

INVESTIGATING ETHICAL REASONING SKILLS IN PRES-SERVICE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS AT JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY, VIRGINIA USA.

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Abstract: The paper examines how pre-service elementary teachers make decisions about ethical dilemmas they face in their professional life. Pre-service teachers were presented with eight key questions they can use as they make ethical decisions. Additionally, the pre-services teachers were presented 10 real life ethical dilemmas. The study indicates that resolution of ethical dilemma was based on the power and authority associated with the person involved. Participants supported the persons with the least amount of resources and power. They used fairness and empathy ahead of liberty, or character. Cultural differences were not considered as student-participants resolved ethical dilemmas.

Keywords: Cultural perspectives, Ethical Reasoning, Ethical Dilemmas, Pre-service teachers.

Introduction: American schools are rapidly becoming more and more diverse attracting students from across the globe. While the student body is becoming diverse in early and elementary classrooms, the demographic profile of the teachers is slower to change to a more diverse group. This disparity in cultural contexts is often magnified when students and teachers find themselves in situations that draw upon culture specific ethical reasoning and decision-making. The disparity causes cognitive dissonance among both teachers and students. It pushes both to move out of their comfort zone and develop an appreciation for alternate ways of thinking and reasoning. This requires a personal commitment, open mind, opportunities for deep and guided reflection, and exposure to a wide range of cultural perspectives.

The mission of James Madison University (JMU) focuses on nurturing educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives. It was also becoming increasingly clear to the JMU leadership that potential employers were interested in hiring employees with a well-developed sense of ethical reasoning skills and conduct. With this in mind, the University launched the Madison Collaborative in Action: A program that will help develop ethical reasoning skills among students. As part of this initiative, JMU developed 8 key questions that can be used to resolve ethical dilemmas. The 8 key questions focus on the following areas of ethical reasoning

1. Fairness: What action does justice, equality, or a balance of legitimate interests require?
2. Outcomes: What achieves the best short- and long-term outcomes for me and all others?
3. Responsibility: What duties and/or obligations apply?
4. Right: What rights, if any, (e.g., innate, legal, social) apply?
5. Empathy: What would I do if I cared deeply about

those involved?

6. Authority: What do legitimate authorities (e.g., experts, law, and my religion/god) expect of me?
7. Liberty: How does respect for freedom, personal autonomy, or consent apply?
8. Character: What action best reflects who I am and the person I want to become?

Rationale & Motivation: Currently, there are several on-going initiatives among faculty and students at JMU to infuse principles of ethical reasoning in our decision-making and actions as students and faculty. One specific initiative is to introduce the learning and practice of the 8 key questions in the courses that are taught at the University.

The College of Education offers a three credit course on Child Development. As part of this course students discuss moral development in young children. In summer and fall 2014, the course outline was modified to include the understanding and practice of the 8 Key questions using real life examples of ethical dilemmas encountered by Elementary teachers. The course was modified by adding course objectives specific to ethical reasoning, assignments that bring the 8 Key questions into focus, related assessment strategies, and learning experiences.

While the 8 key questions are aligned to ethical values across cultures, their interpretation may differ from one cultural world view to another. For instance, the value of advocating for the "rights" of individuals has high values for all currency in the US. Children are socialized to be aware of their rights and demand equal rights for themselves and others. On the other hand, in more collectivist cultures like India, the emphasis is more on one's duty to the collective. Children are socialized to emphasize their duty towards family and society with the understanding that if one does their duty, rights will follow. Similarly, the role and value of authority figures differs too based on the cultural context.

Research Objectives: The broad objective of this study is to examine the following questions as they pertain to pre-service elementary teachers in a small town in Northeast USA.

Specific Objectives:

1. What core values do pre-service teacher draw upon to resolve ethical dilemmas they encounter as teachers?
2. Which core values are used more than others by pre-service teachers as they resolve ethical dilemmas?
3. How do pre-service teachers resolve ethical dilemmas when they are confronted with two right solutions that lead to opposite conclusions?
4. Does knowing what's right ensure doing what's right among pre-service elementary teachers?
5. What role does culture play in resolving ethical dilemmas?

Operational Definition: For this study, the ethical dilemma was one that met all three criteria

Criteria 1: The situation called for a decision about the best course of action

Criteria 2: The situation must offer three or more possible course of actions that could be taken to achieve resolution.

Criteria 3: In an ethical dilemma, no matter which course of action is finally chosen, some ethical principle is compromised. In other words, there is no perfect solution.

Methods: Context & Participants: This on-going study was conducted with twenty undergraduate student-participants enrolled in a course on child growth and development at James Madison University in Virginia. The class meets for three hours once a week and focuses on various aspects of child development. The ages of student-participants range from 18 years to 21 years. The student-participants were single and hail from white middle class families. The class is composed of 19 female and 1 male student. The student-participants are juniors and as part of their curriculum, students spend one day a week in a local school, working in elementary classrooms. They focus on learning about the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and moral development in young children using a case study method.

Instruments: This exploratory descriptive case study method to explore the process by which student-participants use ethical reasoning to resolve real life ethical dilemmas they experience as elementary teachers. Students were presented one real life dilemma every week. Subsequently, they used the 8 key questions to formulate an action plan to resolve

the dilemma and write a reflection paper on their reasoning and metacognitive thought process. The reflections were submitted prior to class. Content analysis was conducted on the weekly reflection papers and emerging themes were documented.

The reflection and writing process was followed by small and large group class discussions on the ethical dilemmas that were video recorded. Video recordings were transcribed. Transcriptions were analyzed to detect emerging themes.

Finally, student-participants were interviewed to explore their personal thought process. Interviews were video recorded and transcribed. Content analysis of interview transcripts was conducted to document and analyze emerging themes in the student-participant narratives. Data from reflection papers, reflection logs, and interviews was qualitatively analyzed for emerging themes.

Results: The following themes emerged as student-participants resolved ethical dilemmas.

1. Resolution of ethical dilemma was based on the power associated with the person involved. Student-participants supported the persons with the least amount of resources and power. Young children received more support than the teachers, and teachers received greater sympathy than administrators. In a discussion on whether a teacher should be fired for leaving a 2 year old child in her care unattended, all the students advocated for not firing the teacher even though the school had a well-established zero tolerance policy for leaving children unattended. Student-participants were not persuaded by the fact that the teacher was aware of the zero tolerance policy and that leaving children unattended can have dire consequences such as accidents and even in some cases accidental death of the child.
2. Student-participants used the criteria of fairness and empathy before they considered issues of liberty, or character as described in the 8 Key Questions.
3. Cultural differences were not considered as student-participants resolved ethical dilemmas. Students used their own cultural lenses as they resolved conflicts and even though they acknowledged that cultural differences existed, they were hard pressed to move out of their comfort zone and step into the shoes of others with different world views.

The findings give rise to key recommendations and direction for future research which will be highlighted at the conference.

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