



From ethical reasoning to teacher education for social justice



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Ethical decision-making was based on morality of care and morality of justice.
- The findings show that teachers have the ability to use both moral orientations.
- The categories were: democratic education, culturally responsive and critical pedagogy.
- We found multifaceted ethical dilemmas nested in different categories.
- Teachers' professional development programmes should focus on social justice.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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The goal of this study is to explore teachers' ethical decision-making process in order to redesign teacher professional development programmes. Twenty teachers shared their critical ethical incidents; then another 50 teachers responded to those incidents. Findings relating to aspects of care and justice were nested into three categories: 'democratic education,' 'culturally responsive' and 'critical pedagogy'. The disparity we noted among participants between perceived behaviours expected by educational policy and the perceived behaviours that they would choose reveal that it is recommended for teachers' professional development programmes to focus on social justice by learning how to integrate between justice and care.

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1. Introduction

Studies around the world note that teachers often find themselves dealing with critical ethical incidents (e.g., Bullough, 2011; Ehrich, Kimber, Millwater, & Cranston, 2011). Despite their experience in the field, teachers often articulate a lack of self-confidence as to how they should respond to these incidents (Mahony, 2009; Tirri & Husu, 2002). This lack of self-confidence becomes even more problematic when one considers that many countries do have laws, school regulations, and codes of ethics that teachers ought to be able to consult with in order to deal with these critical ethical incidents (e.g., French-Lee & Dooley, 2015; O'Neill & Bourke, 2010; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010). Therefore, the main goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of teachers' ethical decision-making. More specifically, the sub-goals of this study are:

- To explore teachers' ethical decision-making by analysing what perceptions and knowledge characterise this process.
- To investigate whether, and how, teachers' awareness of expected behaviour (e.g., educational management circulars, school rules) shapes their ethical decision-making.
- To rethink and redesign teachers' professional development programmes.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Ethical reasoning

The term "ethical reasoning" as used in this study describes the process by which an individual deals with an ethical dilemma (Abdolmohammadi, Read, & Scarbrough, 2003). There are two central components of reasoning about ethical dilemmas: 'morality of justice', and 'morality of care'. 'Morality of justice' implies endeavoring to follow universal rules, societal rules, and individual

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rights. Kohlberg's (1986) research is based on the 'morality of justice'. His framework provides three broad levels of cognitive moral development; each comprises two stages. Moral development involves an individual's passage between stages. The characteristics of the levels and stages define the construct "moral judgment".

Morality of justice in schools may be reflected by legitimising rights and obligations, such as parents' and students' rights to a 'good' education, and a teachers' obligation to provide that. Thus, success is determined by quantitative attainment published in international reports such as TIMSS, PISA and OECD. Therefore, schools are required to employ measures that are designed to demonstrate the progress of students. As a result, education becomes a political issue, insofar as it requires consideration of the ways in which student achievements are monitored and controlled (Adams, 2015).

The concept '*morality of care*' reflects a less formal approach. Its focus centers on the notion of providing care by which the appropriateness of response can be appraised in a particular case. '*Morality of care*' is a standard that allows one to say that a certain thing was the appropriate action for a particular individual to take, but not that it would be necessarily the right action for each person in that situation. Knowing what to do involves knowing others and being connected in ways that involve both emotion and cognition (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1997). '*Morality of care*' is distinct from '*morality of justice*' in that it does not attempt to follow universal rules or ensure equitable treatment. It focuses on responsiveness to another's needs.

Previous studies indicated that morality of care is typically reflected in teacher statements about professionalism, and the way in which teachers defined themselves was in terms of care (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2010; Tirri & Husu, 2002). What is relevant, however, is the way in which care as an aspect of interpersonal relationships aligns itself with the issue of education. The positions adopted by the psychology of morality within a caring framework propel us toward the heart of education-caring relationships with students (Adams, 2015).

2.2. *Morality of care and morality of justice*

According to Adams (2015), there are two primary approaches to the relationship between morality of justice and morality of care: (1) *The superiority approach*. This approach holds that one ethic is superior to the other. In most cases, it is argued in favor of justice, although some do argue for care as the superior approach; (2) *The integration approach* seeks to find one monistic theory; that care and justice are intertwined. The latter view is that justice cannot exist without care and vice versa. In support of that approach, Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) witnessed care and justice intertwined: care as conceived through the prism of justice and care as a perspective on moral action. They concluded that the justice perspective is incomplete without an accompanying care perspective. Based on the duality of justice and care, this study will focus its investigation on '*morality of care*' and '*morality of justice*' by examining critical ethical incidents.

2.3. *Critical incidents in an ethical context*

The term 'critical incident' has been defined in various ways: vivid happenings that are considered significant or memorable (Brookfield, 2005), a uniquely problematic situation that promotes reflection (Bruster & Peterson, 2013), and episodes with enormous consequences for personal change and development (Sikes, Measor, & Woods, 2001). In schools, uncertain conditions may be categorised as critical incidents (Tripp, 2011). According to Halquist and Musanti (2010), it is our interpretation of an event's

significance that makes it critical.

In order to turn an event into a critical incident, we must do more than simply categorise or label it. We need to investigate some of the underlying structures that produce that type of incident. To be *critical*, an event has to be shown to contain a more general meaning and indicate something of greater importance in a broader context. According to Angelides (2001), for the most part, the majority of critical incidents are not at all dramatic or obvious. It is only through analysis that these rather typical incidents come to be viewed as critical.

In an ethical context, critical incidents labeled as critical *ethical* incidents (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011) involve the need to discover the underlying ethical meaning of what is usually taken for granted, and entail interpretation of what events constituted turning points. Small, sometimes even unnoticed events or situations can turn into critical ethical incidents. Their criticality is based on the justification and meaning accorded to them in the ethical context, eliciting a need for reflection on that particular event, thereby rendering it visible and susceptible to further analysis and interpretation.

2.4. *Using critical ethical incidents to promote reflective practice*

Reflection is the active, purposeful process of exploration and discovery; it often leads to rather unexpected outcomes. It is an activity that helps to bridge an actual experience with the learning derived from that experience. It involves both cognition and feeling (Halquist & Musanti, 2010). As such, reflection differs from developing an understanding. It is an attempt to understand an issue or doubt that triggered the reflective process. This process goes beyond a search for understanding in the quest for personal meaning. A new concept becomes absorbed into a personal knowledge structure, and is then linked to other knowledge and experience. Learning takes place via active critical reflection, wherein reflection precedes further action (Harrison & Lee, 2011).

Hence, the particular attributes of a critically reflective teacher can include disbelieving what was previously held to be true. Furthermore, trying to distinguish reflection (a way of justifying one's beliefs) from critical reflection (checking one's assumptions by examining both the sources of evidence and consequences of the action) may lead us to the notion of learning at a higher, transformative level via processes of critical reflection that critique the pre-suppositions on which individual beliefs are based (Bruster & Peterson, 2013).

As Tripp (2011) emphasised, reflecting on significant critical incidents in ethical contexts is essential to the development of teachers' professional judgment when we take into consideration that teachers often make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. However, encouraging teachers to reflect on critical ethical incidents in uncertain conditions can elicit their ethical dilemmas in educational practice (Mahony, 2009).

2.5. *Exploring ethical dilemmas by reflecting critical incidents*

Ethical incidents in school become *critical* because they present the teacher with a dilemma in which there may be at least two mutually exclusive courses of action. They provide an opportunity for reflective processes by questioning the way things in school operate. Those sorts of questions provide an opportunity for more scholarly analyses of a teacher's perceptions of meaning, rather than just the experience of the actual incident (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011).

Ethical dilemmas will exist wherever different principles lead to different resolutions. This may happen in any situation where different ethical principles come into conflict, where there is no evident right answer and we must make a tough choice between

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