

Reading the im/possibility of ethics in pre-service teacher professional experiences

DANIELLA FORSTER

School of Education, University of Newcastle (Australia)

Abstract

This work begins to deconstruct the ‘obligations’ pre-service teachers name and not-name in a reflection on a collection of ‘ethical events’ articulated in a capstone teacher education course that explored their philosophies of teaching and applied ethics. Obligation is more of a “matter of being claimed, in which something has a hold on us... that has us before we have it” (Caputo, p. 31) rather than the holding of a value or principle or claim for the enduring Good.

In an attempt to recognise the explosiveness of the problem of respecting alterity in writing about ethics one has an obligation to consider the ethical demands of interpretation and the groundlessness of ethics itself. Deconstruction provides the im/possibility of writing about proper names and particularities which are the condition for allowing us to speak about justice.

Acknowledging the variety of contemporary research in the area of ethics in teaching my analysis of these pre-service teachers’ writings traces major concepts and traditions in modern ethics that may have been used in alternative readings to characterise these subjective phenomena and potentially bring deeper meaning to the role morality of teaching. Reading these texts for the ‘possibility of ethics’ one might see implications for the devolution of ethical standardisation in teaching as what it means to take responsibility for responsibility as a teacher educator.

Keywords: possibility of ethics, obligation, teacher education

Introduction

An obligation is a call we receive to which we must respond, a prescriptive to which we must keep an open line. It is of the utmost importance to be able to sort out among prescriptives, to tell the difference between prescriptives to follow and prescriptives to resist, to differentiate among prescriptives, which often conflict, e.g., or which often oblige us precisely to disobey them. That is why we have always required ethics, and that is the disadvantage of speaking against ethics. (Caputo, 1993, p. 26)

How, if at all, should ethics be taught in teacher education and what kinds of understandings ought to arise from pre-service teachers to indicate that they have gained ethical insights, moral imagination and knowledge? If Codes of ethics govern professional discourse around what it means to be an ethical professional, then what kinds of implications follow for teacher educators in the contested field of applied ethics? Are these different if we claim the end of ethics, returning to morality by a way of the post-modern conscience? As a field, applied ethics works in a space of theory/practice where defined roles are claimed to indicate the contribution of a professional to society (Oakley & Cocking, 2006); but since normative questions cannot be answered once and for all, questions in applied ethics for the moral conscience must be taken with some suspicion of the metanarratives through which we are to make sense of them. Caputo claims that “incredulity is an interesting word; the great metanarratives have not been ‘refuted’ but have simply withered away and lost their power to command our belief” (1993, p. 257, endnote 49 (to pages 31-33)). This paper will explore some of the grand

stories of ethics in teaching with some post-modern relief. The aim here is to find a way in and through the reflective work of 151 pre-service teachers in a capstone course towards an understanding of different forms of moral experience in the contemporary Australian professional setting, an understanding that develops a lens through which to comment on the conditions for role morality of teaching as a profession.

To begin, the relationship between ethics and morality needs clarification. Biesta (2010) writes about Dewey's implications for the use of educational research as making decisions more intelligent, rather than describing what will work. He also makes a case using the work of Bauman with his Levinasian lineage, to talk about the problems of accountability and genuine responsibility. In this view, ethics *is* different from morality. As Critchley (1995) states: "for Levinas, the construction of a system or procedure, for formulating and testing the moral acceptability of certain maxims or judgements relating to social action and civic duty is itself derived and distinct from a primordial ethical experience that Levinas's work seeks to describe" (p. 3).

For Biesta (2010), Bauman's most convincing argument for the value of a post modern morality is that "following the rules, however scrupulously, does not and will never save us from responsibility. We can always ask ourselves and we can always be asked by others whether our following of some set of (ethical) rules is or was the right thing to do – and we will never have a conclusive answer" (p. 62). Thus the moral relationship is characterised by *real* responsibility, and, as Biesta explains, this is "one-sided, nonreciprocal and nonreversible" (2010, p. 63). The moral gift is given without any expectation, it is apprehension of the other; "the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me" (Critchley, p.5, citing Levinas *TEL 21/TI 50*). For Derrida, the moral gift is beyond "any possible restitution, there would be need for my gesture to operate without debt, in absolute ingratitude" (Derrida, *ECM 24* cited in Critchley, p. 111).

The possibility for this moral relationship, Biesta reports, "*has* been neutralized by (modern) society" (2010, p. 66), via sociality and socialisation. The latter in three ways: in a structured society people feel they are part of a chain of command whereby their capacity to have moral effect on the suffering of others is limited and overreached by the impacts of others above and below them; that some people are exempted from moral subjectivity (dehumanized) and finally, the receiving 'object' of moral action is reconstituted as a set of traits without a recognisable moral self.

Biesta argues that the path of least resistance emerging in today's culture of accountability has enabled the relationships between schools/teachers and students/parents to become depoliticised and stripped of real responsibility to each other and to community as a democracy. The crucial argument Biesta makes from his analysis of Bauman's post-modern ethics and the three effects of socialisation (the impact of structured society), is that today's "culture of accountability poses a serious threat to the possibility of proximity" (2010, p. 71) and thus a serious threat to the merely anesthetised (not amputated) moral conscience of humanity. Proximity is the possibility of "attention and waiting" which is both a personal task to be performed over and over again, but "also a professional task, that is, if we are willing to see that responsibility is an essential component of what educational relationships are made of" (Biesta, 2010, p. 72).

Kostogriz and Doecke (2011), in their work on the rise of a neoliberal culture of accountability and standardisation in education in Australia by way of NAPLAN testing and MySchool, describe the impact on the ethical subjectivities of serving teachers in a Melbourne school. They argue that whilst many teachers accept the mantle of accountability, its impact is felt by teachers in the erosion of human relationships and sense of genuine commitment to and responsibility for school community. The reification of the relationships between the intellectual labour of teaching and measurable outputs of learning works to "flatten" the complexity of social relations (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011, p. 404). The implications are an intensification of perennial tensions such as between justice and caring for example; and the conditions under which educational values are understood.

Dominant and often taken-for-granted assumptions about what is important, what is valued and what education ought to strive to achieve permeate teacher education. Being ethical/moral is about becoming sensitive to and imaginative about intentions, actions, consequences; being able to unpick lines of justification, and ways for making moral judgment; and attuned to the needs of self and others. It is not about shifting responsibility for ethical judgment onto others and shrugging one's shoulders as if there's nothing one can do.

From distinctive post-modern perspective/s, such as Levinas, Derrida and others, proximal relations are characterized by attention, connection and response. The openness to another's call is a presumption of 'attunement', the capacity and willingness to genuinely connect with others that is generous but also risky because the new connection may bring "harm or creative transformation" (Fenwick, 2008, p. 14). These interconnections emphasise "the importance of *relations* among beings, and of 'becomings' as generated within these relations, not pre-existing in them"; and thus Fenwick suggests that educators' sense of ethical responsibility is inherent in their capacity to "focus on the immediate, [be] open to possibility, leap into uncertainty, [and] care without knowledge" (2008, p. 16).

Given this understanding, to ask pre-service teachers to demonstrate moral imagination or ethical knowledge and so forth is largely an artificial task; having said this, it is better to have a constructed form of assessment than to overlook the field altogether. The task needs to be read for the intentions of the author, for the learning contexts and histories in which they arose, for the structure that was externally imposed and the policies and norms in which they were experienced. Given these reservations, suspicions and uncertainties, an analysis of the work of pre-service teachers who write about their ethical understandings needed to acknowledge the basic lack of foundation, or of multiple overlapping foundations, of different forms of disagreement and consensus and the inherent complexity of the tensions and relationships that continually arise around ethics and morality in education. Peters states that in theorizing the legitimation of education in terms of imaginative invention (paralogy) rather than on a principle of consensus or the logic of maximum performance "we might begin to bear witness to the *differend*, to a form of education based on difference, where the little narratives, still largely unwritten, are not forced to resolve themselves into a monologue" (1995, p. xxxii).

Continuing

Thus it is with concepts gleaned from a post-structural ethics linked with deconstruction that this work develops the theoretical basis for the tasks of exploring in depth the articulations of hundreds of pre-service teachers whose writings have been collected over the past several years. These students, transitioning through various permutations of a secondary teacher education program, reflect on their perceptions of an ethical event or series of events occurring during a final year professional placement experience. For a greater majority of the pre-service teachers whose work I have taken through initial stages of content analysis, these writings are an externalization of their struggles with some concept of doing justice on behalf of students, of being or becoming a 'fair teacher' in action and intent and in the context of policies, procedures and received wisdom.

Some pre-service teachers are cognisant of the need for proximity with students, as this excerpt indicates:

I found that my students wanted to get to know about my life and how I dealt with the world but I also wanted to get to know them better, to create relationships with them and gain their trust so that I might know them better to aid with their learning. ... My ethical issue with these students was that I grappled with the desire to move away from course content, if that was what the students were interested in at the time and allowing for myself to be seen on a more 'human' level to these students... I very much wanted to engage my students in meaningful learning through reference to my personal experience and through more personal relationships ... but I felt that the overall attitudes held by teachers in the staffroom and by my supervising teacher, was that they were against it. (pre-service teacher A)

Pre-service teachers are often striving to make sense of their experiences with practicing mentors and colleagues. Sometimes there are obstacles to being able to make sense of an experience and a tension in the expectations they have of their context and conditions, or the actions and expressed beliefs of others, as is the case with this example – this gives reason to look for another way around. Here, the pre-service teacher sometimes reveals something new, a possibility of becoming something else, or something different emerges.

In *The ethics of deconstruction* Derrida is given an ethical possibility with the work of Levinas (Critchley, p. 3). Uncertainty is a feature of moral responsibility in two respects – the other to whom the agent responds is unknowable, and in responding to one other, there are other others whose calls are neglected. Thus moral agents

ought to pay “attention to the singularity of the other, the singularity of the situation...” (Derrida, 1999, p. 78) and ‘endless difference’ (*différance*). Derrida speaks of the essential perpetuation of *aporia* or ‘undecidability’ where the recognition that “‘I don’t know what to do’ ... is not the negative condition of decision. It is rather the possibility of a decision” (Derrida, 1999, p. 66). This decision requires preparation, knowledge, analysis, but it must go beyond knowledge into the unknown which is the ‘terrible experience’ of ethical responsibility.

Derrida asserts that undecidability is not opposed to decision, but is a condition of responsibility. He states

[i]f you don’t experience some undecidability, then the decision would simply be an application of a programme, the consequence of a premise or of a matrix... [it] would simply be the application of a rule, ... and there would be no problem, there would be no decision. Ethics and politics, therefore, start with undecidability. (Derrida, 1999, p. 66)

Without a sense of undecidability, decisions are not genuine. Undecidability is part of the relations in which humans are embedded. Ethical responsibility is a “phenomenal and relational dynamic” (Fenwick, 2008, p. 5) where one’s obligation “calls forth a sense of duty to care for self and others extending beyond one’s own self-interest, and accountability to others for one’s actions” (*ibid*).

The ethical events pre-service teachers describe and for which this paper is a theoretical backlight, are framed with Derrida’s notion of *aporia*. The notion of *aporia* is used to describe the phenomenological state of being in the midst of moral complexity; and as a mundane feature of the highly emotional and political work of teaching. It is used here as a flag for pre-service teachers to become cognisant of during their professional experience placement, and to explain the difficulty of resolving these kinds of aspects of being a teacher, such as the example given above. This is not to say, however, that the writings of pre-service teachers can be characterised by an unknowing; often, in fact, they report clear processes, procedures and policies based in stable values and structural worldviews.

In a discussion of the educational value of the concept of *aporia* the work of Burbules (2000) is helpful. He states that central to the notion of *aporia* is a “sense of being lost”; it is “a problem of having arrived in an unfamiliar location, and a riddle of uncertain signification” (p. 175). He explains that the opposite of *aporia* is a *poros*, which means ‘way’. For Burbules, when faced with *aporia*, individuals either find themselves lost and confused, or trace out a way or rule to follow. In the case of pre-service teachers, how can they find a way to go on, in the face of a moral problem or challenge? Burbules continues:

there are different kinds of *aporia*. The *aporia* of the Meno is an epistemic emptiness; at that moment, one knows nothing, and does not know what to think or say or do next-hence, paralysis, numbness. There is no path in sight. But a different kind of *aporia* is to have lost one’s way, to be confused; there are too many paths from which to choose. Different still is an *aporia* in which one cannot recognize a path that is already there. And yet another is an *aporia* in which the path is apparent, but one cannot or will not follow it (perhaps because the destination is unknown, perhaps because it is known and unpleasant). In all of these cases, one does not know how to go on, but for very different reasons. (2000, p. 179)

Dilemmas have long been understood as interrelated parts of the ‘web’ of teachers’ work that have both ethical and epistemological dimensions (Lyons, 1990). Complex webs, passages, uncertainties, *aporias* are the stuff of teaching, learning, education, as Burbules (2000) explicates. Lyons (1990) asserts that ethics and epistemology are explicitly connected because morality rests in people’s relationships to each other, raising “the question of interpretations; that is, how to make sense of ... knowing” (p. 168). This is important because of the assumption that teacher “dilemmas come out of working relationships between people... that are fed by the everyday interactions between them, that happen over time, and that have no real guarantee of success even though they require daily response and action” the pre-service teacher is exposed to the challenging idea that, “however, resolved, the teacher lives with conflict” (Lyons, 1990, p. 165).

Colnerud's (1997) work identified various types of ethical conflict in teachers' work in an empirical study based in Sweden with 189 teachers and 223 dilemmas. She explored the professional conditions that help to clarify how these arise. She claims that today's "teachers are parts of systems and caught in complicated structures, which may be morally desensitising" (Colnerud, 2003, p. 560). But pre-service teachers are not, it seems, as susceptible to ethical desensitisation, at least initially. Rather, many express a personally vigorous perception of injustice, of the use and abuse of power and of personal obligation to the needs of others, as is seen in the following excerpt from a pre-service teacher's reflective writing:

I wonder if as a new teacher, I have felt more strongly about the situation because I have not yet been exposed or 'desensitised' to such experiences. I have a genuine concern for a lot of the students I taught as their day-to-day life may often seem like something out of a book or movie. This particular situation may not sit perfectly within the context of an ethical dilemma, and does not align with any cases from *The Ethical Teacher* (Campbell, 2003), but it does not sit well within my ethical beliefs, therefore I felt it worthy to discuss. (pre-service teacher B)

Pre-service teachers presume differently about the nature of fulfilling their ethical or moral obligations. The kinds of basic moral tensions they explored largely consisted in issues around notions of fairness in the context of the emotional and individual care of students and the implementation of school policies, especially discipline policies and required curriculum. They are struggling with their emotions and their perception of what it takes to be a professional – objective marking of quality not effort; social distance rather than personal knowledge; enforcement of rules; what it means to provide 'equal' treatment, etc.

The power of the notion of *aporia* is in describing the groundlessness of ethics as a way of helping pre-service teachers to identify and accept feelings of uncertainty, and not to shy away from these but to find them essential in developing ethical sensitivity to their conditions. These states are important for learning, but can be overwhelming, so pre-service teachers sometimes retreat and pull back from them. Here, different examples from two other pre-service teachers write about the nature of ethics in teaching, making appeals to the role, policies and hierarchical organisation:

teaching brings with it many situations in which a teacher must make an ethical decision. The decision may go against one's personal beliefs, but in the end a teacher is part of a profession that involves abiding by a set of standards and codes to ensure that the institute as a whole is protected. (pre-service teacher C)

Although shocking and somewhat stressful, this experience really helped me to clearly and openly define this idea of 'the line' between Professional Interest and the 'friend' type relationship. It also helped me to understand the policies within the school, as well as the existing 'chain of command'. (pre-service teacher D)

Two of the three characterise their obligations as professionals ethically, looking to the structure, process and protection of the greater whole. The other (pre-service teacher B) does so with a more moral bent, feeling the way to understanding their students' conditions of life despite the lack of exemplar in the literature or a sense of fit.

The work of Shapira-Lischinsky (2010) posited five dichotomous ethical tensions characterising teachers' work, as an extension of the work completed by Colnerud (1997) who distinguished several categories of norms that lead to conflicts in teacher's work: ethical 'interpersonal' values; task-specific internal professional norms; institutional norms; social conformity norms and self-protecting norms. These each relate to the teacher's interactions with students, parents and colleagues. Another pre-service teacher explains how ethical problems arose during their placement:

During my internship there were several times where I had to stop and think about what actions to take next, based on the greater good for all parties involved, and in particular, the students... (pre-service teacher E)

Here, a classical ethical tension lies with the perception of the greater good and the particularities of individuals involved; and the need for the pre-service teacher to *stop* and to *think*; to hold still and stable so that the threads of ethical practice might be woven together to make some sense of the good and the right. These threads are re-articulated in Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) as dichotomous tensions:

1. Caring climate versus formal climate
2. Distributive justice versus school standards
3. Confidentiality versus school rules
4. Loyalty to colleagues versus school norms
5. Family agenda versus educational standards (p. 651)

For instance, the dichotomous tension between distributive justice and school standards is explained as “teachers’ perceptions of tension between distributive justice (rewards appropriate for effort) and school standards which follow clear criteria regarding decision-making at school” (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011, p. 653). What counts as relevant student factors for special treatment from pre-service teachers? That is, what factors mean that there is a victim of unfair policy for whom there are reasons against the application of a rule or policy? One pre-service teacher reported being counselled by their teacher-supervisor to take a more caring approach to an individual under hardship, whilst the pre-service teacher’s individual inclinations were to follow the school policies consistently and rigidly in order to be ‘fair’. This is a case in which a lack of sensitivity on behalf of the pre-service teacher was ‘corrected’ by a more experienced practitioner.

The NSW Code of Conduct states that all employees of the Department must be “committed to social justice by opposing prejudice, injustice and dishonesty” (2010, p. 3.) Having a sense of injustice involves the feelings of outrage against perceptions of injustice and of deservedness/desert. But for Caputo, the “law falls short – inevitably, structurally - of justice, which deals in proper names. ... you should not apply laws to individuals, but individuals to the law... The individual, who always knows better than the law, always protests ‘but this case is different’. That is because ‘this’ is always different (even as difference always involves a ‘this’), and justice is a function of the ‘this’” (1993, p. 89).

A dilemma can be framed as a choice between equally distasteful ‘horns’ and used in the teaching of ethics to differentiate the implications of meta-ethical theories. It can be a pedagogical tool. As one pre-service teacher explains, paraphrasing Campbell (2003), it is

a predicament that entails a choice concerning two equally problematic, commendable, or unsatisfactory options. The choice has unpredictable degrees of advantage or disadvantage for the agents involved. Often the dilemma involves two competing rights or ethical principles. (pre-service teacher F)

In sum, the data oscillates between rich descriptions of the struggles of pre-service teachers in becoming morally sensitive and those perfunctory essays that gloss over the possible uncertainties to find clear solutions indicative of the high ground and ‘just deserts’. Some pre-service teachers report on the tension between individual rights and the good of the whole, with an appeal to laws of process. Others have a stronger eye to relations of power, control and conformity, and pull back from relational proximity with students, whilst recognising certain implications. There is also evidence of the ways in which many pre-service teachers questioningly accept the advice of their supervisors; viewing the state of things – children, policies, expectations- otherwise. As a group, much of the collected work of pre-service teachers describe a perpetual sense of unfairness that many of them effectively claim their experienced supervising teachers have forgotten or perhaps haven’t forgotten but grown weary of. These pre-service teachers test out the limits of ‘professional’ transgression when they experiment with the literal application of school policies to real human beings, and as they record their own emotional misgivings, their expectations of the responsibilities associated with difference, school-organisational roles, and the observed behaviour of others in chronological sequences of events.

How to go on?

In reading and re-reading the ‘obligations’ pre-service teachers are naming and not-naming; one must assume that there is obligation to be found. Obligation is more of a “matter of being claimed, in which something has a hold on us... that has us before we have it” (Caputo, 1993, p. 31) rather than the holding of a value or principle or claim for the enduring Good. The interpretations of these written pre-service teacher reflections through deconstruction operate on the assumption that the meaning of any particular text can never be recovered and in some sense must be re-authored. In other words, through the “very instability of meaning [deconstruction] induces”, the reading and rereading of pre-service teacher reflections on ethics exemplify a kind of authenticity towards their work and the nature of the work of teachers to subvert the need for “finalised solutions or completed understandings” (Irwin, 2013, p. 175).

In *Against Ethics* deconstruction provides the im/possibility of writing about proper names, which are the condition for allowing “us to say when and where obligation is happening, and to whom, and they help us remember” (Caputo, 1993, p.72). It faces the impossibility of justice; which is a particular justice “like the justice that would reign if each case, which is always different, were judged on its own merits without the weight of the law” (Caputo, 1993, p.269, footnote 53). Lyons argues that the complexities of ‘conflicting goods’ teachers face “requires a less confident and yet more particular wisdom” (1990, p.178). Caputo’s (1993) core conceptual and poetic analysis – of a tearing sense of obligation and the individuation of ethics as the ‘almost ineffable’ sum of sentient existence – disrupted my reading of student reflections such that the classical tensions – between justice and care, experience and novelty, wisdom and naivety – were teased open to concede ground.

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