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Using the Teachers' Values Game to facilitate teachers' reflection on their own values

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Margit Sutrop
University of Tartu, Estonia
Margit.Sutrop@ut.ee

Abstract

At present, teacher education is focused on giving future teachers in-depth knowledge of the subject matter they are going to teach, while far less emphasis is placed on preparing them for their role as values educators. As students learn many important values through interaction with teachers, it is important that teachers start reflecting on their values and notice that values can be transmitted not only through subjects which deal overtly with moral content, but also through teachers' conduct and a school's overall functioning. In order to urge students to reflect on and discuss their values, the teacher must first acquire the same skills. In this paper I shall ask what universities should do to better prepare future teachers for their role as values educators. I will also show how a methodological tool – the Teachers' Values Game – based on group discussions of moral dilemmas inherent in practical examples collected from real life, can help teachers to get to know their values and bring their behaviour in line with their own and their school's shared values.

Keywords: ethical teacher; ethics in teaching; moral dilemma; value; teacher education; values education; values game; values clarification; character education; virtues, principles.

Introduction

The vocation of a teacher sets high demands. In addition to skills specific to the subject area taught and didactic methods, a teacher's professionalism includes being ethical. Campbell (2003) argues that ethics permeate every aspect of teaching; more than ever, teachers should become conscious of the ethical aspects of teaching, thereby increasing their professionalism. Even if some teachers believe that they are only teaching their subject or developing children's mental capacities, they are unavoidably engaged in teaching values. The way teachers instruct and assess learning outcomes, the reasons they praise and punish students are based on the virtues and principles they themselves appreciate. The values of schools are apparent in their organisation, curriculum, and disciplinary procedures; they underlie all classroom interactions (Halstead, 1996:3). Teachers' values are reflected in the curricular content on which they focus, what they choose to allow or encourage in the classroom, the way they address pupils and each other, the way they dress, the language they use, even where they stand while talking with students (Pantic and Wubbels, 2012:451).

Teachers leave deep and lasting impressions on students through their attitudes towards them and through the feedback they provide on their behaviour. A teacher can encourage a student to develop his or her abilities to the fullest, or instead cause serious psychological complexes and loss of self-confidence for a lifetime. It is believed that an ethically competent teacher knows how to help young people acquire virtues, that is habits of directing their behaviour, and consciousness of the moral principles on which to base their actions (Carr, 2000: 191-194). It is also in the power of teachers as values educators to spur students to become conscious of their values and to give them skills to reflect on them. The support of students' moral development should culminate in the emergence of their own personal code of values. However, as a values educator the teacher has to be aware of a time shift. The teacher should not attempt to transfer one's own values straightforwardly; by doing

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so one transmits *today* those values acquired *yesterday* to those young people who will step into their own lives *tomorrow*. Instead the teacher should motivate students to seek clarity about their own values and guide them in reflecting upon their own values and those of others. In a pluralistic society young people should acquire the skills to make values choices, and to give rational justification for their choices. Instead of seeing the teacher's task as the transmission of a predetermined set of values, the teacher needs to promote students' understanding of values and to cultivate their ability to reflect and discuss values (Haydon, 2006:178).

In the context of the school community, the values of teachers, students, and parents should be engaged in ongoing dialogue, conflict is not a rare occurrence. Surprisingly, little is known about how teachers understand or interpret their own values, or what happens if their personal values conflict with the organisational values that schools seek to establish (Sunley and Locke, 2010). Although it is well known that decisions are shaped by internalised values, empirical research indicates that teachers are not always fully aware of the moral and ethical impact of their values (Jackson, Boostrom & Hansen, 1993; Tirri, 2010).

One explanation for this state of affairs may be that future teachers are not given sufficient opportunities to think about their profession in ethical terms. Teachers from different countries around the world have reported themselves to be ill prepared to deal with conflicting values identified in school life (Hostetler, 1997; Willemse, Lunenberg and Korthagen, 2005; Pantic and Wubbels, 2012). At present, teacher education is mostly focused on giving future teachers in-depth knowledge of the subject matter they will teach, while far less emphasis is placed on acquiring and imparting ethical knowledge and preparing for the role of a values educator.

In this paper I shall ask what teachers' educators should do to better prepare future teachers for their role as values educators. I will show how a methodological tool – the Teachers' Values Game – based on group discussions of moral dilemmas inherent in practical examples collected from real life, can help teachers to get to know their values and align their behaviour with their own and their school's shared values.

A case study of developing the values education competency of teachers in Estonia

Using examples from the experience of my country, Estonia, I shall briefly describe the steps we have taken to give our teachers an understanding of their role as teachers of values, and to provide them with the necessary competencies.

Although Estonia has returned excellent results in all recent comparative international educational research studies, including TIMSS, PIAAC, PISA, and others, we are still struggling to overcome the influence of the totalitarian Soviet regime. We face a large gap between those values that are considered desirable in the raising of children, and the personal values held by teachers and parents. As pointed out by the Finnish researcher Tirri, empirical research shows that teachers cannot separate their own moral character from their professional self (Tirri, 2010: 154). Thus the way to change methods of teaching is by influencing teachers' personal value attitudes.

Debates in Estonian society have issued a clarion call to develop self-determination, courage, entrepreneurship, and creativity in students, but these admonitions mask old approaches to child development which are still in use. These demand obedience, rote learning, order and discipline; sometimes justifications are even heard for corporal punishment. In view of these summons to change, all teachers must make a conscious effort to leave behind those patterns and models of instruction by which they themselves were raised.

To support the paradigm shift in education, the Ministry for Education and Research inaugurated a nationwide values programme (2009-2013)¹, which supports the raising of teachers' competence in values education through the preparation of methodological materials, and the organising of workshops, conferences, and competitions. When we began talking about the teacher's role as a values educator, we first encountered a great deal of resistance. Many teachers said that they teach only their subject, and that they do not want to take on the additional role of mentor. We had to show that the teacher's real choice is between being a conscious or an unconscious values teacher. In either case a teacher influences the student's values through his or her attitude toward the student, and by the manner in which he or she teaches. Therefore, all teachers should learn contemporary methods of values education, but they should begin by clarifying their own values. However, we soon found out that things were not that simple. Teachers were not accustomed to analysing their behaviour and the values expressed through them. Often they were not equipped to see what values were implied by one approach as distinct from another. Furthermore, when we analysed how our universities prepare future teachers to deal with values education, we discovered that teacher training pays very little attention to values education.

From 2009-2011 we carried out a research project entitled 'Developing the values education competency of teachers in teacher training programmes'², which undertook a comprehensive analysis of all the curricula of Tartu University and Tallinn University - the largest universities responsible for teacher training in Estonia. The results showed that values education competencies are seldom articulated in course descriptions and learning outcomes in teacher training curricula. If they are articulated at all, they take knowledge of professional ethics standards as the point of departure. Skills for handling ethical issues as they arise in lessons, analysis of values as expressed in school culture, or the ability to direct students in reflection and discussion about values are missing altogether. This state of affairs is at odds with the new primary school and high school curricula that went into effect in 2011 in Estonia; the new curricula contain a strong emphasis on values education. Teachers are expected to include values as a pervasive thread in the teaching of all subjects, as well as to develop students' values competencies in active ways.

Our study included a survey of teachers undergoing their pedagogical practicum. We found that young teachers embarking on their first teaching assignment felt unsure about practising values education, recognising ethical dilemmas as they arise, understanding school culture, and conducting self-analysis. Obviously, this is due to lack of knowledge and experience, since in teacher training programmes the values education aspect of a teacher's work is handled unreflectively. These research findings called our attention to developing teachers' competence in values education. To meet this need, we prepared a new course for student teachers entitled 'Values Education in the Context of the School'. In the theoretical part of the course, we introduced basic concepts and methods of values education as well as opportunities for values education in the curricula of basic schools. The practical part of the course focused on reflection in the context of the practicum: students compiled values education portfolios with examples of how values emerge in school culture, identifying possible conflict situations between declared and real values. In addition, students had to articulate how they carried out values education in subject lessons and to describe values dilemmas that might occur. On the basis of the analysis of curricula and the course that was piloted in the schools, we drew up recommendations for improving teacher training programmes. To date, teacher training in universities has been renewed from the ground up; teachers who embark on their work in schools tomorrow are becoming much better prepared to undertake values education.

¹ See http://www.ethics.ut.ee/value_programme/value_programme

² The project 'Developing the values education competency of teachers in teacher training programmes' was financed by the European Social Funds scheme EDUKO between 1.10.2009-31.10.2011.

The Teachers' Values Game

How does the Teachers' Values Game teach the valuing process?

In order for teachers to understand that values are not abstract topics for discussion, but rather entities on which their everyday activities and decisions are based, a special values game for teachers was worked out.³ The Values Game is an instrument of dialogue with serious content and entertaining form, modelled on a typical board game. In the course of the game a team composed of 5-6 persons tries to solve different dilemmas containing values conflicts that they have experienced in their own lives. The authors of the game have thought up six solutions for each situation. In order to promote discussion, none of the solutions offered is ideal. The players can choose among 28 different cases which place the teacher in different roles and relationships, either with students, another teacher, the school principal, a parent, or family member.

The theoretical framework of the Values Game

The Teachers' Values Game utilises the method of values clarification. The values clarification method (Raths, Harmin and Simon, 1966; Kirschenbaum, 1977; Simon and Olds, 1976) is based on a pluralistic approach. Values pluralism is in opposition to values absolutism. According to values absolutism certain prescribed values are designated as important in all cases, while relativists and pluralists believe that values are context-dependent. Unlike relativists, pluralists may agree that values are objective in nature but that they can be ranked or rated differently in particular contexts.

In contrast to the virtue ethics based character education method (Lickona 1996; Schwartz 2008) which stresses that the main role of teachers is to create an environment to facilitate students' development of certain good behavioural inclinations or qualities of character (virtues), the values clarification account points out that in a pluralistic society there is a plethora of models of values. The inaugurators of values clarification decided to model a process for clarifying and developing values instead of specific values (Kirschenbaum, 1977: 8). This method implies that the teacher does not intervene in the discussion but helps students to learn the valuing process, rating and ranking different values in various contexts. By promoting critical thinking and moral reasoning, by upholding free choice and advocating consensus-building, the teacher still substantially directs pupils' moral behaviour. The result of the values clarification process includes acquisition of certain specific values or virtues – autonomy, creativity, tolerance, and equality.

The method is in line with the social constructivist teaching which promotes the students' critical and reflective thinking and sees the teacher's task in 'creating a community in which the active cognitive participation of all students is promoted and valued' (Nuthall, 2002: 52). As the minimum framework of common values may be rather thin in a pluralist society, it is important that the teacher helps students to build up their own set of values. Yet even this is not sufficient, as values can be ranked differently and may often come into conflict. Thus people feel the need to achieve the consistency among their chosen values, or, to put it otherwise, to understand how all their values hang together.

If there is no absolute value, one has to weigh different values and decide what to do on the basis of one's own judgement. However, learning moral principles is not enough. We also have to apply abstract principles in concrete situations. As pointed out by Van Hooft (2006), a general principle or norm is only a general guide or a rule of thumb. The decision one makes will be expressive of one's judgement, experience, character, and virtue. In the end, moral decision-making in a pluralist framework depends on one's character and the virtues one has acquired. Thus the two approaches – values clarification and character education - are not necessarily in conflict, and may in fact be

³ The Teachers' Values Game was worked out by the Centre for Ethics, University of Tartu and the Foundation Implement Baltic Ltd. For more information see: <http://www.ethics.ut.ee/1081525>

complementary, both requiring that future teachers be given the opportunity to reflect on their values and possible effects on students.

Here is an example of one case study from the Teachers' Values Game.

The Dangerous Schoolyard

On the road from the street to the schoolyard there is a prohibition sign in the interests of student safety. Some parents ignore the sign and drive through the schoolyard to bring children to the school's front door. One day a car stops directly in front of teacher Rille in the schoolyard and a child is sent to school with the warning: 'Be careful!' How should Rille react?

1. In a humorous tone of voice, call attention to the fact that in order to give a child a positive role model, one should not break the rules oneself.
2. Ask politely whether the driver has a moment, and proceed to explain that there are young children running around the schoolyard, and that driving past them might pose a danger to them.
3. You approach the school leadership and propose that barrier stones be placed in the driveway.
4. You address the child as she enters the school and tell her that it is not allowed to drive into the schoolyard.
5. You remember that this topic should most certainly be addressed at the parents' meeting, where you do not have to point fingers at anybody.
6. Not to intervene at all. Everybody knows that prohibition signs get ignored anyway. It is the school leadership's job to decide how high a priority to put on this question.

First, every participant at the table decides for herself what they would do in this situation. When everyone has made a decision, they show the cards indicating their choice of options from 1 to 6. Now the discussion begins. Each participant has to explain her choice. After everybody has given their explanation, the group begins discussing which options to take as a group. The task of the group is to reach consensus; otherwise the team will lose points. Once the group has made its decision, the worksheet is turned over, and the feedback is read out - explaining which values are implicit in their response. Giving points is important, since it focuses the participants' attention on how values are continuously ranked in the pluralist setting - winning points for one value, one may lose points for some other value. When the participants turn the page, they can read the feedback provided for each option and learn what values are at stake in each case.

The Dangerous Schoolyard

1. In a humorous tone of voice, call attention to the fact that in order to give a child a positive role model, one should not break the rules oneself.
You respond to the situation, and apparently are able to prevent an infuriated reaction on the part of the parent, but the humorous tone of voice does not allow you to communicate how important it is in your view to follow the rules—in the interest of the children's safety. You should also point out possible consequences. Since there are drivers entering the schoolyard, there should be an attempt at finding a broader solution.
Honesty (directness) + 100, fairness (adhering to the rules) + 100, safety – 100, responsibility – 100
2. Ask politely, whether the driver has a moment, and proceed to explain that there are young children running around the schoolyard, and that it might be dangerous to them to drive by.
You respectfully explain what the problem is and provide reasons why it is a problem, as well as what might be the consequences. Since there are more people driving into the schoolyard than just this one parent, one should find ways for more comprehensive solutions to the problem.
Honesty (directness) + 200, respect + 100, safety + 100
3. You approach the school leadership and propose that barrier stones be placed in the driveway.
You offer a solution which would guarantee the safety of the children in the schoolyard, but merely placing physical barriers does not help change attitudes. Also, you avoid responding to the particular situation at hand.
Safety + 300, cooperation + 100, responsibility – 100
4. You address the child as she enters the school and tell her that it is not allowed to drive into the schoolyard.
You respond to the problem, but you make the child responsible for the parent's mistake. You might instead approach the parent directly and also try to find a more comprehensive solution to the problem.
Responsibility + 100, cooperation – 100, respect – 200
5. You remember that this topic should most certainly be addressed at the parents' meeting, where you do not have to point fingers at anybody.
You want to involve the parents in finding a solution. However, in this particular situation, you do not respond; nor do you address the parent directly. Discussing the matter at the meeting might seem like moralising after the fact; there is also the danger that by the time of the meeting, the matter has already been forgotten.
Safety + 300, cooperation + 200, respect – 100, responsibility (reaction) – 200
6. Not to intervene at all. Everybody knows that prohibition signs get ignored anyway. It is the school leadership's job to decide how high a priority to put on this question.
You relinquish your responsibility, do not report the matter, and take risks with the children's safety.
Cooperation – 100, responsibility – 200, safety – 200.

Reception of the Values Game

We have used the Teachers' Values Game since 2012 both in teacher training and in continuing education workshops for teachers in schools. We do not yet have a reliable scientific evaluation of this methodological tool. However, we have some clear indications as to how the 'Values Game' has been received: after playing the Values Game, teachers fill out evaluation forms where they can write down their criticism or point out what they gained from playing the game.

Here are some quotations from the evaluation forms:

'This game is a very good way to clarify common values in an organisation (a school). The game format reduces tensions, but maintains positive motivation. The usual discussions about values in school often become conflictual.'

'The game taught discussion, argumentation, listening skills, the courage to justify one's position, how to go deeper into situations, and the need for discussion when there are differing opinions.'

'The game helped me get to know my colleagues: we think and feel differently. A great deal depends on experience. People of different ages have different life experiences, which are influenced by values.'

'Through discussing the situations, attention is drawn to different details. If one talks things through, in the majority of cases the solution can be agreed upon easily, without damaging each other's important values. If you know how to justify your position, it is easy to come to an agreement.'

'A good tool for self-analysis. We might have our theoretical positions for how to behave, but the real situation can be quite different from our theoretical expectations.'

'The Values Game made me think about the fact that perhaps I should pay more attention to values in different situations, and not always behave as I see best.'

These evaluations provide evidence that the Values Game helps teachers to get to know their values, compare them with their teammates' values, and learn how to deal with values dilemmas. By thinking through what they would do in a particular case, and by justifying their chosen action to their team members, teachers gain an understanding of how values influence their behaviour. They learn to weigh and hierarchise their own values, to justify values choices, listen to the opinions of teammates and reach consensus. The game has been appreciated as a useful tool for building skills of self-analysis and teamwork.

However, there have also been some critical voices. Some people have said that they are confused as to how they should choose between the available options: should they vote for the option that they know is the 'right' behaviour or should they be honest and tell their colleagues what they would do in real life? To my mind, this frequently-asked question shows that teachers themselves are aware that in real life they do not always behave as they ought to. My answer to this question has been that given the options, one should choose what one would do in the real life. There must be a justification for choosing a particular way of action. If one has to explain to other players why one prefers this choice over that one, one either has to convince others that this is the right thing to do or become self-aware of the discrepancy between one's declared and actual values.

Another critical question that is often asked is how one should choose if there is no option with which group members fully agree. Quite often one would like to mix two options and leave out some parts. The answer to this objection is that it is intentional that none of the options offered is ideal. If we would have provided an ideal option, everybody would choose this and there would be no discussion. But the whole idea of the Values Game is to make people argue for their choice they have made and work toward reaching consensus in the group. Thus the players are asked to choose what they would do in the case of the available non-ideal options but go on to think and discuss what might be the best course of action in the situation.

The third type of criticism concerns the scoring of points. Since we provide feedback to players in the form of giving them bonus points or minus points, it has been asked whether we do not have a hidden script that there are 'right' answers. We usually address this criticism by arguing that the points reflect what the authors of the game find it best to do in the described situation. The players are free to disagree and write down the arguments. However, if one compares the feedback provided to all six options, it is easy to see that no ideal option is articulated. One has to choose among a large set of values. As they may all be equally important to us, one has to rank them on the basis of the evaluation of the specific situation which may differ because of people's different experience, understanding of good life, etc. The dilemmas cause headaches because by prioritising one value, we unavoidably have to underplay another one.

The Values Game helps teachers to learn the valuing process, and to practice rating and ranking of different values in various contexts. If there is no absolute value, one has to weigh different values and decide what to do on the basis of one's own judgement. Thus the Teachers' Values Game teaches the skills of moral deliberation.

Reflection on practical examples encourages teachers to consider whether there is a gap between their values and their behaviour, either on an individual or organisational level. The Teachers' Values Game thereby provides the teachers an opportunity to start living according to their real values and also become better values educators.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show why teachers should be better prepared for their role as values educators. My argument was that since methods of teaching, assessment of learning, practices of praise and punishment and, significantly, the manner in which teachers and colleagues relate among themselves depend on teachers' own values, the teacher has to reflect on her values and see the ethical dimension of everything she does. In order to become a good values educator the teacher has to learn how to guide and oversee students' moral development: how to help young people acquire virtues, habits of directing their behaviour, and consciousness of the moral principles on which to base their actions. Particularly in a pluralistic society, it is especially important to learn how to direct students to reflect on and discuss their values and to form their own set of values. As value conflicts and moral disagreements are a pervasive feature of our pluralistic world, young people should acquire the skills to discuss values, make values choices, and to give rational justification for them. In order to support pupils in their reflection and discussion of values, the future teacher has to learn the skills of self-analysis and moral deliberation.

Our experience with the Teachers' Values Game shows that teachers appreciate a practical opportunity to reflect on and discuss personal and professional values. Co-operation between teachers and conversation about ethical dilemmas creates a shared values space in the school and motivates the teachers to take seriously their role as values educators.

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