Service-Learning | Student Scholarship

Service-Learning

Fall 2014

Ethics in Education

Rena Chan
Dominican University of California

Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.

Rena Chan

Julia Van der Ryn

Honors Ethics

15 December 2014

<div align="center">Ethics in Education</div>

There are not many courses taken in college that can change your perspective of the world. After taking ethics at Dominican University of California that emphasized the social issues that run against the values of a democratic society, I realized that ethics was not as black and white as I had imagined. Every person has a different set of values and beliefs morphed by their parents, their peers, and the social and cultural environment they grew up in. Thus, the perspective each individual holds on what is right and wrong differs from one person to the next.

NGS is a program in Marin that creates a college bound culture to help students get into college. The striking similarities and the definitive differences between the students at Next Generation Scholars and myself was surprising, for I had not anticipated myself opening up to the people that I had set forth to serve. At NGS, I worked with program coordinators to tutor high school students. During my time with my community partner, I realized that there was evident education inequality in the American school system that could only be changed with enforced government policies. But with such diversity found even within the American culture, can we find common ground on the ethics in education? Even though the globe is naturally diverse, a consensus on ethics and education equality can be reached.

Diversity around the globe and finding common ground:

Because the world is so diverse, we place more importance in certain beliefs and less in others. In *Cosmopolitanism*, Kwame Anthony Appiah identifies three kinds of disagreements of

values. He elaborates on how "we can fail to share a vocabulary of evaluation; we can give the same vocabulary different interpretations; and we can give the same values different weighs" (66). In our ethics course, we participated in an activity where we decided whether we agreed on a statement or not by standing in different regions in the room. Once the professor wrote the statement on the board, we shuffled around and tried to convince people with opinions that differed from ours that we were right. Interestingly enough, all of us were right. We all had different interpretations of words used in the statement provided and found some words more important than others. As a result, we all formed different opinions and found ourselves in different parts of the room. Because of the diversity present in the classroom, we were unable to come to a consensus on whether the statement written on the board was true or not, but we were able to identify a common component we all agreed with.

In *Responsibility and Judgment*, Hannah Arendt claims that we cannot excuse ourselves from collective responsibility despite differences in "individual and personal standards of conduct" (157). Every person is different. They were brought up differently, in different areas of the world, surrounded by different cultures, so it's no surprise that everyone had different moral standards of conduct. But as a working human society, we should have some common ground on what we, as a society, should be "responsible" for. It truly surprises me when people complain about how their tax dollars are being spent. They always get heated up and passionate about how taxes should be lowered and that people should work to bring themselves out of poverty (which is never as easy as it sounds). Some of the income tax is used for assistance programs for the poor, but is it horrific to literally help put food on someone else's table? Are you truly against giving 8.7 cents out of every dollar to feed a hungry family? Is there a need to be *that* angry about spending 4.4 cents on education and social services? We spend more income tax dollars

for the military than for government housing assistance programs. This is why at NGS, even though most families are in government-sponsored programs, families still need help from the program to keep the pantry full. Yet there are people who still complain that they are paying "too much" to help the poor reach higher education. Why is the idea of helping other people who are less fortunate rejected so furiously? Collective responsibility can be both a bad and good thing. Communities must take responsibility of what was done in the past and what should be done for the future. As a society, we should be responsible for helping those less fortunate to attain a better life, despite our individual differences in morality.

Difficulty of coming to a consensus:

The market culture created by democracy in the United States fosters values that make it more difficult to find common ethical beliefs – much less common educational values. Cornel West explains that in order to maintain democracy and justice, we must address social issues and be willing to work through them in *The Moral Obligations of Living in a Democratic Society*. West notes that economic decline and political lethargy are synonymous to cultural decay. He explains that a culturally decadent civilization is caused by the erosion of systems of caring and nurturing. Growing up in California, I never realized how "culturally decadent" we were because the low levels of empathy seemed normal to me. There are the people who stop when your emergency brake lights are on, but you don't have the people who offer to help paint your house when you've only moved into the neighborhood for a week. Just imagining that makes me feel uncomfortable, because that kind of caring and nurturing culture isn't cultivated in the Bay Area. The environment at NGS directly contrasts with this prominent market culture. Just being there on Sundays makes me feel like I'm part of a community. Everyone addresses each other by their first name and the staff is so responsive to the kid's needs. It's not just giving them access to

computers, food, and clothing. They care and they nurture them. Sometimes I'll overhear some

harsh words from a staff member but it's because they care. Two weeks ago I was talking to a

student and somehow we started talking about dreams and she tried to explain how she was

scared of movies that had creepy dolls (but not any other type of horror film). When one of the

staff members asked if she talked to the psychologist about not being able to sleep without

holding onto something she broke down crying because apparently she was told she was "doing

it for attention." My body froze and I did not know how to react. But the staff member that was

in the conversation immediately told her that she didn't think she was doing for attention. I

didn't know how to care for her but the staff did. The staff member was so responsive and

nurturing. Looking back, I feel like I didn't know how to empathize with her because I was

brought up in the market culture. It is even harder to come to a consensus on ethical values when

there is a lack of empathy within the market culture.

People also have a general fear of the unknown, so we are naturally hesitant and cautious

when meeting others from different cultures or places. The fear of difference is not a valid reason

for being unable to find common ethical beliefs that includes all cultures. In "Toward

Transcultural Ethics in a Multicultural World," Suk Cha reasons that "one of the reasons why

modern humanity cannot claim vestiges of primordial fear of difference as viable cause for

violence and conflict is that we humans share too much in common with each other in our

societies" (5). Appiah expands on this by explaining how "cultural purity is an oxymoron" (113).

The life you live is enriched by literature, art, and film that come from a variety of places. But

they are also influenced by other places, people, and cultures. With globalization, there is less

overall homogeneity, but there is still local homogeneity. Whenever a local group of people lose

part of their culture that makes them different, they make new differences to make up for it:

"new hairstyles, new slang, even from time to time, new religions" (103). Even with all these little differences that permeate the modern world, humanity still shares cultural exchanges, which is why violence caused by fear of difference is unfounded. Different cultures may have different rules, but many of the principles are the same. Thus, as a modern society, we should be able to find common ground in all cultures, and find common ethical values that strive for the betterment of education equity.

An agreement on ethics and education equity can be reached:

Appiah states that "we can live together without agreeing on what the values are that make it good to live together" and that "we can agree about what to do in most cases, without agreeing about why it is right" (71). It seems impossible to find common values because "a good deal of what we take to be right, we take to be right just because it is what we are used to" (72) – but it is possible. There is a way to bridge different people together. Appiah believes that the "points of entry into cross cultural conversation are things that are shared by those who are in the conversation. They do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what these particular people have in common" (97). Even within the American culture, there are small subcultures. The kids at NGS are very different from me. We do have things in common, but their family situations, economic background, and childhood are vastly different from mine. We don't have a ton of stuff in common, but what we have is enough to maintain our relationships. We are able to disregard our differences and find common ground in family, social, and ethical values.

NGS helps bridge cultural differences by placing an emphasis on multicultural content and discussing underlying social, familial, and ethical values. They study books and authors that do not come from "traditional" authors. The high schoolers recently finished *Persepolis*, a graphic novel series highlighting the events of the Islamic Revolution in Tehran through the eyes

of a child. I was very surprised to walk in on a Sunday and see those books on the table because the book was set in a completely different part of the world with heavy and mature themes. Yet the kids were able to recognize that even though the culture differed from ours, there was no excuse for the torture and execution of Marji's uncle. They were still able to connect with Marji, the main character, in both her public and private life. As a modern society, we should also be able to do the same; we should be able to identify shared ethical values.

Communities must strive for policy level changes in education:

According to West, in order to remain a part of the democratic tradition we must have "mutual respect, personal responsibility, and social accountability" (214). In Clifton Fadiman's *Living Philosophies*, Jane Goodall laments that ""it is unfortunate that human greed and arrogance and selfishness have, by and large, played a greater role in our history than concern and respect for each other and for other life forms". Because non market values, like care, service, solidarity, fidelity, mercy, justice, sweetness, kindness, and gentleness, are scarce, "it is tough to mobilize and organize our society about any cause" (215). West explains that "there can be no democratic tradition without non market values" (215). As a society, we must cultivate non market values and learn to empathize with one another

To be part of a democratic community means to be able to empathize, care, and be able to put yourself in someone else's position and see things from their point of view, which are all non market values. We can't render the middle and lower class powerless otherwise it would no longer be a democratic society. According to West, the middle class cannot be desperate enough to be "willing to accept any authoritarian option in order to provide some sense of normalcy and security in their lives" (10). We must have a sense of justice (a non market value) to be willing to change things when social structures or laws are unfair and prejudiced. Doing service learning as

part of this course reinforces the idea that we need non market values in order to play our part in a democratic community. Not only is working with NGS considered service, but being with the kids has turned me into a more caring and (surprisingly) gentler person. Because you are with them so much, you end up caring for them and see their struggles. A couple of weeks ago one of the girls came up to me and told me that she was nominated for homecoming queen. I was never involved in events high school but I was so excited for her. We brainstormed ideas for her and her partner's debut for a parade in downtown San Rafael. The kids at NGS are amazing and I want them to be able to reach their dreams. I have seen their potential and know they can do anything if they set their mind on it. Most of them are from low income families so they need help. There's no time to wait for someone who is willing to speak up about the diminishing middle class and diminishing class mobility. Someone must begin the change, and it might as well be you. Democracy is about having a voice in the government. Those who are treated unfairly have a voice but adding yours will amplify it.

There are stories about exceptional students who come from poverty stricken households but somehow make it to a prestigious university though years of hard work. That is indeed amazing and spectacular, but it does not happen on a regular basis. Those stories are about *one* single student. Judith Butler explains in *Precarious Life* that "isolating the individuals involved [in terrorism] absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events" (5). She then goes on to explain that "our collective responsibility….requires that we ask how these conditions came about, and endeavor to recreate social and political conditions on more sustaining grounds" (17-18). In her book, Butler was referring to 9/11 but the same concept can be applied to students from low income households. You could figure out how those students were able to achieve so highly on their own, but as a community, we need to figure how to

give all low income students access to college. It's exponentially harder for low income students to make it to higher education. NGS can only do so much to bridge the gap between college and low income students. There must be social and political change to make the college bound path more accessible.

Appiah mentions that "what you see depends on what you believe. What it's reasonable for you to think, faced with a particular experience, depends on what ideas you already have" (39). My passion for changing education policies comes from my experience at NGS. I really do want better access and ability for the lower class to reach their academic potential and break out the cycle of poverty. But this desire for equal education comes from my background. I was brought up on the idea that college was attainable and that I could do better than my parents if I focused on my education. Now I realize that the path to higher education is more of an uphill climb for some people. This service learning experience is what makes me "see" the diminishing educational opportunity for the lower class. It's not that I never cared about the education system. Because I was able to go to college (and stay in college), I was unaware of the institutional inequality in education.

Ethics is rarely black and white. Even with cross cultural exchanges, people are too different and too diverse to agree on a set of moral beliefs. Even so, we can still find a shared set of beliefs to reach a consensus on ethical concerns despite these differences. By working together and holding dialogue with people who are culturally different than us, the community can collectively strive for policy level changes in education equity to make the college bound road more accessible for low income families.

Works Cited

Appiah, Kwame A. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: W.W. Norton,

    2006. Print.

Arendt, Hannah, and Jerome Kohn. *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken, 2003.

    Print.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

    Print.

Fadiman, Clifton. "Respect for Life." *Living Philosophies: The Reflections of Some Eminent Men

    and Women of Our Time*. New York: Doubleday, 1990. Print.

West, Cornell. "The Moral Obligations of Living in a Democratic Society." In *The Good Citizen*,

    eds. Linda Martin Alcoff, David Batstone, Robert N. Bellah, et al. New York: Routledge,

    2001, 5–12.