Ethics and School

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ExCET-TExES Competency 003/ NCATE-ELCC Standard 5

My philosophy of education maintains that a liberal education in mathematics, science, history, and literature cultivates reason and knowledge, developing the ability for a student to make practical choices and most importantly, the moral sensibilities of the student. The ethics of the school is essential.

The student first is to become absorbed and disciplined in his own American heritage. The teacher must first internalize eternal values. Only then can the school become the place envisioned by the Founding Fathers, one that elevates morality. The profoundest theme in Western civilization, the fundamental worth of the individual, a being with the capacity of determining right and wrong, is engrained in our history.

The Vornberg text says in Chapter Nine that the higher image of school leaders is outside of politics. Frank W. Lutz and Rex A. Carr dispel the myth that ethics and politics cannot be mixed. “Nothing can or should be further from the truth in the American democracy…It was the intent of the founding fathers that the American Democracy be founded on the principle of the common good…Far down among the definitions (of politics) and one of eight offered are the words artful and dishonest…Many Americans have come to accept and believe that politics cannot be ethical because of is very nature. The public may have even come to seek out the artful and dishonest person as their political representative on the premise that such a person can be more successful in pursing their personal interest in policy making actually because they are not encumbered with personal or public ethics…All of our citizens can and should expect better! We the People are the government, not the representatives that we elect…This is what the
American Democracy is about and public education and its governance is one of the essential elements of that dream. When other nations and their people fail to understand why Americans get upset about graft, they are leaving ethics and the concept of the common good out of the definition of democracy, as intended by the founding fathers. Is ethical behavior possible in politics? Not only is it possible, it is essential if the American Democracy is to live and prosper.” How long has it been since it people were encouraged to enter politics as a vocation of worth? Policy makers serve their country just as well as one who follows orders.

On one of my discussion board posting, I mentioned Lawrence Kohlberg, who formulated stages in the psychological moral development of human beings. The highest Kohlberg stage involves Kantian categorical thinking. Children first pass through the power stage where “might makes right,” the reward and punishment stage, and the interpersonal stage where one tries to please others, before he enters the social stage of doing right simply for its own sake. My Curriculum Textbook (for another class) gives six Kohlberg stages. The first is the punishment and fear stage. The second state is doing things to get a reward. The third stage is to make peers happy. “Will people I like and respect approve or disapprove of this action. “ The fourth stage is doing this or that because of established rules, for the sake of the law, without any consideration of whether the law itself is right in the abstract. The fifth stage involves doing things in the spirit of the law. “Is this decision consistent with the traditions and general outlook of the law?” The sixth stage is the universal or Kantian stage, doing things because they comply with universal principles.
One author (Crain) equates John Rawls modern defense of the Social Contract under the “veil of ignorance,” with the Kantian categorical imperative, in elaborating the highest stage. The categorical imperative can admit no exceptions to the moral law, that maxim which a pure reason deems to be universal law. In Rawls’s “veil of ignorance,” nobody knows anything about their own persons or abilities when forming the social contract. Each person make the principles of society without knowing if he or she is smart, white etc. they do not even know if they are a he or she! Rawls is a return to the old Social Contract theory against the ubiquitous Utilitarianism of the last two centuries. Whereas a Utilitarian might allow for a society having an underclass if the numbers who benefit and the quality of the benefits of the sociopolitical infrastructure are justified, Rawls speculated that under the veil of ignorance, nobody deciding without previous knowledge that he or she was not going to be disadvantaged, would risk assenting to a society with an underclass, taking the risk that he or she would be a member of that underclass.

This is the philosophical discussion that students should be introduced to, rather than psychological discussion, which should be reserved for post-secondary study. Philosophical discussion involves universal application of justice and notions of right and wrong without regard to terms such as “I” and “we” in determining the rightness of actions, which Kohlberg quantifies as the highest psychological stage. Milgram looked into the psychological reasons why people might follow orders against their ethics. Sherman explained how one can fell committed to do the right thing by making simply saying that one would do a right action beforehand. Although psychology can help us find the pathological roots of our drives and make us aware of them, only philosophy can
probe into what is properly ethical. In fact, the autonomous self in determining the unconditional rule should pay no regard to pathological determinants of action. Moral action can have no psychological motive according to Kant.

Assignment IX listed several ethical values. Mutuality is when people share some common values such as integrity and professionalism. Generality is the basis to ethics, the taking the “I” or “me” out of the analysis. Caring concerns itself with the interests of others. Respect means to realize that humanity in each of us. Kant’s second version of the categorical imperative says to treat yourself and all others never as objects, but as ends in themselves. We are equal because we all have the capacity to set our own ends, the most final of which is our moral ends. That is the source of human dignity.

Dorothy Angell claims that cultural diversity taught in American classrooms in which students are told about the culture of others fails to identify a student with that other. Caring and the “I-Thou” relationship such as that elaborated by Martin Buber cannot properly develop. Anglell distinguishes between empathy, which draws attention to the other, and sympathy, which draws attention to one’s own feelings. Empathy for the other can be a source of the self. When we develop the ability to feel for the other, we gain a heightened awareness, which is an expansion of the self.

In conclusion, the teacher and school bind the nation to its moral past. The study of history and schooling in general, is a contract between one generation and the next, a duty of the student to his parents and grandparents. We are a nation of law, not a nation of men. Although we rarely hear the following, it is the proper message that our student receive the minute they walk into our schools: The people must follow the law, not that the law must follow the people.
I wish to continue this reflection paper by reporting an experiment that explores the ethics of democracy in a discipline plan used in a school that had little or no order during its later afternoon hours. Ubben writes in Chapter five, “Few things are universally true in this world but we have never been in a school that had a productive learning environment that was not also orderly.” The private school in which I now teach and the one in which I taught last year was far from orderly. A school cannot have effective learning when there is a negative learning culture (Standard Two). Competency 005 requires a campus culture that are conducive to student learning.

I tried to create a positive learning atmosphere last year by introducing the Judicious Discipline method (Gathercoal) into my Tenth Grade, World History class. Judicious Discipline encourages young people to think for themselves and determine on their own the consequences for their own actions. It attempts to influence students toward the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. This is NCATE-ELCC Standard 6.

The more autonomous one becomes in formulating laws and rules that he or she lives by, the more that individual internalizes that to which was consented, and the more he or she respects others whose worth were considered in the determination of that consent. The more one participates in legislation or rulemaking, the more one develops his moral capacity and love of other and community. Students and schools become part of the rule-making process and buy into the rules by asking, “What would be the laws and rules that rational beings would agree upon if nobody knew his gender, physical or mental abilities, likes and dislikes, or wealth?” They conceive the “veil of ignorance” introduced by Rawls.
The class of twelve students met from 3:40 until 4:20, Mondays through Thursdays. Creating a positive learning environment is Standard Two and necessary for real learning, which was not happening. Up until that date, thirty percent of the academic grade in my class was dependent upon note taking and attendance. At the beginning of the year, a letter with thirteen rules was sent home for parents to sign. Three tardies equaled one unexcused absence, and students who walked out of class without permission received a “cut.” Several students would walk in and out of class several times and receive several “cuts” in one day. Only two students took notes on a regular basis. Other students had taken notes only during three class sessions. All students except one had a failing test average. The class was so difficult to teach that all content had to be written on the board for students to copy.

I introduced Judicious Discipline on the second day of class after close to one month without meeting. Students remained in their seats and paid close attention as I explained to them their rights under the United States Constitution. I explained their right to be in a religious school, despite the legitimate educational interest of New Jersey, was based on Pierce v. Society of Sisters (1922).

I explained Gathercoal’s position that tardies, absences, and behavior should not be reflected in an academic grade due to the integrity of a transcript. Students then questioned my previous rules and I told them that they were right. I asked, “What should a student who is late do?” One student answered, “He should walk to his seat as quietly as possible.” Another student asked about being graded on keeping a notebook. I agreed to his point and advised that further discussion might be needed, depending on future test
grades. Students asked if they can just take the tests to show their proficiency to pass the class, to which I reluctantly admitted.

I explained that we are all equal. Just because I was the teacher did not mean that I would have the final say. My professional accountability required that I should sometimes insist on some point, but that was no difference than a police officer or anyone else charged with a duty in our democracy based on training and trust.

On my third day of using Judicious Discipline, I lectured about Hannibal and the Second Punic War and its results. I posed thought provoking questions, but no student heard them. Students were walking in and out of the classroom. One student had headphones on. I asked if he would like it if I wore headphones while I talked to him. He took them off for a several seconds. Another student interrupted to ask an irrelevant question about my public school students. I reminded him of our legitimate interest in education and asked whether it was the appropriate time to ask the question, taking five minutes from my lecture. He admitted that he was interrupting, but merely went back to his seat and leaned back in his chair, even after he admitted the danger in so doing. Another student climbed on a chair to get a bottle of milk in front of a wall unit air conditioning, after which he fell and caused a disturbance. I asked him about health and safety, and he acknowledged my concern. Another student ran back in forth through the classroom entrance. When I asked if he was disrupting the education process, he said he was, but continued to disrupt as soon as I took my attention off him. Another student had his leg up on a chair. When he asked how that violated the State interest, I merely said that it was disrespectful. A good student stood over another student playing like he was challenging him to a fight. He responded that World History was boring. The end result
was that every student sympathized with me about my professional duty, but none of
them really cared enough to learn. I told them that Judicious Discipline was over, took
down a diagram that I taped to the wall, and said that we were going to revert back to our
original rules. I took out my grade book to begin to give minuses, sent out two students to
the principal, and began yelling at them. I was then able to finish my lesson. As I left
class, I notice some students trying to put a second copy of the Judicious Discipline
diagram back on the wall.

Although I did not discuss Judicious Discipline with my students again, one day I
found that my class was very interest in asking, “What is morality?” I spent the whole
period discussing the Kantian categorical imperative, Platonic idealism and Aristotelian
Realism. Morality was not simply a matter that was dictated, but something that we all
could rationally internalize. I must admit, these boys are Talmudic scholars, but they are
only fifteen years old. That day, they thanked me for the best class they ever had. We had
reached our goal, to be able to determine right and wrong as a cognitive concept.
Unfortunately, only three boys passed the class. It takes more than a teacher (principal) to
make a school. There has to be a culture that values secular education (Standard Two).
References


