Ethically Speaking: Teachers and the Politics of Educational Reform

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The Ontario College of Teachers is in the process of revising its statement of Ethical Standards. The proposed guidelines ("Revised Ethical Standards") reflect a new way at looking at the role and responsibilities of teachers in Ontario. Rather than focusing on behaviors or rules to be followed in particular sets of circumstances, the proposed revisions focus on four key values or virtues that can guide ethical judgment and decision making in the day to day practice of teaching. This shift emphasizes the importance of informed professional judgment and views the teacher as a responsible moral agent. With autonomy comes accountability and as a member of a professional college, teachers exercise their autonomy in communication with their colleagues.

Professional judgment, then, is not a license to "shut one's door and run my own classroom." At the same time, it imposes on teachers the responsibility to not simply discharge their duties whatever the consequences. When teachers question the fairness and appropriateness of curriculum expectations, when they see the detrimental effects on the loss of programs such as music or family studies, they are making not only a professional judgment, but also a judgment with ethical dimensions. When teachers express concern about the

negative impact of some recent educational reforms on student learning, they are raising ethical issues that are larger than one's personal morality.

Professional Ethics and Educational Reform

Over the past decade education has become a political hot potato. Competing expectations regarding educational outcomes, opposing images of the good teacher, and rival understandings of what schools are, what they can do and how they should be managed have created a situation in which almost any choice is controversial. "Stakeholders" is not a singular word, describing a homogenous public with the best interests of students, teachers, and schools in mind. Rather it refers to a sea of too often divergent interests and ideologies.

Experience plainly shows that many educational reforms fail to produce the results that are promised or expected. The urgency of reforms and convictions about their efficacy are often based on partial research. We know the faulty reasoning behind the premise that what works in some documented cases can be generalized into an obligatory province-wide programme. (Bond, 2005).

Teachers, committed to excellence in their profession, to genuine learning in their students,

and to the development of a work environment conducive to both, feel both optimistic and badgered by yet another reform in education or a "new" approach to preventing dropouts, failures and potential unemployment. Sometimes they also feel like scapegoats, when uniform curricula, standardized reporting or enforced professional development appear to suggest that teachers can't be counted on to plan, carry out and judge good educational projects.

Moreover, teachers know that political agendas often contribute to public cynicism toward the teaching profession. When the public loses faith in teachers' knowledge, skill and dedication, it threatens the social environment necessary for good teaching. Slogans such as "improved students achievement," "success for all," or "world class math scores" signal yet another shift in educational policy, that leaves teachers skeptical. How valid are the new standards? What techniques are going to be tried now? What political agenda will be imposed on the students? Will they really help the students or hurt them?

How teachers react to politically driven intrusions into the core of what constitutes their professional competence and responsibility is an affair with undeniable ethical dimensions. The fact that governments set new standards and comparative and competitive levels of student achievement is no guarantee that more effective education will occur.

Political purposes are not necessarily bad educational goals. However, teachers have an ethical responsibility to respond creatively to political initiatives

and make ethically informed judgments about their purpose, their impact on students and on the profession of teaching.

Ethical standards and teacher choices

The ethical standards of teaching practice not only direct teachers to the educational and personal well being of their students, they also foster the integrity of the profession and the trust placed in teachers by the public.

Ethical standards in some professions function as a set of rules. They set limits that define “tolerable” behaviour on the part of practitioners. Rule based ethical standards aim at compliance and, in practice, are enforced by disciplining professionals who overstep the boundaries they set.

The Ontario College of Teachers does not adhere to a rule based (deontological) model of ethical standards. Instead the “Ethical Standards of the Teaching Profession” are built on moral habits (virtues) that represent the best of what it means to be a teacher. Professional ethics, in this sense, is about the moral qualities that are inherent in good teaching, where “good teaching” is understood as a relationship and responsibility and not merely a set of technical skills. Members of the Ontario College of Teachers are guided by a set of values—care, respect, responsibility and integrity—that are appropriate to their professional relationships and responsibilities and are integral to achieving excellence in teaching.

The values of teachers are embedded in professional practice. Therefore, the ethical standards

do not function as external restrictions. They are not enforced through compliance policies. Instead, they are embodied in our choices and actions. Ethical teaching is an acquired habit that requires a personal commitment to ethical standards.

Professional practice requires professional judgment—a concept that is larger than individual opinion. The teaching profession embraces more than any one person’s practice. The actions of any one teacher contribute to or detract from the profession as a whole.

Professional judgment emerges in dialogue, consultation, and shared practice with other teachers. It builds on both an understanding of the requirements of the profession, in general, and on situated knowledge—an understanding of students and challenges that can only be grasped by those who are “there.” It follows that the full implications and binding force of the ethics of teaching can only be understood with the help of local knowledge, garnered through experience and in communication with one’s colleagues.

Using ethical standards

The ethical standards of the teaching profession are not meant to be used as a checklist. They don’t dictate what we are to do in conflictual situations. They are statements of values that inform thinking and guide good decisions.

Political agenda for education can be occasions for teachers to stop and reflect on their practice. They can be wake-up calls for improvement. But often such

agenda reflect the dissatisfaction of the public or business community with some aspect of social-economic life that they expect the schools to deal with. They are more apt to name the problem than put their finger on the solution. Focus groups, consultations, and the best advice of educational researchers are often part of the preparation of the reform documents, programs, and guidelines emanating from government departments. At best, however, these directives can

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only approximate the desired solution to the problem they are addressing. Moreover, a worthy goal is no guarantee of ethical practice. As a reliable ethical maxim has it: ends don’t justify the means.

The Ontario College of Teachers revised Ethical Standards offer a framework for a professional and collegial response. Based on the professional values of care, respect, responsibility and integrity, the ethical standards offer support to teachers who recoil at the idea of students being guinea pigs for yet another experiment in educational reform, yet are committed to communication with the public and

improving their teaching practice. They are aware that government-initiated reforms may help them ensure that changes in education respond to the social and personal environments, which shape students' views, values, commitments and aspirations. They also know that reform can mean theories that create more paper work, stress, and confusion, but don't work well in practice.

All the strategies of innovation will be futile, if what happens in the classroom fails to make credible connections between what the school or government views as "student success," for example, and the actual goals of students—what's real in their lives, which includes the beliefs, hopes, and values of their families, their cultures, and their peers. Ethical responsibility goes even further. It asks whether "success" means that students are shaped to fit the market-economy, for example, or being prepared for a future of free and critical citizenship (Giroux).

Simply recognizing the value or dangers of school reforms, however, is not enough. Teachers must critically assess the strategies and assumptions that come with the new curriculum and educational goals. Government and school board directives do not relieve teachers of this important ethical dimension of their work. Teachers should insure that they, in fact, listen to and respect the voices of their students, before committing to new school reforms.

The ethical standards of Ontario's teachers provide a critical impulse for evaluating government directives and planning teaching strategies that will lead to good learning and effective schools. Ethical responses will

differ from school to school, region to region, but they will all involve a process that includes at least three elements. The values from the revised Ethical Standards of the Ontario College of Teachers are noted in brackets

- Strategies of intervention have to be developed by the teachers who will use them (Integrity).
- These strategies should be in response to the complex systems of meaning, value, relationships, motivations, and aspirations of the persons they are intended to benefit. (Respect).
- They strategies should be maintained, reviewed and revised as needed by teachers in dialogue with each other and the students they are meant to help. (Care).

Conclusion

Education always has the potential of being politicized. Caught up in a battlefield of competing social, political, and cultural agendas, teachers may feel torn in their fidelities—pulled in different directions by competing goods, without clear norms. They may experience a sense of powerlessness as boards and unions, politicians and interest groups clash over what should be happening in schools. In defending their own professional autonomy, teachers need to have confidence of their professional judgment and the ethical soundness of the responses they decide on.

Ultimately, teachers are accountable for what they do in the classroom and the impact of their interaction with their students. Their influence on how students come to view the world, their ca-

capacity to prepare students for social responsibility and critical citizenship, and their ability to acquire the skills, knowledge, and values that fosters genuine human growth—all of these factors make teachers ethically accountable. It is imperative for teachers, when—individually and collectively—they reflect on what they do, to do it with an eye to the ethical values that guide their profession (Sullivan).

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