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Practicing the Virtue of Reflection in an Unfamiliar Cultural Context

The purpose of this article is to map the intersection of three concepts—cultural diversity, reflective teaching, and moral value—synthesize them into a consistent model, and explore the implications of this model for teaching and teacher education. The model of reflection described in this article is phronesis, the virtue of thought that permits correct reasoning in decisions that involve virtues of character. Illustrated by stories of student teachers' work in culturally diverse settings, the concept of reflection as phronesis is shown to be essentially moral and morally essential. It is bound to specific concrete situations; distinct from, yet affected by, propositional knowledge; expressed in moral actions; intertwined with other moral virtues; and dependent upon a moral community.

EMILY GREW UP IN AN INTACT family in the suburbs of a large city. She attended private schools, earned good grades, worked with children at a summer camp, and went off to an expensive private university to become a public school teacher. She spent a semester studying abroad, studied Spanish for 3 semesters, observed and successfully student-taught in a variety of urban and suburban

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schools. Yet she had a hard time adjusting to her final student teaching placement—fifth grade at Citrus Elementary School, a new school in the center of the county's most densely populated neighborhood, serving 750 students from Mexican immigrant families.

Emily's challenge is understandable. No amount of detached study can fully prepare a student teacher for the experience of working in an unfamiliar culture. There is no substitute for the kind of learning that comes through reflection on direct experience. The need for this situated learning, however, does not end with the completion of student teaching and teacher certification. Each school, each community, each culture that a teacher faces calls for different understandings and different responses. Emily may leave Citrus with a developing awareness of its particular way of doing things, but she may encounter several culturally diverse settings in the course of her career. How we prepare student teachers like Emily to learn to teach successfully in a multicultural world is crucial.

In the face of this need, reflective teaching has become a goal of many teacher education programs since the 1970s. Although suffering from chronic nebulosity, the concept of reflective teaching has held the attention of many teachers and teacher educators. Reflective teaching has been theorized, analyzed, synthesized, revised, and criticized. However it is conceptualized, reflective teaching continues

to guide teacher educators as they work to develop beginning teachers who learn from their experiences, think carefully about the implications of their practices, and adapt their strategies to meet the needs of their students.

The combination of reflective teaching and cultural diversity makes sense. When the two are mixed, however, a third factor rises to the top—moral issues in teaching and learning. Cultural values, moral values, and questions of rights and responsibilities become evident when teachers reflect on their work in culturally diverse settings. The purpose of this article is to map the intersection of these three concepts—reflective teaching, cultural diversity, and moral value—synthesize them into a consistent model, and explore the implications of this model for teaching and teacher education.

The motivation for this work stems not only from national trends in teaching and teacher education but from my own experiences working with student teachers. I work with undergraduate student teachers in a private Christian university during their final two student teaching placements at the end of an integrated teacher preparation program. The first of these two placements is in Willow Hill Elementary School,¹ a suburban school similar to the schools that many of my students attended as children. The second is in Citrus Elementary School, a new school in the center of the county's most densely populated neighborhood, serving about 750 students from low-income Mexican immigrant families. During weekly seminar meetings held concurrently with their student teaching, I listened to this small class of five student teachers² voicing their confusions, concerns, and complaints, and I decided to inquire systematically into their experiences. I was interested in finding out what it is to be a reflective student teacher, in particular, what it is to be a reflective student teacher in diverse cultural contexts.

When the student teachers completed their final placement, I interviewed each one of them three times, for up to 90 minutes each time, following the pattern for phenomenological interviews developed by Seidman (1991). These interviews resembled monologues in that the student teachers were encouraged to talk freely without interruption.

What I heard in these interviews provides the practical examples that will illustrate the theoretical concepts in this article.

Moreover, as I write this article, I recall another student teacher who, exactly 20 years ago, stepped out from her suburban upbringing into an urban school serving students whose families had immigrated to the city from Appalachia. My absolute unpreparedness to work with those teachers and those students haunts me to this day. This article is hereby dedicated to every teacher and student teacher who has stepped out of a familiar home culture to make a difference in the lives of students from another culture.

One of my goals in working with these student teachers throughout their placements was to help them develop in reflection. The model of reflection that I encouraged grew from a study of the relationship between reflection and moral value. The following sections explain the particulars of that relationship and illustrate the model with examples from the student teachers' interviews.

The Moral Essence of Reflection

As a first step in mapping out the intersection of cultural diversity, reflective teaching, and moral values, I will begin with an examination of the relationship between reflection and moral values. This relationship can be understood through an investigation into virtue-centered ethics, an ethical system first described by Aristotle in his work *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. 1999). As the name implies, prime moral value in virtue-centered ethics lies in an individual's character in the form of virtues. Furthermore, in virtue-centered ethics, moral thoughts, actions, and attitudes proceed from moral character, and in this way a person's entire moral life is bound together into a unified whole. The model that is used in this article and promoted in the student teaching seminar is pedagogical reflection as a virtue. As such, reflection is not something a teacher does, not a form of knowledge or a thought process, not a rule or principle, but a moral way of being. The first implication of this model is that reflection is more than relevant to moral issues; reflection is *essentially* moral.

This moral essence was lived out by my student teachers as they reflected on moral issues in

their two placements. For instance, in seminar discussions held early in the first placement and in the interviews after their student teaching was completed, it was clear that all five student teachers came into student teaching valuing the affective components of education as much as or more than academic components. For example, some discussions in the seminars were focused on an examination of the culture of Willow Hill and its community and how this culture influenced the educational values enacted in the classrooms. Although they enjoyed the high quality of teaching and learning at Willow Hill, they felt that academic achievement was overvalued to the detriment of the students. The student teachers witnessed competitiveness among teachers, pressure on students and teachers alike, and a lack of time to address affective components of education. One student teacher, Dave, commented that important affective outcomes were being sacrificed in the pursuit of "academic prowess," and he wondered "if that academic excellence is worth that." Having made this judgment, each student teacher made a decision about how to act in the face of it, even in a small way. Andrea strove to make her instruction enjoyable to the students. Emily played tetherball at recess with her students. Annie paid extra attention to a student who was having difficulty at home. The virtue of reflection was evident in the thoughts, attitudes, and actions of the student teachers as they responded to what they perceived as a moral issue.

Dewey (1932) developed an ethical system he called *reflective morality*. He argued that every action, even a seemingly trivial action, is potentially of moral import because it is connected to other actions. Therefore, the separate actions of a student teacher join together to form conduct and then habits, which, in turn, leave an "enduring impress" (Dewey, 1932, p. 13) on the character of the student teacher; thus moral development becomes an essential component of teacher development. For instance, as the student teachers worked with students at Citrus who were culturally and economically different from themselves, they became aware of their prejudices. One student teacher, Stacy, spoke at length about her preconceptions about low-income children and how those preconceptions changed:

It sounds really bad to say, but I guess I would not have expected them to be as complex of people as you would find like in [more affluent schools], because in those schools you sort of expected to find kids whose horizons are broadened and have a lot of different interests and have a lot of complex ideas and that kind of thing. I guess I just sort of figured at Citrus it would be all about the basics, and I wouldn't be dealing with very individualized personalities and kids that are like every bit as complicated and interesting as these other kids are. And that sounds horrible to say, and I didn't even realize I had that preconception when I went there, but it was definitely a preconception that changed when I got to know each of those kids individually. . . . When you're actually in that class day in and day out, and it's not like low-income kids, it's like Gustavo, Carlos, Manuel, you know, that makes it different.

The above example foreshadows some points to be made later in this article about how the virtue of reflection is played out in culturally powerful contexts. For now, the point is that individual actions and events do not stand as morally neutral comings and goings; they are bound together into a moral course of action, whether or not we are aware of it. As teachers interact with their students and each other, they are guided by reflection into morally appropriate responses. The next sections of this article will examine more specifically the ways in which reflection guides the moral lives of teachers.

Reflection as Phronesis

One particular virtue described by Aristotle, *phronesis*, is especially congruous with reflection. Phronesis, at times translated *intelligence*, *prudence*, or *practical wisdom*, is a virtue of thought that permits correct reasoning in decisions that involve virtues of character. For instance, phronesis helps us know exactly how to develop and maintain the virtue of openmindedness without becoming impulsive or bound by routines. When a new teaching strategy is presented, phronesis is the virtue of the mind that allows us to consider this new strategy on its own merits, neither embracing it simply for the sake of novelty nor utterly rejecting it as a passing fad. Phronesis also enables us to act virtuously in specific instances (Zagzebski, 1996). It can be difficult to know exactly how to be fair to children who have different needs, how to show care to youths who are angry and aggressive, or how to be truthful and yet kind in delicate situations.

Phronesis is the virtue of the mind that allows us to know how to enact virtues such as fairness, caring, truthfulness, and kindness in complex situations.

Conversely, virtues of character, such as open-mindedness, fairness, and caring are necessary for phronesis, for a virtuous character ensures that the reasoning of phronesis is toward virtuous goals. For instance, the reasoning of a close-minded person will be corrupted by prejudice, and the reasoning of an irresponsible person will be distorted by negligence, but the reasoning of a fully virtuous person will be toward morally good ends. A person who cultivates an attitude of racial prejudice will find it very difficult to think appropriately about how to treat individuals of different races fairly and will be hard-pressed when called upon to care for a person of an unfavored race. In the same position, a person who cultivates the virtues of impartiality and tolerance will be much more inclined to reason correctly about fairness and to care appropriately for individuals of all races. Therefore, phronesis is required for moral virtue, and moral virtue is required for phronesis; the two are inextricably intertwined. In other words, phronesis is both necessary and sufficient for complete virtue. As Aristotle wrote, "One has all the virtues if and only if one has prudence [phronesis]" (trans. 1999, p. 99).

This model of reflection was an underlying principle of the seminar. Through written reflections and class discussions, the student teachers were encouraged and challenged to consider the moral implications of their actions and attitudes, school and classroom cultures, and conditions within each school. In the seminar, student teachers expressed the emotional, physical, spiritual, and social aspects of student teaching as well as the moral and cognitive components. In short, student teachers were encouraged to consider teaching as a vocation that calls for the best of a teacher's physical, emotional, social, spiritual, cognitive, and moral selves.

Reflection in a Culturally Diverse Context

Pedagogical reflection as phronesis is situated in the particulars of a specific time and place and is concerned with specific events and persons. Kessels and Korthagen (1996) explain that phronesis has to do with "the understanding of specific concrete cases

and complex or ambiguous situations" (p. 19). This is in contrast to another mental state or form of knowledge, *episteme*, which Aristotle considered to be about things that are necessarily true and which "does not even admit of being otherwise" (Aristotle, trans. 1999, p. 88). In contemporary work, *episteme* is the form of knowledge taken by educational theory. Phronesis, on the other hand, begins not with abstract principles but with the particulars of a concrete situation.

The situation-boundedness of pedagogical reflection calls attention to an obvious but not trivial truth: Student teachers, as well as in-service teachers, need concrete experiences in order to develop pedagogical reflection and all that follows from it. In particular, student teachers benefit from the challenges of adapting to culturally diverse classrooms, developing their skills, their knowledge base, and most importantly, their characters. Aristotle argued that the way for young people to develop virtues is to observe models of virtue and practice the virtues. Therefore, it is important to realize that when we work with teachers and student teachers who are facing the challenges afforded by a culturally diverse placement, we are doing more than managing the development of teaching skills and providing a knowledge base of a particular cultural context. In fact, we are working with people in the midst of a character-intensive (MacDonald & Healy, 1999) endeavor that has the potential for changing them in a very significant way.

Although phronesis is distinct from *episteme*, it is affected by *episteme*. For instance, the student teachers came into Citrus without much information about the home and community culture of their students. Consequently, when they noticed instances of culturally bound events in the school, they did not always interpret them as such, but rather attributed them to other causes, such as the master teacher's style or personality, or the parents' commitment to their children's education. Because the student teachers did not understand the cultural significance of these events, they were not able to grasp their full moral implications and complications but misunderstood them as clear-cut examples of right and wrong. However, consideration of these events in the cultural context of Citrus, its surrounding community, and the culture of North American public education imparts these events

greater moral complexity, significance, and relevance to issues such as equity and tolerance. In these cases, the reflection of the student teachers was indeed tied to particulars of the concrete situations, but lack of information about cultural values contributed to a misinterpretation of their meaning and significance.

This misinterpretation points to another obvious yet important truth: experience—even reflective experience—alone is not enough. In this case, the student teachers would have benefited from specific propositional knowledge, or information about the particular culture of Citrus and its community and opportunities to consider concepts such as culturally responsive teaching. However, in order for propositional knowledge to be meaningful, a student teacher must feel the need for it. Reflection begins with the experience, seeks out information that can be found in educational theory as it is needed and relevant, and uses this information to help answer questions about the experience (Korthagen, 2001). All the student teachers had taken courses on multicultural perspectives, but until they entered Citrus Elementary School, this theoretical knowledge was at best interesting but without roots.

Reflection Incites Moral Responses

Aristotle wrote that phronesis is “concerned with action” (trans. 1999, p. 92). Situated in morally significant concrete events, phronesis incites a moral response. Thus, the virtue of reflection is expressed in moral actions.

The student teachers responded in moral situations by taking action. Andrea, for example, acting on her conviction that students’ time should be used efficiently, convinced her master teacher to adopt a more time-efficient method for turning in homework, and she began writing a daily schedule on the chalkboard for students to see and follow. She reduced the amount of time spent on standardized test preparation to make time for more content instruction in math. Feeling that her students would learn better with hands-on strategies than with book and worksheet activities, Andrea convinced her skeptical master teacher to allow her to lead the class in a pizza-making lesson to teach percentages and a brownie-baking lesson to illustrate the concept of dividing fractions.

Reflection and Other Virtues

As a keystone virtue, phronesis both requires and encompasses virtues of character. In *How We Think* (1933) and *Theory of the Moral Life* (1932), Dewey describes three virtues of character, or attitudes that he considers to be essential for reflection. The first is wholeheartedness, a sincere and steady devotion to an idea or interest. Dewey defines wholeheartedness as “something quite different from immediate enthusiasm and ardor. . . . For it requires consistency, continuity, and community of purpose and effort” (1932, p. 114). On one hand, wholeheartedness is essential for reflection because it “buoys [the] mind up and gives an onward impetus to thinking” (1933, p. 32). On the other hand, reflection is essential for wholeheartedness, for reflection is the practical wisdom that allows a teacher to decide exactly how to be wholehearted without becoming obsessive, how to continue in consistent devotion to teaching without alternately flaming up and sputtering.

The second attitude (or virtue) that Dewey considers essential for reflection is openmindedness, “freedom from prejudice, partisanship, and such other habits as close the mind and make it unwilling to consider new problems and entertain new ideas” (1933, p. 30). Again, reflection is essential for openmindedness, because a teacher needs to decide how to be openminded without becoming infatuated with novelty, and on the other hand, how to avoid becoming rigid or routine-bound.

The third attitude is responsibility, which secures integrity, consistency, and harmony in belief. An attitude of responsibility permits a teacher to consider difficult and complex issues, for example, cultural values and their implications for classroom procedures, language and its implications for curriculum accessibility, or social class and its implications for student expectations. On the other hand, reflection helps a teacher decide when, where, and how to take responsibility for these issues.

Dave’s experiences offer an example of a student teacher’s reflective struggle with wholeheartedness, openmindedness, and responsibility. Dave had been extremely happy and comfortable in his placement at Willow Hill, and he admits going into Citrus with a close-minded attitude and low expectations: “I know it’s weird, but I had fallen in love with that classroom at the previous school,

and I really didn't want to leave. I didn't want to learn somebody else's rules. I didn't want to meet new kids. . . . I didn't think I was going to learn as much. I didn't think I was going to get much out of this assignment." Overwhelmed, he realized his wholeheartedness was failing: "I didn't want to fall into the 'I don't really care—I just have to do this' mode, because that's what I see that teachers do that I don't like. . . . They don't really care about what they do any more. . . . I didn't want to do that, but on the other hand, I was just so tired of, I don't know, coming up with it on my own and working on my own." Not wanting to feel like a "bad teacher," Dave decided to take responsibility. "I realized this is a real taste of what teaching can be, and this is a real testament of being able to work on your own and generate that energy on your own. And so it started to work out. I started to . . . put it in gear a little bit. And then I kind of started to take the lead, and I could see the master teacher starting to look to me for ideas about things. . . . That was neat and . . . that kind of started to serve as my encouragement that I needed to keep it going."

Even though he entitled his treatise on reflection *How We Think*, Dewey believed that the affective qualities of wholeheartedness, openmindedness, and responsibility were more important for reflection than cognitive processes:

If we were compelled to make a choice between these personal attitudes and knowledge about the principles of logical reasoning together with some degree of technical skill in manipulating special logical processes, we should decide for the former. Fortunately no such choice has to be made, because there is no opposition between personal attitudes and logical processes. We only need to bear in mind that, with respect to the aims of education, no separation can be made between impersonal, abstract principles of logic and moral qualities of character. What is needed is to weave them into unity. (1933, p. 34)

As a teacher faces the daily challenges of teaching in a diverse classroom, reflection and other personal virtues are woven into a unity of moral practice.

Reflection in the Moral Community

Aristotle considered virtue to be important for the community, and community important for virtue, for it is through the community that young people are brought up among examples of virtuous

living and are given chances to practice and develop their own moral characters. Similarly, the educational community is essential for the development of reflection (Cinnamond & Zimpher, 1990). How can the educational community support teachers and student teachers to develop in the virtue of reflection, especially in a culturally diverse context? Korthagen (2001) has developed an approach to teacher education that is congruous with the concept of reflection as a virtue. The following four principles are distilled from his work in the Netherlands as it has developed over many years.

An awareness of the emotional weight of becoming a teacher obliges teacher educators to take seriously the emotional realities of student teachers. Although learning to teach does involve the development of knowledge and skills, the process of becoming a teacher is experienced with great emotions. I recall a tearful student teacher showing me a poor evaluation from her master teacher. She told me, "All these things I got marked down on are part of my personality. I don't feel like a bad teacher. I feel like a bad person!" Becoming a teacher often involves personal transformation, creating fear and uncertainty, which is not a sign of weakness but rather a normal response to fundamental change. For the student teachers at Citrus, encountering diverse cultural perspectives and facing their own presuppositions only intensified these emotions.

Student teachers need a feeling of safety in order to take the risks necessary to examine their presuppositions and make fundamental changes to themselves as persons. Acceptance, empathy, and genuineness create an atmosphere that allows student teachers to make these changes. Ironically, external pressure to change, however subtle, often prevents student teachers from making changes. When the student teachers were adjusting to unfamiliar cultural expectations at Citrus, they relied on others for this feeling of safety even more. Being placed in the same school provided them the time to support one another during their breaks and as they carpooled together. Also, consistent contact with understanding teacher educators and master teachers promotes reflection in diverse settings.

The traditional paradigm of teacher education—educating student teachers in educational theory and then sending them out to practice—creates

a gap between theory and practice. As phronesis, reflection begins with practical experience, not with abstract theory. Reflection on concrete experiences creates a need for educational theory to answer the questions that become apparent. At this point of need, teacher educators can provide student teachers with carefully chosen relevant educational theory, based in practice.

Aristotle proposed that the way for a young person to become virtuous is to observe a virtuous person and imitate virtuous ways of being. Teacher educators, then, must provide that model by modeling pedagogical reflection in a way that is evident and accessible to student teachers.

Conclusion

The student teachers in this study experienced their work as essentially moral. Full of value-laden goals, situations, actions, questions, attitudes, and relationships, the student teachers' experiences and their reflections on their experiences illustrate and support the concept of reflection as phronesis, a virtue of the mind that enables correct reasoning about the moral implications of what happens in schools. The moral intensity of their experience was increased by the complexity of contrasting cultural contexts. Faced with unfamiliar cultural patterns, uncomfortable in situations they did not understand, and puzzled by teachers and students alike, the student teachers grappled with their own moral attitudes as they tried to make a positive contribution to the lives of their students. In this diverse context, the student teachers developed in the virtue of reflection through many opportunities to express and extend their moral characters. Therefore, the challenges of cultural adjustment not only called for the development of new teaching skills, but became an impetus for moral growth.

The conceptualization of reflection as a virtue of the mind calls for a reexamination or perhaps simply a recollection of the purposes of teacher education and the responsibility of the

teacher education institution. For if the development of reflection is an important aspect of becoming a teacher, and reflection is indeed a moral virtue, then teacher education is in essence a form of moral education. I believe that few educators would find this conclusion surprising. Of course, the ongoing difficulty is to determine the particular stances that teacher education should take toward recognizing and addressing its moral essence in the policies, procedures, and day-to-day work of preparing teachers to work responsively and responsibly in diverse settings. I believe the construction of a model of reflection as phronesis is a step in the right direction.

Notes

1. Schools and individuals have been given pseudonyms.
2. The student teachers were White, from middle-class suburban and small town backgrounds.

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