

The Impact of Religious Beliefs on Professional Ethics: A Case Study of a New Teacher

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Abstract

This case study of a math and science teacher in a private religious school looks at the impact of a teacher's religious beliefs on her experience of engaging with ethical issues in her practice. A Freirean ethical framework is used to analyze her struggles with differences between her own personal religious convictions and those of the school in which she teaches, avoiding undue influence on her students' developing beliefs, and the inherent violence of schooling. This case provides an example of ways in which discussions with teachers about professional ethics might be broadened beyond codes and regulations to the everyday embodied, social milieu in which they work.

Keywords: teacher, beliefs, professional ethics, Freirean ethical framework, case study, religion

Résumé

Cette étude de cas d'une professeure de mathématique et de science dans une école confessionnelle privée porte sur l'impact des croyances religieuses d'une enseignante sur les questions éthiques qu'elle aborde avec ses élèves. Un cadre éthique inspiré de Freire est utilisé pour analyser ses dilemmes face aux différences entre ses propres convictions

religieuses et celles de l'école et ses efforts pour éviter une influence indue sur l'évolution des croyances de ses élèves et la violence inhérente à la scolarisation. Cette étude de cas montre comment les discussions avec les enseignants au sujet de l'éthique professionnelle pourraient aller au-delà des codes et règlements en vue de prendre en compte le milieu social dans lequel ils travaillent au quotidien.

Mots-clés : enseignant, croyances, éthique professionnelle, cadre éthique inspiré de Freire, étude de cas, religion

Introduction

As a helping profession, teaching is infused with actions and interactions that have ethical implications. Teachers are expected to act as moral exemplars for their students (Joseph & Efron, 1993). Yet there are few opportunities for teachers to engage in discussions about ethics—whether in pre-service education or in professional development activities after certification (Boon, 2011; Campbell, 2008). Those discussions that do occur tend to focus on procedures and legalities which are not necessarily engaging issues that arise in teachers' day-to-day relationships with students, parents, and colleagues. Since professional ethics are not only cognitive but embodied and emotional, contextualized and relational (N. H. Smith, 1997), in this article, I pay attention to teachers' *experiences* with professional ethics as one way to deepen and broaden the conversation. This case study of a math and science teacher aims to use a Freirean (1998) ethical framework to holistically analyze her experience of engaging with ethical issues in her practice.

Teachers' day-to-day lives are grounded by a foundation of values and beliefs, which manifests in their relationships with students and colleagues, assessment practices, and curricular choices (Higgins, 2011). This web of beliefs and values that they bring to their practice originates in both their professional and personal lives and is not necessarily compartmentalized based on the role they are playing at any given time (Barrett, 2013). Rather, epistemological, axiological, and ontological beliefs about how to determine what is true, what is right (and wrong) and proper, and what is human nature and the nature of existence are fundamental beliefs about the world that teachers (like all of us) use as a framework for their experiences (Fisher, 2013).

Beliefs about religion or beliefs that are derived from religion (which I will call *religious beliefs*) are fundamental to the values and beliefs of many people. Therefore, I suspect that religious beliefs may be central to the ethical stance of some teachers and that those beliefs are an aspect of their experience that warrants attention. However, in the literature, most discussion about religion in education focuses on two things: how to teach religion, and the religious views of students. There is very little information about how teachers' religious beliefs affect their teaching except, perhaps, with respect to teaching evolution (Levesque & Guillaume, 2010; White, 2009). Further, when teachers' religious beliefs are considered at all, they tend to be viewed in binary—either the teachers are religious or they are not (see, for example, Wong & Canagarajah, 2009). This

ignores the complication of various religious traditions and political differences (M. U. Smith, 2013). Thus, it may be that deeply held religious beliefs influence teaching practice in subtle ways that cannot be captured or understood without a more nuanced view of religious beliefs.

The jurisdiction in which this study was conducted is the Province of Ontario, where the publicly funded K–12 education system consists of a secular system and a Roman Catholic system. While it is currently not generally possible to teach in an Ontario Catholic school without a letter from a parish priest verifying that the teacher is Catholic (see, for example, Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board, n.d.), it is important to note that, like any religious community, specific beliefs are contested within the Roman Catholic community (Pogorelc & Davidson, 2000). Thus, a case of a teacher teaching in a religious school whose beliefs may not completely correspond with the official doctrine of the school may not be an uncommon occurrence in Ontario’s publicly funded system. Thus, this particular case, which examines the ways in which a teacher experiences subtle differences between institutional beliefs and values and her own, may be of relevance to teachers in the public system as well.

The Role of Teachers’ Beliefs

I use Luft’s (2009) definition of beliefs where they are “propositions held to be true by the individual; they can be non-evidential and based on personal judgment and experience, unlike knowledge that is evidential and requires community or group consensus” (p. 2358). While I do not deny the epistemological status of beliefs emphasized by this definition, I focus on the axiological dimension—the believer’s sense of “rightness” and the ways in which that sense affects a teacher’s experience. I also distinguish between espoused beliefs (what one says one believes) and enacted beliefs (what one does) (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002). Given the constraints on teaching practice that go beyond the teacher’s individual intentions and capabilities (Barrett, Ford, & James, 2010), I do not use enacted beliefs to judge espoused beliefs (as if to test the teacher’s conviction) (see, for example, Theriot & Tice, 2009) but rather as another way to understand teachers’ experiences of reconciling their espoused beliefs with enacted ones.

In examining the influence of teachers' religious beliefs, I am deliberately taking a holistic view of the teachers, as people who—like their students—do not leave parts of themselves behind when they enter the classroom. They possess espoused beliefs that relate directly to their work—such as those related to the subject being taught, professional culture, student characteristics, and professional content knowledge (Barrett, 2013)—as well as possessing espoused beliefs about the nature of the society in which they live and about their existential understanding of their place in it. This study begins with the premise that teachers' enacted beliefs will depend on espoused beliefs related to both their work and personal lives, thus religious beliefs become an important set of beliefs to examine.

Ethical Issues: Defining the Terrain

Ethics can be viewed both as a topic to be taught and a dimension of relationships. Therefore, a teacher may contend with ethical issues with respect to (1) ways to engage students in discussions about ethical issues related to content in a course, or (2) how to engage with students in day-to-day interactions involving one-on-one relationships and institutional concerns. In the literature, the former is illustrated by the studies on how religious beliefs affect how teachers teach evolution. Studies about professional ethics illustrate the latter.

In Canada, although education policy is set at the provincial level, there are similarities from province to province. For example, including ethical issues as content in mathematics and science courses is not a common approach. One exception to this trend is the science curriculum in the Province of Manitoba, which explicitly cites preparing students to critically engage with ethical issues as one of its goals (see, for example, Manitoba Education and Training, 2000). The approach in Ontario is more typical. The curriculum documents from the Ontario Ministry of Education contain lists of expectations which stipulate the content that is required to be taught from K–12, and in the math and science curriculum, there are very few expectations related to ethical issues of any kind (see, for example, Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2008). Because there are many expectations that need to be fulfilled (almost none of which relate to ethics), a teacher must make a special effort to create opportunities within the science

and mathematics curriculum to include ethical issues. For a new teacher, this can be a daunting task (Barrett, 2013). Ontario does, however, mandate character education from K–12 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). This mandate consists of goals for students related to (1) learning and academic achievement, (2) respect for diversity, (3) citizenship development, and (4) parent and community partnerships (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). These goals are expected to be infused throughout the curriculum without specific content that must be taught. Perhaps as a result, character education tends to be implemented as a school-wide initiative rather than part of individual courses. Nevertheless, this is Ontario’s attempt to integrate ethics as content within schools.

Professional ethics in Ontario is under the jurisdiction of the Ontario College of Teachers and is described in a document called the *Foundations of Professional Practice* (Ontario College of Teachers, 2012). Although the document refrains from reducing professional ethics to a list of rules—instead characterizing it as four categories of action (care, respect, trust, and integrity)—in practice, the College’s role has been to conduct hearings investigating cases of professional misconduct through a legalistic framework. The day-to-day ethical dilemmas encountered by classroom teachers are rarely associated with the College’s role as professional regulator. Thus, while the *Foundations for Professional Practice* (2012) could have been used as a lens to analyze the teacher’s beliefs and dilemmas in this study, I have chosen to use a framework that is designed to be more attuned to the day-to-day work of a classroom teacher.

The chosen framework needed to not only consider the individual deliberative aspects of ethical decision-making but also the community ethos and the teacher’s position within that community. As a result, I will be using a Freirean framework to analyze this case.

Freirean Ethics

My conception of Freirean ethics consists of an ontological conception of what it means to be human and an axiological conception of what education should value based on that ontology. Freire (1998) argued that to be human is to have the capacity to insert oneself into history. Thus education must encourage agency and deliberate questioning of the status quo. From this arises the Freirean imperative to “name” problems in order to allow

for open and honest discussion of personal and social dilemmas. For Freire, it follows that any education which undermines agency and problem-posing is dehumanizing and could therefore be classified as violence. This concept of violence provides some insight into how professional ethics might be analyzed because it focuses on the effect of current classroom practices on students' capacity for autonomy and freedom in the future. He described this education as one that teaches students to internalize a sense of helplessness and cynicism, precluding and obscuring the possibility of influencing society in any way. Freire (2000) thus defines violence in the following way:

Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or *hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person* [emphasis added] is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. (p. 55)

Thus, Freire suggests that the very structure of schooling may be violent. This raises the question of what specific acts would constitute violence within a classroom and how a teacher should respond to that realization once discovered. For example, in a study of an urban alternative school for teenagers who had displayed disruptive behaviour in the mainstream system, Goodmana and Uzun (2013) found that the students responded positively to authoritarian rules. The students said that they appreciated the structure because, based on their behaviour in their home schools, they no longer trusted their own capacities for self-discipline. Freire might consider this to be violence sweetened by false generosity, where the school implements a set of rules and regulations in order to make sure that students feel secure but does so, arguably, at the expense of helping students to grow as individuals. Thus, Freire's (1998) conception of education is inherently infused with ethical responsibilities. I would suggest that it could not be otherwise so long as any given teacher is educating other people's children. But the role that a professional teacher's personal convictions should play in her or his day-to-day work is not always obvious (Kelly & Brandes, 2001).

To reiterate, the specific aim of this case study is to use a Freirean ethical framework to explore the role of religion in one teacher's experience of engaging with ethical issues in her practice.

My own experience in the school system includes 10 years of teaching chemistry, general science, and mathematics in the public secular system in Ontario. Since the beginning of my career as an educator 20 years ago, my religious convictions have morphed from Christian to agnostic to Buddhist, where they have remained for the duration of the study. Freire's critical pedagogy has been central to my approach to both teaching and research. I describe this here to provide the reader with some insight into how my own situatedness has affected my analysis and presentation of the data, which are also situated in a particular time and place.

Methodology

Data presented here are part of a multi-case study examining new science and math teachers' first years of teaching. All participants from the larger study were recruited through convenience sampling (Creswell, 2013) from the physics and chemistry methods courses at two Faculties of Education in southern Ontario. The case study was chosen as the methodology to investigate the problem because of its capacity to provide in-depth knowledge about an individual's experience in a particular context and time (Merriam, 1998). An individual case study is presented here instead of a cross-case analysis in order to capitalize on one of the strengths of a case study—its focus on depth rather than breadth. The purpose here is not to present a generalizable case study but to consider a vivid one that can open up possibilities for future research and discussion about an aspect of professional ethics that is rarely discussed in the literature. The efficacy of the use of case studies for professional development in a variety of fields, including education, is well documented (Anson, Cafarrelli, Rutz, Weis, & The Collaboration for the Advancement of College Teaching & Learning, 1998). Indeed, in a professional development context, the narrative form of case studies provides a launching pad for a more sophisticated analysis on the part of participating teachers (Wallace & Loudon, 2000). This particular case study brings the issues related to religious conviction to light because it occurs in a religious school, but the larger project indicates that teachers may not leave their religious beliefs at home, even when they are working in a secular system. However, Renate was the participant who talked about the issue explicitly and so it is her case that I present

here. In order to protect the teacher's identity, pseudonyms are used and some details have been changed.

The participant, Renate (pronounced "Renata"), was a math/science teacher at a private religious school in a rural area. She is white, 33 years old, and was raised in a Mennonite community on the West Coast. This religious community's commitment to non-violence has meant, historically, that they have been conscientious objectors to military service. Renate attended Mennonite schools until university, where she studied physics and music in a secular university in the mid-west before completing her initial teacher education program in a large urban centre near the Great Lakes. Upon graduation, she was immediately hired by a Christian school outside of the city, which subscribed to a fundamentalist tradition—one which viewed the bible as infallible "Truth" and included an admonition to share a specific version of the gospel with others. This approach to Christianity was at odds with her own.

Renate is a member of the Ontario College of Teachers and proud of it. The school follows the Ontario curriculum and uses the combination of certified teachers and adherence to the provincial curriculum as a selling point when promoting the school to parents.

Data Sources

This case examines Renate's fourth year of teaching. Data consist of 30 hours of full-day, monthly, classroom visits and six hours of interviews over the course of the school year. Class handouts and student work were also examined to provide context for the interviews. There was also regular email correspondence between classroom visits that was analyzed along with the interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. Classroom observations were recorded in the form of field notes. All data were collected and analyzed by the author.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in two stages. After examining the data for emerging themes, these initial themes were collapsed into larger ones through a process of decontextualization and recontextualization (Tesch, 1990). Emerging themes were determined throughout the data collection and confirmed through additional questions of clarification

in each subsequent interview. Larger themes were then examined using a Freirean ethical framework and verified with the participant. Validity was established through member checks, long-term observation, multiple sources of data, and looking for counter examples (Merriam, 1998).

Findings and Discussion

Renate works in a private religious school in a rural area. A large number of the students live on farms that they expect to work on once they graduate. The community is prosperous and their ethnic background is homogenous. A small group of foreign students also attends the school, often boarding with local families. These students come from various countries in Africa and East Asia. For the most part, the foreign students do not interact socially with the general population—evidenced by the way that they sit separately in ethnically homogenous groups in the cafeteria. However, in the face of declining enrolments from the local community, this group of students is set to grow in the near future. Teachers at the school come from various ethnic backgrounds, although they are all white. They do not tend to spend time with each other outside of the school but there is a friendly and congenial atmosphere in the staff room, where many teachers choose to eat lunch together. There are many activities in the school, including sports teams, drama, and music ensembles. A grand piano sits in the foyer. Between, before, and after classes, various students usually sit at it and play. A dozen computers line the wall near the office so that students can check email if they so choose. These computers are rarely all occupied as most students have their own laptops or cell phones.

Beyond the regular classroom spaces, the school is equipped with four science classrooms, two large computer labs, a large art room, a woodworking shop, one large music room, and a large gym. The library is next to the cafeteria and is generally busy.

Three themes related to the impact of Renate's religious beliefs on her professional practice emerged throughout the study. They were (1) sanction of religious values, (2) conflicts with personal convictions, and (3) school structure as violence.

Sanction of Religious Values

It's definitely encouraged...at this school particularly, we are given a lot of support [but] it's not that we are given a doctrine of a formal position.

The school in which Renate taught was affiliated with an evangelical branch of Christianity. The religious values it promoted were most succinctly described in terms of the characteristics of a graduate of the school (posted on their website and throughout the school)—competent, given to reflection, compassionate, resilient, and creative. Each characteristic was described as “Christ-centred” (i.e., based on the Gospel in the Christian bible). Although the school adhered to the curriculum mandated by the Province of Ontario, it also encouraged all departments, including the mathematics and science department, to infuse these religious values into all aspects of the curriculum. This is similar to the publicly funded Roman Catholic system in Ontario (see, for example, Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, 2012). Nevertheless, Renate struggled with highlighting compassion in the curriculum because it did not seem to flow from the expectations listed in the mathematics and science curriculum documents. She did use statistics highlighting social justice issues (such as income distribution) in her teaching; however, I witnessed the students going through the mechanics of working through the numbers without really engaging with the content. Renate did not seem to know how to initiate discussions about the meaning of the data or how they as Christians should be moved by them.

Yet completely separate from the content of the mandated curriculum, Renate expressed comfort in being able to discuss religious convictions in class and so took advantage of this with all of her students by opening each class with “joys or concerns” followed by a prayer. In this exercise, students would share aspects of their own lives, such as a sick relative, a birthday, or a difficult or happy circumstance. These contributions would be incorporated into a prayer said aloud by Renate. Students seemed to be enthusiastic about this exercise and I felt a real sense of emotional intimacy pervading the activity. However, her attempts to use this activity to lead into discussions of related broader societal or even school community issues seemed to fall flat. Afterwards, Renate confided that, compared to their parents, her students were ambivalent about their own religious beliefs and, therefore, were inclined to give “Sunday school answers” instead of sincere ones whenever abstract ethical issues were raised in class:

I think that sometimes they maybe do feel that they're supposed to give the Sunday school answer. So, that's the part that is harder, is to get them to [talk about] well "but why do you think that?" Or "What does that mean?"

It seemed that students were uncomfortable with discussing their religious convictions or lack thereof, even as they took comfort in Renate's daily prayers. Thus Renate was glad to have the space to include religion as part of their daily routine but was weary of the ways in which her position of authority as the teacher seemed to discourage students' openness to discussing their beliefs. This was a conflict that she voiced again and again:

I think I felt a little bit apprehensive as to how I was supposed to relate professionally...[and] how much to censor any of those issues [related to religion]. And if engaging them, how much of my personal convictions to [express]? How much could they influence how the discussion might go?

Aligned with a Freirean ethic, Renate found this dilemma particularly disturbing. Her attempts to create an atmosphere where students could feel comfortable expressing their ambivalence about the role of religion in their lives persisted in spite of her efforts being limited to situations that were not related to formal course content. Perhaps this was because, regardless of her intentions, Renate was still a representative of a school system with a stated religious stance and a perceived ability to enforce its positions through marks. It may have been naive for Renate to believe that her individual intentions were enough to overcome this context. In Freirean terms, her attempts to be an authoritative but open teacher were thwarted by the authoritarian role she occupied within the system (Freire, 1970/2000).

Conflict with Personal Convictions

It's important to know who you are and what you are convicted of in order to be able to engage anyone in a way that really values who they are. If you just say, "I'm open to any idea," in a sense you don't really take any idea seriously.

The idea stated in the above quote expresses what was probably at the root of Renate's struggles. It was important to Renate to have a stance with respect to ethical issues in her teaching, whether it was content or the ways in which she engaged with her students.

However, in her attempts to minimize undue influence, this self-awareness caused her to overcompensate by being passive about presenting alternative views to her students. For example, because she subscribed to a different Christian tradition than that of the school community, one which emphasized non-violence and had a history of conscientious objection to military service, she felt uncomfortable with some aspects of activities and social realities within her school. As she put it:

The first time I came to school that we had military officers in the front who were recruiting, I was sort of frozen. I didn't know how to respond. I've never personally known an officer before and now I've had several students who are. And we have staff members whose husband or children served. And that has been [challenging]. I just want to be sensitive.

Renate's dilemma was that, on the one hand, she wanted to be truthful about the pacifist convictions she had inherited from her religious community. On the other, she did not want to disrespect the students' affiliations with the military or the community's gratitude for the benefits they had derived from the sacrifices of those in the military. Renate's solution was to hint at alternatives to physical violence through wearing a white rather than red poppy on Remembrance Day and putting up a poster in her classroom with the slogan "War cannot prevent terror."

What if we simply refuse? What happens then? And just opening up that question is what really started to get me to think about how to relate to war in a different posture... So when you take away the necessity of using violence for good, what is the kind of space you open up for a different good? And it might be one that costs you. So that's definitely an area I'm still grappling [with] how to share.

One can imagine the sorts of rich discussions that could grow out of such questions, enacting the problem-posing pedagogy that Freire (1970/2000) champions. In this way, she said that she aimed to allow students to initiate conversations with her if they so chose, rather than forcing the discussion on them by explicitly initiating the discussion herself. However, none of Renate's students chose to engage with this topic. According to Renate, this lack of engagement related to the structure of schooling and the ways in which it seemed to breed passivity in students.

School Structure as Violence

The Ontario system uses a streaming model from Grade 9 to Grade 12, where students choose one of three levels for each subject (applied or academic in Grades 9 and 10; workplace, college, or university in Grades 11 and 12). The Ministry of Education classifies these streams as destination-oriented and not reflective of students' abilities, but parents, students, and teachers tend to view them as indicators of academic merit. Further, although to attend university a student must have credits from the university stream or attend one year of a three-year program, competition for limited university places means that university stream credits are often needed to get into some three-year college programs as well. As a result, in a society in which students are told repeatedly that they need a university degree to succeed, many view the applied, college, and workplace streams as dead ends. In Renate's school, there were no applied level courses running in Grade 9 mathematics or science because parents were not interested in enrolling their children in them.

Renate put a great deal of energy into motivating the bottom academic tier in her classes. She often avoided criticizing their behaviour (which was often disruptive) in order to maintain a positive relationship with them and keep them coming to class. This was especially important in her Grade 9 advanced mathematics class, in which a large proportion of her students struggled with mathematics and were in danger of failing. According to Renate, many of the struggling students were resigned to dropping to a lower academic stream in Grade 10:

By streaming, we just generate that much more of the sense that "We are not the successful [ones] of society." And it's only the [strong] personalities that say, "No, this isn't right."

In interviews, Renate described the streaming system explicitly as a form of violence where students were taught that they were not important and were destined to be set aside by society. Interview data indicate that her objection to streaming was grounded in a concept of justice, where teaching students that they are failures not only in school but also in their future lives is unjust and is a form of violence to the soul.

Perhaps as a result of her focus on her students' self-esteem, Renate struggled with maintaining order. For example, she never raised her voice and if a student chose

to lie to her she simply allowed them to experience the consequence of that lie (a failing grade on a test, lack of confidence in the subject matter) rather than punishing them for the lie itself. She said that it was not her place to tell students what to do but to show them the consequences of their behaviour in their lives, instead. This approach caused some friction with her colleagues who wanted her to be stricter with those students that all of the teachers struggled to discipline.

The school itself espoused a belief in restorative justice and had sponsored a number of professional development opportunities centred on the subject for its teachers. For Renate, these had precipitated a recognition of the connection between the pacifism of her faith and her work as a teacher:

And that was very sobering. To see the violent way in which we approach education. That's not violent in that I hit you with a stick [laughs] which is very easy to see and to learn that that's not what you do but in terms of posture and the language you use. So that was very revolutionary for me as a person... [I thought], "I can't believe I didn't realize that I was doing that." Because we've talked about growing into accepting the pacifism of my faith heritage...but I just hadn't put the two together in terms of what made for good teaching...because I think a lot of traditional good teaching markers involve violent ways of relating to students... And that's why I say, "I don't know how to be stricter" because, to me, the [classroom management] methods that I see that are successful are ones that are very violent and I don't know how to take [student behaviour] on in a non-violent way.

Through classroom observations, it was clear that classroom management was a problem for Renate and, in some ways, she may have used her religious convictions as an excuse not to fully address this. From her perspective, this was not just a case of wanting to be liked or lack of technical tools—although that was part of it—but rather a struggle with self with respect to reconciling the spiritual violence of the hegemonic structure of schooling with her commitment to pacifism. In other words, her conception of what constituted a violent act was based on a Freirean (1970/2000) ethical framework which, in turn, was rooted in her religious convictions. To her, it was unethical to take an authoritarian stance at any time and she would adopt one only when institutional policies gave her no choice but to do so.

Conclusions

The main aim of this case study is to use a Freirean ethical framework to explore the role of religion in one teacher's experience of engaging with ethical issues in her practice. Overall, classroom observations of Renate's teaching practice indicate that her experience of engaging with professional ethics was shaped by a fear of imposing her beliefs on her students. Although she espoused a desire to engage in deep discussions about the relationship between religious convictions and the subjects they were studying—discussions in which students would feel free to explore their ideas and feelings—her enacted belief was one of fear rather than empowerment. Further, the discussions she wished to have required the naming of specific problems and a more active acceptance of her role as the authoritative teacher capable of demonstrating deliberate, open, honest, and, yes, courageous questioning of official school policies and practices (Freire, 1998). Renate suggested that her students—and, to some extent, the school—were not especially interested in those discussions. It is hard to know if that is true. Certainly, Renate's approach seemed to emphasize avoiding conflict even when she professed to feel strongly about engaging in a discussion about an issue. It may be that she was too intimidated by the possibility of undue influence on the students' opinions or the possibility of creating a classroom atmosphere in which her students did not feel safe to be themselves.

Another interpretation is that she herself lacked the confidence to invite real conflict into her classroom (hooks, 1994) because when real societal norms and problems are named and discussed openly, neutrality itself is problematized. Indeed, in many ways, Renate seemed to equate any conflict with violence and consequently equated pacifism with passivity. Paradoxically, since in her role as teacher, Renate was a role model, the passivity she practised to allow her students more agency, may have inspired passivity in her students. This, arguably, was also a Freirean act of violence.

Renate's religious convictions played a significant role in the way she dealt with ethical issues in her classroom, from what she recognized as an ethical dilemma to the actions she took to deal with them to how she felt about those actions. Specifically, her ethical stance was based on a Freirean understanding of violence that expanded the scope of her religious commitment to pacifism. The combination of her religious convictions and the school's professed commitment to restorative justice imposed on Renate a level of responsibility that she felt ill-equipped to fulfill.

I would suggest that she was unsure of how to view conflict as a positive force within her teaching practice because of her conflation of conflict with violence. This may have been because the very concept of Freirean violence was new to her and she was still in the process of accommodating it into her practice. Indeed, most of our discussions revolved around how to be sincere in actions and words with respect to her religious beliefs while being sensitive to her students' developing beliefs, and maintaining authority without discouraging independence and individual responsibility. Through our conversations, her beliefs evolved just as her students' beliefs will eventually do so, as she learns how to interact with them and accommodate the constructive conflict that is central to the problem-posing education that Freire (1970/2000) describes.

Implications

The significance of this study lies in how it can inform our approach to understanding the ways in which teachers' beliefs and values influence their teaching. Renate framed her struggles as a new teacher in religious terms, thus in working with her it was her religious beliefs that needed to be engaged. None of this is to say that non-religious teachers do not struggle with similar issues. Rather, this research emphasizes that the foundational beliefs and values that teachers use to understand these issues of professional ethics and teaching about ethics are significant. They provide the vocabulary that resonates for them and, in turn, the motivation to engage and struggle and reflect. If religious beliefs are not an important part of a given teacher's beliefs, they need not be attended to, but, if they are, discussion about professional ethics will likely be superficial and ineffectual if they are ignored. Further, as researchers who wish to engage with teachers about the ethical issues they teach and encounter, we need to have a holistic view of the task at hand and to recognize that resolving ethical dilemmas and teaching about ethics are not merely intellectual activities. The beliefs and values that teachers and students bring to bear are fluid, social, and ever-evolving.

As noted above, case studies are effective tools in professional development activities because they provide fodder for discussion of complex issues (Wallace & Loudon, 2000). This particular case study highlights the idea that a teacher's religious convictions are not only a concern in secular environments—the interaction of religious beliefs and

context is more complicated than that. Beyond questions of religion, however, this case study is a good example of a teacher with strong convictions struggling with the problem of undue influence on her students' beliefs and convictions—a narrative that can therefore inform discussions of other contexts whether private or public, religious or secular.

This study is a single case in a particular context and therefore the results cannot be strictly generalized. However, generalization was not its purpose. Rather, it is meant as a starting point for discussions that expand the notion of professional ethics from one of intellectual deliberation to one that not only acknowledges the beliefs and values that teachers bring to their practice but the sociocultural milieu in which they experience those beliefs and values. Without denying the importance of large-scale surveys for assessing pre-service and in-service teachers' beliefs and values (see, for example, Boon, 2011), a case study such as this is useful because (1) in the context of initial teacher education and in-service professional development, narrative cases and follow-up discussion resonate with teachers (Ejsing, 2007), and (2) it provides another avenue for further study of the experiential and social aspects of professional ethics.

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