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Developing a Common Language of Ethical Engagement in Teaching: Lessons for and from a Time of Crisis

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Developing a Common Language of Ethical Engagement in Teaching: Lessons for and from a Time of Crisis

Abstract

This article explores how educators may develop and contribute to a common language of ethical engagement, a language that rises above specific actions but is grounded in ethical practice and scholarship. Questions are raised about how online education may further the patterns educational inequities in the United States. An ethics framework is explored through a comparison. The author explores the educational principles—not standards—that educators can surface in their teaching practice. A discussion is included of recent dilemmas and problems with online teaching environments, underscoring the need for ethical principles helping to frame practice.

Keywords

Educational Ethics, Curriculum, COVID-19, Curriculum Theory, Online Education

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I have a friend who is an early childhood special education teacher in an underfunded section of a large California city. His students are all under four and have fairly severe disabilities, such as autism/Asperger's, cystic fibrosis, and cerebral palsy. His students require relational care and attention.

As with most people working in education, in spring, 2020 in response to COVID-19 he had to shift the classroom setting and environmental context of his curriculum. In early March, his school and classroom basically shuttered as face-to-face, in person sites. Instead, his school faced a new mandate: moving classes online and working with families more closely. He told me that he had to frantically rewrite his fourteen students' IEPs—their Individual Educational Plans. He mentioned that to prevent lawsuits, he needed to be in compliance with American ADA law. As partners in their educational plans, the parents of his students join the IEP negotiation. He found, however, that there became less negotiation and more emergency, as he called each of his students' parents and guardians.

He told me the story of contacting one, after many tries. In broken Spanish he described to the parent how she would become central in meeting her child's educational needs. In the middle of their conversation, she had to put my friend on hold as she had just received a large order in the Mexican restaurant where she worked. After the phonecall, my friend returned to his computer to continue recording his video-taped curriculum for his students to watch.

Since the COVID emergency, I have revisited the question of moral authority in our work as educators. Specifically, I have wondered about the ethical frameworks that guide our work in education: what is our language of ethical engagement? I suggest that given the growing accountability movement where students are sorted into levels of success or failure (coded as remediation), we who oppose the narrowing of education develop a new language, tied to a reimagining of education, grounded in critical ethics for the benefit of all students.

However, as a corporate mediation of public education via internet platforms takes place during the current crisis, the question of educational ethics assumes a new importance. Like many educators, I face the urgent need of working with my peers to develop a new language for schooling.

In this article I examine the relationship between ethics and lived engagement in schools and education, with the goal being a call for the development of ethical principles, grounded in our practice, for all children. While I place a special focus on this moment in time, I intend for this discussion to apply more generally to education even in "normal" times.

First, I briefly raise questions about how online education may be another example of a pattern of inequity running through education in the United States. Next, I review educational ethics. Drawing from Biesta, (2015), Coombs (1998), Maxwell and Schwimmer (2016), and Tom (1984), I review a framework for educational ethics. Then, I discuss a relationship between the three major categories of educational ethics, how two of them may frame the third. Finally, considering formal educational ethics, I tentatively present educational principles, not standards, that I am surfacing for my practice. These are my operating principles. To conclude, I consider a couple of examples and dilemmas surrounding these principles.

Regulatory Discourses in Education and the Norming of Equity

Part of the need for a declaration of ethically grounded principles for education stems from the interaction of two interlocked patterns in American education. The first is the lack of a historical awareness of the evolving traditions in American education. Most non-educators and even many educators are unaware of the story of American education. This lack of awareness gives education a strange ahistorical character—neat snapshots of progress separated from more complex narratives. It limits educational goals and even ideals to the present moment, to contemporary political, economic, ideological, and societal notions of right and wrong. The lack of awareness of the past erases the complexity and promise of the struggle of the American curriculum and schooling (Marable, 2007; Sawyer & Laguardia, 2010), foreclosing difficult but ultimately more hopeful educational visions for the future.

The second pattern is related to the ideological traditions that move like underground streams through education. These ideologies include, for example, discourses about the meaning of progress (e.g., expansion, wealth), the interaction between capitalism and democracy, the source of knowledge (i.e., Western civilization), and the value sorting of people (e.g., producers and consumers), into those with—and without—voice and agency, power and influence. Most importantly, these discourses involve and differentiate people related to, for example, race and ethnicity, gender, ability, orientation, and wealth (with multiple intersections of these categories).

These ideologies and traditions of thought help justify and maintain the continuation of privilege, often delineated and made meaningful in relation to its opposite, a continuation of oppression. According to Matus and McCarthy (2003), this binary dynamic is rooted in a practice of *ressentiment*, in which “one defines one’s identity through the negation of the other” (p. 75). A lack of awareness of these ideological patterns does not erase them; it simply moves them more deeply into the murky undergrowth of education, into a hidden curriculum. The intersection of these two patterns, limited deep-seated change, promotes a conservative, traditional view of education.

Historical Struggles for the American Curriculum

While the specific details in the treatment of different groups of people in American education certainly do change, the ideologies in which such treatment is rooted change more slowly. A few concrete examples will illustrate how in some ways education in the U.S. has been like the repetition of a broken record, returning to a renewal of privilege for some and a lack of opportunity for others.

During pre-colonial times, only white male property owners were entitled to an *elementary* education (Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2013). College was expensive and restricted to the elite. Women, people of color, poor people, and disabled people were excluded. Curriculum of course was a way both to shape and to maintain the social order. For example, in 1828 Jeremian Day and James L. Kingsley attempted to justify and maintain a humanistic curriculum built around students learning Greek, Latin, and mathematics. They wrote in the famous Yale Report that such a course of study built the muscles of the mind. As Kliebard (2004) noted, the rise of humanism as an educational ideal coincided with the rise of a highly restricted class of cultivated aristocracy.

Even after women, people of color, and non-wealthy people begin to attend public schools starting in the mid-1800s, the regulatory discourses related to gender, race, wealth, and ability continued to usurp and shape schooling and education. A couple of well-known examples

illustrate this pattern. In 1896, three decades after the Civil War ended, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy vs Ferguson* that racial separation in education could continue as long as separate facilities were equal. In 1954 in *Brown vs the Board of Education*, the Supreme Court overturned the earlier decision, stated that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." However, since the 1980s, segregation between school districts has increased, within the quality of the educational infrastructure reduced by local funding of schooling.

Another example of privileged education at the expense of another group may be found in Indigenous education. One of the most egregious chapters in American education involves the so-called Native American boarding schools. These schools were established to separate Indigenous children from their families and cultures and to assimilate them into a Euro-American culture. Before European settlement in North America, Indigenous people used a story curriculum to teach their children about their land, their language, their culture, and their community (Holt, Hill, & King, 2020), as well as about endurance, patience, and tribal history (Szasz, 1989). However, in 1891, Congress made education compulsory for Indigenous children. By 1900 over 80% of Indigenous children were attending boarding schools, effectively removing these children from their families and cultures for a length of five years (Szasz, 1989). In 1975, the Indian Self Determination and Educational Assistance Act was passed, returning a level of educational autonomy to Indigenous people.

Currently, Indigenous education has a goal of healing the wounds of colonialism (Holt, Hill, & King, 2020). The healing process recenters education around Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), involving culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogies (Holt, Hill, & King, 2020). Underscoring these goals, for example, in 2015 the Washington State Legislature required the *Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State* or other tribally-developed curriculum be taught in all schools. One noteworthy aspect of this curriculum is its emphasis on a dynamic Indigenous narrative of engagement from the past to the present to the future. It remains to be seen, however, the extent to which an externally imposed accountability system, not rooted in Indigenous knowledge, will support or undermine this curriculum.

In addition to curriculum struggles by people of color, women have also fought against inequities in schooling on both a classroom and structural level (with the two usually intersecting). Although they were allowed to attend elementary schools, secondary schools did not formally open to females until the early nineteenth century. The first high school for females opened in 1824. In Boston, the first high school for females, the English Classical School opened in 1826 but closed three years later due to overwhelming demand, leaving Boston without a public high school for females until 1852. In the early 20th century, as public schools became increasingly coeducational, school systems saw increased regulation of gender (Pinar, et al., 2008). By 1928, 30% of females were enrolled in domestic science (Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2013). Sports, another differentiated curricular area, were organized for the benefit of males, with females "sidelined to the roles of spectators and cheerleaders" (Pinar, et al., 2008, p. 363).

Females in education face barriers to this day. In 2011 it was found that students begin to believe that math is for boys and not for girls, and that boys self-identify with math more strongly than girls (Cvencek, et al., 2011). Teachers underscore this bias, with a recent study showing that teachers found that fictional girl students were less academically capable and scientifically knowledgeable in science than fictional boy students (Newell, et al., 2018).

While progress has been made in some areas by groups seeking equity and voice in education, the regulatory function of education has shifted from laws to policies, such as the

Common Core State Standards. One criticism of the CCSS is its accompanying testing and accountability measures. Operating as an educational gate, the Smarter Balanced Test, for example, is a standardized test with one size fitting all. Intended to provide data to judge students and teachers alike, the high-stakes test sorts students and teachers not based on the lived cultural experience of the student, but on students' critical thinking of real life problems and situations. Measuring the deficit between what students know (or at least answer) and the correct answer, the test reflects a standard developed outside the lived experience of students, pressuring all students, but alienating and labeling those who do poorly.

What is lost in the above examples is the individual and cultural uniqueness of the students, that is, culture as curricular asset. The humanistic reflection of the meaning and potential of the child is erased as their future becomes shadowed. When a standardized curriculum is underscored by high stakes testing, it usurps an organic curriculum of students' lived experience and subjectivities. The emphasis on structures and systems shifts the normative basis in education from the value and meaning of the child to larger educational systems and externally framed meanings (often intended to help the child).

Contemporary Pressures on the American Curriculum

This taken-for-granted normative focus may be found in recent media reporting of online learning, especially in examples actually critical or questioning of online learning. Since the pandemic a number of media sources have raised serious questions about the new online learning environment. For example, the Wall Street Journal (Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020) pointed out that teachers have reported a number of problems, including students simply not attending classes, parents too busy or unprepared to tutor their children, lack of computers and connectivity for many kinds, problems with testing and the need to retest in the fall to determine curriculum baselines, and lack of students' meaningful interaction with their teachers. All of these issues are serious and underscore the lack of equity. But they also suggest serious deficit assumptions about teaching and learning and an authoritative view of curriculum.

As the above examples suggest, not only are the experiences of female and students of color devaluated and marginalized, but their narratives are as well: perceptions of their past, present, and future are rooted in traditional beliefs. For such structural biases to be disrupted, the cultural and individual subjectivity, voice, and agency need to be supported in the classroom. As Munro (1992) noted nearly three decades ago, "When curricular practice is seen and remembered as fluid and embedded in lived experience, these women [that she studied] not only subvert traditional forms, but deflect the standardization of curriculum which has traditionally functioned as a form of control" (p. 15).

Naomi Klein (2007) in the *Shock Doctrine* stated that neoliberal changes accelerate in education during times of natural or human-made crisis. An example of this process is the privatization of public schools in New Orleans. Given the current crisis situation, the long history of normalized inequity in American education, and the lack of awareness of student-generated curriculum as opposed to larger systems, I suggest that ethical principles--a moral compass—are urgently needed at the present moment in education.

Ethics in Education

In education, much of the discussion about ethics falls into the categories of professional ethics (Biesta, 2015), moral ethics (Tom, 1984; Cooper, 2010), and social justice ethics (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016). Thus ethical principles and ethical actions and engagement animate each other. However, in educational discussions of ethics the civic-engagement dimension is often missing and the dispositional definition—how people live ethics—is abstract and decontextualized.

The first dimension, professional ethics, involves what Coombs (1998, p. 564) calls the ‘public moral language’ of the profession. Including teachers’ common norms of high-quality professional service, conduct, and ideals (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016; National Education Association Code of Ethics), professional ethics is rooted in the evolving conceptions for “a specific set of ethical concepts that define and frame ethically responsible conduct” (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016, p. 360). The source of these norms have been located in society (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016) and the public trust (National Education Association Code of Ethics).

A key aspect of professional ethics is the development of a normative field consensus of the meaning of educational ethics. As a normative consensus it is intended to provide language, developed from the practice of teachers, overarching and framing specific teaching situations (Biesta, 2015). Clarifying the meaning of a normative field consensus, Biesta (2015) here discusses the difference between specific aims and broader purposes in education:

Whereas aims are the concrete things that we intend our educational endeavors to bring about or that we expect our students to achieve, the purposes of education have to do with wider rationales for our educational endeavors, the purposes of education give meaning and identity to the practice of education. (p. 673)

Biesta (2015) suggests that an emphasis on meaningful human action rather than human behavior highlights the role of value judgments in teaching.

The second dimension, moral ethics, draws from Tom’s seminal 1984 text, *Teaching As a Moral Craft*. Moral ethics acknowledges that given teachers’ work as agents of student transformation, there is a moral obligation for them to interact with students in ways that are good or worthwhile (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016). Aspects of morality ethics include care (Hamington, 2013; Rogers & Webb, 1991), empathy, and democratic relationships (Cooper, 2010). Hamington (2013) defines care ethics as “a relational approach to morality that values emotion, imagination, and context over externally imposed rubrics of normative decision making” (p. 32). Curriculum grounded in care ethics may promote “the independence and autonomy of the student, or what we might call the student’s right to responsible self-determination” (Biesta, 2015, p. 674). Again, depending on the situation, this definition of care ethics, which is grounded in specific situations, may be distinguishable from that of professional ethics and a notion of practice which transcends any given or specific situation (Biesta, 2015; Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016). As part of care ethics, I would include students’ moral and even spiritual dimensions.

As a relational form of ethics, the role of the teacher is central in creating a classroom environment conducive to care ethics. As such, a part of moral ethics involves the teacher’s deep reflection about her positionality in relation to difference and personal open-mindedness (Hyttén, 2015). Part of the quality of open-mindedness acknowledges that teachers are human and are not

infallible or somehow neutral or objective as they make classroom decisions. Rather, their decisions are embedded in their own epistemological frameworks that may or may not be congruent with those of their students.

The third dimension, social justice ethics, “centers on raising future teachers’ awareness of social exclusion and the public school as a potential motor of social justice, and preparing them to act as agents of social justice and equality” (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016, p. 356). Drawing from the foundational work of Freire (1974), social justice ethics is about more than critiquing social inequities and includes personal reflexivity and even one’s positionality in relation to ethics of self-accountability involving difference (Ruitenbergh, 2015; Sawyer & Norris, 2013).

Ideally, these dimensions of ethics complement one another. However, the different dimensions of educational ethics have been critiqued as potential sites of tension between more macro (codes of ethics) and micro levels (classroom teaching) (Biesta, 2015) on the one hand and between ideals and actions on the other.

Part of the difficulty in being an ethical educator, then, is negotiating the challenges between the different levels of ethics. Professional ethics, for example, offering a stable and decontextualized moral language of broader purposes and ideals, may be challenged by the specific contingencies of care ethics. Is the concept of social justice an absolute, or do goals sometimes justify short term compromises? Aoki (1993), for example, discussed the tensions—the inbetween spaces—that teachers inhabit as they work with the curriculum as plan and the curriculum as lived. Knowing that high-stakes testing ultimately sorts not just individual students but also communities into winners and losers, teachers can choose to refuse to let such tests drive their curriculum. But does a lack of preparation for such tests then foreclose or at least limit the future of a student who relies on a teacher for guidance with their normative and mainstream cultural knowledge?

Developing Principles

I now turn to the formation of a framework that I seek to use in my practice and scholarship. While considering the language of “standards,” is tempting, standards are too often conflated with standardization. Instead, I prefer the use of the term “principles.” Drawing from curriculum theory, I offer a tentative list for myself. The following are organized in the three above categories.

The Moral Category. Educational principles

- Promote life and humanity,
- Acknowledge the situated and personal nature of learning, knowledge, and being,
- Promote emergent interpersonal engagement open to cultural translations, and
- Acknowledge the spiritual dimension of learning and development

Social Justice principles

- Promote human as well as post human and eco-justice
- Acknowledge place as critical space, contested, unfolding, and involving social justice
- Center diverse cultures, knowledge, and ways of being in the classroom, and

- Commit to the dismantling of discourses that promote inequity both individually and socially, Finally,

Professional principles

- Strive toward a language of practice from the above two, grounded in the socially just and moral work of teachers,
- Include action and the committed engagement toward the promotion of justice,
- Are grounded in principled ways of acting, and finally,
- Are grounded in a critical and contingent self-critique and awareness.

Application: Walking the Talk

I'm suggesting that as a profession, those of us working together in education draw from our practice and—framed by moral ethics of care and social justice—together propose an ethical language for education. Personally, I have long been suspicious of normative frameworks in education. However, given the urgency of the times, it seems to me that a collective language that is grounded in ethical practice is needed. The principles that I suggest here are more than placeholders, but still I offer them as a starting point to develop living ethical principles.

Let me give an example from my own practice about the urgent need for their use at this moment of time. Like my friend who teaches special education, I too have now had to shift my courses onto online and distance learning. Unlike my friend, however, I work in teacher preparation and now also have to teach and support new and current teachers teaching in an online environment. While I can't prevent teachers from moving to this format, what I can do is stay focused on the above principles to recenter how we are working on-line.

So, like my friend, in the past month my students who were doing practicums in brick-and-mortar schools are now doing their practicums online. My new cohort was working in a ecojustice focused project based school on collective garden projects. That has all changed as they ended up designing project based learning projects related to the pandemic. The new topic was engaging in positive ways (given the circumstances) to the pandemic.

With the crisis, I began teaching on Zoom. Each of us in the class—students, myself, and a faculty member in Finland who had been working with us as part of a Fulbright Fellowship, had our very own participant Zoom square. My using Zoom surfaced a number of concerns. First is the obvious equity issue that my friend mentioned: there is a digital divide related to access to technology and ability to use technology. But there is a second issue: technology is not culturally neutral, as some might maintain. As technology, it mediates engagement on its platform. For example, it lends itself to didactic, video-taped lessons, to centralized knowledge and power (including the instructor), and the separation of students. There is a profound hidden and not so hidden curriculum at play on electronic learning platforms related to voice, engagement, and culture. These are not new issues in education, but they are now intensified by the use of technology.

In class, I presented some of the main propositions of Django Paris and Sammi Alim's (2017) *Culturally Sustainable Pedagogy* to the class. One tenet of CSP is that dynamic and intersectional cultural engagement of students of color related to linguistic practices is not considered an additive curriculum in classrooms, introduced during a particular month of the year or holiday, but rather comes to center the curriculum. That is, curriculum should reflect—actually grow from—culture. But this is not a defined and historic sense of culture, but rather one that reflects our students' dynamic and continuously changing culture. A second tenet is that

students in the classroom have the opportunity to critique power structures that maintain oppression. And a third tenet is that students have the opportunity to examine how they themselves have been socialized into this oppression. As Pinar et al. (2008) remind us, in US history, one of the goals of curriculum has been the forging of student identity in relation to ideological discourses.

In one class, I asked my students to discuss how these characteristics may be difficult to achieve in their new online environments. I mentioned that they didn't need to come up with "solutions," but rather simply problematizing online teaching viz-a-vie CSP would be a first step to moving toward a more equitable situation. The students raised a number of excellent points, including that cultural oppression is ongoing and somehow stays one step ahead of societal change, even change that appears for the better. This student gave the example of the new Indigenous curriculum in Washington State, *Since Time Immemorial*. While the goal of having Indigenous curriculum is worthy, ways to contain its liberation power move and involve in tandem with its use, which continue to offer a hidden curriculum of oppression in relation to it in the classroom. Someone else mentioned that technology separates the teacher from the lived world of his or her students, making it more difficult to see cultural expressions (or cultural suppressions) that motivate students, thus challenging the teacher to adapt and change the curriculum in relation to lived student engagement. A third student in my class thought that the classroom environment itself is much more controlled and contained, acting as a formal conduit of engagement in the online classroom, and working to separate students and limit their voice, again, suppressing emergent culture and third-space translations and transactions.

At the end of the semester, I continued an on-going study examining how these students engaged in project-based teaching and learning. The shift to online education gave me the opportunity to examine how my students made curriculum with their middle school students which involved their students' lived experiences, cultural history, and subjective ways of knowing. I collected different forms of data from my students, a survey, an interview, a teaching portfolio, and a curriculum unit. First, I found that my students rose to the demands and pressures of teaching in a new way with an online curriculum. In relation to the specific question of how well they actually promoted their students' cultures (or allowed students' culture and lived experiences to animate the curriculum), with one exception they all said that they were unable to develop a more organic curriculum. They still engaged in project-based learning, now online project-based learning, but they found that they had to much more rigidly scaffold and direct the learning.

Another of my students conducted his own study of his first teaching job. Instead of what he had expected as a "regular" classroom teacher, he, like many other teachers, had to unexpectedly engage in online learning. In his case, he also meeting his students for the first time, as he was hired to replace the regular high school science teacher who had earlier arranged a short leave of absence. For his curriculum, the new teacher used both previously prepared modules as well as self-designed units. The modules came from the Concord Consortium. As he wrote, they included

questions, videos, maps, and models that the students use to answer questions. The students must provide evidence for most of these questions as well. There are even a few multiple choice questions in each module that allow the student to check if their answer is right or not. (Rains, 2020, p. 11)

Discovering that many students who were attending were struggling with this curriculum, he had them create “their own geologic timeline, along with adding major geological and biological events with a picture that would be related to the event” (p. 11). Reflecting honestly on the quality of the online teaching, he commented,

Perhaps one of the hardest struggles with this temporary position of a distance learning teacher was trying to give the same opportunities and quality of education to students that didn't have access to online content. During distance learning, absolutely everything was done online, from classes to assignments. So, the question is, did these students receive the same quality of education? In short, not even close. (p. 16)

It is important to note that the following assessment came from a smart, dedicated, and compassionate teacher. His words illustrate ongoing educational issues of access, voice, cultural relevance, and culturally relevant assessment. These themes fit neatly into historical patterns of inequity in American education.

Conclusion

New literacies constantly develop around us. Like the student in my class who mentioned that with a positive change there is an accompanying oppressive counter change, we find ourselves in a new world of electronic literacy. Even without this change, standardization and the accountability movement have made the work of teachers who believe in social justice and the liberation capacity of curriculum increasingly difficult to achieve. Without a language not so much of resistance, although that might be part of it, but rather of a culturally and socially just engagement, as well as a curriculum of hope that is grounded in life, we as educators are powerless—without a language—with which to imagine and implement new possibilities. At this moment of time, we need a language that is framed by morals and social justice and that is centered both in and above our practice.

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