all possibilities and ethical guidelines, the teacher with colleagues and families need to evaluate situations and discuss techniques to make changes.

While many students articulated their optimism, promise, and hope for the future of children, they also reflected on how complex life situations, an institutional view of childhood and injustices in our society limit children. One student shared her perspective,

Children's potentials are limitless, only to be hindered by future learning and being made to listen to rules only made for convenience of the one's in charge... Adults have the tendency to be very hypocritical about what children should be. Adults expect them to learn quickly and be pushed to their limits; basically, they want them to be adults in a child's body. But then on the other hand, many times they do not trust them to make their own decisions, take responsibility for the actions, or be trusted to lead themselves in learning.

These pre-service teachers understood that current societal conditions and social institutions often restrict children's rights, creating situations of risk in systems intended to be supportive. They expressed the view that early childhood should challenge these trends by engaging in practices focused on respect and justice toward children as valuable members of society.

Self-Awareness

Pre-service teachers in this course reflected on their own values as well as multiple other perspectives in defining what it means to be a caring, fair, ethical practitioner. They acknowledged the importance of their own needs and well-being to their work as a teacher of young children (Tronto 1993). Among participants there existed a strong commitment to "doing the right thing for everyone involved," and satisfaction that providing a quality experience would have on them personally and professionally. One student explained, "As a teacher the most rewarding thing would be to know I could have a positive effect on a child."

Through the course students had many opportunities to reflect on the powerful influence of their histories and beliefs on how they interpret the knowledge and experiences within their teacher education program. One student commented, "Previous experiences and encounters make people's views and perspectives. Their mind adapts and accommodates for new situations and new ideas." This active awareness reflected openness toward developing a new understanding of oneself as a professional. As students experienced the complexity of decision-making for others, they began to examine and question their beliefs. One student expressed,

As a witness to situations that conflict with my values and beliefs, it is my ethical obligation to ask questions. I believe it is my responsibility not to sit by and judge others but to fully understand a situation from all angles. I may not understand things well. I need to be aware of the rules and policies. I don't know what resources are available so I am not in a position to judge others.

Student's commitment to their own development reflected an image of professionals embracing various perspectives and knowledge that may challenge their existing beliefs and values. One student stated, "As a teacher, I know who I am, but I have to take as much time as I can to find out about what other's think." These reflective practices demonstrated students' capacity for intellectual thought, critical reflection, and introspection necessary for building on their already established ethical understanding of situations. Often fieldwork challenged some of their established assumptions. Students showed

care for themselves as learners by acknowledging their own power in determining if and how new information and experiences changed their beliefs. One student reflected,

[The teacher] has to learn to resolve dilemmas in her classroom ethically, which will take time. This does not come automatically. Situations are very complex because they involve conflicting responsibilities to the child, family, co-workers, and even oneself.

Students recognized meaning making as a difficult process involving caring, knowledge, and values. In one assignment a student stressed this challenge,

What is best for the child is the foremost element in any decision. There must also be collaboration with their families and respect for their values. Teachers also have personal beliefs and they should comply with the Code of Ethics and school rules. With all of these complicated variables floating around, things can get very puzzling in a teacher's mind. Sometimes teachers have to go against their own personal beliefs, values, or morals. Teachers make some terrible decisions. Teachers make some brilliant decisions.

The values expressed by pre-service teachers in their reflections demonstrated a clear foundation for autonomous ethical practice based on responsibility to children, commitment to improving early childhood practice, and acknowledgement of their own values in forming their professional identity. By embracing an image of the teacher as a learner whose beliefs are open to change, students show care for themselves as professionals who are full of potential.

Discussion

This course shifted the focus of pedagogical work in our teacher education program from knowledge, standards, and evaluation procedures intended to define quality, to one of early childhood education as a space for ethical practices full of possibilities. The processes utilized in this course laid a foundation for students in understanding the complexity of early childhood education. Through various experiences, students constructed an understanding of “equity” and “care” as ethical approaches to teaching (Fenech 2006). By embedding ethics content in a first-year course, we hoped to assist students in developing the critical thinking and decision-making capabilities necessary for the ethical practice expected during advanced coursework, practicum placements, and student teaching.

Students' participation in class and field experiences promoted meaning making and ethical judgment related to children, relationships, and curriculum used in early

childhood institutions. Students were challenged to examine their values in addressing ethical questions and situations that arise in practice. They became meaning makers through debate, discussion, and deliberation over how relationships and perspectives influence the decision-making of teachers. Some critical questions that students raised included: What do we want for children? How do teachers make decisions about their practice? What is a meaningful context for learning? What does it mean for a professional to provide education and care? Can/should we define quality? What limits teachers and children from reaching their fullest potential? In this context students' evaluation of the pedagogical work of early childhood education is clearly connected to the study of ethics.

Early childhood care and education is steeped in ethical considerations that should have larger implications for our pedagogical work in the field. Connections between teacher education course content and fieldwork provided students opportunities to have first-hand experiences with applying theories learned to situations of practice with young children (Clawson and Shinn 2000; McNair et al. 2002). Students witnessed issues that teachers face daily in their interactions with children, families, and colleagues that served as a basis for reflection on their image of children, professional responsibilities, decision-making, and ethical behavior. Based on field experiences pre-service teachers learned that the meaning of pedagogical work is always open to different interpretations that can inform their own perspectives relative to various educational issues. This research shows promise in the incorporation of field experiences within early stage introductory courses to the focus on ethics as a lived experience.

This project applied critical pedagogies that challenged beliefs about universal standards of good practice, as a means to promoting “moral autonomy” among students (Groundwater-Smith and Sachs 2002). By reflecting on their beliefs about children at the beginning of their formal early childhood coursework, the students uncovered information from their histories that impacted how they interpreted the knowledge and experiences within their teacher education program. As a result, students enrolled in this introductory course developed an understanding of the importance of professional autonomy in addressing dilemmas of practice that challenge their understandings, beliefs and values (Dunn 2003). As students reflected and on analyzed issues, they developed independent thought and action that incorporated what they believe to be in the best interest of themselves and others, with the multiple perspectives, and knowledge they have acquired through coursework (Tronto 1993).

This course opened up the teacher education curriculum to new, more inclusive ideas about the application of ethics to the education and care of young children. Understanding and conceptualizing both equity and care for others and self

as ethical approaches applicable to all relationships within early childhood institutions emerged through interactions with other students in the class and the instructor, early childhood teachers, and the children/families of community-based programs. Such relationships connect pre-service teachers with the lives of others. Students often engaged in reflective writing as a way to articulate their values, understandings and priorities for children, thereby providing the instructor with information on the dispositions of new students. The goal of this process was for students to formulate an image of the child not as a subject to be studied or object of teaching but rather as one to be respected and carefully considered in making decisions. This image of the child was integrated with an image of the teacher as a learner, researcher, and co-creator with children.

Early childhood educators must consider how they address the moral and ethical dilemmas faced daily in classrooms and the learning process can begin with experiences early in preparation programs. When asked to examine real situations of practice from fieldwork, students indicated the importance of considering many complex variables to acting ethically. After thorough analysis of some extremely complex issues, students found that the “trials and triumphs” of teaching are based in relationships and “it is through these challenges that teachers show their values, morals, and personalities.” This focus on situating ethical decisions in context and in connection to specific relationships promoted students’ strong commitment to social action whether applying care or justice orientations (Johnston 2008).

Conclusion

For some time teacher education programs have attempted to define, develop, and assess pre-service teacher dispositions as they exit their preparation and enter into professional life. However, this project documents the importance of the moral and ethical identity the students bring with them to their professional preparation and how thinking and acting ethically is continually shaped and reformed by experiences in a formal teacher education program. Teacher educators should respect students and take responsibility for building on their already established and preferred understanding of teaching and learning through engagement in real life work with children, families, and teachers. Reflection, discussion, and debate regarding issues of ethical practice and quality expose students to various perspectives and new ideas that extend and expand their image of children and teaching. As students engage with course content and gain practical experience, their knowledge and beliefs regarding teaching evolve together demonstrating the power of ethical thinking in enhancing early childhood teacher education.

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