**13 Learning to be an ethical practitioner**

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*Ethical conduct in the world consists not of being able to recite principles but in being willing really to engage with the messiness and complexity of the world to make things better.*

(Beckett, 2009: 67)

**Introduction (A)**

This chapter encourages you to view yourself as an ethical professional and to recognise your ethical responsibilities throughout your studies and your practice. The topic of ethicality within Early Years is often seen as an aspect research, that is its *place*. Outside of research, within day to day practice, we frequently mention the terms safeguarding and confidentiality, but not general ‘ethical practice’. It is important not to view ethicality as something that is related to your research only, but to recognise it as a way of being that should underpin all aspects of your practice.

**What is ethicality and why does it apply to me? [A]**

Ethical practice as a term is surprisingly absent from the discourse of Early Childhood. The meaning of the term *to be ethical* is usually taken for granted and rarely unpacked. Aubrey et al (2000: 155 *my emphasis*) state that “ethics means *the moral philosophy or set of moral principles* underpinning a project.” Here we can substitute ‘a project’ with ‘our practice.’ Ethicality is about the beliefs and principles that comprise the foundation of our practice with young children. You will notice the use of ‘moral’ used by Aubrey et al, because ethicality is about acting in a ‘right’ or ‘good’ way. Behaving ethically is about doing ‘the right thing’ by other people and showing sensitivity towards their position and their feelings. It is about showing empathy and understanding. As an early years practitioner yours is a position of care and you have a responsibility to try to act ethically, despite how ‘messy and complex’ (Clifford, 2008) situations often are.

It is important to begin to develop ethical sensitivity from the very outset of your studies and your practice. A large measure of your time studying to become an early years practitioner is actually spent within settings, dealing directly with children, families and colleagues; and with all of the complications that this entails. As an early years student you could, and in all likelihood will, encounter a range of small scale ethical dilemmas from the very beginning of your studies. These could range from inappropriate comments made on social media, to concerns about children to issues with colleagues. It is important that you feel prepared to tackle these situations, or that you at least have a good idea where to start. James et al (2005) discuss how practitioners like yourselves, with the moral obligations of public service, must have a ‘good character’ if they are to shape the character of the young. This is a huge responsibility for you as trainee practitioners, and something that can often be taken for granted.

**Critical questions (F)**

* *Do you feel that you have already encountered ‘ethical dilemmas’ in your studies or your practice?*
* *What were these and how did you reach a decision about how to respond?*
* *Were you content that you made the ‘right’ decision?*

**Ethical dilemmas (A)**

Ethical dilemmas such as ‘conflict of interest’ apply just as readily to those training in early childhood as they do to those studying subjects such as business or law. As an early years practitioner you need to consider what you should do when your concerns for a child’s needs conflict with the desire of the parents, or how you might respond when governors are pushing for a course of action that you know will be detrimental to the experience of the children. On a smaller and more feasible scale, what would you do when you are drawn into a friend’s social network conversation that discusses one of your colleagues, in a less than favourable light (as Katie encounters below). You need to feel prepared and stop to consider the ‘good’ or the ‘right’ way to respond.

**Case Study (F)**

**Katie’s dilemma [C]**

Katie has been in university for six weeks now and the last week was spent in practice at a child care centre. There were two other students from Katie’s course at the setting and she got on with them very well. As a result she became part of these students’ groups on Facebook. On the Sunday after her practice Katie browses Facebook and realises that the two students that she was on placement with have been posting critical and unpleasant remarks about one of the practitioners at the children’s centre. They did not like her and have been making a number of demeaning comments about her appearance and personality. Worse still they have named both the practitioner and the setting. What should Katie do?

**Critical questions (F)**

* Consider the individuals involved in this scenario and how you might respond if you found yourself in a similar situation
* How useful would the four stages in table 1.3 below be for guiding your response?

**How do I go about making ‘ethical decisions’? (B)**

Unfortunately, an ‘off the shelf’ set of rules for making ethical decisions simply doesn’t exist. McAuliffe and Chenoweth (2008) offer some useful points for consideration when faced with an ethical dilemma. They suggest the four stages of action in table 13.1 below.

**Table 13.1 Staged response to an ethical dilemma**

**Based upon McAuliffe and Chenoweth (2008)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Stage One** | Consider the **responsibility** that you hold in terms of this dilemma. Who might it affect- children, parents, colleagues? | **Define exactly what the dilemma is and the possible outcomes**. If you do not act then what is the worst case scenario? If you have recognised this as an ethical dilemma then there are likely to be negative repercussions if it is not acted upon. |
| **Stage Two** | **Consult** with significant others who might be able to offer insights into the situation. These will usually be those with greater knowledge and experience within the area, but may, alternatively be someone with no contextual knowledge and so impartial. Such a person is often referred to as a ‘critical friend.’ | By doing this your worries can be **legitimised** and supported, instigating next steps, or alternatively they may be abated. You may come to realise that you are worrying for no reason. |
| **Stage Three** | Show sensitivity to your **context**- particularly the individuals within it. Consider the socio-cultural aspects (rules, relationships, traditions) which will influence your plan of action. | **Gather the information that you need** to make an informed decision. Consider different approaches which might be taken. What is common practice within you setting? What is policy? |
| **Stage Four** | **Critically analyse** the decision that you have reached regarding action. This is another good stage to **consult** with a critical friend. | **Carry out the course of action** that you have decided upon and reflect upon the response. If this is not satisfactory it may mean beginning the process again, at stage one. |

**Teaching and learning about ethicality (B)**

Although the need to behave in an ethical manner is intrinsic to the skills of practitioners this is rarely a formal element of your training. Straightforward processes such as confidentiality are explicitly introduced, but qualities such as care, compassion, sensitivity and empathy, are rarely explored in depth in our seminar discussions. James et al (2005:19) make a valid point when they ask “How can the prospective teacher be ethical when he or she does not know with any certainty what it is to be ethical?” Haddad (2005) suggests that some key terms such as being ‘mindful’, or ‘self-aware,’ or recognising ‘human dignity’, are key to reflecting upon ethical issues in practice. And Noddings (1984) explains why reflecting upon actual experiences and not only upon *case studies* is necessary, she says.

… the actions of one-caring will be varied rather than rule-bound;

that is, her actions, while predictable in a global sense, will be unpredictable in detail.

Variation is to be expected if the one claiming to care really cares…

Part of caring, Noddings argues, is recognising the individuality of people and contexts and that no two responses to situations will ever be the same. You should not be afraid to bring your experiences to teaching sessions in order to discuss and better understand them. Confidentiality is not breached simply by discussing issues; discussion is not the same as being critical of individuals, which is explored more fully in the next session.

Exploring the literature makes it clear that ethicality or ‘morality’ within teaching has been more fully explored in other countries, for example the USA (Tuana, 2007, Fleischmann, 2006, Cummings eta l, 2001) and Australia (Walker et al, 2012), than it has in the UK. Tuana (2007) produced a significant piece of research, which discussed the absence of ‘moral literacy’ from American teenagers’ education. In this article Tuana argues that moral literacy should take an equal standing with subjects such as literacy or numeracy, yet it is seldom touched upon within secondary schooling. To what extent has acting morally, or ethically, been a part of your own educational experience?

Engen (2000) argues that it is not the content of teaching sessions that makes a difference, but the way that tutors act. He contends that the ‘hidden curriculum’ that teachers, often subconsciously, nurture, is more important than actual session content. Engen (2000: 22) says, “In short, our messages in the classroom do much more than simply transmit information, they build - or disrupt - community, and they teach about citizenship and moral vision in ways we too often ignore.” Jarvis (1995:25) makes a very similar point when he says that “the manner through which teachers interact with learners is probably more important that the actual teaching methods employed.” So these theorists suggest that your university tutors should be modelling, rather than actually teaching, the ‘good character’ that they hope all early years practitioners will develop.

**Critical Questions:**

* *What are your thoughts about this? How much do you learn from the content of sessions and how much from the way that the tutor delivers the content?*
* *Now, relate these reflections to your own practice with young children- what significant points can you draw?*

**Purposefully reflecting upon ethical dilemmas (A)**

The best way to develop your ethical understanding is to discuss and reflect upon actual situations as they arise with someone that you trust, or to ‘talk through’ issues within your reflective writing. But discussing real life occurrences does need a clear set of ethical guidelines. The following approaches can help to change a potentially unprofessional outburst into a useful professional reflection.

1. Focus upon the ‘issue’ or ‘dilemma’ that has caused difficulty, not upon the individuals involved. Never use names, instead generalise, so that your discussion will be about a practitioner, a student, or a parent; it won’t be about Ruth, or Steve, or Charlie’s mum.

2. Try not to judge. Although it is likely that these situations have become dilemmas because they have caused an emotional reaction in you, such as hurt or outrage, try to accept that initial, human reaction and then step back from the situation to view it more objectively. It is vital to consider the factors acting upon the other individuals involved and their differing perspectives of the situation. Talking with someone who is less emotionally involved will often help you to gain a clearer view of the different perspectives.

3. Focus your reflection upon devising a way forward. Raising (or writing about) an issue in a negative manner is a counterproductive. Considering the situation and then suggesting positive action in relation to your own practice turns your discussion from a tirade into a purposeful reflection.

Below are two reflections upon the same situation. These are the types of reflection often recorded within a placement journal that you might use in your written work. Both students have replaced the child’s name with a made up name (a pseudonym) to maintain anonymity and both have been careful not to use the name of the setting in order to discuss this incident in a confidential way. These examples clearly show that just following ethical processes and procedures in your writing is not enough to make a piece of work ethical in nature.

**Case Study**

**Approach 1 (C)**

I tried to talk to Kali’s Mum at the end of the day about Kali’s reading at home. Kali has taken a few books home but doesn’t seem to have read any of them. Nothing has been written in her home reading record for months. When her mum came in to collect her I tried to tell her how important it was for Kali’s language development that she make time at home to hear her read. Her Mum was quite rude and dismissive. She didn’t seem interested in supporting Kali’s development at all.

**Approach 2 (C)**

Kali has taken a few reading books home but doesn’t seem to have read any of them. Nothing has been written in her home reading record for months. I wondered why this might be and brought it to the attention of the lead practitioner. The lead practitioner told me that Kali’s mum is on her own looking after three children (the eldest two are teenagers) whilst working full time has been struggling since the loss of her own mother four months ago. Her mother had been a great help to her with the children and she was finding it hard to adjust to the loss. I discussed some ideas with colleagues about possible ways forward.

When mum came to collect Kali the next day she seemed in a rush. I made a point of telling her how well Kali had done with her reading in the setting over the last few weeks and that she had now moved on to the next set of books. Mum was really pleased to hear that. I told mum that she didn’t need to feel that she was the only one that could fill in the reading record that Kali took home and that if Kali’s older brother or sister heard her read it would be great for them to write a few comments. Mum said that was great, Kali’s big brother had been reading with Kali each night before bed, but was not sure whether or not he was ‘allowed’ write in her book.

**Table 13.2: Analysis of the two approaches**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Unethical response** | **Ethical response** |
| Angered outburst | Reasoned and thoughtful reflection |
| Only one view presented | Information sought about different perspectives |
| A criticism of the mother |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

If you carefully consider these responses you begin to clearly recognise ethical (caring and empathetic) and unethical (insensitive) responses. *Are you able to complete the table above by pulling out the key behaviours from the examples?*

Returning to the three guidance points above, it would be fair to say that Approach 1, although thinly disguised as reflective writing, is in fact, an emotional outburst. This piece of writing does not consider the issue, that the child’s reading record is not being completed, instead it focuses a criticism upon the mother as she has not acted in a way that the student considers to be appropriate. Approach 1 offers no empathy or understanding, no care or support for the parent or child and no possible way forward. Approach 1 is simply a criticism of the parent used in such a way as to portray the superior understanding of the student.

Approach 1 demonstrates how, in such situations, our emotions can often take over our reasoning; this is why talking to someone who is not emotionally involved in the event can be extremely helpful. Sometimes it is difficult to see things from different perspectives and talking to someone on the ‘outside’ of the situation always helps. This approach is also promoted by McAuliffe and Chenoweth (2008) in their response guidance. Make sure that this is someone whose opinion you respect and avoid identifying a friend that you know will agree with you. An appropriate ‘critical friend’ will be able to offer a detached and rational view and may be able to offer insights into the situation that you had not considered. Your tutors are happy to talk through such situations with you.

Although the second reflective piece is considering precisely the same issue, the response could not be more different. Starting with the same issue of the reading record having not been completed, the focus of Approach 2 is to identify the reasons for the problem, the precedents. Having taken the time to talk to colleagues, the student has then reflected upon how both mother and child can be best supported, reaching a potential solution. Not only does she present this solution, but by showing sensitivity to the vulnerable position that the parent is currently in, she frames it in as positive and supportive a manner as possible. Her approach is one of sharing something positive with the mother, there is no hint of ‘telling off’ in this dialogue. The key difference between these two approaches, is the time made to reflect upon the issue and within that reflection to carefully and sensitively consider the alternative perspectives of all individuals involved. The second reflection is mindful of the ‘dignity of the parent’, to use Haddad’s(2005) terminology.

But sometimes it is difficult to make time for careful consideration as the professional demands placed upon practitioners seem to increase almost daily. From planning, to assessment, to record keeping, to information sharing and working collaboratively, there are rarely enough hours in the day to take stock. Despite best intentions the need for haste can sometimes sabotage thoughtful reflection. In the Snapchat and Twitter age replies are formulated within seconds, meaning that frequently there is no time to stop, review or edit one’s thoughts. Czarniawska (2013) discusses how within the current electronic generation thoughts are often ‘burped’ out without temperance. How can you find time to slow down and systematically consider your thoughts and actions? How can you make the time to act mindfully?

**Critical Questions (F)**

* Have you ever posted something in haste on social media that you have later regretted? If so, how did you feel?
* Does your online, public persona reflect that of the ethical professional that you strive to be and that you would like potential employers to see?

**Research Focus (F)**

**Making time for mindfulness [C]**

It may seem strange for a chapter discussing early years education to refer to a science and engineering article, but Fleischmann’s (2006) exploration of teaching ethics within an American university’s school of engineering is extremely thought-provoking. In this article she unpacks many of the issues that I have just begun to touch upon in this last section, such as the ‘problem’ of living for the present, influenced by the rapid technological shift over recent times. Fleischmann explores some key literature which outlines a shift away from historical principles over the last century towards a life of ‘the present’, which does not retain the underpinning foundations of honour and respect for others that it has had in the past. She touches upon Bloom’s (1987) depiction of young people today living in an “impoverished present” starved of “an understanding of the past and a vision for the future, both of which come out of the human tradition that is passed from generation to generation in the form of shared values and standards of human behaviour” (Fleischmann, 2006: 383). She concludes that in a world where students want answers, not reasons for them, the teaching of ethics has become more difficult than ever.

**Critical questions (F)**

* What are your thoughts on these ideas presented by Fleischmann?
* Are you content to simply take on board what you have been told is the ‘right’ answer, or do you feel it is important to explore the issue more deeply and be sure that you understand why?

By modelling the creation of time and space to explore emotional responses and reasons why we demonstrate that these aspects are just as worthy of consideration as other skills and knowledge. We should all try to find the time and space in our seminars and in our activities with children to introduce the language of ethicality: care, empathy, mindfulness, kindness and sensitivity. Regardless of the ever mounting pressures of assessment, we should not lose sight of “the ethic of concern for persons that forms the very essence of education itself” (Jarvis, 1995:25).

**Exploring Case Studies**

Although it has been stated above that it is best to explore real life examples emerging from your own practice, some of you may be fortunate enough not to have encountered such situations so far. For this reason, some examples are given below of the types of ethical dilemmas, involving children, colleagues, parents and fellow students, that you are likely to come across in your practice experience.

**Case Studies (F)**

**1 Safeguarding concerns [C]**

You are on practice in a nursery, in the toddler room. You have been working with these children for two weeks and you feel that you are getting to know them quite well. Thomas is just over two years old and appears to have a voracious appetite, although he looks quite underweight. During snack time he is prone to snatch food and has even taken food from the other children. You notice practitioners telling Thomas off quite sharply for this and hear one practitioner tells Thomas that he will have to miss his next snack time because of his behaviour. You feel uneasy about this situation and the way that this is being dealt with

**2 Policy breach [C]**

You were employed by one of your placements, a pre-school, on a part-time basis, because they were impressed by your interaction with the children. You thoroughly enjoy working at the nursery due to its caring ethos and you regularly encourage your friends to come and do their placements there. One of your best friends at university is currently on placement with you. This friend is going through a very difficult break up with his girlfriend. Although very unsettled, he is managing to control his emotions and get on with his placement. You have noticed, though, that he is texting whenever he is out of view of the other practitioners. Because you are aware of his situation he assumes that you will understand his need to text, even though there is a ‘no mobile phones’ policy at the setting. He has been relying on you a great deal for emotional support at this time and you are wary of confronting him about this.

**3. Confidentiality [C]**

You have only been at your new placement three days and you are quite shocked by the way that a number of practitioners at the setting talk about the families. Some of the practitioners are friends with parents of the children in the setting and see them socially. They will openly discuss private details about those parents in front of both yourself and the children. Sometimes these have included comments about drunkenness and even promiscuousness. This appears to be the ‘norm’ within this setting due to the social relationships in existence. Comments made have implicated a sense of ‘fun’ not concern about the parents under discussion.

***Use the three guidance points suggested previously to unpack each of these case studies: what is the actual issue, what factors may be influencing different perspectives, and what are possible ways forward?***

**Chapter reflections (A)**

As an early years practitioner you have a responsibility to carry out ‘ethics work.’ Banks (2009: 62) defines this as “the work that goes into being caring, attentive and compassionate in situations where this would not be our natural response.” It would not be a stretch of the imagination to suppose that many who choose a career in early years do have a caring nature, and this will enable an ethical or moral response to a situation as a matter of course. But sometimes doing ‘the right thing’ can be more difficult. You may have conflicting principles, or, as Beckett (2009: 67) points out “the morally correct course of action is often not clear.” That is when ethics becomes *work.*

While this chapter cannot provide full ‘answers’ it should help you recognise your own responsibility to engage in ‘ethics work’ and to endeavour to do what is ‘good’ or ‘right’. Sometimes the best course of action will not be clear and sometimes you will make mistakes, everyone does, but it is dealing with human frailties and foibles that makes a caring and understanding approach so important for us all.

**Further reading**

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