

The complexities of ethical decision-making: A study of prospective teachers' learning

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Professional values and ethics are central agencies innately connected to the teaching profession. In Ontario, Canada, the College of Teachers established the *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession*. In the context of these ethical standards, this study employed a professional inquiry model using a case-study method to investigate prospective teachers' learning by examining over 800 reflection logs written by 52 undergraduate education students. Results reveal that: (i) the ethical statements are instrumental in scaffolding their learning; and (ii) the practice of teaching exists within paradoxical tensions. The study also discusses how the process challenged participants' identity by bringing them to the threshold of moral disequilibrium.

INTRODUCTION

Professional standards of ethics are centrally connected to the teaching profession. In Ontario, Canada, the College of Teachers (OCT), as the governing body for the province's 200,000 teachers, established the *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* (2006) consisting of key statements that capture the responsibilities of all educators to honourably represent the profession. The purposes of the ethical standards are to inspire dignified behaviour in all teaching professionals, advocate for exemplary professional conduct, and address the public accountability of the profession (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006). The College of Teachers' ethical standards recognize the positions of trust and influence that educators hold, and underscore the necessity of maintaining professional relationships, respecting student diversity, sustaining professional environments committed to social justice and student development, establishing cooperative relationships with school community, and complying with the Education Act (Ontario College of Teachers). In the context of ethical standards, the Ontario College of Teachers developed a professional inquiry model using a case-study method. The cases are authored from an Ontario perspective and through their narratives depict varying complexities of being a classroom teacher. Each case provides "a glimpse into teachers' professional lives as reflected in the *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession*" (Smith & Goldblatt, 2005, p. 4).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Critical to teacher education is not only ensuring that prospective teachers have a sound understanding of professional codes and educational law, but sufficient insight to recognize an ethical dilemma and the ability to respond professionally and rationally to the latter (Campbell, 2003; Sockett, 1993). This is particularly significant given that teachers' influence extends to lessons of morality learned by the students entrusted to their care (Campbell, 1996; Hansen, 1996; Winch, 2004). Understanding teachers' decisions and the implications on the ethical standards of the profession are paramount to preparing prospective educators (Richardson & Fenstermacher, 2001).

The literature on case-based pedagogy as a means of espousing epistemological considerations has, however, been seemingly exclusive to preservice and graduate education programs. Novel in the findings of this study is the complexity of prospective teachers' thinking as they scaffold the theoretical learning from their education courses into the paradoxical tensions of ethically-based case dilemmas. Perhaps even more significantly, this study discovered that case-based inquiry challenged participants' identity by bringing them to the threshold of moral disequilibrium.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Teachers are regulated by professional codes of ethics and the law itself. As a profession, teachers are required to have both pedagogical knowledge of what it means to practice as well as an awareness of their legal obligation to students and the educational community (Carr, 2000). While it may be true that,

there is no unanimity on the specifics of teachers' professional ethics, there are core values that are common and from which one can begin to derive a description of an ethical identity for the profession. (Cook & Truscott, 2007, p. 2)

Professionalism is linked directly to the quality of practice and to the status of a job as perceived by society (Sockett, 1993). Implicit in the practice of teaching are ethical relationships since the teacher's responsibility is to facilitate learning and growth in younger student. As a result, professional teachers must: be capable of profound reflection on practice; be competent to enter into a dialogue of the practice they know and the theory or literature they read; be able to engage in a community of interpretation and critique with colleagues and with students; and be able to observe, document, and analyse their own practice and experience, and take that analysis into the white hot cauldron of public forums and public accountability. (Sockett, 1996, p. 26)

Given the unique relationship between the teacher and student, the teaching profession is bound by what are considered unique considerations when compared to other professions, namely, exercising judicious power and negotiating acceptable social distances that neither befriends nor alienates the pupil (Clark, 1990; Fenstermacher, 1986; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993). Every choice presented to an individual that involves ethical judgement requires a steadiness of predictability and flexibility (Strike, 1996). "In practice teachers make exceptions from principles of justice with reference to students'

different needs. They may, for example, help students not in the order in which they asked for help but according to their ability to wait” (Colerud, 2006, p. 369; see also Colerud, 2003). Teachers are expected to be able to justify the validity of their ethical standpoints on the basis of their professional role (Jackson, 1990). However, “teachers sometimes lack the linguistic tools to explain and investigate the moral justification of his/her moral actions” (Colerud, 2006, p. 377). Teaching is a complicated profession given that its practice is often marked by conflicting societal, institutional, emotional, and personal forces making it imperative that educators be able to successfully negotiate this complex terrain by exercising their critical judgements (Berlak & Berlak, 1981).

Case studies are intended to facilitate this negotiation and illuminate student-teachers’ awareness of what Shulman (1986) describes as “theoretical principles, maxims, and norms” (Orland-Barak, 2002, p. 452; Shulman, 1992; Sykes & Bird, 1992). Student teachers benefit from a variety of opportunities to contextualize the complexities of teaching, including case-based pedagogy (Caruso, 1998). As Garrahy, Cothran, and Kulinna (2005) suggest, by providing a combination of observations in the field, preliminary exposure to teaching situations, and formal coursework, “teacher educators can help pre-service teachers interpret their new knowledge” (p. 61; see also O’Sullivan, 1996; Pagano & Langley, 2001). This research project investigated the process by which prospective teachers negotiated the case-based ethical dilemmas in a professional inquiry model. The advocates for implementing a case-based pedagogy suggest that instruction be intermingled with ethical issues that foster independent analytical skills and conceptual thinking (Burger, 1992; Freire, 1998; Katz, 1998; McClain, 2003; Morse, 2000; Shulman, 1986; Simon, 2000; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). The cases employed in this study entail real-life dilemmas that infer the ethical standards and the standards of practice that inform the “facilitate deeper awareness, understanding, and integration of the standards” (Smith & Goldblatt, 2005, p. 4).

The literature on case-based pedagogy is very much focused on preservice and graduate education programs. To clarify, the pre-service teacher education program of study consists of one academic school year of post-bachelor degree studies and the concurrent program is a five academic year program that combines undergraduate study with education courses. The multidimensional mode of case inquiry developed by the Ontario College of Teachers is in fact intended for practicing teachers and those aspiring to positions of additional responsibility. This research study employed the case inquiry process to examine concurrent undergraduate students’ ability to link abstract educational theory to the eventual circumstances of ethical professional practice. The case-based pedagogy under discussion was especially conducive to the critical examination of ethical practice and for the consideration of the theory that founds it (Shulman, 1992; Shulman & Colbert, 1988; Whitehouse & McPherson, 2002). The case discussion encouraged participant reflection and served as a vehicle to deconstruct, construct, and eventually reconstruct meaning (Shulman, Whittaker, & Lew, 2002). The OCT’s ethical standards for the teaching profession facilitates student-teachers’ ethical decision-making process based on ethical principles that are accepted by the profession as core values (Cole & Knowles, 2000; Jenlink & Kinnucan-Welsch, 2001).

RESEARCH QUESTION

This qualitative research examines the discourse of undergraduate education students and analyses the interchange between their preconceived notions, the standards of ethics, and their critical reflections. One question guided the inquiry, namely how do undergraduate education students negotiate case-based ethical dilemmas and arrive at decisions in a professional inquiry model?

METHODS

Participants and setting

Fifty-two undergraduate students enrolled in the third year of a concurrent education program in a university located in southern Ontario, Canada, participated in the study. All participants had chosen the intermediate/senior division as their area of concentration. They ranged from 20 to 23 years of age. Each participant engaged in four case studies between September 2005 and September 2006. Each case inquiry session lasted two hours. The case-based process employed in this research design was facilitated by professional educators not directly involved in this project.

Data collection and analysis

Participants' reflection logs for each of the four case inquiries represented the data for this study. The four cases under study dealt with core critical issues faced by both new and experienced educators. In the first case, a mid-career teacher was presented with a challenging elementary school student and his family. In the second, a student teacher directly confronted the challenges of managing a classroom of students who recognize her inexperience. The third case described a relatively new teacher who implements a classroom management strategy with minimal success and is then forced to deal with the implications and outcomes. In the last instance, the subject case teacher shared the difficulty of balancing the needs of all students in an inclusive classroom and the impending pressure from colleagues and school administrators. Participants were provided a copy of each case at the beginning of the session, its complementary expert-authored commentaries, and four reflection logs (per case) consisting of the following headings: Thoughts about the Case, Thoughts about the Case following the Case Discussion, Thoughts about the Case after Reading the Commentary, and Thoughts about the Case after the Commentary Discussion. Participants were prompted to first read the case (and then write their reflections in the first log); to discuss their perspectives about the case with their peers (and document their reflection in the second log); to read the often-competing tensions inherent in one of the three assigned commentaries written by educators and various experts related to the case (then to reflect in the third log); and last, were divided into three groups, each of which assumed the persona of one expert author in the large-group discussion of the commentaries (culminating with a final prompt to record their thoughts in the last reflection log). As explained in Smith and Goldblatt (2005), a commentary is a written response made to a particular case and may consist of an elaboration upon a teaching principle, a personal anecdote on the part of the commentator that is related to the issues of the

case, a series of pointed questions for the reader to ponder, a contemplative reflection, or even a critical interpretation of a case-subject's decision. The impetus for each of the commentaries that accompany the cases is to serve as catalysts that foster deeper understandings of case predicaments. Commentators provide an informed perspective from which to approach and revisit a case.

Eight hundred and twelve reflection logs, out of a possible 832, were collected (representing a 97% response rate). The process allowed for individual rumination, peer interaction, role-play, and retrospective critical reflection. It provided a means for participants to actively deconstruct the contextual relevance and ethics of the case. Each participant had the opportunity to review their responses for a member check of the data. There were no extensive changes.

Content analysis, as the study's research design, is particularly appropriate for domains where relatively new research is explored (Firmin & Wilhelm, 2006; Ten Have, 2004). The data were therefore subjected to content analysis (Patton, 1988). The reflection logs were hand-written and ranged from one to three pages in length. Participants' reflections were transcribed verbatim. Each log was examined as a text first as it pertained specifically to its respective case and then as it responded to the research question. The text of each log was re-read and labelled by category. Themes and patterns between categories and across logs were considered (Patton, 1998). Properties within the categories were distinguished as descriptors. The logs were also subjected to another critical reading and coded by theme. The themes were juxtaposed to the emerging categories and analysed for applicability (Bernard & Ryan, 1998). The suitability of the themes and properties within each category determined their relevance. Qualitative content analysis indulges in the discreet manner whereby language influences perceptions, shapes critical thinking, and creates a specific interpretation of what is real (Avdi, 2005; Johnstone & Frith, 2005). Selected extracts from the data that best represented participants' authentic reflections are cited in the paper (Krippendorff, 2004).

Investigator triangulation was factored in to increase trustworthiness measures. A research associate not involved in the project but well versed in these qualitative methodologies agreed to engage in this inductive exercise (Peter & Lauf, 2002). The transcripts were independently coded through a meticulous line-by-line investigation of concepts relevant to the expressed meaning. The significant categories were identified after all of the data, analytical notes, and decisive discussions between researchers were consolidated (Cherubini, 2007). Since each of the logs was considered a "textual whole," themes were coded separately as they emerged in participants' rhetorical constructions of their critical reflections (Hilden & Honkasalo, 2006). This also facilitated the management of such an extensive body of data.

The inductive content analytical process for the central research question identified four subcategories, including participants underestimating teachers' moral considerations, the difficulty of examining one's rationales, coming to grips with an image of teachers, and how the case analysis process shed a different light on the assigned readings from their Education coursework. These subcategories and

their collective 11 properties were subsumed into two dominant categories described as participants' perception of the ethical standards as being instrumental in scaffolding their learning into the moral complexities of teacher decision-making; and second, their awareness that the contextual practice of teaching exists within paradoxical tensions best described as creative anxiety and continuous uncertainty.

The trustworthiness of the study was addressed by employing various procedures. Participants could edit and revise responses during a member check of their reflection pages. Also, data triangulation included the collection and examination of four separate data sets after each case study inquiry. Further, both researchers investigated for the presence of negative cases that countered the dominant categories to arrive at a comprehensive view of participants' perceptions and voice during this initial stage of student-teacher development (see Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

The content of the discursive reflections consisted of connections between concepts and themes that participants employed to trace their thinking. Two significant categories emerged from the core research question.

Scaffolding learning into the complexities of decision-making

Participants acknowledged their emerging awareness of the need to understand and appreciate the *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession*. The statements challenged some of their myopic views and self-centred assumptions of their responsibilities not only to the students entrusted to their care but to other stakeholders in the school community. This participant's reflection was indicative of many others: "By themselves, the statements are clear and make sense in regards to us and the students. When we challenged them through the cases, they suddenly did not seem so cut and dry." Prior to the case-based studies, participants' understanding of theory learned in Education coursework seemed to circumvent cultural, political, individual, and social issues that confounded the contextual considerations of teaching and learning. Although they professed to acquire a profound understanding of textbook knowledge, they admitted that their study of the actualization of practice assumed a far greater degree of complexity when examined against the ethical standards. "When we got into them [the case discussions] it was unbelievable how many underlying themes there were. Everyone saw each case from a different angle depending on their background, but we were all bound to the same code of ethics." Another telling comment read, "it's essential that we understand others' perspectives and that we work towards creating positive dynamics in our classrooms." While another stated,

I see how the [case subject] supply teacher was caught in a no-win situation, and I completely understand how she was paralysed by her indecision. That's the thing with ethical dilemmas like this, you are constantly weighing what you think is the right thing to do with what the profession expects. I never imagined that such positions existed in the role of teacher.

The case-based inquiry, therefore, provided various opportunities for participants to scaffold their learning. This participant suggested, “we learn strategies in methods class [and] philosophy in another. Here [using case-based pedagogy] we can examine causes and reactions that happen between the lines.”

Participants were candid in sharing that “there are many ethical variables in teaching. So many people are responsible for each outcome [of the respective cases].” Not only, therefore, were participants’ coursework and knowledge more effectively contextualized as a result of intensive self and group interrogations into ethical principles, but their admission that the process forced them to travel difficult moral terrains was especially significant. One participant stated,

I want to do what is best for my students, but according to the law and the standards they are children and because of that teachers have to contact parents [even] if they are begged not to [by the student]. But when I think about it from the student’s perspective, what could be worse than confiding in a teacher only to have them speak to your parents about an issue of confidence.

Multiple points of divergence surfaced in the series of reflection logs in terms of participants’ moral perspectives. Common in the reflections was this one: “Should I worry that so many of us are coming from different directions? I don’t see my responsibilities with Scott [case-subject] in the same light as my group, that’s for sure.” Another participant candidly stated, “I am responsible for these students’ learning, not for controlling the way they act and think. I think some of these people [the other study participants] need to remember that.” Participants often struggled with aligning the ethical standards to their decision-making. They discerned how political relations between teachers are often a distinct ethical consideration that inevitably intermingles with classroom dynamics. One participant stated, “there can be such a power struggle between teachers. But you have to do what is morally responsible.” Another participant reflected, “I don’t expect to be morally perfect and now I understand the strength of teacher’s voices...but we can’t lose sight of the students despite our different understandings of what a class should look like.” Yet another reflected,

A teacher has to do what the profession expects. Period and end of discussion. Where I see [case] teachers getting into trouble is when they try to be saviours and take matters into their own hands. Hey, we are teachers and not the kids’ best friends.

Participants consistently reflected that the core problem in each case potentially represented latent tensions in the context of teaching and learning. In fact, they felt personally engaged in the negotiation of these tensions that, as one participant stated, “involved issues that could not be swept under the rug.” On numerous occasions participants admitted that the subjects and series of events in the case narratives forced them into a critical assessment of personal and occupational knowledge as it related to the ethical interests of their decisions, and hence realized that “it’s not just a matter of making a decision, but about being informed and about informing others in terms of where you stand.” As another individual stated, “I have to weigh the consequences of losing a kid’s trust with what I’m supposed to do as a teacher. Right now, to be honest, I don’t have an answer.” Participants cited their expectation that their inexperience would be “tested and questioned daily” as beginning teachers,

and suggested that the case-inquiry process enlightened them to the difficulties of managing their roles given various ethical considerations. Indicative of others' perspectives, this individual stated, "I can see that I'm not alone in realizing that teaching is going to be difficult, and that there will be some decisions where I will be bound by the standards regardless [of] what my heart is telling me what to do." On many occasions participants scrutinized the professional standards for appearing to be, as one individual described, "too motherly." The participants' reflections, particularly for the final two cases, were also indicative of their growing ambivalence to what they perceived as an over-reliance on the part of many of the case-subject school administrators on remaining objective about how teachers should approach their decision-making. In fact, participants' became increasingly critical of

principals who seem to want to remove the personal dimension from teachers' relationship with kids. It seems to me that if you can sit back and separate yourself from a situation it's pretty easy to be the objective voice and with the rational opinion. When I put myself into the [case-subject] teacher's shoes, though, there is so much that has to go into making every decision. We have to abide by the school rules, the community's expectations, our union, and the rest of it. Meanwhile, we have to make decisions that we think are best for us because we will be the ones on the hot seat.

The practice of teaching in the context of competing tensions

The case-based inquiry process, given the *Ethical Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession*, illuminated for participants that the intrinsic dilemmas in the practice of teaching are present daily and can be anxiety inducing. Participants noted that the multiplicity of ethical demands and professional responsibilities were cause for anxiety. One participant reflected, "I am anxious about these moral judgments that affect the situation. It seems best to get many perspectives when resolving a problem but this can't always be possible....Then what?" Participants suggested that this anxiety would be a constant source of tension in their practice, given the variables that impact upon students and their learning that would be beyond their control as teachers. On numerous occasions they cited their perceived lack of control in terms of student demographics, learning styles and proficiencies. One individual wrote, "the standards are clear. What I struggle with both morally and professionally is having the courage to abide by them during one of these messes where there doesn't seem to be a completely positive outcome." They were adamant in qualifying, however, that despite the anticipated anxiety they understood their responsibility to exercise their creative energies to engage students, nurture their development, and further their learning. Representative of other participants, this individual commented, "on some days it will feel like 30 against 1 and that my priority will be to stay in control. But I have to speak to, relate, teach, and be responsible for them each day." Particularly telling was this comment, "the values [referring to the ethical standard statements] will demand my energy. But it's not about my ego. The most important question I have to ask is how will I deliver student learning?"

Synonymous with the notions of teaching and the ethical standards, participants acknowledged a level of recurring uncertainty in the context of their prospective daily practice. They defined successful teacher-practitioners by their proficiency to thrive in this condition of continuous uncertainty. As one participant reflected, “I’ll learn not to worry about what comes through my classroom door each morning. My attention will be doing what is right for each student when they are in front of me. And the standards will take care of themselves. Sounds easy, doesn’t it? I am expecting it not to be.” Participants did not shy away from the difficult ethical implications of each case; instead, they accepted (without resigning themselves) to having “a shared responsibility” and “mutual respect” of teachers and students alike given the parameters that the ethical standards entail. Another individual stated, “I know what it means to be ethical, and I know it won’t be easy every day.” A different participant wrote, “I see some of these teachers [the subject-teachers in the case narratives] and realize that I too may not have my eyes open to every difficult situation. But it is what it is and I’ll run with it.” Participants acknowledged the vast array of uncertainties as they relate to their practice, and realized as this prospective teacher indicated, “what a nightmare it can be if your approach is seen as unethical. But there are always better alternatives and it will be part of our job to find them out.”

It was clear that the tension of creative anxiety and continuous unpredictability existed symbiotically for participants. Interestingly, they perceived a blurred yet fundamental connection between the anxiety and unpredictability of teaching and their mandate to be ethical and professional teachers. Common to the majority of reflections was the sentiment shared by this participant: “I also see our responsibilities, morals and the sense of who we are all tied into one. The situations of some of these teachers [case-subject teachers] force us to look at the big picture and to break it down from there.” Another individual added, “it is a matter of assessing and re-assessing what is troubling us before actually doing something about it and making the morally correct choices.” Participants were also very sensitive to appreciating the inter-connectedness of this friction and cited on numerous occasions the perceived danger of dwelling on stressful circumstances. To do so, according to participants, would be to adopt a teaching paradigm of perpetual despair, thereby reducing the potential of practicing in a productive capacity. This participant’s reflection summarizes many others: “In some of these situations [the ethical dilemmas presented in the case studies], it seems that the teachers have lost their focus and are driven by defence mechanisms to justify what they did and why they did it.” Participants distinguished the paradoxical tension of teaching, recognized the complex variations involved in ethical decision-making, and readily reflected upon their capacities to be pragmatic practitioners without relinquishing their altruistic values. Another individual poignantly captured the competing tensions inherent in the case dilemmas and how they would impact upon her practice. She described feelings of empathy for case-subject teachers who were “being pulled about from every direction” while wanting to remain true to her own professional obligations:

Remaining calm is key. Knowing you do not have to make a split-second decision when all of these people are screaming their perspectives in your ear. You have the College standards to

abide by, for sure, but they can be blanket statements during times of crisis. I have learned the importance of being well-informed of the expectations and good-intentioned in my behaviour. As someone else said today, teaching is about making decisions every minute of the day. But these ones [ethical dilemmas] have to catch our attention because of the consequences of what we do, or what we don't.

On many occasions during the final case study reflections participants commented on how impressed they were with some case-subject individuals who were able to eloquently express themselves to the parties involved in the dilemmas and the interests they each represented. Participants distinguished "how much more convincing it really is" when an educator is able to effectively articulate the justification for their decision. This reinforced for participants the importance of being well-informed of professional, school, and federation expectations in terms of ethical conduct.

DISCUSSION

The process of individually examining, sharing and then critiquing their reflections on the case-based dilemmas and commentaries translated into diverse participant discourse and reasoning. As the inquiry process progressed from cases one to four there were notable gradual shifts in participants' considerations of their own worldviews to more comprehensive understandings of the ethics that impacted upon the teachers, students, parents, and administrators within the cases. The case study assisted participants in mediating their prospective role as teachers in a social and relational light (Lowe, 2005; Shotter & Lannamann, 2002). In fact, the ethical dilemmas presented in the narratives crystalized participants' understanding of their occupational roles (Goldstein, Kielhofner, & Paul-Ward, 2004). As one individual commented in a final reflection, "it seems like there is a lot more to consider than just me being that presence in front of the class. The whole idea of how we interact with the hidden curriculum is a different thing to think about." Participants candidly admitted that their conceptual negotiations of each case circumstance provided significant insight that culminated, at the conclusion of the case inquiry, into what one participant described as "walking in the teacher's shoes" (see Barrett, Beer, & Kielhofner, 1999; Rand & Shelton-Colangelo, 2003).

The *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* provided, therefore, opportunities for participants to juxtapose the knowledge learned from their studies with their preconceptions of teaching and learning. The implications of the ethical standards often created tension between participants' idealistic paradigms and the necessary professional considerations that are involved in ethical decision-making. As one participant wrote, "it may be ethical to side with the parent, but isn't the student getting the short end of the stick?" Another reflected, "I see how a teacher can be torn between doing what is right and doing what feels right...at what point do you draw the line?" Such discussions evolved throughout the process into participants' assessment of their conceptual self-understandings. Participants' reflections from the final case inquiry were, thus, markedly different from their initial ones. Although there was awareness of the importance to comply with the professional protocols of being a teacher across the

first to last case reflections, the final set of considerations took notice of participants' self-awareness as professionals commissioned to ensure students' learning. In the reflections pertaining to the final case study, participants' scope of understanding extended away from self-serving outcomes to reflect a more vested interest in creating learning environments that were conducive to all students. Participants tended to justify their decisions on how they implicated upon the respective relationships between case-subject teachers and the various stakeholders in the school community. Participants noted an intense interest in accounting for the implications of the professional standards of ethics on how their decisions were relevant and appropriate beyond their professional self-interest. Participants' understanding were underscored by how they perceived their roles as prospective teachers. They appreciated, as the results of the study suggest, that their professional practice and the ethical standards are coterminous realities that govern the foundational purpose of their behaviour. They understood the professional responsibilities in the context of ethical decision-making. Moreover, participants' reflections often confronted their own professional assumptions. In their reflection logs, they consistently accounted for their past experiences in school and how the definition of ethical practice was enacted in their learning. Particularly noteworthy was this participant's comment, "it seemed that when I was in high school it was all about learning and succeeding. You did the work, you learned, and you got a grade. Now it seems so much more complicated." Another wrote,

I get the sense that accountability is everywhere these days. We will be accountable to the standards, the kids, other teachers, parents, and the principal. I guess the key will be to make the moral judgments that are expected of us.

The case-based inquiry resulted in the exploration of theoretical principles, the discussion of viable alternatives, and the discovery of the complexity of the ethical standards of the profession. Participants noted how the process was conducive to developing what one individual described as "a greater appreciation for real-life examples", and as another wrote, "to see things through someone else's eyes and then dissect on our own exactly where our thoughts are situated and how we got there." Participants articulated their thoughts, harboured others' viewpoints, and by the final set of reflections demonstrated their proficiency at reconsidering the issues and arrive at informed opinions. Of particular interest to this study were participants' perceptions of the ethical statements as a conceptual construct that affected the social and emotional tapestry of their identity as prospective teachers. While the process enabled self-understanding, it challenged participants' emerging sense of identity by bringing them to the threshold of moral disequilibrium. Participants attempted to account for case-subjects' decisions by employing theoretically-informed positions; however, these set of discourses often challenged pre-conceived truths and blurred the distinctions between right and wrong. In the presence of ethical dilemmas, participants consistently noted their struggle with being able to explain alternatives but not be able to predict the consequences of their decisions. As participants' reflections arrived at this threshold, they shared experiential justifications for their thoughts while simultaneously confronting unacknowledged values. Of particular interest, as the reflections progressed from the first

to last case study, participants increasingly noted that the moral, or “right” decision as one individual described, was more an outcome of conforming to the ethical standards of the profession and less a genuine response to the dilemma. The moral construct that the case-based inquiry yielded provided a filter for participants to challenge solutions to case dilemmas that some individuals rationalized as “creating the least harm” and “doing what’s best for the majority of students.” Participants’ inclinations regarding the constitution of ethical decision-making and subsequent action were factored against the moral construct that the ethical standards came to embody.

The consequence of this state of moral disequilibrium that emerged in earnest within the final set of reflection logs was participants feeling somewhat ambivalent about the ethical standards themselves. They felt that the standards and the principles they represent at times illegitimized their voices as individual professional teachers. Participants were more critical in the third and fourth cases in situations when they felt case-subject decisions were made on the basis of being self-righteous in their strict adherence to the ethical standards at the peril of neglecting students’ voices.

SUMMARY

It has been suggested that teacher education programs are less than successful because of their focus on technical forms of knowledge (Beyer, 1987; Sheehan & Fullan, 1995). Viewed in this light, teachers are cast as those who transform knowledge to students as non-critical practitioners. By adopting a more critical and complex approach, as provided by a case study pedagogy founded upon ethical dilemmas, teacher educators may in fact encourage prospective teachers to first recognize and then probe the often ambiguous ethical implications confronting them. This would contribute to the development of teacher education programs that would emphasize the notion of teachers reflecting on their social and political beliefs, and challenge the reality of classroom practices. That is, teachers ought to be trained to reflect on what kind of teachers they are, (their values and beliefs) and how they became that way (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2008).

The statements for the *Ethical Standards of the Teaching Profession* are beneficial in scaffolding participant learning into the dilemmas of teachers’ practice. The study discovered that participants became increasingly aware that teachers function within a conceptual framework best described in terms such as creative anxiety and continuous uncertainty. Participants perceived the ethical statements as profoundly influencing their social and emotional self-identities as prospective teachers. Further, the case-based inquiry process challenged participants’ identity by bringing them to the threshold of moral disequilibrium.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations can be drawn from this research. To begin, the study may be replicated since all participants were students from a centrally located province in Canada and were predominantly White and middle class citizens. The study was limited to the *Ethical Standards of the Teaching Profession* as they apply to one province. Further research may be considered with more diverse populations from other Canadian provinces in the context of their provincial value statements. Second, research on a larger scale involving other undergraduate education students may provide a more thorough depiction of the critical commentary that affects strategic decision-making. Third, that concurrent preservice education programs should consider employing similar case-based processes to enable prospective teachers to trace the layers of their critical thinking and emerging professional identities. Last, a longitudinal study could trace prospective teacher participants' decision-making processes from their undergraduate courses to the last year of their professional teacher education programs and then into the first years of their practice to account for the critical focus of how they generate decisions.

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