

Exploring the moral imagination through relational pedagogies in pre-service teacher ethics

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Whilst there is significant research examining the pedagogical development of pre-service teachers' knowledge and skills after their internship experience, there has been little examination of their experience of ethical tension and little investigation into ways to further enhance pre-service teachers' ethical reasoning. This paper documents some of the ways that pre-service teachers reason about ethically charged situations. It aims to extend conceptions of the moral imagination and its place in the teaching of ethics to pre-service teachers by discussing findings from a teaching project pilot study designed to investigate the ways in which pre-service teachers experience and respond to ethical tensions. Whilst recognising common difficulties in responding to ethically charged situations, our analysis utilises pre-service teacher dialogue in the form of an assessment strategy based on a 'community of inquiry' model and examines the ways in which pre-service teachers utilise the moral imagination to reason through ethical issues. This paper indicates some ways professional development could provide opportunities more aligned with pre-service teachers' learning needs in the development of their ethical reasoning, and argues that the moral imagination is a fundamental feature of ethical practice and decision-making.

Introduction

Teaching Ethics in Pre-service teacher education

In this paper we examine data gathered in a teacher education project pilot, which studied secondary pre-service teachers' experiences and understandings of ethical tensions perceived to arise during their final professional experience situation. The rationale for this project rests predominately in the difficulty associated with responding to ethically salient workplace situations well and the use of institutionalised Codes of Ethics to defend moral views. Principles and values provided by professional organisations can often be in conflict, and ethical dilemmas are, by nature and definition, not solvable in an entirely satisfactory way. Every State and Territory in Australia has a teachers' code of ethics or conduct, however research demonstrates that teachers cannot be expected to 'learn' codes of ethics but may tend to treat them superficially and 'pay lip-service' to them without genuine engagement or care (Terhart, 1998, p. 439). Evidence suggests that Australian pre-service teachers consider ethics removed from daily working life, feel little 'ownership' of professional ethics and even though most had experienced ethical dilemmas, the greater majority were unable to distinguish these from poor practice (Coombe, 1997). Further, practicing teachers who are consciously aware of their moral agency have been found to experience a 'fading' of ethical knowledge under some circumstances and a diminished sense of the moral dimensions of their actions (Campbell, 2003). In Australia, a recent comparative study of codes of ethics and conduct has demonstrated that whilst there is a shared family of values in teaching, these values are presented as static and their application is riddled with ambiguity and tensions around deference to authority. Further, there is in general an absence of support for the development of ethical knowledge in serving teachers, for example through opportunities for professional dialogue on questions of value (Forster, 2012). Interpretations of ethical value can be difficult particularly given the cultural diversity of our schools and the need to justifiably defend professional decisions.

Since moral matters are so complex, they require interpretation through multiple frames or theoretical positions in order to cut between "relativism ... and the kind of absolutism that seems to follow the quest for ethical rules" (Bullough, 2011, p. 28). Thus we are interested to examine how pre-service

teachers practically demonstrate their ethical knowledge. Jensen (2007) found that knowledge-seeking in professions such as teaching was characterised by an unfolding process which forms a “back and forth looping” (p. 496) of theory and practical considerations. Others have shown how teachers’ practical knowledge has a strong element of “the self” in which idiosyncratic practice is embedded within and justified with reference to concepts of intuitive plausibility, social utility, rational standards, rules of practice and, as emotionally compelling via notions of hope and commitment (Tirri, Husu, & Kansanen, 1999). In the pilot project discussed here we analyse the idiosyncratic ways in which pre-service teachers express their ethical knowledge. Their language is raw and demonstrates a sense of the compelling nature of ethical dilemmas. As one pre-service teacher explains,

It sucks for her, because she still has an obligation, but she’s just between a rock and a hard place – not of her causing, but ...

Pre-service teachers recognise ethical tensions in their work that emerge amongst disparate educational objectives, resources, values and the needs of others. They feel the struggle to act with integrity.

An ability to imagine has been posited as one way teachers can negotiate such competing positions. Johnson (1996) contends it is our capacity to imagine morally significant conditions and possibilities that actually supports moral understanding. From this, moral education thus entails learning to utilise certain imaginative capacities to work through the complex territory of laws, codes of ethics and various stakeholder positions, including our own, in the educative domain. Joseph (2003) posits the advantages of drawing on the notion of the moral imagination as one possibility for drawing together accounts of the moral nature of teaching that spans reflective practice, professional ethics, values spirituality, moral curriculum, and emphasises moral praxis. Werhane (1999) defines the concept of moral imagination as: “The ability in particular circumstances to discover and evaluate possibilities, not merely determined by that circumstance, or limited by its operative mental models, or framed by a set of rules, or rule governed concerns” (Werhane 1999, p. 93).

Given the variety of perspectives on the notion of the moral imagination, Joseph conceptualizes it in terms of an integration of the cognitive and affective domains comprising the components of: perception, rationality, reflection, emotion and caring for self (Joseph, 2003 p. 8). Such features, Joseph argues, comprise “the intricacies of teachers’ work and their practice as moral educators” (p.8).

(Table 1 – Joseph, 2003, p. 16)

TABLE I. The components of moral imagination

Perception	The ability of people to become aware of others and their needs, desires, interests, wishes, hopes, and potentials.
Rationality	Realistic understanding of situations calling for moral response and our knowledge of the particular issues and problems at stake. This is our ability to be flexible and not just apply a moral value or rule to every situation.
Reflection	The continuing examination of beliefs and actions and consideration of how they affect other people and the questioning of the origins of our beliefs and values.
Emotion	Feelings that permit sympathetic and empathic connection with and responsiveness to others. The catalyst for moral action is the capacity for feeling.
Caring for self	Affirmation of individuals’ need for their lives to have meaning and purpose. Awareness that as moral agents, individuals have needs that must be considered.

We also see this work being in line with what Smyth (2007) envisions as a method for “recapturing relationships in teaching and learning” (p. 221) and counter to forms of education that reduce teaching “to SR [stimulus response] formula...” (Sidorkin, cited in Smyth, 2007, p. 224). Smyth calls for a “major reclamation project” (2007, p. 223) “around the political will and imagination to stand up and speak out for the fundamental relational essence of what schools exist for” (Smyth, 2007, p. 223). We locate the application of the moral imagination to the ethical reasoning of pre-service teacher educators as an example of his ‘learner-centred policy constellation’ by incorporating a focus on ‘authentic assessment’ and ‘respectful relationships’, to make relationships a major priority in the course, recognising that learning is fundamentally a ‘social process’ (Smyth, 2007, p. 296). Yet the real power, we would argue, of including the moral imagination in the teaching of ethics is the assessment tasks are relatively open-ended in the sense that they require pre-service teachers to frame their work in terms of an issue or value of personal interest and to discuss it in an academically and professionally-informed fashion. For us, this indicates some ways forward for providing learning opportunities more aligned with pre-service teachers’ experiences and expressed needs that take account of the moral imagination as a fundamental feature of the way that teachers can come to articulate their practice and in the way that they may reason through and make ethical decisions.

Method

The study conducted involved 136 fourth year secondary pre-service teachers from one regional university campus. Pre-service teachers were enrolled in a compulsory final year combined professional practice and ethics course that was delivered in tandem with their final year ‘internship experience’ in a local high school (a 10 week block of practical teaching). Course content included preparing for professional practice and the provision of problem solving frameworks to help them identify and discuss ethical dilemmas. Assessments were focussed on providing pre-service teachers an opportunity to describe and analyse ethical tensions that arose during ‘internship experience’.

Research ethics approval¹ was obtained with participation solicited by email and being entirely voluntary. Data was collected through the use of peer facilitated group discussion seminars that formed the basis of the final assessment for the course. This dimension of the course was modelled on Burgh et al. (2006) pedagogy of a community of inquiry. The ‘community’ aspect of the discussion is built by the management of the tutor/facilitator during semester tutorials where pre-service teachers, in small groups, learn to self-manage and contribute critically and constructively to discussion about topical issues in teacher ethics as para-professionals. Thus our data set comprised six ‘community of inquiry’ groups with between 10-14 participants in each with group discussion lasting approximately one hour. Participants were asked to respond to ethically charged case studies based on their knowledge from the course and drawing on their internship experiences. The community of inquiry discussion consisted of an inner circle (between 5-7 pre-service teachers directly involved in discussion) and an outer circle (matching number of peer assessors who made comments and asked questions based on observations of the discussion). An academic staff member acted as a facilitator adding additional comments and intervening in discussion, particularly when the discussion took on a more technical or pedagogical nature rather than focus on the ethical tensions presented. Discussions were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data in this pilot study consisted of the occurrences of articulated reasoning that demonstrated pre-service teachers’ use of their moral imagination. Using the framework developed by Joseph (2003) we sought to apply these discrete categories of the moral imagination as well as to explore some of its blind spots and limitations. The identification of ‘imaginative reasoning’ in the data was identified using a combination of recognised and emergent themes (Glasser, 1992). The research team analysed the data set with individual researchers reading the complete set of forums for expressions of themes

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then meeting regularly throughout to discuss and moderate an initial analysis. This coding system was then transferred into NVivo qualitative data analysis software and coding applied to the complete data set by one researcher.

Results

The nature of the data set provided additional insight into the range of reasoning strategies employed by pre-service teachers. We began with Joseph's (2003) five main categories for coding, yet aimed to build a more nuanced picture of these components. Instances invoking the moral imagination were singly coded into the five categories provided by Joseph, where a contribution could fit across one or more categories it was coded into the category of best fit. Blind spots and limitations of the categories are explored in the subsection of 'additional elements'.

From these categories, 'perception' was invoked most frequently in total across the six sessions, occurring an average of 12.8 times per session. 'Rationality' was the next most frequent, occurring an average of 10.3 times per session; followed by 'reflection' which occurred an average of 5.2 times per session; and 'caring for self' which occurred an average of 4.2 times per session. The least frequent category was 'emotion' which only occurred 6 times in total – an average of only one invocation per session.

Perception

In our analysis perception was deemed to be occurring when pre-service teachers exhibited empathy, when they expressed a belief in doing something that was in the best interests of students. Perception was also deemed to be exhibited when pre-service teachers were engaged in imaginative perspective taking, when they interpreted dilemmas as an encounter with the 'other', and when they expressed a belief that they could or should be trying to 'fix students'. That is, they were making sense of situations in particular ways. Within all sessions these elements were present, especially imaginative perspective taking; pre-service teachers were trying to understand the parameters of the dilemmas that they had been presented with by taking or looking at the perspectives of students and fellow teachers. The following comments reflect some of the ways in which pre-service teachers demonstrated perception:

I think it's equity versus equality. I mean you can provide equality for the kids, it's not going to mean it's going to be the same rule. And certain- if they're just always late, and you're like 'oh', but I think their mum yells at them so they can be late, you know. No, the kid can get up to certain expectations, but if it's like literally they didn't have access to that, they couldn't get that in place, then you need to provide extra for that to be equal for that kid at certain time.

But the child has got to come first

Rationality

In our analysis rationality was represented by a realistic recognition of the moral dimension of the situation such as fairness, knowledge of particular problems, rational traits combined with open mindedness, creative thinking, envisioning new possibilities, evaluation from a moral viewpoint and not just a technical one, the use of moral language, where there was moral uncertainty and deliberation, considering the stakeholders (especially who has responsibility and rights and for what), and applying the moral rule to every situation. The notion of fairness was frequently invoked by pre-service teachers as a way of explaining the ethical principle of each of the dilemmas and most sessions contained instances of pre-service teachers attempting to resolve the dilemma by reference to codes of ethics of conduct or the moral principles of care, consistency or consequences. Rationality occurred frequently in each of the sessions as pre-service teachers attempted to come to terms with the dilemma that they had been presented and find ways of resolving it. The following data demonstrate the ways in

which pre-service teachers were drawing on rationality to explore their dilemma:

Well, that's this one here – which principle is more important, school policy or the perceived needs of the student?

Because it comes down to the whole thing of fairness if – because these kids are being marked down

That's [our] responsibility to the child; its not to the parents.

But ethics aren't – don't work like that. There's often blurry lines – there's two rights or two wrongs.

In these examples participants are attempting to make sense of the dilemma that they have been presented with by naming the ethical principles being contested in their scenario.

Reflection

Although the element of reflection was seen less frequently than rationality and perception it was present in the moments where pre-service teachers recognised their own personal bias, in moments when they characterised themselves as moral practitioners, where they exhibited deep reflection on their own practice or gave a serious critique of schooling. Many of these comments suggested unease (often not conscious) with the school environment. Some moments of reflection revealed the profound moral concerns or tensions at play, such as the unease evident in this example where the discussion centred on the practice of streaming. Having experienced this practice (as interns or as students) several participants were able to reflect upon it:

And what I found on my internship is I was given an A stream class and almost through sort of my own bias, I gave them a better quality of education because I expected more of them. Whereas I spent all my time in the low ability classes trying to remediate the kind of difficulties they were having. And so you end up sort of not giving the quality of education to the lower ability kids.

Yeah, being a product of streaming [myself] I personally don't agree with it. Me and my friends would just be so distraught and upset, because going to a selective high school a lot of kids get pressured to succeed.

Emotion

Of all the categories described by Joseph (2003) emotion was the category occurring the least across all sessions, appearing an average of once in each. Embodied emotions were prevalent in all sessions but emotional responses were often coded as perception in the analysis as the emotions were often connected to a student centred perspective. The emotions that were represented in the sessions were empathy, conflict, confusion or anger. At times where a tension between rational communication and the irrational responses of empathy, care or anger were evident in the dialogue with the pre-service teachers overwhelmingly opting to be seen as being rational and tying their emotions to the rational discourse of fairness for the students, rather than care for them, or anger at injustice. Emotion was especially evident in dilemmas where the actions of a new teacher were being questioned:

I really like the chance to sort of – it's a bit late to tell people about my – or explain my integrity. Tell them why, ask why I'm being questioned. I find that really personally offensive if someone's questioning my motives, my pedagogy as a teacher.

and in a dilemma about streaming, were able to articulate their anger about some of the inequitable practices that they had witnessed:

I [just want to] add to this – at the school that I've just been to literally the head of English was saying like basically streaming and then saying the best teachers go to the best classes. And that just made me

so mad. I just sit [sic] there and I just didn't want to see – so I avoided that. He's going that's it, the best teachers should go to the best students because they believe that marks were in line with wanting to be there and effort. So I can't remember who was saying about it before, but there are kids that are really intelligent but just don't have the motivation. So basically the teacher's going well that's it, that kid's not putting in enough effort they don't deserve to be in that class.

Care of Self

Caring for self was evident in pre-service teachers articulation of their emerging professional stance, and in instances where they demonstrated agency – in the moments where they described surviving and actually standing up for something, making change in the broader school or system, self-reflexively acknowledging their own needs and feelings (anger, risk isolation, frustration, alienation, anger, passion, fear) and taking them seriously. This is demonstrated by the participant who described when presented with a difficult dilemma would ensure that she followed the appropriate process that would ensure as a new teacher she could confident that she was doing the 'right' thing:

The first thing I would do is look at my staff handbook, if I'm a new teacher, and I'd flip through it and I'd be like, "All right. What do I do now? Who do I talk to? How do I work it? Where do I stand?" you know, and talk myself through that – you know, "What's my first step? What's my second step?" to really figure it out in my head, to the school code of conduct, knowing what I know and standing up for my kids in ethical way. And that's the step that I would take.

In another example, the participant's care for self was demonstrated in their belief that as new teacher they have something to offer the profession:

Exactly. You come in fresh; you've got enthusiasm. So you can't necessarily say that an older teacher is better.

Yet, the importance of self-care was not made evident on many occasions during discussion. Instead, its inverse was often invoked as pre-service teachers often conceptualised their role as 'guardians' or 'advocates' for their students, thus negating their self-care for the perceived good of others. As one participant remarked:

It's not about defending my teaching; it's about making sure that my kids get the marks that they deserve.

Additional Elements

In addition to the five elements identified by Joseph within each of the sessions, one of the most significant issues noted in discussions of ethical tensions was the participants tendencies to initially attempt to 'solve' each dilemma – they sought pragmatic, technical and pedagogical 'fixes' to the specifics of the dilemma given. These pragmatic instances outnumbered the instances of perception and were the most frequently occurring response across the sessions. Pragmatic or technical responses to the tensions occurred at an average of 14.5 times per session.

When attempting to solve their dilemmas pragmatically, pre-service teachers would initially ignore the wider ethical implications of the situations that they had been presented with and often gave responses that focused on the specific details of the dilemma. For example, in a dilemma that involved the deduction of marks for late submission of assessments (in accordance with school policy) but without consideration of students' "difficult circumstances" the participants in our study initially sought a specific solution:

I think the main thing here is like Anne should collaborate with the welfare and like other areas to determine like what she's going to do.

Also discernible within each of the sessions was recognition of the power dynamic present in the school system. Issues relating to power were raised by participants an average of 4 times per session. As each of the dilemmas that the pre-service teachers were presented with involved either early career or pre-service teachers, the participants exploring the dilemmas were able to identify the power dynamics inherent in the school system and how as pre-service teachers it impacted upon them. In a scenario regarding teaching practice that was perceived as unfair, pre-service teachers were acutely aware that, like new service teachers, the situation would be difficult for them to address:

But would you challenge it on internship?

You're more worried about getting a mark as an intern.

Like in theory, in theory I'd definitely say no, it shouldn't be like that. Just because you're an intern doesn't mean you shouldn't behave ethically, or at least – but in practice, and I know from my experiences, I've let things go...

Discussion

The data analysed in the previous section builds on the model of moral imagination described by Joseph (2003); perception, rationality, reflection, emotion and caring for self but also reveals the struggle to achieve this challenging but valuable educational aim. Perception was the most vigorous dimension of the moral imagination demonstrated by participants. Pre-service teachers often began to explore the moral dilemmas presented by taking on the role of student-advocate and used this position as a reference point. An interesting extension of the willingness to take the child's side was also evident. Arising from this common position, of advocating for the needs of the child first, pre-service teachers sometimes positioned themselves in ways that revealed a questionable assumption regarding the capacity of teachers to know student needs 'better' than the educational community, or even the child's parents. Thus, important to the dimension of perception is the ability to be open to multiple stakeholders' perspectives, as well as the most central and vulnerable, the child.

To guide their rational decision-making, it is evident that pre-service teachers used moral principles such as appeals to autonomy (respect for personhood); non-maleficence (don't cause harm); beneficence (do good); justice (promote fairness); and occasionally, the ends justify the means (the means might be unpleasant, but lead to some worthwhile goal). The data indicated a tendency to consider compelling legalities first, as advocated by the Ethical Response Cycle (Newman & Pollnitz, 2005) and a latent awareness of the requirements of professional codes of ethics in teaching. These form a useful starting point in ascertaining viable solutions to problems posed in the dilemmas, but critical reflection on these codes and rules was not evident. Seemingly benign features of school systems such as streamed classes, professional hierarchies or the rhetoric of 'effective practice' have perverse features and hide questions of educational desirability. Since education is a process of "critical reconstruction", teachers cannot depend on "reasoning as a form of technical calculations" (Carr, 1995, p. 69). Thus developing and maintaining ethical sensitivities and an awareness of the dynamic relationships between one's values and the morally salient dimensions of daily work is important to the work of teachers as agents.

Reflection is an essential feature of moral imagination and this capacity has been connected with and contributes to a person's freedom to make choices. The data indicates a lack of reflection initiated by participants, however this does not mean that reflection was not occurring since only the contributions of pre-service teachers was included in the dialogue analysis. The articulation of points of reflection on solutions, underlying values and salient themes tended to be demonstrated by the facilitator of the group dialogue, potentially in response to the perception of this gap in participants' moral imagination.

Emotion was the element of the moral imagination least invoked in the discussions, perhaps reflecting pre-service teachers beliefs about the value of rational discourse. "Although philosophers have long denigrated emotions and put a high valuation on reason most have recognised that emotions often

motivate action” (Noddings, 1998, p. 135). Emotional reactions did not feature strongly in the data, but this may be explained by a sense in which the pre-service teachers were channeling their moral thinking through their developing professional identities and potentially making the subtle distinction between personal and professional ethics, with the view that emotional reactions are not professionally ethical. They did, however demonstrate an honest and authentic sense of care for the best interests of students as noted above.

Finally, care for the self was articulated to a moderate degree and engaged pre-service teachers’ emerging sense of their professional identities. The course encouraged pre-service teachers to ask themselves moral questions such as those posed by Charles Taylor: “Have I really understood what is essential to my identity? Have I truly determined what I sense to be the highest mode of life?” (Taylor, 1985, p. 40). These moral questions are raised in order that they consider the intersection or overlapping of professional and personal values so that they may get “through to something deeper” (Taylor, 1985, p. 41). This appears to be important in enabling pre-service teachers to begin to recognise opportunities for enhancing the meaningfulness and longevity of their work.

Conclusion

The implications for us as teacher educators is that we must broaden our ideas about the moral dimensions of teaching by imaginatively taking into account the hopes and experiences of teachers, caring about them as people, and helping them to care about themselves. It makes discussions about teachers’ fulfilment, satisfaction, and hopes for themselves as professionals and as human beings a normal part of our discourse, not a frivolous aberration (Joseph, 2003, p. 18).

While current teacher education is positioned within the dominant discourse of the ‘age of measurement’ (Biesta, 2010) with its preference for standardised professional development, pre-determined curriculum outcomes and the rhetoric of ‘effectiveness’ (for what? for whom? he asks), the moral imagination presents a desirable and challenging educational aim.

Additionally, relational pedagogies and moral imagination have an important connection. The moral imagination as described and extended so far lends itself to relational pedagogies such as the community of inquiry as the context of group dialogue enables expressions of value to be responded to and challenged by alternative views in ways that are closed to the writer of the formal, ‘arm’s length’, essay. In the model utilised in this research, the ‘outer circle’ of peers performed a vital function that provided opportunities to further expand on the multiplicity of views generated by the ‘inner circle’. Community of inquiry pedagogy centred on moral dilemmas is potentially a very powerful embodiment of shared thinking and brings immediacy to participants that uncovers various sides to complex problems as well as enabling participants to feel the effect of counter arguments and claims with a sense of having to ‘think on their feet’.

The nature of teachers’ work is such that its peculiar conditions cause a documented range of ethical conflicts that may arise given the number of morally rich sub-roles within the relationships between teachers and students (Best, 1996). Considering the vulnerability of student stakeholders (age and developmental levels), pressures for collegial harmony and trust in the profession, providing effective development in the area of a teacher’s daily sense of duty of care for others is important. The use of the moral imagination in this pilot project demonstrates that it can be used as a framework to incorporate some of the morally salient dimensions of the pre-service teaching internship experience into teacher education.

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