

Just Follow the Rules: The Myth of Ethical Adherence

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Two children sit on the carpeted floor yelling with determined ferocity, “It’s my toy!” Unable to navigate the emotions they are experiencing, the children resort to yelling and pushing. An early childhood educator walks over and sits down beside the children, and says in a calm voice, “Wow, you both seem to really want this toy.” Every day, early childhood educators witness the difficulties children experience as they try to navigate the social complexities of living in community with others. Similar complexities also confront early childhood educators as they individually grapple with following the Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia’s Code of Ethics. What is it that enables some educators to “do the right thing” and prevents others from following the Code of Ethics? My research into this question reveals a number of strategies to support ethical practice, and highlights one strategy that early childhood educators can implement.

Code of Ethics

For members of ECEBC, and for certified early childhood educators, the Code of Ethics directs and guides practice. The Code of Ethics contains eight principles, with considerations ranging from professional relationships to curriculum development. They are as follows:

- Early childhood educators pro-

mote the health and well-being of all children.

- Early childhood educators use developmentally appropriate practices when working with all children.
- Early childhood educators demonstrate caring for all children in all aspects of their practice.
- Early childhood educators work in partnership with parents, supporting them in meeting their responsibilities to their children.
- Early childhood educators work in partnership with colleagues and other service providers in the community to support the well-being of families.
- Early childhood educators work in ways that enhance human dignity.
- Early childhood educators pursue, on an ongoing basis, the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness needed to be professionally competent.
- Early childhood educators demonstrate integrity in all of their professional relationships.

Decision-Making Speed

In order to follow the Code of Ethics, educators need to understand that ethical decisions are made quickly and reflect pressure from a social group. According to the psychologist Jonathan Haidt, ethical decision-making is typically a split-second process, contrary to the belief that it is a lengthy or ago-

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nizing process (Murphy, 2014, p. 414). Haidt also asserts that ethical decisions are also made “for largely social reasons—most importantly to manage our reputations, build alliances, and win people over” (as cited in Murphy, 2014, p. 417). An example of this is when a child spits on an early childhood educator. The response to this behaviour happens within seconds; it does not happen after 20 minutes of reflection. However, this understanding of the ethical decision-making process is not all doom and gloom; there are strategies that support “ethical reframing” (Murphy, 2014, p. 424). Through the use of narrative or written reflection, and of strategies beyond a brain-dump journaling approach, early childhood educators can unpack and reflect on their practice in a deeper way than discussing with colleagues.

Moral Rebels

In addition, there are some people who engage in ethical decision-making differently because of their high self-esteem, low levels of influence from others, and determination to do what is good (Sonntag & McDaniel, 2013, p. 440). These people, called “moral rebels,” experience ethical decision-making differently: they are compelled to challenge the expectations of others, because not doing so would compromise their own values and/or beliefs (as cited in Sonntag & McDaniel, 2013, p. 433). However, there is a cost to being a moral rebel, as this behaviour can result in being ostracized from the social group. Monin, Sayer, and Marquez indicate that in these situations, moral rebels are “disliked and resented” (as cited in Sonntag & McDaniel, 2013, p. 433).

Stanley Milgram—the Influence of Others

Understanding the speed at which people make ethical decisions, and that some “moral rebels” are willing to make “good” decisions at any cost, provides a helpful backdrop to understanding what influences ethical decision-making. One more factor that must also be considered is the influence of others. The experiments of Stanley Milgram, a psychologist, demonstrate that people will inflict harm on others if directed to by a person in authority. When the “teacher” (who was the actual subject of the experiment) was separated by an opaque wall from the “learner” (who was unknown to the “teacher,” and was actually an actor hired by the research team), and a person in authority prompted the teacher

to administer what was assumed to be electric shocks to the learner, the compliance level was nearly 100% (Russell, 2017, p. 269). Like an opaque wall, the limited memory and vocabulary of the children in their care enable some educators to dismiss the shocking impact of their guidance or discipline approaches.

Early childhood educators care for and interact with extremely vulnerable people who have limited language. Limited language makes it difficult for young children to convey, in detail, the behaviours of others that have caused them emotional or physical harm. There is also a cultural assumption that young children have limited memories, and as such will not remember the emotional or physical harm they have experienced.

Considering that early childhood educators typically work as part of a team, most practice errors are not hidden. The errors are seen, although not always acknowledged, by colleagues. What can mask recurring errors in ethical behaviour and practice is a kind of workplace propaganda at the particular child care centre that can sway the behaviour of the early childhood educators working there. At orientation, during staff meetings, and in day-to-day interactions, there can be repeated directions to “correct the child, show the child who is boss / in control, or get the children under control.” One of the reasons the teachers from Milgram’s test were willing to shock the learners was that “inflicting harm . . . was perceived to be important, even necessary” based on the verbal direction from the experimenter (Russell, 2017, p. 274). Thus, the repeated use of inappropriate guid-

ance strategies can become part of the culture of a child care centre and an expectation of practice. The educators are willing to use these strategies because in that place they are deemed appropriate forms of behaviour modification for the children in their care.

Early childhood education students enter post-secondary with their own cultural values and biases, their own understanding of child care practices, and their own ethical behaviours. Immediately upon entering their first practicum site, student educators experience the push and pull of being in the place of Milgram’s “teacher.” They are susceptible to the people around them urging them to be firm, to not let the children push them around, and to assume the role of the teacher. Those people, whether in leadership or senior educator roles, are in the place of Milgram’s “experimenter.” Any justification that this type of practice is in the best interest of the children rings hollow, when what the children experience is an increased level of aggression.

Recommendations

These insights point to strategies that can instill or regain ethical decision-making. College instructors can include opportunities to use narrative reflection, such as personal non-fiction short stories or proprioceptive writing (a mindfulness practice that uses writing to explore consciousness and the individual psyche), as described by Trichter Metcalf and Simon (2002), to slow down the ethical decision-making process. They can also use instructional techniques that support “moral rebels.” In a reverse application of Milgram’s experi-

ments, instructors can become the “experimenter” who supports ethical practice through positive reinforcement such as “you are an advocate of young children” and “you care for young children enough to ensure their safety.” Practising early childhood educators are encouraged to use writing exercises to reflect on their practice and to slow down ethical decision-making. I encourage written reflections that go beyond brain-dump journaling. Instead, early childhood educators are recommended to write down their stories, particularly stories of when they were challenged to do, to stop, to listen, or to talk.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators must be constantly aware that inappropriate workplace culture, poor role-modelling, and incorrect beliefs around how children remember or articulate experience can undermine their ethical practice. Post-secondary instructors who teach early childhood education must be aware that they play a vital role in establishing the moral fortitude students need to engage in practice that is consistent with the Code of Ethics. Finally, early childhood educators must also acknowledge that they are responsible for their own practice, and that influences from the work environment may sway their ethical decision-making, so that as educators they take extra steps to incorporate strategies that support decisions grounded in the Code of Ethics.

Focus of This Research

I want to acknowledge the early childhood educators included within my research. Also, in acknowl-

edgement of the recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and my experience as part of the colonial or settler culture, I do not include the practice of Indigenous early childhood educators as I lack the historical and cultural awareness necessary to include their concerns or practices adequately.

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- When not reflecting on ethical decision-making, Denise Pawliuk can be heard singing children's songs, or storytelling, while teaching at Langara College.*

Awards, Continued from 6

Horizon Award: EMILY GAWLICK

ECEBC's Executive Director Emily Gawlick was presented the first Horizon Award. Below is the speech made at ECEBC's conference.

The field of early care and learning is vast and it is complex. It is a sector like no other. It pulls at our heart-strings and tugs at our purse strings. It is filled with the most dedicated and passionate women and men you will ever know. ECEBC is very proud to be the professional organization that not only supports each and every one of us, but also leads the way in innovation, collaboration and professionalism.

That does not come together by accident. It takes someone with exceptional skill and dedication to be at the helm. This year, like no other year before, we have relied on that very leadership to guide us and to make space for all that has come our way and is yet to come.

The Board of Directors of ECEBC felt it was extremely important to not only recognize the work of our leader, but to celebrate and honour it. This morning I am very blessed to be presenting the very first Horizon Award. This award is dedicated to visionaries, those who can thrive in the realities of the present day AND look towards the future and imagine the possibilities—someone who can guide everyone else to see that vision too.

I am honoured to present the Horizon Award to Emily Gawlick.

Congratulations to all award recipients. You make us proud to be early childhood educators!