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ABSTRACT

This study investigated ethical conflicts in early childhood education as experienced by early education teachers. The study's focus was the themes and main interactive relationships involved in such conflicts. Twenty-six Finnish kindergarten and elementary teachers were asked to write about a real-life moral dilemma they had experienced in their work and to provide a just solution to it. Data were gathered during an inservice training on ethical issues in teaching. The written reports were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The different perspectives of teachers, colleagues, and parents were analyzed by the values and virtues presented in the stories. Findings showed that the majority of conflicts involved relationships between a teacher and parents. Other ethical dilemmas involved conflicts between a teacher and a colleague; and some dilemmas concerned conflicts between a teacher and the whole community (for example, in fighting for a child to remain in a classroom rather than be transferred to special education). Teachers referred frequently to the basic needs of children as the guiding value in solving the ethical conflicts in their work. The most frequently mentioned moral virtues of a teacher included bravery, truthfulness, and justice. (Contains 16 references.) (EV)

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Ethical conflicts in early childhood education

A paper presented at the EECERA conference in Helsinki, Finland, September 1999.

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1. Introduction

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The purpose of this study is to investigate ethical conflicts in early childhood education as experienced by early education teachers. The teachers of the study (N=26) represented kindergarten and elementary school teachers from different public daycare centers and schools. Each teacher was asked to write about a real-life moral dilemma they had experienced in their work and to provide a just solution to it. The main interest of the study was to explore the themes and the main interactive relationships involved in the conflicts. Morality can be defined as an active process of constructing understandings and meanings relating to social interactions (McCadden 1998). According to this definition, there are no definite answer which morality or whose morality we should observe in our everyday interactions. In the context of school community, the values of teachers, parents and children are in a constant dialogue with each other. In addition to personal values, teachers need to consider the ethical standards of teaching profession. Professional ethics include reflection on the values and virtues of a teacher. In this paper, we present teachers' reflections on the everyday ethical dilemmas in their work. A special emphasis is shown to the most frequently mentioned virtues or values underlying teachers' ethics. The ethical conflicts experienced by early education teachers are analyzed and compared with earlier studies on ethical dilemmas in teaching (Colnerud 1997, Tirri 1999). The concrete examples of these conflicts are reported with the most successful and unsuccessful decisions to them.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the 1990s the moral base of teacher profession and the ethical dilemmas in teaching have been popular themes in educational research (Socket 1993, Oser 1994, Colnerud 1997, Tirri 1999). Everyday life of teachers involves relations to pupils, parents and colleagues. A school provides an institutional context for teachers' ethical dilemmas and interactive relationships. Previous research on ethical dilemmas in teaching indicates that teachers are not always aware of the moral impact of their actions (Jackson, Boostrom & Hansen 1993). Furthermore, teachers have reported to be ill-prepared for dealing with those ethical dilemmas they have identified in their work (Lyons 1990, Tirri 1999).

The Aristotelian perspective emphasizes particulars in teaching. In the Aristotelian view, decisions are not under some general principle and the character of the teacher always affects them (Bricker 1993). Applying Aristotelian view to teaching leads us to focus on the specifics of each case instead of some general principle. Teachers own descriptions and narratives of the case are at the heart of moral judgment (Sherman 1997, Fallona 1999).

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In early education children's needs for care and love are emphasized (Goldstein 1998). The feminist moral theory emphasizes ethics that enables maintenance of relationships and sustains connection (Gilligan 1982). According to Noddings, every interaction provides one with an opportunity to enter into a caring relation. In each caring encounter one can identify a one-caring and a cared-for. The one-caring steps out of one's own personal frame of reference and into the others (Noddings 1984, 24). Teachers who meet their pupils as ones-caring are taking a moral stance that has an effect on their professional ethics. This moral stance leads to a caring perspective on moral decision making. In the field of early childhood education, many authors find it impossible to tease apart education and care (Goldstein 1998).

Clark (1995) has identified fundamental needs of children to which teachers should aim at responding, such as to be loved or to be led. The best interest of a child can be identified as the leading goal of education. However, each individual teacher can pick out different morally salient features from an ethical conflict they experience. Teachers may interpret the needs of children in the different light than their colleagues or parents. These differences in teachers' perceptions might result to various moral judgements.

3. Methods

The data includes 26 written reports of ethical conflicts experienced by early education teachers. These teachers represented Finnish kindergarten and early elementary school teachers from urban public schools. The data was gathered during a in-service training on ethical issues in teaching. Each teacher was asked to write about a real-life moral dilemma they had experienced in their work and to provide a just solution to it. The request was formulated in the following way: *Describe a situation in your work in early education in which you have had difficulties to decide what would be the right thing to do from an ethical point of view.* In addition, the teachers were provided some detailed questions about the relationships, context and the solution of the dilemma.

The written reports of teachers were analyzed by qualitative content analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The data was coded according to the key concepts identified and the main categories were formed. The coding process focused on the main themes and relationships involved in the conflicts. The different perspectives of teachers, colleagues and parents were analyzed by the values and virtues presented in the stories. The different perspectives in each conflict were presented in order to give justice to the complexity and relational knowing in ethical conflicts.

4. Results

4.1 Ethical conflicts between a teacher and parents

The ethical conflicts in early education were categorized according to the contacts and relations involved in the dilemma. Majority of the conflicts (N=10) dealt with relationships between a **teacher and parents**. Teachers reported situations in which they had to question whether the actions of the parents served the best interest of a child. These dilemmas dealt with the most suitable educational arrangement for the child or some evident problems at home. For example, in one of the cases the parents advocated the most academically advanced studies for a child who was identified as

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