

Ethics in Teaching

The information here was obtained from the excellent resource "Teaching for Student Learning: Becoming a Master Teacher" by Kevin Ryan.

Teachers as professionals are constrained in how they do their jobs. In a negative sense, for example, teachers do not use sarcasm, don't swear, and do not get visibly angry with students. In a positive sense, a teacher's ethical behaviour can be characterized by an appreciation for moral deliberation, empathy, knowledge, reasoning, courage and interpersonal skills, as these apply to dealing with challenging behaviours in the classroom. In this article I'll describe these characteristics, with examples of how they could apply to you.

Moral Deliberation

Teachers need to be able to see the right and wrong in any situation, and step in if they think the behaviours they are seeing are inappropriate. It goes without saying that a teacher's own moral standards must be higher than those in the community at large; they must serve as a role model for their students. Being a Christian helps a lot.

Empathy

Empathy is defined as the ability to see things from another's perspective, and to understand and share a student's feelings. As a teacher it is too easy to stand back and just expect good behaviour, and to impose rules and consequences when the behaviour you are seeing is not what you want. But a truly effective teacher needs to understand *why* students are behaving the way they are, and to try to see things from their perspective.

Knowledge

If you are to effectively help students to deal with their problems, you must learn everything you can about any given situation. Don't make assumptions about students. Talk to them and find out why they acted the way they did. Talk to others about the problem. Seek advice from more experienced teachers.

Reasoning

This is an attribute that teachers sometimes don't apply in stressful situations with students. You will have to make decisions often about what to do about kids' behaviour; don't be too quick to make judgments and apply consequences. Think about it first. Try to decide the best course of action. Ask for advice. Use reason instead of reacting emotionally.

Every situation will come with unique circumstances, so there is no set procedure for dealing with challenges. But there are three types of reasoning you might apply.

- 'Ends-based thinking' suggests that you do whatever results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Reasoning this way might lead you to apply specific consequences for a student who is affecting the learning of others in your classroom.

- 'Rule-based thinking' means that you will always apply consequences according to the established rules and your own principles. Teachers who think this way sometimes fail to take into account the fact that all students are different, and that every behaviour problem is unique.

- 'Care-based thinking' demands that our consequences would be what we would expect to receive ourselves, if we had misbehaved in the same way.

There are arguments for and against each of these methods for reasoning out how you will deal with any given situation. Experienced teachers who are good at what they do often use all three, depending on the circumstances.

Courage

Courage? Understanding your students' problems and applying reasoning to try to solve a problem aren't enough. Being ethically correct as a teacher means you will have to act on what you've decided, and sometimes this takes courage. It takes courage to do the right thing, even though others (including the student and his parents) may not agree with your decision. It also takes courage to deal with a challenging situation in the first place; too often it's easier to just ignore the problem.

Interpersonal Skills

In order to treat students ethically, you will need to be able to communicate effectively with them, by showing compassion, caring and sensitivity. You need to be able to use the right words, with the right feeling and tone, having thought through what you are going to say beforehand.

This is not a skill that every teacher is good at, unfortunately. Again, it's too easy just to get angry, or to state your expectations and describe the consequences, all without empathy or reasoning.

It's also difficult for a student teacher to learn to do this effectively; you don't know the kids well, and often the practicum supervisor will do it for you. One way to get some experience helping challenging students with behaviour issues is to visit a school where teachers know you, and will allow you to get familiar with the techniques.

Unfortunately Teachers' Colleges don't often do a good job preparing teachers-in-training for the ethical dilemmas they will face. Proper training would include extensive role-playing to help new teachers learn the skills necessary for dealing with challenging behaviour; I'm guessing this doesn't happen.

Some ethical decisions, about deciding the right thing to do, are easier than others. Bullying on the playground, a mean rumour being spread, or minor vandalism all lead to pretty straightforward solutions.

But teachers can be faced with ethical dilemmas where it's hard to decide the right course of action. For example, if an important principle to you is fairness to students, you might not be inclined to report bad behaviour to the Principal if he or she has a history of acting unfairly toward students. Similarly, your personal honesty and integrity may be at stake if you are asked to do something that doesn't sit right with you.

Another common dilemma that teachers face is what to do about a colleague who is not doing a very good job with students; you can choose to do nothing, but if you act on it, you are required to discuss your concerns with that person first. That can be hard, especially for a beginning teacher.

Sometimes student teachers face ethical dilemmas too. What would you do if your supervising teacher on a practicum is not a very good teacher? (It happens). What would you do if that supervisor expected you to do a lot of things that shouldn't be assigned to a student teacher? What would you do if you witnessed another teacher in the school where you're doing your practicum put down a student by calling him 'fat and lazy'?

On a daily basis as a teacher, you and your students will experience things that will have a lasting impact on them. Your job is to make sure that that impact is always positive, and that the moral behaviours you exhibit help them to form their own moral principles and good character. Assume that all of your actions and behaviours will influence some students in some way. Make sure it's always the right way!