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Are Teacher Ethics Really Complicated? Attempting an Uncomplicated Appraisal...

Abstract

The paper engages with the issue of teacher ethics while adopting an experiential-investigative tone as a practicing teacher-educator. It draws upon the existing literature to establish the near ubiquity of positing teaching as an ethical enterprise. However by drawing upon, as an illustrative case in point, the author's recent intellectual run-ins with a promising and critical B.Ed. student, the author attempts to highlight how this ubiquity gets undermined, restricted and challenged in the wake of inter alia institutional collegiality. The paper raises questions on the ethicality of attempting a balancing act among the established taxonomies of ethics and whether a vision of uncompromising ethics in teaching qualify as utopia or are par for course.

Introduction

Teacher Educators are in the same moment being; and training teachers. Given the ubiquity of discussions on ethics and moral matters in teaching (Bullough Jr., 2011), this duality of being in teacher educators necessitates a serious consideration of teacher ethics in their roles .

The belief that teaching is a moral and ethical enterprise is pervasive in academic discourse and discussions on teacher ethics (Buzzelli and Johnston, 2001; Elbaz,1992). This pervasiveness is highlighted by Bullough Jr. (2011) in a systematic review of research articles on this theme. In a consideration of 22 articles published on the theme 'ethics and moral matters in teaching and teacher education', in the influential journal *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Bullough Jr. rarely finds a position where ethics are not seen as integral and indispensable to teaching.

I, as a mid-career academic and a teacher educator too am disposed to considering ethics an integral

part of what we do as teachers (and teacher educators). Yet, as I recently realized, an ethical disposition or an acknowledgement of teaching as a moral enterprise alone cannot imply ethical conduct; not in least for the lack of a...well, disposition, but simply because ethical conduct emerges from "complex and ambiguous moral contexts in which decisions are rarely easy or straightforward" (Elbaz, 1992, p.882).

It is this precise complexity that dawned upon me as I was at the receiving end of an unrelenting question from a bright and critical pre-service teacher education student last month. For convenience, I will hereafter refer to this student as 'NT' (pun intended).

The Context

To share the context first, I teach in a Department of Teacher Education. My average day is littered with invigorating interactions with creative young adults pursuing a degree in initial teacher

education geared towards middle, secondary and senior secondary classes in schools. We question everything from established ontological and epistemological paradigms, their respective reflections in sundry thinkers and theorists, to erstwhile and current educational policies, frameworks and practices, discourses and diktats.

To me, we seemed to be doing enough questioning as teachers: current and prospective. However a question by NT highlighted that I had failed to adequately question myself as an ethical teacher.

NT is enrolled with me in a class on pedagogy of Psychology. She holds a Master's degree in Psychology and is training to teach psychology in senior classes in K-12 schools. As part of the initial teacher training program she has to study a foundational course in Human Development, Diversity and Learning. Given her previous qualifications this course becomes too unchallenging for her as it is. Albeit it is not the repetitiveness of content which fuels her anger and disenchantment; rather by her own admission and acknowledgement it is the insipid, insouciant and passionless transaction of the course by her assigned course tutor which frustrates her.

NT cited this colleague as an exemplar of an unethical teacher during a discussion in my class on 'the ethical teacher'. She acknowledged that she could share this case with me as she felt I could be 'trusted'. Whereas, I saw my trustworthiness as a mark of me doing something right throughout the year as a teacher-pedagogue, it soon happened that her outburst turned towards me. She accused me of being 'not entirely ethical' because I remained inert despite knowing the frivolous treatment meted out to both the content being discussed and the students in the room next door. It dawned on me that in the

same moment, I was being trusted and being scorned at; I was trusted as a teacher, and was scorned at for being not entirely ethical about not pursuing the matter of quality in the adjoining classroom any further. In that moment, I was both right and wrong; I was in the same moment ethical and 'not entirely ethical'!

In the discussion that followed, we steered towards the need for students' solidarity to ensure teacher accountability and to ensure that Higher Education remained a space for dissent and disparate voices. Whereas, NT subsequently concluded that it was indeed up to herself and her peers to redress the situation in a democratic and civilised fashion and I could hardly be called unethical, my reflections since then have been dominated by occasions when I have fallen short of my ordained duty as a teacher, teacher educator and a HE academic. While, I have always thought of myself as an ethical teacher-academic, NT's question has led me to another question.

Teacher Ethics: Do they have to be complicated?

I have been questioning the relevance of social conformity norms defined as 'norms prescribing what is important and suitable within the work context including loyalty to one's colleague' especially when the work context is education (Colnerud 1997, p.630). In other words, I am questioning whether collegial loyalty as an ethic has enough weight at all to pose an ethical dilemma for a teacher endeavouring to educate? to educere? Also, should it have enough weight?

This specific question to me is a mere manifestation of a graver discomfiture. Scholars have attempted to provide various taxonomies, frames of reference and categories of ethics and ethical decisions (Colneurd, 1997;

Husu and Tirri, 2003; Bullough, 2011). The rationale for these is universally found in the assumption that ethics are embedded in context, in identities and so on.

Whereas, I do cognitively understand these epistemic framings of ethics, as a teacher-educator trying hard not to be 'not entirely ethical', I see the limitations of the ensuing demarcations of ethics. To illustrate, the demarcation that stared me in face, as NT challenged my sense and construction of ethics, was the dichotomy of personal and professional ethics, or ethics of teacher as an individual on one hand and the institutional ethics that bind her on the other.

I have spent the last fortnight asking whether the boundaries and extent of how much we as teachers, whether in schools or in universities, really care for our roles, responsibilities and students has been carefully and strategically curated to appease too many people, and follow too many institutional-structural protocols at the same time? I am questioning whether we, as teachers can really ever be in conflict at the most fundamental level? Can, for instance, we be content with being 'punctual' or 'dedicated' or 'accessible' professors who strive to practice utmost integrity in their respective classes? Importantly, will these suffice when we are trustingly approached with instances of none of this happening in the next door class of a peer who advertently or inadvertently fails at being any of these?

Or for instance, am I ethical in favourably discussing the role of teachers as agents of social change if in my own conduct, especially as a teacher educator, I feign inability or act oblivious of the immediate need to bring about change in the work ethics and work culture of the institute that I am a part of? Am I ethical, if I voluntarily trade idealism for pragmatism?

I submit that I am not ! My arguments for this position emanate from the typicality of my location as a teacher, and a teacher educator and my epistemological-ontological leanings towards teaching being more, much more than mere transmission of content.

At the outset, I argue that firstly all teachers are inevitably educators; they do far more than teach skills, concepts and content. Any synonymization of mere teaching (as in most formal educational contexts like schools) with education is unfortunate, and should be avoided. As a fellow colleague once remarked, "...even the most ineffective teacher educator educates (by inadvertent modelling) teacher trainees on what not to do as a teacher. There is thus a need to see the inextricability of educating from teaching. The two ought not be seen as ideationally disjunct, disparate or dichotomous (Mishra, 2018).

The above role definition of *all* teachers as educators mandates that ethics are understood only in reference to teachers' responsibility towards drawing out the best in her students at all times. By corollary, ethics in teaching (and in teacher education) also require us to work to challenge mindsets, people and structures which jeopardise this pursuit. Seen in this light, the taxonomies, categories and classifications become redundant.

Epilogue

I realize the risk of an ascription of intellectual naïveté in proposing a seemingly idealist-utopian take on ethics. Whereas a couple of well-intentioned colleagues have already been baffled by the uncomplicated position I have just adopted, my subsequent discussion with NT and other students have been overwhelmingly reinforcing of my position. Interestingly, in the

mixed reception of my position on ethics in teaching and teacher education, I do once again see the earlier discussed tug of war being played out between the

educand and the institution. This time however, the realization that there is no 'ethics basket' to choose from, I have, I believe ended up choosing my location, indeed, ethically.

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