Ethical behaviour in education: Dewey in difficult contemporary times

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WORKSHOP

Since July 1st teachers and others in public service in England are legally required to report students and pupils who demonstrate ‘extreme views’ to the police (DfE 2014). Schools also have to promote British values, defined as ‘democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’ (ibid.). The reporting requirement risks leading teachers into difficult positions, in which they feel obliged to engage in unethical behaviour in order to comply with school and government policy. What is to count as ‘extreme’ is a matter of judgement, because it is context and culturally specific. The nature of ethical decision making is such, that even if teachers are able to decide on a clear cut case of ‘extreme views’, they may be compromising their beliefs about good teaching if they report someone to a senior teacher, who then has to report to the police.

Teachers may think such an action would send a message to children that some thoughts are too dangerous to discuss. Such a message would conflict with democratic ideals of freedom of speech. This is more than a logical matter: these ideals do not exist in a vacuum. To create a culture of closing down discussion would itself compromise an aim of education to promote critical reflection and discursive capacities, which arguably are needed for democratic citizenship and therefore should be an aim of education, fostering the dispositions of open mindedness and the capacity for articulating reasons for actions and choices.

Requiring teachers to comply with the law in reporting extreme views to the police is resonant with political significance (See Arendt 1968 for an example). If the heart of democratic education and education for democracy is to enable an open society, Dewey’s 1939 warning is pertinent:

‘to beware of supposing that totalitarian states are brought about by factors so foreign to us that "It can't happen here"; — to beware especially of the belief that these states rest only upon unmitigated coercion and intimidation... The belief that only such things operate to harm democracy keeps us from being on our guard against the causes that may be at work undermining the values we nominally prize’ (Dewey 1939, p. 88-9).

An aspect of being an ethical teacher is to help students to understand and cope with ambiguity and complexity and this is supported by activities which help to develop habits of critical reflection and the dialogical capacities to engage with others, since a moral sense develops by engaging in specific practices.

‘What the normal child continuously needs is not so much isolated moral lessons instilling in him the importance of truthfulness and honesty, or the beneficial results that follow from some particular act of patriotism, etc. It is the formation of habits of social imagination and conception’. (Dewey 1897, p. 283).
Dewey’s view that ‘the moral purpose of the school is universal and dominant in all instruction whatever the topic’ (Dewey 1909, p.2) and the commonly held view that morals are caught and not taught, imply teachers as role models of ethical behaviour. It is a serious matter that they may be asked to choose between their beliefs about what constitutes acting ethically and doing their legal duty.

The workshop starts with individual reading of a vignette as a spring board for discussion. Vignettes as tools for exploring complex issues through ‘real-life stories’, are common in social work, medical and teacher education (Kruse 1997; Chambers 1999; King 2002; Hughes & Huby 2002; Jeffries & Maeder 2005; Swanson et al. 2011).

The voice of the text is Karen, a newly qualified teacher with strong vocational commitments. Participants are invited to pinpoint issues arising from their reading for the workshop discussion.

Karen talks of building trust with the children over a period of time; why trust is crucial to her teaching; how understanding children’s different cultures is important, and her belief that talking together about issues is a vital aspect of her teaching. The text reveals Karen’s ethical commitments to relationships (Noddings 2005 and 2013) and how requirements from school policies, stemming from government policies, risk impacting on these relationships and go against her beliefs about good teaching and the kind of teacher she wants to be. She cites one of her own teachers as a role model and relates how a film shown by this teacher enabled her and others in her class to learn about the corrupting effect of ‘informing’ on others. She says how uneasy she feels about what she is being asked to do, and ends by saying:

‘In order to promote these British values surely we need to allow the children to talk about their home lives, what happens, so that we can all hear about them and comment. I don’t want to close down discussions ... and I don’t want to loose the children’s trust’.

Some questions that might be posed in the discussion are:

- Is this a similar example to the case often discussed in which the use of torture is defended on the grounds that it might enable information to be revealed that would save lives where an imminent attack is suspected? If so, what are the implications? If not, what are the differences?

- How does Dewey’s view that ‘the moral purpose of the school is universal and dominant in all instruction whatever the topic’ (Dewey 1909, p.2) illuminate this policy requirement? Do the participants agree with Dewey’s view that the child acquires a moral sense through learning in all subjects in which she is actively engaged with ideas? What would it mean to be thus engaged?

- What is implied in the requirement for teachers to promote ‘British values’, (DfE 2014) particularly ‘democracy’, and ‘freedom of speech’? Does Dewey’s view of democracy as ‘associated living’ and the school as the place for such living help in considering this question? (Dewey 1916)
Does the requirement to report on pupils run counter to the promotion of democratic values?

Are there any occasions when reporting is advisable? What might these be?

Is the promotion of deliberative practices a necessary condition for democracy?

Where in the curriculum do children engage with deliberative practices?

Implications for future discussion and action.

Other questions?

References


