Laughing and Crying through First Year of Teaching

Moral Education and Real-Life Elementary Children

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Introduction

What situations and dialogues happen in U.S. schools that inspire first-year teachers on their career path? To shed light on one aspect of this question, I will focus on interactions that stem from teachers' moral compasses and how these dialogues affect learning community relationships between teachers and students. While many researchers agree that multiple components outside the classroom come into play with teacher attrition, such as support from administration and strong collegiality (Gonzalez, Brown, & Slate, 2008; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Strunk & Robinson, 2006), I am primarily interested in the influence of morality within the schoolroom community. With the push toward policy and accountability in U.S. schools today, it appears these school communities neglect focus on mutual respect, basic trust, and moral responsibility as significant factors in career decisions for American first-year teachers. Therefore, to understand first-year teacher career choices from this viewpoint, this article uses a reflective analysis from narrative inquiry about moral situations among fifth grade children and their teacher. In particular, I am concerned with what novice teachers may recall and learn from their first year of teaching with elementary students when challenged by demands and dynamics of a classroom.

Moral Complexities to Start

When beginning my career as a classroom teacher with 19 fifth-

graders, I vaguely recognized successful teaching included many components, creating lesson plans, designing assessments, and keeping students on-tasks, and yet I was unaware of the "moral complexities and ambiguities inherent in the practice of teaching" (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002, p. 2). Now, over 10 years later, I perceive the moral searching and discovery within classroom walls. I have found teachers and students' voices reveal a yearning for deep understanding and critical thinking. These conversations, which focus on fairness and integrity, share a core purpose of our being: how we learn to accept and love each other as a community of learners. It is these critical conversations which I have seen influence future actions, and, subsequently, society as a whole. If, according to the literature (Coles, 2001, Kunzman, 2006; Meier, 1995), a school involves everyone as a community of learners, then teachers, students, parents and their staff may find a place of acceptance, and become accepting and loving toward each other. Consequently, if this is an inherent attribute of a school that keeps first year teachers in their chosen career, then it is imperative to understand moral behaviors and attitudes within smaller classroom communities.

In order to begin this narrative inquiry, I will explain that before I stepped into my own classroom as an elementary teacher, my thinking about morality had begun when I was a young student and my personal desire to grapple about ethical experiences with my peers. Since I was a novice teacher, I devoured examinations into classroom pedagogy, including an inspiring theory about students' education that argued deep learning is continual and social (Smith, 1998) so that students feel invested. As we will discuss, these teaching approaches were new and complex for me but carried meaning about the importance of allowing students to explore and grapple with moral issues. Yet little research has examined the effect of moral dimensions for first-year teachers, that is, what happens when young teachers explore and see as critical in their lives the moral impact of teaching.

For purposes in this article, my definition of morality comprises a set of beliefs that are judgments on a number of levels about right or wrong. My teaching experiences in a fifth-grade classroom will show that many moral lessons were emergent from classroom interactions as I utilize a narrative approach of qualitative research to explore implications. Even though I, working on projects as a young student, discovered both good and bad moral experiences while collaborating with peers, I felt that a learning community was a successful teaching approach (Berliner & Glass, 2014), and I hoped different perspectives could illuminate ideas beyond one's own understanding. According to research, many students remember collaboration projects to be their best and worst memories of

their schooling experiences (Gray, 2006). As manifested by particular events of my first year in teaching, I argue interactions that emphasize compassion and interdependence inspire both teachers and students to develop morally when situations are guided with compassion and openness. This article, thus, uses narrative inquiry to examine dynamics and find meaning about moral considerations in a classroom context.

When I Grow Up

By Christmas vacation of my first year teaching, I became familiar with the personalities of my nineteen children. Observing and interacting with the children helped me understand each student's passion, and I could tell that while some children enjoyed particular sports such as cheer, football, or tennis, many others loved art, cooking, or music. Knowledge held personal connections when I could relate it to their interests, backgrounds, and lives. The students shared stories and dreams, and we grew close as a supportive community; in fact, students often requested and played "We Are Family," an old 1970s classic song about togetherness, when we packed up belongings at the end of the day. Our little community seemed to learn from each other and respect each other, or at least, that was one of my goals as a first-year teacher.

One morning we were reading about the Industrial Revolution and new opportunities when the children grew excited, thinking about these dramatic changes in our country. Many children began to talk about hopes and plans for their own futures. Most interestingly, they felt safe to share their thoughts. Evan (children have been given pseudonyms) raised his hand, and his face lit up with excitement while he waved his hand in the air. "My dad has his own business," he proudly told us.

"That sounds like the American dream," I said.

The children grew silent as they contemplated what would be their own American dream. Perhaps many did not know yet—deciding on a career is always a challenge for students and even adults. Then Jordan commented, "I'd like to be a chef."

"I could see you doing that and being successful," responded a popular student named Amy. The children murmured to each other how fun it would be to cook and to eat for a career.

"Do you have to go to school to be a chef?" Hillary asked and looked at me.

"Most jobs require some type of schooling..."

The students discussed and asked questions among themselves how schooling led to a particular job. Some students contemplated law school, medical school, and other types of specializations. Throughout the year,

I had been discussing with the students how I balanced my time since I was attending graduate school. Although their education was a priority for my role as their instructor, my teaching also endeavored to show a balance of work and play as critical components of life.

Alex was wiggling in his chair. He frantically waved his hand in the air. I nodded to encourage his question. "What are you going to be when you grow up?" And he smiled with excitement. This was an honest question.

"She is our teacher," Amy said, laughing. Because for her, the answer of being their teacher seemed clear.

"But she goes to night classes," argued Alex, although he was now laughing too. We were all chuckling that I, the adult teacher, had been included in this exciting exploration of dreams. My students knew how much I loved reading and writing from my graduate classes. Why would someone go to extra school? They knew their teacher well, but this answer was not clear after further thought.

"I hope that I am always learning and teaching," I smiled and replied. Inside, I was wondering… Not wondering about my love of education or children since I enjoyed mentoring others from a young age. And yet, I felt conflicted. My future work could lead to a different path in other forms of education.

"That is not a good answer," called out Jordan. I nodded yes a few times. The students observed that their teacher did not know. I admitted that I did not know something... and something that was related to me! Our classroom interactions held honesty before, but now we shared a vulnerable moment.

Using this situation for narrative analysis, I understand that this interaction and similar other ones inspired us to be authentic, which takes a lot of courage. School dynamics can trigger reluctance about sharing; however, I had revealed adult grappling and mutual respect. In the words of Nel Noddings (2002), "If students trust us, they will usually accept such coercion in good spirit" (p. 29). This concept emphasizes an ethic of care within the school setting. This story revealed students wanted to trust and share so that teachers show them meaningful information for life itself. Clandinin and Connelly pointed out that "People live stories, and in the telling of stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others…" (p. xxvi.). Using this particular experience as a springboard that year, an emergent finding was discovered: teachers who show and give warmth have an incredible ability to connect with students since they are able to influence more than intellectual thought but moral responsibility.

Furthermore, classroom educators thus play a significant role in

social relations when they show approval or disapproval of student behaviors. This discovery of self requires guidance from others: parents, siblings, friends, and teachers. Based upon previous research, Warin and Muldoon (2009) asserted for an examination of "self-awareness that acknowledges its inextricable link with social awareness" (p. 291, emphasis in original). This work emphasized that people are always interacting and refining their ideas of self and social perceptions, and, therefore, I am arguing teachers have one of the most delicate roles in a child's moral development as they manage diverse personalities, as well as the interactions, within the main social environment of a child's life. When a teacher models and encourages a behavior of virtue, children immediately feel it, responding in turn. Most significantly, they have the trust and space to be themselves in order to build loving communities.

The Courage to Speak Truth

Throughout the school year, many interesting and enlightening conversations stimulated from fictional characters who struggled with moral decisions. Our class completed a book study approximately every two months, and the children expressed excitement about reading the same book together. Ironically, one book of moral courage revealed to me how students are programmed too often for pleasing or acceptable answers—in brief, for what their teacher views as a proper response. Imaginary characters, nonetheless, help students think creatively and gain insight into ethical issues since the story situations are not personal. The adventure novel, *Shiloh*, is an account of an eleven-year-old boy's bravery and resiliency to protect an abused Beagle puppy. Although many students related to Marty the main character, they seemed fascinated and intrigued with the antagonist.

"Why is Judd so mean and hateful to everyone? He cheats and manipulates people… for fun!" inquired Chris. I was not surprised that he asked this question. Chris must have not read the assigned chapter the night before, but this conversation would open up good dialogue. I waited. Sure enough, all the children groaned since they had already read and learned the background.

"What? What? Am I supposed to know this?" Chris looked guilty as the class gave him a difficult time about not being up-to-date on his reading.

"We read that last night," Emma said in exasperation. "He was abused as a child. I think he doesn't know love and likes the power from being mean. Remember he manipulates people and feels important. He's even mean to the kids when be blocks their views at events!"

Another hand raised. Jessie, who was up-to-date on her reading, proudly stated, “He lies and cheats people of money, like at the convenience store when he lied about the change back.”

“Doesn’t Marty also tell lies? What did he say to his parents?” I brought up this factor of the novel. In order to protect Shiloh, Marty tells frequent lies.

“Sometimes you have to lie so you don’t hurt people’s feelings,” chimed in Chris as he tried to redeem himself. Most of the class nodded. Children raised hands so that they, too, could share their stories and thoughts.

“If someone’s clothes look bad, you may have to tell a little ‘white lie,” shared Mark.

“But this is a serious reason to lie… Judd may end up killing Shiloh!” Emma spoke in response to Mark’s explanation of acceptable lying. I was enjoying this conversation. To comically emphasize the moral dilemma of the book, Marty often prayed to Jesus about what he should do, whether or not he should be honest and give the dog back to Judd since it would get mistreated or keep him to fatten him up and glorify God’s creation. With this situation of hiding Shiloh, Marty was both lying to his parents and stealing food, and, as a result, he could lose their trust when they find out. Moreover, despite the acknowledgment that hell is for liars, he chose to disobey unjust rules and show fortitude to save Shiloh in a touching display of compassion and responsibility.

“I think people and animals need protection, and that means lying is necessary,” said Jessie. This was logical to most of the children because we knew classroom safety came first and created exceptions to rules.

“What if… it was a group of trees that needed protection? The city needs to put in new apartments, and this business would make a fabulous profit… tons of money! But these trees are an endangered type. What should you do then?” I had been excited to propose this question. People and animals were obvious living creatures that often needed protection in a deontological sense. However, I wondered if the students felt a duty toward natural resources. “You would make millions of dollars, and that would be a lot of video games and candy,” I kidded with a smile.

And still, the children continued to state morally “good” or “correct” answers. To create some gray areas, I then asked a question that related to environmental protection since many people might not view the environment as living. Perhaps they would feel conflict with this predicament: money and power can often sway noble intentions.

“We should definitely protect the trees,” the class seemed to initially agree.

"Do you think business people in the real world would value the trees?" I questioned.

"I'd like to be a rich business man, and I would chop down the trees because you can always grow more trees," spoke up Chris. Immediately, the class gasped in unison. I chuckled under my breath since I finally got some honesty, and I wondered—perhaps this nugget of real-world truth could give us something to consider. We all knew textbook-right actions that we should do.

"Well, these trees are endangered," I began. "They are not just regular trees."

"Could we relocate the trees?" contemplated Emma.

"Hmmm. That would be a good idea. Sounds very expensive and time-consuming though," I tried to trigger doubts in their ideas.

Looking back and connecting to the literature, I realized that these axiological doubts, conflicts, and challenges were critical to students' moral development (Piaget, 1965). In other words, doubts led to further inquiry. Because these students did not have a clear answer, they were being forced to grapple and discover what they believed as fair and true. Likewise, according to Susan Verducci (2014), "Schools, in particular, are important venues for these activities because self-doubt has social aspects; it is not simply an individual process" (p. 919). A teacher has a responsibility to negotiate these conversations, which do not have straightforward results or responses. For instance, if someone needed money for survival, then priorities emphasize income for food and shelter. Our class was murmuring to each other while we struggled with a way to be both moral and wealthy for this hypothetical situation. Although it was especially difficult as a first-year teacher to share authority, students learned well from each other too. Understood in this way, Thayer Bacon (1995) asserted that we need others to gain moral understandings:

> Inquirers need ways to help them gain perspective on their own contexts as well as the contexts of others around them. This is best achieved through interaction with others. We cannot assume we understand without dialogue and mutual explanation….Attempting such understanding can bring added clarity to the development of responsibility and caring. (p. 65)

These group conversations embraced the easy answer of saving the trees. Yet, the students did not appear to have the passion or empathy that they shared and voiced strongly for the Beagle puppy.

With this in mind, moral development pioneer, Jean Piaget (1965) concluded that allowing children to heuristically question and communicate with each other are influential components for moral development.

Conclusions derive from explorations, connections, discovery, sharing, and problem-solving. Interpersonal reasoning, by the same token, can evolve from these intellectual discussions and debates (Noddings, 1991). With open discussions, a learning community may have no idea what final conclusions will be reached, which does require trust between teacher and students. Replication of thought, to be clear, should not be the aim because students can learn to talk across differences. This type of conversation, as Paulo Freire (1970) explained, requires participation and openness from students. The teacher should not push her opinion; rather, she permits the questions and inspires new questions. This can be most challenging as a first-year teacher to have these spontaneous interactions with much grappling. Moral development explorations, however, shine a light on the process by which people form or fail to develop morally if a teacher allows openness.

I learned that awareness is part of the puzzle for moral education to have deep impact. Care and empathy, in addition, heighten awareness due to the emotional connections. It may be difficult to put a singular definition or theory to these concepts, but I prefer it that way. When we, students and I, steered away from labels, we looked past the usual reasoning and strived to learn in critical and creative ways. As supported by literature, Verducci (2000) noted, "An unusually diverse group of American educational thinkers are calling for cultivating empathy in schools for the purpose of moral education" (63), and then asks what do we consider to be empathy in order to embrace this idea for schooling. She pointed out a "dissonance" in what we view as empathy. Communities need to agree on what is valuable; even so, I respectfully disagree on the idea that common moral definitions and perspectives are required as key ingredients for successful moral education. Language does give power. Nonetheless, we do not remember what teachers said and told us every day—instead, we reflect and know the way we felt in their presence. When we think back on our favorite teachers, few people will think and recall exact words. The warmth was simply a natural, happy feeling in the atmosphere. Feeling loved, we remember all the classroom adventures, laugher, and fun together because we were connected.

Beware of Bullying

Because a school environment has many different personalities, conflicts can arise. One particular conflict of bullying remains etched in my memory. Since one student, Bobby, had been identified as special needs, we (principal, parents, and I) agreed and implemented a modified curriculum. However, I found out later that not all students understood or respected the differences in our classroom community.

Two students asked to talk to me one spring morning. I could tell something was on their minds and asked them to step out in the hallway so that we could discuss the matter privately.

"We found a math quiz on the ground," began John.

"It was upside down on the floor, and we were picking it up to clean and accidentally looked at it," added Blake. I raised an eyebrow at the two boys. I had no problems if they wanted to clean, yet I did not believe the accidental part. Curiosity of grades happens naturally in classrooms even when teachers stress grades are confidential, students are always sharing quiz and test grades.

"We saw that Bobby made an A but only answered five of the ten questions. That takes away from my A on the quiz. You see my A is real, but his..." John looked righteous. There was no other way to describe the look. His teacher was wrong; I was shocked that we were even having this conversation. Bobby had been barely passing math all year, and I had assumed all the students knew why his math was modified.

Blake jumped in, "We asked Bobby if this was his quiz. Then we asked him what his grade this year for math was... He told us an A."

"If I had classmates bothering me about grades, I would tell them that I have an 'A.' Are we supposed to ask grades?" I looked at them.

"No, but his A is not worth the same as my A," John spoke now with arrogance. This ignorant statement and body language surprised me. Students with disabilities were not graded in the same way as typical students. Yet, John wanted them all to be graded as the same. He felt that he was smarter than another student who learned differently. Furthermore, he had tried to make Bobby feel bad that he was getting easy grades, and this subtle act of bullying infuriated me. As a teacher, my instincts of protection existed for all my students.

John continued, "I showed the quiz to other students."

"It sounds like we need to address this issue with the class." I made a plan to send Bobby on an errand. First year teachers—and, in fact, most veteran teachers—do not always know how to address bullying. Nonetheless, this was unacceptable behavior that needed to be mentioned at once. I walked back into the room and called for the attention of the class.

"Something troubles me, as a teacher," I said to my fifth graders. They looked up right away because something unusual was in my voice. My face revealed how upset I was about this entire situation. "We've talked about standing up for others and fighting for fairness. This idea of fairness may be different for each of us... Too often, someone who is different is expected to be the same and treated the same. Bobby does learn differently. And we will not pick on people who are different. Bul-

lying is not okay." The moment I stopped speaking, a single tear trickled down my face. I could not stop it. Then I quickly retreated to my desk.

Perhaps I did not have the right words that day, but the emotional charge of the room showed no tolerance for bullying situations. Moral responsibility means that teachers do not sit back when intimidation occurs—in brief, teachers must speak out to protect students. Bullying can become a habit of rejection and power (Paley, 1992). My moral compass knew that I had to say something immediately so that the students could feel my deep disappointment about this situation. The classroom felt cold and disconnected as I refused to make eye contact at my desk, and I, to be honest, was not really sure what to do. But to say nothing about this act of intimidation and allow students to make someone feel inferior was not okay.

Throughout the subsequent weeks, several students spoke to me privately about acceptance. Other students offered help to Bobby in class. Some students invited different children to play with their groups. Many, many acts of kindness occurred after that day. I still wonder if I spoke the right words that day, but my message of inclusion was powerful due to my raw emotion. Teaching inspires moral responsibility from novice teachers—that is, they hope to inspire students' thought about ethical choices after the school bells end. Answers were not simple, but keeping silent would be the gravest of mistakes. I realized that "If teaching is fundamentally moral in nature, it is also fraught with moral complexity and moral ambiguity. Indeed, it is precisely the features of teaching that make it a moral activity..." (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002, p. 10). As teachers, we should not view this moral responsibility in a negative way. On the contrary, we should recognize this connection with students as a way to live in hope and trust that the future is in good hands.

Conclusion

I discovered my teaching held great moral responsibility in that first year with 19 fifth-graders. All in all, my experiences were uplifting despite many complex situations. Most classrooms will have questions and conflicts, and effective teachers realize that warmth and openness can meet those challenges. Why should students not be free to participate and to ask tough questions? Life is full of questions, and, as such, first-year teachers can often find inspiration from honest concerns and interactions with students. Moreover, teachers should love these inquiries with youthful curiosity into subjects and life. If schooling can truly be—in other words, feel—positive and inclusive, then this application could transform lives of all students. Through this narrative analysis,

I assert that teachers recognize and they, most importantly, protect the gift of students' trust, so novice teachers can grow into moral leaders who engage in fair, brave, and thoughtful interactions.

This article extends moral education ideas, thus construed, from reflections of my first year laughing and crying as an elementary school teacher. With that in mind, memory can be viewed as either "fallible or trustworthy" (Yow, 2005, p. 36), but people do remember accurately events and information that are important to them (p. 39). My focus unpacked moral lessons in a fifth-grade classroom, and how a novice teacher's explorations of moral frustrations (Piaget, 1965) unlocked a door to heartfelt life lessons as learning happens best when trusting interactions and connections exist. In particular, a school environment which is full of social relations has an unlimited ability to provide lasting lessons about compassion and acceptance; students who are taught with openness seek opportunities to interact, question, and navigate with their own moral compasses. As we come full circle to the beginning question, this examination shows if these first-year teachers can face challenges and create caring communities which support these honest explorations and interactions in everyday situations, then natural opportunities arise that inspire teachers to stay in education and embrace moral responsibility.

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