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The missing language of the classroom

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore teachers' use of moral language in their descriptions and interpretations of their K-12 classroom and graduate school experiences. We analyze student products that were developed by practicing K-12 teachers who graduated from a nontraditional master's program. We focused on their end of program exit portfolios and reflective essays. We also examined student admission essays and data from an on-line conference space. In our conclusions, we argue that teacher education needs to encourage teachers to envision classrooms as moral rather than technical arenas, and we urge teachers to use a moral vocabulary to describe their work. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we argue that moral language is missing from the K-12 classroom. At first sight, that seems an improbable claim, particularly if moral education “goes with the territory” (Purpel & Ryan, 1976). Moreover, the detailed study made by Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993) in *The Moral Life of Schools* makes it even more improbable. These researchers found that classrooms are places where the moral is richly woven into the fabric of everyday life. Our experience, however, is different, perhaps because our data is not from observation of contexts and detailed interviews, but from teacher self-reports. In this study, we were not seeking to understand whether classrooms are rich in moral dimensions, but

whether teachers use moral language as they describe and interpret their K-12 classroom and graduate school experiences. Our context was that of a two-year, part-time degree program explicitly committed to a *moral* conception of professionalism in teaching. The vast majority of the teachers found this conception extremely unfamiliar when they enrolled. They were simply not accustomed to moral discussions *about* or within classrooms. The discourse began to resonate with many of them, especially as they began to examine the nature of their own authority, to recover ideals they had lost, and to undertake classroom research or to write portfolios as their end of course exercise.

Our claim that moral language *consciously used as such* is missing from classrooms because it is absent from teachers' vocabularies as exemplified here:

For several years we have given out end of year awards to the children. Even though I have felt

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uncomfortable about giving them, I did nothing about it. I didn't even voice my concern and went along with everyone else. I recognize the negative effects these awards have on children and plan to change it next year. I hope in this instance that my "words and actions" will have a positive influence on each child.

While we may assume a certain moral sensitivity, there is no moral language here. "Uncomfortable" is morally opaque, vaguely suggesting disagreement and maybe a sense of shame. "Negative" (that invasive hangover concept from behaviorism) does not distinguish the distinct moral issues she confronts. Is it unfairness? loss of community? lack of respect? or what? that constitute the moral ills she sees in end of year awards. Lurking in the final sentence is the recognition of a teacher as a moral model. Yet she seems unable to discuss her feelings and actions with moral depth, resorting to "positive". Her language is imprecise. She simply lacks a vocabulary, or the habit of using it. In the context of a future faculty discussion about end of year awards, her imprecise code words will be inadequate for framing, defining, or understanding a complex moral conversation.

That may seem unduly critical. First, we must clearly distinguish moral language from moral sentiment. There is no doubt, we think, that the heart of the teacher we have quoted is in the right place, whatever the moral merits of end of year awards. At least she feels some sense of (moral) discomfort where she perceives something as wrong. Our claims are not therefore, as common parlance would have it, that just because teachers do not use moral language they are "bad people". We believe the vast majority of teachers are seriously committed to the moral ideal of serving children and in general act with good moral intuition. Yet with an etiolated moral vocabulary, it is difficult to see (a) how they can address the complexity of moral judgments they must make with either confidence or competence, (b) how they can develop an adequate professional foundation of moral understanding and (c) how they can teach children to think about and reflect on moral issues, quite apart from acting on the beliefs they will

acquire. The moral stakes are very high if the moral language of the classroom is missing because it is not in the teacher's vocabulary.

In Part I, we briefly describe the context of the program, its ambitions and conduct. In Part II, we analyze responses within the overall theme of the place of moral language as it develops through the program, specifically looking at (a) moral autonomy and moral agency, (b) critical self-reflection (c) collaboration and community. We conclude in Part III with some thoughts about the need for a professional moral case-law, and discuss how teacher education might create a more sophisticated context for moral discussions by teachers based on our research conclusions.

2. The context

The context of the study is a school-based Masters program which aims to end the gulf between degree programs and the teachers' work through setting it in the context of moral professionalism (Sockett, LePage, Wood, & DeMulder, 2001). Teachers are recruited to program in teams from individual schools, and the work of teams is pre-eminent throughout. Teachers develop extensive and profound professional and personal relationships and responsibilities, which replace their collegial isolation. Mutual support experiences, we believe, holds promise for impacting a school culture. The team intimacy becomes its own culture and has had a marked influence on how teachers view their students and the way knowledge is generated and transmitted within a school culture (see Gerow, 2001; LePage, Decker, & Maier, 2001).

Second, we commit half the formal structure of the degree to school-based work, defining teachers as expert practitioners and ourselves as coaches for their classroom research. The fact of our students' doing research on their teaching also seems to recast the relationship with students in the classroom. Many teachers report that the adoption of the role of teacher-researcher changes their approach to pedagogy. It becomes questing, rather than authoritative, and this finds its place in getting students to be reflective learners, thereby

opening up the context of moral discourse. (For a detailed account of the program see Sockett et al., 2001)

Our ambitions are moral both in an epistemological and a normative sense. Normatively, although university habits make this a problematic enterprise, we have examined traditional practices and asked how we justify them: for instance, how can we only offer part-time evening teaching to teachers who are busy, with young families and so on when it requires relatively little adjustment for faculty to find other forms? Epistemologically, we have de-emphasized educational psychology. In its place, we are placing at the forefront moral philosophy of education, for “to be truly practical, ethical inquiry must be philosophical”. (Berko-witz, 2001, p. 9) Teaching is at bottom a moral activity and demands the centrality of moral inquiry in teacher education.

In this study, we analyzed student products developed by practicing K-12 teachers who graduated from this program in 1998, 1999 and 2000, especially focusing on their end of program exit portfolios and reflective essays. We also examined student admission essays. And finally, the teachers also conversed in an on-line conference space for two years and we examined these. Each conference was kept for research purposes. Special attention was given to specific conferences that involved discussions about teaching practice. We were most interested in comparing some of the comments made earlier in the Web conferences with comments made later in student portfolios. All participants had at least three years of teaching experience; in fact, most had between five and fifteen years of experience before enrolling in the program, so that the student population tended to be older, mostly students in their 30s and 40s. Most of the student portfolios (9–12) were taken from the 90 students in the graduation class based at the university’s Prince William campus in 1998 (PW98). We conducted an in-depth analysis of exit portfolios for these students. We also analyzed Web conference data for the entire PW98 group, focusing especially on the 9 students from PW98 chosen for in-depth analysis. In the portfolios, we focused on analyzing end of program reflective essays and research. When appropriate, the

information from one data source was used to support and extend information provided from another.

3. The language of teaching and the moral development of the teacher

A program with an explicit moral base is necessarily taking the moral development of teachers seriously. However, to describe a program as having a moral base is not also to presume, either among faculty or teachers, unanimity about what constitutes the moral and how or whether it is connected to a religious view of the world. Such a program is inevitably a selective rather than a comprehensive treatment of different approaches to moral thought. We do no more than introduce teachers to (a) ethics of principles, usually through Kohlberg (1984), Strike (1999) and Norton (1976); (b) to ethics of virtue (MacIntyre, 1984; Sockett, 1993); (c) to pragmatic views of negotiating moral understanding as a social engagement, specifically in terms of the emphasis on the need to educate citizens for a democracy (Dewey, 1916); (d) to the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1992) and the important *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Although there are profound philosophical questions and disagreements about ethical standpoints and the ensuing conception of what it is to be moral, the significance of moral language and moral agency, seen as a medium for understanding the world or negotiating meaning, remains central, except perhaps in the widely discredited emotivist theories (Stevenson, 1964). Morality is also seen as necessarily social, hence the significance for many of a community. Finally few claim that moral understanding comes naturally or is acquired without difficulty. All moral agents struggle with their thought, action and development to a lesser and greater degree in different environments, including teachers, college professors and administrators.

As we sought to examine the teachers use of moral language, it was clear that the teachers’ were struggling consistently with three-topic areas

associated with the moral dimensions of their work. We will examine each sequentially, (1) moral autonomy and moral agency, (2) critical self-reflection, and (3) collaboration and community.

3.1. *Moral autonomy and moral agency*

Once teachers started trying to understand and sophisticate their moral perspectives, developing individual autonomy and voice was an important issue for many of the teachers studying with us, suggesting that they work in a context which expects strict adherence to rules, and can engender a fear of authority. We were especially interested to note echoes of developmental or stage theory as teachers worked through the program. Our focus in this paper, however, is on the use of language. Therefore, we are remaining for the purposes of this enquiry agnostic on the highly contestable accounts of stage theory. Although, we noticed some progression, moral language was used more (or less) often at different times during the program, suggesting that the use of language was heavily influenced by context. For example, although moral language was used more often at the end of the program, the teachers also used moral language frequently at the beginning of the program in their admission essays and much less in the computer conferences. This is because in their admission essays they were often describing moral commitments. So, to accurately describe stages, we would need to conduct a systematic study looking closely at issues of progression and context.

We organized the teachers' writings about agency and autonomy into three categories, (1) egocentric view of learning, (2) rejection of authority and anti-intellectualism, (3) consciousness and full agency.

Egocentric view of learning. Many teachers were productively focused in the program on their own personal growth, which in some cases meant that everything they learnt was interpreted through an egocentric lens. Every book, article or lecture such individuals encounter was *only* compared with, or related to, their own personal experiences, and this implies a rejection of anything that disturbed their experience of the world.

Teachers were given pre-program reading to provide the whole group with a shared body of experience at the outset. A pattern evolved which used evocative novels such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, but also work of autobiographical form such as Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger for Memory* and Catherine Mary Bateson's *Composing a Life*. In respect of the content of the novels, some teachers limited themselves to jejeune comparisons with their own life experiences, using the novel as a vehicle for self-justification. In other cases this developed into a discussion of an individual teacher's victimhood compared with the novel's characters. Autobiographies likewise could elicit egocentrism, e.g. with envious rejection of the author's comparative wealth, or with prejudiced stances to an author's sexual identity. At the beginning of the program, therefore, we found some teachers with an apparent inability to receive insights and different viewpoints, including cultural perspectives. Framing the world through such fixed conceptual lenses as self-justification, victimhood and egocentrism will make a teacher myopic in matters of moral complexity, which must diminish drastically the chances of embracing that complexity and sharing it with students.

Rejection of authority and anti-intellectualism. The program's introduction of moral language or "adopting a moral perspective" was experienced by some teachers as an alternative authority to the conventions, dogmas and rules of the school system, to be embraced by some and rejected by others. We are not very surprised by this phenomenon. First, the program installed from the outset the contrast between moral professionalism and professional socialization into an assigned technical role. Some teachers thus saw the program as a major challenge to the "rightful" authority of their conventional workplaces and employment norms, issuing in the need to question the authority and credibility of the faculty and the program, and in rejecting some of the intellectual content that they believed was not relevant to their lives.

Second, schools are too frequently places where children learn how to give teachers what they want so they can earn good grades. Teachers

themselves, thrust into learning situations, replicate this pattern and its associated anxieties. Their struggles became apparent through the practice of teachers writing end-of-day evaluations of the program where the teachers are continually invited to critique the program. Rather than engaging the intellectual complexity of the program, however, many teachers sought “clear directions” from faculty so that, as it were, the “right” answers could be given, “good grades” could be assigned and we could all go home without a struggle. However, as they faced the alternative authority conflict, some not only professed bewilderment, but as a way to relieve anxiety, they sought to place blame on others for their frustrations. When they confronted intellectual complexity, they often pushed the faculty to relieve the ambiguity they were facing.

Dear C..., I was told before I entered the program last year that I would “grapple with ambiguity” for two years. I’m tired of grappling. Now I am really unsure of my abilities to do a good job on the research paper due in a short while. At least the expectations have been clearly defined. That’s a relief!

Third, whatever the program’s rhetoric of recruitment, many teachers came to it believing that certain intellectual pursuits were not relevant to their classroom. Teachers wanted faculty to provide technical skills, teaching strategies, and advice about what to do with kids who have discipline problems, which is, of course, what their employers offer by way of “in-service courses”. They could not see beyond the technical role they inhabit and which they wished to enhance. The program faculty tried to find a balance between carefully listening to teachers and taking their suggestions seriously, while also recognizing that most teachers are unsatisfied with a “technical” program. And, by the end of the program, teachers overwhelmingly agreed that learning to struggle with intellectual content was indeed what they needed. Given few opportunities in schools to exercise autonomy or be expert, teachers do not always communicate effectively or they reject authority completely by closing their mind to learning. For some teachers, any content that did not live up to

their expectations about what they were “supposed” to learn from an “education program” was questioned and they were disinclined to struggle with understanding anything not within this limited purview.

For example, teachers heard a guest lecture about contemporary culture by Larry Levine in which he gave the example from his book (Levine, 1996) of how the Marx Brothers riot at the end of *A Night at the Opera* is an angry reaction to a widely enjoyed public entertainment being hijacked by the hi-brow (p. 235). In a subsequent web-based discussion, a teacher showed herself clearly not open to an intellectual struggle with his ideas which is ironic since his book is meant to counter Bloom’s (1987) claims that the American mind in being closed. She responded to others who were struggling to understand the lecture’s implications.

No, CHILDREN. It is NOT your age. Grandma had trouble connecting the lecture to daily practice—or even to the grad. program. I know I am not sure I have a handle on what constitutes “pop,” but somehow, I just don’t believe opera qualifies. I felt we listened to a lecture on the history of opera in the USA.

We believe such standpoints are problematic in the creation of a classroom with moral language. First, if teachers cannot themselves come to a moral balance in their relationship with authority, how can children acquire from them the insights and understandings mediated by language which will enable them to develop a moral relationship with authority, whether it be the policeman, the umpire, the professor or the boss? Second, if (however seriously it is played) teaching becomes a game where grades are negotiated (see, for instance, the accounts in Hersch, 1998), how much is the very idea of teaching being a moral activity undermined? Finally, if children do not experience intellectual struggle in classrooms, i.e. face up to difficult learning situations, how can they develop such virtues as courage, persistence, concentration (among other virtues) as illuminative of moral life?

Self-consciousness and full agency. In a situation where teachers are more concerned with getting a

good grade rather than struggling to learn content, it could be said that teachers are searching for (appropriate) validation from an authority figure. Some teachers of course do change during the program, getting over the need for validation and searching for a sense of themselves and their autonomy.

Before this program, I thought to be a good teacher I would have to follow every rule to a tee. Now I know part of being a good teacher is being flexibly and meeting the needs of my students.

I no longer look for the group approval when voicing my opinions.

Many teachers became self-aware of what they thought of as progress in the areas of autonomy and agency over the two years and used their own words to describe the process.

If you were to draw a caricature of me when I first arrived ... two summers ago I would have a huge mouth and my eyes would be narrow slits. I would be wearing a propeller beanie and have my pockets stuff with rubber bands and spit wads. My demeanor would exude arrogance and sarcasm. Today the picture would be different. I would have oversized ears and my eyes would be opened wide. I would be wearing a graduate's cap and my pockets would hold a magnifying glass, a tape recorder, a notebook and a pen. My demeanor would exude confidence, yet humility. It is not easy getting to where I am today and I know it will take hard work to change even more. So, after two years..., I would have to admit that I am a better teacher and a better person, however, I still have a long way to go.

Flexibility, growing out of a need for group approval, and becoming a "real" learner and inquirer are important segments of moral and intellectual autonomy. However, the connection between these aspects of autonomy and classroom language needs to be noted. If we live with what, for the sake of argument, inadequate self-concepts or static professional self-concepts, we cannot think coherently about our moral situations or

enunciate our moral problems, dilemmas and commitments within a context of moral inquiry. If our moral vocabulary is limited, in other words, we cannot enrich the moral vocabulary and thereby the understanding of the students we teach.

3.2. *Critical self-reflection*

Moral agency and autonomy demands critical self-reflection, which is, again, an unfamiliar practice to some teachers in their professional lives. The variety of ways teachers interpret this also reflects the extent of their moral and intellectual autonomy, and it is tempting to say that teachers seem to develop an understanding of (a) description, then move to (b) self-justification and finally to (c) productive self-criticism. "Description" might be seen by advocates of a stage theory as representative of a concrete operational stage, where to describe is to explain, and "self-justification" as representing the need for validation, but the wish to please an authority who controls the rules, of course by demonstrating one's perfection. The pedagogical target for us through the program was teachers' critical self-reflection as a necessary feature of personal and professional life and we describe this in the three categories.

Description.

I was concerned about teaching in the public schools since all of my previous experience had been in private and parochial schools. When I began this position I was immersed in a grade level with very few guidelines. There wasn't much provided by the county in the way teacher manuals or specific strategies to use. We were basically on our own.

Teachers' written descriptions usually come across as a story. A teacher reflects on his or her history, but never delves deeply into the incident or explains why it is important. In this example, the teacher says that she is worried about working in the public schools because she had only worked in parochial schools before, but never elaborates or probes. Of course, teachers' writing is frequently limited to reports on students. So, asked to

write about themselves, they may see description as exemplifying deep reflection, a process of dusting off the memories and relaying a story about their history without really grappling with the complexities or significance of the details.

Self-justification. Some teachers begin reflecting about problems at the start of the program as required but rather than focusing on how they needed to change themselves, they focus on their own quality and, sometimes, on what everyone else did wrong and how that affected them:

- A. If [the program] wants to have a successful school-based program, more thought should be given to make sure the teams are compatible.
- B. During the first year of the program, trouble with one of our group members was making team meetings painful for me to deal with each week.
- C. Something was wrong with me. I was the only one on my team to get a B on the first paper. The remarks were very critical and my teammates told me that I needed to learn to give the teachers what they wanted to hear.
- D. I feel strongly that children must play in order to develop skills listed above. I know that I am entering into this research with pre-conceived ideas of what I will find. Children need to learn to interact and develop communication skills. My research will be directed in a way that allows me to observe and reflect what happens as children play so that I can validate the need for center time in my program.

In these quotations, teachers demonstrate different ways that people self-justify, i.e., focus on their self in some way. Teachers A and B place the responsibility of teaming on the program elsewhere: without taking responsibility for collaboration, by holding “the one team member” responsible and blaming her for causing trouble in the group without exploring her own contribution to the problem. Teacher C echoes the problems of authority discussed defining her problem in terms not useful for her learning, viz. deciding between “defending her thoughts or

telling the faculty what they want to hear”. Teacher D admits her biases coming into this research study, but she still hopes to find evidence to “justify” her methods, a very common form of self-justification found in student products, an indication of the moral problem of getting distance on your own actions. Additionally, dominated by a professional evaluation system, which does not reward analysis, reflection and continuous improvement, some teachers also come to the program expecting out of habit to prove (to the faculty) that they are “great” teachers, which only serves to make people suspicious.

Productive self-criticism. Our data first shows more sophisticated teachers moving past cultures that impede self-reflection.

It is hard. It is so easy to get sucked in by the irritating details of daily teaching rather than stepping back and looking at the big picture. This is a realization. I am not to the point of true change yet. I still struggle giving adults the patience I do children, but as they say, knowing I need to is half the battle.

Over the past few years, I had even developed the habit of following the same lesson plans from year to year. I had convinced myself that this material may be boring to me, but it was “fresh” for each new class taught. At the beginning of this program, I was afraid to deviate from my norm. All I could do was focus on covering the material like a “good” teacher! I would even find myself closing down a conversation on an exciting topic because I didn’t think we had time. — I realized that I taught science as a body of facts to be memorized. I had a fear of making a mistake when trying to explain certain scientific phenomena. I had to learn to be confident and fluent with the scientific models in order to lead discussions, provide examples and explanations, and generate problem solving applications.

Both these quotations illustrate how the idea of change and improvement is a constituent of productive self-criticism, but also both demonstrate that, where a teacher has had the experience

of reflecting, taking risks and experimenting, she is much more strongly placed in her vocabulary about her own actions to be able to discuss these basically moral attributes with students.

Second, our data illustrates how critical self-reflection grounds teachers in continuously improving their relationships with, and moral stances toward, children.

In my narratives and autobiography I discussed situations I faced as a child and the fact that people around me had no idea of the problems I was having. Before this program, I found myself falling into the same judgmental ways. I watched only the actions or outer appearance of students to decide if they had problems. Now I recall how I put on a smile and never let anyone know about my problems. I hope my students will trust me, talk to me and that I will have the wisdom to guide them.

Here we see how teachers come through productive self-criticism to re-envision the moral context of teaching. The teacher remembers that one of the reasons she had become a teacher was so that she could help children in a way that she wished she had been helped when she was in school, but she also realizes that she has fallen into the trap of interacting with children in the same way that adults interacted with her when she was a child. Nor was this uncommon. Many teachers described how their concern and enthusiasm for children was reenergized in the program as they engaged in moral reflection on relationships with children, valuing internal rewards versus external rewards, and reconnecting with the idea that teaching is a morally grounded service.

Finally, teachers with considerable moral sensitivity find the process of critical self-reflection rewarding. In the quotations below, the teacher is not content with a discovery. He thinks reflexively about the program, he realizes the extent of his own transformation and his developed insight into his newly conceived role as a moral professional, not a technician.

My most pertinent challenges concerning culture are being sensitive and fair to children, regardless of race, gender or socio-economic

status. I have always thought of myself as open to all people and respectful of different cultures etc, through the...program I have become more aware of how schools, and myself as a teacher, portray hidden biases, assumptions and prejudices.

I struggled to nail down the definition of moral professionalism. When at last it became clear to me I saw how my character must change in order to be a better moral professional. I cannot run from the “dragon” of policy, I cannot allow the “trauma” of situations to threaten my perseverance in teaching. I must begin at being unselfishly concerned for the welfare of students....

In conclusion, we have seen modes of parenting and teaching move over the last century from a frequently punitive, even physically aggressive style. Nowadays, it is not uncommon to hear parents with very young children seeking to have the child reflect on their actions for which, notionally, the “time out” sometimes supplies the opportunity. The emphasis for many families has shifted from power to language and reason. That may also be true of schools and of teachers. Yet our data suggests that when they entered the program, teachers lacked the experience of careful self-reflection, and the vocabulary within which to conduct it, such that their conversations with and attitudes to children may be morally weak. (Hicks, 2001).

3.3. *Collaboration and community culture*

In this programmatic context, by creating teams as sub-cultures, and by giving the program itself a strong identity whereby all start and all finish at the same point, the program sought to maximize the moral benefit from the creation of a moral culture. Many teachers talked about the significance of this working in collaboration. The data shows that teachers started to value collegial relationships, develop reciprocal growth relationships between teachers, children and college faculty, understand what it means to be citizens in a democracy by developing productive discourse/dialog procedures, and recognize when

school cultures supported or hindered instructional progress.

We found that teachers (1) experienced a team as a supportive community, (2) practiced moral agency through team interactions, and (3) recognized the significance of children working collaboratively, and the need to develop community with all participants including parents and administrators.

Personal benefits of collaboration. Interacting in teams obviously provided a context for day-to-day examination of inter-personal relations:

Our group has the benefit of being a small 2 person team. Trust has been established by working intimately together during the last two years as teammates in second grade. We have established a good personal and professional relationship which continues to grow.

As a team from... High School, we have developed strong moral guidelines and inter-personal skills, which contribute to our continuing team progress. Our mutual respect, concern, sensitivity, and responsibility to each other continues to be reflected in our moral vision/team statement which reads: We commit to a moral code between team members....

Practicing moral agency in community. Team experience inevitably threw up moral problems that had to be practically addressed:

The other teammate and I signed off on her paper, saying it was the best it could be. It wasn't even finished yet and we would not see her again until after it was due. I felt very guilty over this, but I kept silent. When we got our research papers back, our procrastinating teammate earned a C and the other two of us each earned an A. The guilt was very heavy now! Why didn't I say anything to her? Why did I keep silent when I should have told her what I thought? Why did I sign off on her paper?

I accept my teammates as partners and not rivals. I have seen many teaching situations where teachers struggle for the limelight. Schools can inadvertently encourage competition when parents and administrators compare

teachers. I know that sharing and borrowing ideas is a wonderful way to provide children with a variety of strategies and activities. Children can only benefit when teachers collaborate.... It has been through the trust-building aspects of our team these past two years that I am able to see these benefits. I don't think I would have an understanding of professional collaboration had I not experienced it through (the program).

Community for children and others. Reflecting on the work of a team and its coherence as a collaborative community, teachers recognize the significance of a community for children. Self-knowledge is transferred to professional insights.

When a student says "please don't tell anyone" I always wonder if they really don't want me telling or do they want me to tell a particular person something on their behalf (as a cry for help). I find myself more and more trying to avoid being in conversations about a student's home life (particularly problems). However, the more involved that I become in this program, I am feeling more responsibility for the children's welfare in all areas, not just in the classroom. (April 97).

If they (students) can't find themselves in the life of the school they create "community" amongst themselves. Too often these students' subculture works against the purposes of schools and the aspirations of teachers. It is my desire to reach in and touch, to bring students out and a little bit closer, and to create a "new" community. (June 1998).

In these quotations, the same teacher begins by recognizing her responsibilities after striving to avoid the problem. After 14 months she accepts her responsibilities and recognizes the impact of community. From the experience of community, she is herself able to cash her feelings into a practical program where, we assume, the kinds of delights and dilemmas will crop up for students as they have for teachers.

As part of the complexity of developing a caring community, teachers frequently use the

language of caring for children, sometimes rhetorically and sometimes without good judgment. Some find it difficult to move out of maternal feelings and fail to realize the complexity of the moral traps they then set for themselves and their students, in particular by condescending to children (rather than caring for them) through failing to set high standards in terms of individual responsibility.

Yet some, through conducting student interviews needed for the teacher-research requirement in the program, learned again, and with surprise, how much caring for children can make a difference in their students' lives.

What was amazing to me was the incredible bond I had with each student after each interview. It was as if we both became real people to each other. Perhaps it was because I had talked to them one on one as an individual instead of as a student. But, even more remarkable to me was that in every single case with all the students interviewed, their grades went up immediately and their homework got done more often. It occurred to me that these kids didn't need more academic reinforcement to succeed in their mainstream classes, they just needed someone who took an interest in them period. Someone who really cared.

But is this the answer to having children cope with difficulty? Some teachers struggled with achieving a balance as they developed a supportive and caring relationship and pushed children to face difficulty.

I was helping students temporarily by listening, but for students to truly resolve current and future problems they needed to learn how to reflect. My hugs and pats on the back were not enough because the students had still not worked through their problems.

I pulled out all my students' journals. I was so proud of all of them, all of them, but one. Rigney's. I had let Rigney slide. Yes, he wrote a whole page and yes, it was legible, but it was not thoughtful. I had not required him to think. I had accepted his excuses that his thoughts were

personal or that he could not answer my question for the day. I knew Rigney was sensitive so I never pushed the issue. I lowered my expectations for Rigney out of convenience and consequently he did not get as much of the journal writing experience as my other students and I missed out on getting to know him better.

Teachers' experiences in their teams with each other resonated through to the problems with children. Relationships with parents and administrators were a different matter where the technobureaucratic vocabulary dominated:

I seem to always be on his [child's] negative side and feed into that image that he has of himself as the bad boy.... His lack of reading and cognitive skills put him in my Spec Ed class but he is smart in a lot of ways. He moved in during January and was the "quiet kid" for the first 6-7 weeks. Then all of a sudden he decided that was enough or he couldn't contain himself anymore and all this negative behavior started coming out. But he is capable of working and behaving. What a quandary! I'm still looking for the motivators for him. I'll keep using notes home and a Hershey Kiss when he's had a good day.

Anyway, in the meeting, the father insisted that it was my problem that I needed to fix. I told him I couldn't "fix" a medical, physical problem but I could make accommodations for him. Even after explaining all the positive reinforcements I use in class, they wanted more. Even after they said they trusted my judgement, they questioned every thing I did. Even after I explained the accommodations I was making for him, they wanted more. ... Well, they faxed this long letter to my principal about how I am making this up and that in their opinion, I work for their son and they are my supervisors and that I needed to use their suggestions! ... Well, things have calmed down some since, but its still an issue. Where are they coming from? Some colleagues say its denial. I have had much support from my team, colleagues and family. However, does it justify their behavior?

These comments are, of course, replete with the *lingua franca* of discussions with parents. Neither

teacher was contemplating changing styles to accommodate the parents or children; in both cases, they have concluded that improvement is hopeless unless the children and the parents do the changing. Yet, if we examine the language used more carefully, we can understand the root of the failed approaches. The behaviorist language, commonly used in special education (negative behavior, reinforcements, motivators), puts the teacher in the role of the technician trying to fix people's behavior frequently regarded from the other side as an offensive and unproductive endeavor. Using language associated with Freudian psychology too (e.g., denial), may be helpful when "speculating" about the underlying cause, but is not morally explanatory. Second, the children are put into categories, (e.g., the quiet kid and special education). This becomes problematic as "the quiet kid" (who is smart in many ways) changes and all his negative behaviors start coming out at which time he becomes the special education kid again, reinforcing many unproductive stereotypes of children with special learning needs. The hyperbole, created, for example, by some of the metaphors (e.g., hit the roof) unproductively exaggerates the situation and suggests that struggling with this type of difficulty is not part of the job.

Contrast the tone and frustration evident in these two quotes, with the tone of the next two quotes taken from two teacher-research studies. In the first quote, a (young) teacher developed a scheme of home visits to use with working-class families whose initial reactions were hostile as their own experience of school was so bad. In the second quote, the teachers worked with parents to develop a trusting relationship.

I was able to discover how much parents actually do care about their children's education, yet sometimes they are intimidated by coming into the school. By going into their homes, they tend to feel more comfortable...

The avenues of communication we explored gave us an opportunity to create not only a parent partnership, but also a true triad of communication. Our parents welcomed our

communication and we listened to what they had to say.

Finally, the more sophisticated teachers are able to recast their life decisions differently as they have encountered new moral perspectives on particular struggles they have. They may change careers, but they do so because they are now fully conscious of the roles and responsibilities of a morally professional teacher.

Hansen's book had the most profound effect of me in regards to "choosing" a career. The point is that by acting as if I had a vocation, I will test in a more adequate way my suitability and fit with teaching. I may leave the practice, perhaps sooner, rather than later. But by entertaining what "vocation" implies, I will at least leave on my own terms rather than having been pushed out by external forces of pressures generated by the built-in difficulties of the work.

4. Implications for teacher education

We have three main sets of conclusions from this experience and the data.

First, can teacher education have (these) teachers envision classrooms as moral arenas, their own purposes as moral not technical, and use a moral vocabulary in more than vestigial terms? Though there may be others, we detected three origins in teachers' present language:

1. behaviorist psychology and its technical applications in management and organization theory (e.g. reinforcement, feedback, skills, strategies),
2. developmental and Freudian psychology (e.g. readiness, developmentally appropriate practice, metacognition, denial, etc.), and
3. the everyday metaphors of public discourse drawn from different sources (e.g. "comfortable" from therapy, "covering the bases" from games),

However, teachers do get accustomed to using moral language through a program. We experienced teachers using the vocabulary where a unit or course emphasizes moral questions applying them to other arenas, in self-reflection and in

discussing relationships in classrooms rather than content. Where moral vocabulary and issues dominate a program, they seem to help teachers reorient their relationships to children, to parents and to colleagues. But we have no evidence as to whether the techno-bureaucratic language overwhelms them when they are outside the program culture, or whether they can begin discourses e.g. with other colleagues, parents or administrators framed as moral conversations.

Second, we are, as we indicated, agnostic about stage theory, especially in the form of invariant cross-cultural hypotheses through which all must develop. Although we have cast our data in the form of differences between teachers, it could be seen, generally speaking, as moral development. Although this is the topic for another paper, we did see some identifiable patterns in the paths that teachers took as they sophisticated their moral understandings in autonomy, reflection and collaboration. Indeed we believe that that these patterns might be linked to stages explicit and implicit in Kohlberg, Belenky et al. and Gilligan.

Finally, we were struck by the impact of isolation in the teaching context. The isolated teacher is left to make moral judgments on a daily basis. While there may be conventions, habits, customs and so on, there is little sense of the profession building a corpus of professional action, morally speaking, on which the individual teacher can draw or which can frame professional discourse in a staff lounge. Many (moral) classroom judgments are not made with a sense of using such a corpus: rather they are just *judgments*. However, “such judgment consists... in a weighing and evaluating of particulars, an application of cross-cutting principles to ambiguous and incompletely understood circumstances, an organization of the passions that serves reason and not rationalization” (Berkowitz, 2001, p. 3). We are not confident that teachers’ use of judgment goes much beyond the intuitive.

Teaching needs a moral case-law not merely because it gives the teacher a base on which to draw. Jackson et al. (1993) note that teachers “put up a moral front”: they act as models for actions and dispositions, which they may not share as private persons. This suggests a certain lack of

authenticity, which we did not specifically encounter. Even here, the possibility of moral “case law” recedes as bureaucratic injunctions multiply. Take the injunction “never touch a child”, developed, we presume, to protect teachers from accusations of physical violence or sexual contact, but which has assumed for many teachers an absurd level of physical detachment. We have found teachers in the same school system, but with different principals, unable to get past the threat potential of hugging to engage in the profound moral discussion that is needed to develop such a moral “case law”. Were it available, it could offer both a guide to the moral development of the individual teacher and to communal protection, but that can only emerge from detailed studies of situations seen as moral.

What do the conclusions of this study mean for teacher education? First, moral sophistication is a profound struggle, but a requirement for teacher-educators and a prerequisite to intellectual development for teachers. Second, in order for pedagogical and content knowledge to be truly useful, teachers must themselves be willing and able to hear and struggle with the ideas intellectually, perhaps conceived as a moral obligation. Third, most practicing teachers are totally unprepared by teacher education for moral complexity. This lack of preparation did not result from too little training, but instead from programs which suggest behaviorist strategies for dealing with children and parents and a profound moral relativism. Fourth, with regard to colleagues and administrators, teachers are instructed with interaction skills that are antagonistic (Tannen, 1998), witness the conflicts described with parents. Few texts provide strategies for reconciliation (e.g., LePage & Sockett, in press). Finally, teacher education at all levels must grapple with the culture into which teachers are socialized, one where moral judgment and decision making are de-emphasized, control is maintained as part of a hierarchical structure, monitoring devices (like standardized tests) are used as scare tactics to motivate teachers to do their jobs and rewards and punishments are meted out when teachers toe (or fail to toe) the line. Teachers do not lack moral sophistication because they are not moral people. Just the opposite, most

teachers are drawn to teaching because of their moral commitments. Moral language is missing in classrooms: but it is also missing in the seminar rooms and lecture halls of teacher education.

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