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AUTHOR Coombe, Kennece; Newman, Linda
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ABSTRACT

The place of ethics in the professions is often unquestioned. What is not so clear is the awareness of students of early childhood education about ethical issues and their contribution to ethical practice. This study investigated student experiences and perceptions of ethical dilemmas in their practicums. A survey of 171 early childhood students at two Australian universities was used to establish: (1) the level of student awareness of the existence of the Australian Early Childhood Association's "Code of Ethics"; (2) what they believe constitutes ethics; and (3) their perceptions of ethical dilemmas encountered in their practicums and their ability to respond. Results indicated that there seemed to be the general expectation that codes of ethics are imposed from beyond the day-to-day lives of practitioners and that there is little sense of ownership of what is contained within such codes and limited consideration of the students' own moral and ethical stances. All but two students were aware of the Code of Ethics, while more than two-thirds of the students reported that they had witnessed three or more situations of ethical dilemma while completing practicums. The dilemmas that were described, however, indicated some confusion in understanding the difference between ethical dilemmas and the observation of poor practice. Dilemmas could be placed into three categories: interactions and practices, abuse, and supervision of practicum students. Data also showed that students' perceptions of their ability to handle ethical dilemmas were correlated with their year in the program. (Contains 11 references.) (EV)

ETHICS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD FIELD EXPERIENCES

Kennece Coombe
Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga
and
Linda Newman
University of Western Sydney, Nepean
with the assistance of
Marzieh Arefi and Fiona Davidson
University of Western Sydney, Nepean

ABSTRACT

The place of ethics in the professions is often unquestioned. What is not so clear is the awareness of early childhood students about ethical issues and their contribution to ethical practice. The New South Wales Early Childhood Practicum Council has developed 'Guidelines for Ethical Practice in Early Childhood Field Experience' on the premise that there is insufficient awareness amongst early childhood education stakeholders about how to deal with ethical concerns. This paper reports on a survey of students that examines student experiences and perceptions of ethical dilemmas in the practicum. The survey sought to establish a level of student awareness of the existence of the Australian Early Childhood Association's *Code of Ethics*, what constitutes ethics, some examples of the students' perceptions of ethical dilemmas they encountered in the practicum and their ability to respond. The paper suggests action and strategies which can be taken within teacher preparation courses for the development of strategies to facilitate ethical practice in the practicum.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses four aspects of discussion about ethics and the practicum. First, it contextualises the discussion about ethics within the realms of the professional. Second, it considers ethics within the narrower field of education and the practicum. Third, it will present the results of a survey of early childhood education students undertaken during 1995 before considering the final aspect of suggesting action and strategies to facilitate ethical practice in the practicum in light of practicum stakeholders.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Ethics or ethical behaviour encompasses a range of values relating to morality and 'proper' conduct. Although the general idea of ethical practice is acknowledged within a range of professions, the same Code of Ethics would not be appropriate for medicos, legal professionals, architects, accountants and teachers. The constitution of ethical conduct is a construction of morality based on the cultural and professional biases of those in positions of power. These biases then become the accepted norms of behaviour—ethical standards.

The notion of ethics is never unproblematic. Because what constitutes ethical behaviour is context-specific, it is difficult to define. For example, it would be considered to be unethical behaviour if medical practitioners were to advertise as medical practitioners. On the other hand, they are quite at liberty to advertise their services as lay marriage celebrants or tutors for HSC students in maths or physics. Thus, to advertise is not in itself regarded as unethical behaviour, except within particular constraints, and it is within the purview of professional

organisations to determine which constraints, and what ethical principles, apply within a particular profession.

Given the number of professions and trades which have actively pursued the development and implementation of codes of ethics, it seems reasonable to assume that such codes are seen as important symbols that indicate: externally, for public consumption, that the association or group to which the workers belong is one that values morality and integrity; and, internally, that the association has a prescribed standard of acceptable behaviour which also serves as a validation for disciplinary action against non-conformity. Coady (1994), presents some degree of cynicism in pointing out that *the past record of many professions in enforcing their codes of ethics is not reassuring, leading many to believe that such codes provide a veneer of professional commitment to hide incompetence and malpractice behind a collective wall of secrecy justified by the principle of confidentiality* (Coady, 1994:5).

It is not the purpose of this paper to problematise ethics to any grand extent, rather the discussion thus far serves as a caveat to that which follows — a reminder that each of the groups of stakeholders within education will have a slightly different view of ethics from each other. And each view will be determined by the biases each group has about what is important, moral and right.

ETHICS IN EDUCATION

The role, application and evaluation of ethics and ethical standards in education have received a deal of attention in the literature (Bredekamp & Willer, 1993; Katz, 1993; Strike & Ternasky, 1993; Poplin & Ebert, 1993; Smith, 1994; Sottile, 1994; Hatch, 1995). Katz (1993) indicates that a code of ethics is one of eight characteristics of a profession and uses these characteristics to consider the professionalism of early childhood education.

Sottile (1994), for example, points to the lack of preparation of teachers to deal with situations involving ethical decision-making. He found that the teachers he surveyed indicated that the three most common types of ethical dilemmas they experienced related to psychological (emotional) abuse, confidentiality, and physical abuse. On the other hand, Poplin and Ebert (1993) discuss the perceptions of parents that the moral and ethical stand taken by teachers might well undermine that which is part of the family culture.

The almost inevitable concomitant of teachers dealing with the subjective nature of morals and ethics in the classroom is the moral dilemma. Katz (1992) defines the dilemma as a predicament wherein there is a choice between alternative courses of action and the selection of one of the alternatives sacrifices the advantages that might accrue from a different selection. She continues:

> *It is assumed further, that each of the two 'horns' of the dilemma, A and B, carry with them their own errors; alternative A involves certain errors as does alternative B; error-free alternatives are not really available. In principle, each of the available alternatives involves 'a choice of error'. Thus part of our task is to determine which error is preferred in each predicament.* (Katz, 1992:165)

Such choices confront students during their practicum sessions. To facilitate early childhood teacher's preparation, information is needed about students' experiences of decision-making in situations of ethical dilemma. Thus, the survey that is reported on here sought to consider students' views about their recent practicum sessions..

THE SURVEY

In July/August 1995, 179 students enrolled in early childhood teacher education programs at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga and University of Western Sydney, Nepean were surveyed by means of a written questionnaire. Fifty-four (30%) of the respondents were first year students, 50 (28%) were in their second year, and 75 (42%) were third year students.

Eighteen of the students (10%) were studying at CSU. The survey instrument comprised 12 questions intended to elicit information in relation to the students' knowledge about the existence of codes of ethics, their understandings about such codes and their experiences with ethical dilemmas during their practicum sessions. The purpose of the survey at this time was as a 'pilot' to provide some foundation data from which the determination could be made to proceed with a more extensive piece of research. The inherent difficulties of relying on one-shot, question and response surveys were recognised. There was some attempt to offset these difficulties by encouraging short, written responses as well as including Likert-type rankings. Quantitative responses were analysed according to students' year of study using Chi Square and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) techniques.

Briefly, 171 of the students were able to provide a response to the question, 'What is a code of ethics?' Chi Square analyses indicated no relationship between year of course and knowledge of the Australian Early Childhood Association (AECA) *Code of Ethics*, possibly indicating that students are introduced to the *Code of Ethics* at the beginning of their respective course in the universities studied. Students' responses to what constituted a code of ethics were categorised into four areas: professionalism; guidelines, standards and structures; beliefs, values and attitudes; and, behaviours and practices. These categorisations arose from the data and were not predetermined. Ten 'professions' were nominated by students as having codes of ethics, with the most predominant one being teaching (56%) followed by medicine (29%). Hairdressing and real estate were included. Examples of the responses from the students which were included in each of the categorisations were:

Professionalism:

Statements which bind a profession together. Ethics are sort of a law by which you should abide, believe and understand.

A list of the expectations of a professional in their field. Thus, what is expected of them, the roles they have and their responsibilities.

A set of norms, values, protocols etc. that members of a profession subscribe to.

Our professional responsibility towards the children, parents, colleagues and the community.

A summary of information relevant to a particular profession that outlines suitable or acceptable practice while working within that profession on a daily basis, based on professional community beliefs.

Guidelines, standards and structures:

A set of rules to protect the rights of others.

A code of ethics is a 'code' which we follow. It provides a standard or guideline—may or may not be signed.

A set of statements of 'advice' that a certain profession may use as a guideline to issues relating to work.

A set of guidelines owned and designed by professionals to ensure continuity and quality in all areas of their work. Beliefs, values and attitudes.

Beliefs, values and attitudes

Beliefs and moral compromises.

A code of ethics is not really a philosophy but a set of beliefs shared by a group.

Personal beliefs and values that influence your behaviour in daily interactions.

It is a set of comments about appropriate behaviour relating to self and others.

A set of morals, beliefs and values that people in a certain profession should adhere to.

Behaviours and practices

A list of ethical practices and behaviours which must be used and practised by the early childhood professional at all times.

A statement of the expected behaviours that will occur within a centre. The centre usually devises the ethics themselves.

As the responses above might indicate, there were overlaps into two or more of the categorisations, so it was not possible to specify the **number** of responses exclusive to each category, nor even those which might be generally included in the category. It was noted, however, that a majority of responses alluded to the notion of 'Guidelines, standards and structures'. There was only the occasional reference to issues of moral conduct though this concept might well have been an implicit understanding within the students' conceptions about beliefs and values or behaviours and practices.

There seemed to be the general expectation that codes of ethics were imposed from beyond the day-to-day lives of the practitioners and that there was little sense of ownership of what was contained within such codes and limited consideration of the students' own moral and ethical stance. Similarly, there appeared to be scant understanding that codes might allow for autonomous action and critically reflective practice. Eleven students either could not, or chose not to, nominate a profession that had a code of ethics, although only two students were unaware of the existence of the AECA *Code of Ethics*.

More than two-thirds of the students reported that they had witnessed three or more situations of ethical dilemma while on practicum placements. (See Figure 1)

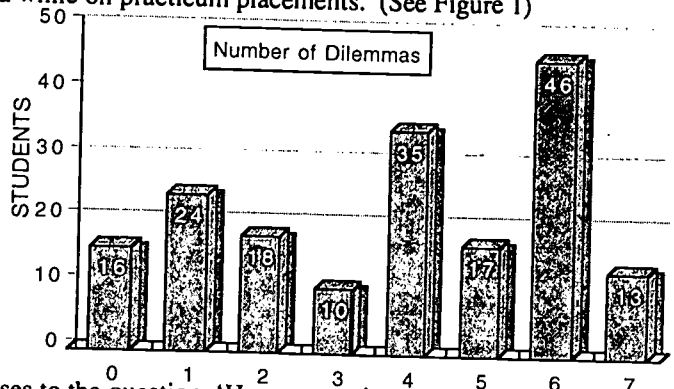

Figure 1: Responses to the question, 'How many situations involving ethical dilemmas have you been in since you commenced this course?'

The dilemmas that were described indicated some confusion in understanding the difference between ethical dilemmas and the observation of poor practice though some did suggest that the choices that confronted them when being drawn into, or observing, poor practice was the source of the dilemma. Examples of observations of poor practice rather than ethical dilemmas, *per se*, included:

* *On prac I was asked to change a baby without wearing gloves.*
* *Staff not keeping developmental records.*

Comments which 'created' dilemmas from observations of such practice were exemplified in the following terms:

* *When I was an assistant in a 0–3's room and the materials given to the babies were developmentally inappropriate. My dilemma was, should I mention this to the teacher or not.*

Several of the stories provided by the students seemed to include an implicit, if unarticulated, query of 'Should I mention it?'; 'Should I intervene?'; 'Should I report it to someone else?'. And where this can be read into their reports, the dilemmas as they saw them became quite clear. The short descriptions of the professional ethical dilemmas the students had faced were coded into three categories: interactions and practices; abuse; and supervision of students. Again, it was difficult to code responses into discreet categories. It is arguable that those descriptions relating to abuse could similarly have been coded for interactions and practices and so on. Examples of the coded data for each of the categories included:

Interactions and practices

This category of data included those issues relating to confidentiality, staff interactions and staff relationships with parents.

> *An assistant roughly manhandled (sic) a child who was suffering from separation anxiety. The assistant was abusive both physically and verbally. The mother of the child happened to have observed the incident and withdrew her child from care. The assistant declared she had done nothing wrong and had the support of the rest of the staff. But I was in a situation of being the middle man. I saw what the mother saw, but was expected to take the defence of the assistant.*
>
> *The Director of a centre told a boy that home corner was only for girls and that he should do something else.*
>
> *A carer who was comparing two children and their skills to do puzzles.*
>
> *A parent wanted to know about another child's progress and as a student, also as a professional, it was not my position to speak or reveal any confidential information.*
>
> *A parent told me to hit his children when they are misbehaving and since I wouldn't, he questioned what kind of caregiver I was for not hitting the children to make them do the right thing.*
>
> *Staff bitching about other staff in front of me and asking my opinion about them.*

Abuse

The category of 'abuse' included those incidents which related to the perceived physical or emotional abuse of children.

> *In a small group situation, a child was singled out, pulled up by his arm and made to stand in the corner while the teacher yelled at him in front of the other children.*
>
> *I did not believe in the way the children were criticised or put down by the teachers. These children that were from different cultures or backgrounds were particular targets. The teachers continued the judgments, jokes and their comments to me and expected me to feel the same and to treat the children in the same way.*

At a day care centre one staff member told off a child in a way that was quite unpleasant in front of other staff members and all other children and then locked him in a baby chair. But the child wasn't a baby, he was nearly three. Everyone there was told not to communicate with him.

A child being grabbed, dragged by the arm and sat on a 'naughty chair'.

Situation such as when a child has done something inappropriate for their age, for example wet pants. Teacher scolds child and says they should know better and tells them that they are behaving like a baby.

Insisting that a distressed child (under 2) wait 40 minutes for her bottle. She was constantly crying and asking for it, but had to wait for morning tea.

Supervision of students

In terms of the supervision of students, there were examples reported where the students felt that they were put in an invidious position because they were left to cope on their own.

Being left alone by teachers in the nappy room with two babies on first year prac. I did not feel happy about this or trained enough to handle this situation.

Being left alone in the classroom with children.

I was asked to sit with a group of children during morning tea. This was my first visit and I was not sure of what they expected of me. I asked the children to sit down and one child wasn't doing what I said. I asked nicely and then told him. He had a piece of fruit in his mouth and spat it at me. Another teacher came over and took him away.

A group of 3–4-year-old boys kept on swearing at me and other children. At first I was shocked as I didn't know how to deal with it. I felt all I could say was that 'that sort of language isn't used here at daycare'. However, they kept on saying, 'You stupid, fucking slut!'

From this brief selection of responses, it is clear that students are exposed to a range of situations which cause them to be concerned while they are undertaking professional experience in schools and centres. The final four questions on the survey were used to garner some information about the students' self-rankings of how confident they felt in the situations they described, how well they felt they had handled it, how confident they would now feel about handling the situation and finally how well-prepared they feel to handle such ethical dilemmas in the work situation when they are teachers. These results are summarised in figures 2-4 below. The ranking codes for each of the tables are: 1=not at all; 2=limited; 3=developing; 4=quite; and, 5=very.

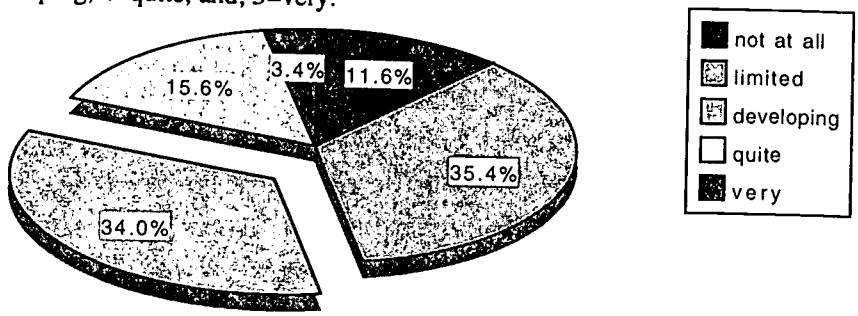

Figure 2: How confident did you feel about knowing what to do in this situation? (*32 cases missing)

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) techniques indicated that students' perception of their knowledge of what to do was correlated with the year of their course (0.06, $p<0.07$), suggesting that students' perceptions of their own ability to handle dilemmas appropriately increases as they progress through their course.

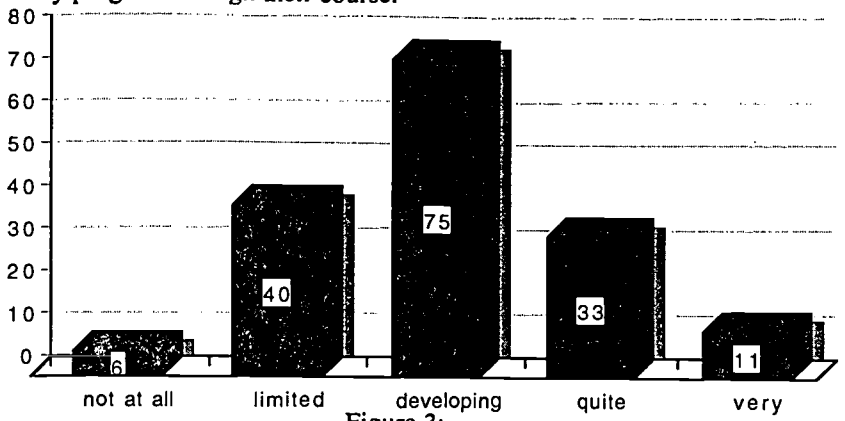

Figure 3:
How prepared do you now feel about your ability to handle difficult ethical situations when you are out on field experience?
(*14 cases missing)

ANOVA techniques again revealed that students' perceptions of their current ability to handle dilemmas in field experiences was highly correlated with the year of their course (0.002, $p<0.005$). Similar to the students' perception of knowledge of what to do, students felt that their ability to apply the knowledge to appropriate action increased as they progressed through their course.

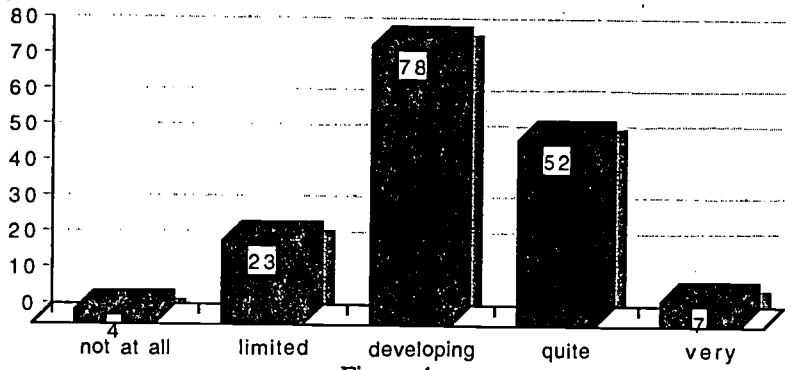

Figure 4:
How prepared do you now feel about your ability to handle difficult ethical situations when you commence work?
(*15 cases missing)

Similar to the previous analyses, students felt more confident about their future ability to handle dilemmas after graduation, as they proceeded through their early childhood courses.

Data analysis indicated a firm ambivalence on the part of the students regarding their confidence in relation to situations involving ethical dilemmas. However, analyses revealed that the level of confidence amongst the students increased according to their succeeding years of study.

STRATEGIES

It is not possible to ensure that students are placed only in 'sanitised' practicum situations, thus it becomes the responsibility of the teacher preparation institution to advise students

about some of the dilemmas they might experience and to assist them with strategies to cope, and perhaps, to institute change. This final section of the paper attempts to offer some strategies in this vein.

Currently, there are several projects underway to facilitate students' and other stakeholders' understanding and practice of ethical behaviours during early childhood fieldwork experiences.

At this point it is necessary to differentiate between those guidelines which relate to general codes of conduct such as the AECA *Code of Ethics* and the *Code of Ethical Conduct* of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and those which relate specifically to ethics in the practicum: *Guidelines for Ethical Practice in Early Childhood Field Experience* developed by the Early Childhood Practicum Council of New South Wales.

The 'Guidelines' developed by the Practicum Council did not evolve in isolation from the AECA code but rather as an adjunct to it with a specific focus on the particular situations which present themselves in the practicum. The 'Guidelines' consider the responsibilities for ethical practice that are applicable to the tertiary institution, the student, the professional colleague and the centre/school and inform each about the expectations held for them and what they might expect of other stakeholders. The strategies which can be employed to introduce the 'Guidelines' to each of the stakeholder groups include information seminars within the university setting and inservice sessions for staff either in individual settings or group inservices which include a number of settings at a time. In developing such strategies, care must be taken to avoid a metropolitan model of information dissemination to ensure the involvement of staff and students in rural and remote locations. The production of a video-recording of examples and discussion topics which is presently in production by members of the Practicum Council will assist in overcoming a little of the tyranny of distance and will also assist as a teaching tool in the preparation of students for the practicum. The 'Guidelines' and video will assist in individual or group preparation of students for field experiences.

Further strategies could involve the encouragement of universities to include the 'Guidelines' within practicum handbooks to ensure dissemination to all cooperating colleagues involved in any given practicum session. This strategy would allow the 'Guidelines' to be available for quick reference during the practicum and provide a focus for debriefing by both staff and students following the practicum session.

CONCLUSION

The results of the survey that was reported on here indicated that students appear to need some direction in firstly determining what constitutes an ethical decision-making situation and secondly, knowing how to deal with it. It is the responsibility of the institution that is preparing students for the early childhood work force to ensure this preparation is as thorough as possible. This would mean inclusion of the study of ethics within professional education subjects. The *Guidelines for Ethical Practice in Early Childhood Field Experience* provides one source for such professional development. Others to be included would be the AECA Code of Ethics as well as consideration of various resource publications which direct attention to the understanding and implementation of ethical guidelines (Fasoli & Woodrow; NAEYC, 1994)

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AUTHORS

Dr Kennece Coombe, Lecturer in Education at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga. Research interests include gender issues, ethics, mentoring, practicum issues and learning organisations in early childhood education.

Linda Newman, Lecturer in Early Childhood Education, University of Western Sydney, Nepean. Research interests include ethids in the practicum, and how children learn.

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Organization/Address: University of Canberra, Faculty of Education, Belconnon ACT 2617, Australia	Telephone: 06-201246 (Australia) FAX: 06-2015056 (Aust)
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