

## **Towards a practical ethics toolkit for educators**

I, like many teachers, recently made the difficult decision to leave teaching in search of a broader scale of my impact on education. To have stayed would have seemed an abdication of my responsibility and potential as a systems level transformational agent during a pivotal era of educational change; and yet, to leave students with whom I had formed a strong relationship and who I knew I could well serve was also by credible ethical standards a dereliction of duty and rejection of possibility for positive change.

In this essay I first situate my experience within the broader moral landscape that educators face and then sketch a vision for three guiding concepts needed in educators' ethical toolkits, drawing inspiration in turn from Heifetz's leadership framework, longtermism, and Lear's radical hope. I conclude that educators navigating a challenging ethical landscape must orient towards being adaptive, imaginative, and radically hopeful.

### **Tragic Questions**

Education is a profession dominated by deontology (rules and responsibility) and virtue ethics (character development) at the level of interpersonal work with students, but is at the systems level overwhelmingly oriented towards narrowly conceived consequentialist outcomes for institutions. In their work with students, teachers constantly invoke responsibilities and virtues and are themselves largely guided by an ethic of responsibility, empathy, and care for every child. Schools, districts, and even parents, however, increasingly prioritize results as measured by academic achievement and financial outcomes.<sup>1</sup> For educators committed to both their students and their institutions - on the grounds of fundamentally different moral frameworks - conflict seems inevitable.

Teachers are thus regularly facing Nussbaum's "tragic questions," where no available action seems morally acceptable.<sup>2</sup> In *When the State Meets the Street*, Bernardo Zaka writes of a teacher caught between his moral principles and the curricular imperatives of his school: "To avoid being a "bad teacher" in the eyes of his administration, Johnson effectively became a bad teacher in his own."<sup>3</sup> Exhausted and disillusioned by this state of affairs, teachers are increasingly choosing to exit, which Liza Herzog in *Reclaiming the System* worries is "only able to send rather blurry signals to organizations" and leaves educators in professional and personal limbo.<sup>4</sup>

Ethical systems are most coherent at the scale of individuals or societies, but become messy for institutions or professionals operating in the middle. These liminal spaces are the domain of *practical* ethics, or decision-making under specific ethical conflict or uncertainty.<sup>5</sup> It is here that educators need a more robust toolkit of ideas to guide their work, especially during this time of rapid societal and technological transformation. In her essay “A morally defensible mission for schools in the 21st century” Nel Noddings plainly states: “We live in an age troubled by social problems that force us to reconsider what we do in schools.”<sup>6</sup> Educators today are thus operating *institutionally* in a chaotic middleground and *temporally* within a period of rapid destabilization in the profession, and need a new set of conceptual maps to help them navigate the increasingly complicated ethical terrain. I propose below three such maps as practical orientations that would help educators in modern ethical sensemaking.

### **Adaptability**

Ronald Heifetz writes that situations “not amenable to authoritative know-how” require leadership and that adaptive leaders are successful thanks to ongoing reality testing, tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity, and taking responsibility for tough trade-offs.<sup>7</sup> This must be the work that aspiring educational leaders and innovators strive for, even in situations where they do not hold formal authority. These leaders seek integrative and collective solutions, asking what competencies, values, and wisdom are essential to keep from the past while fully accepting that they will not be sufficient for the challenges of the future. Students themselves are models of adaptability, and teachers can look to them for support in anticipating the coming adaptive challenges.

### **Imagination**

Educators need new ways to understand the good that they do with their work. At the interpersonal level, Paul Bloom pushes back against the sustainability and utility of an ethics of empathy, noting that it is insensitive to scale and “irrational, arbitrary, and self-destructive,” but, thankfully, “not the only force that motivates kindness.”<sup>8</sup> An idea like longtermism - that future people matter morally and there may be lots of them - can provide educators with a wider lens through which to understand their work as agents of good for

the future into which children will grow up. Will MacAskill highlights the centrality of imagination in this process: “If we anchor our sense of humanity’s potential to a fixed-up version of our present world, we risk dramatically underestimating just how good life in the future could be.”<sup>9</sup> This call for imagination expands rather than imposes upon a view like Nodding’s, that: “our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people.”<sup>10</sup> An increasingly imaginative stance towards education could help educators satisfy noble aims like this in new ways and at greater scale.

## **Radical Hope**

Jonathan Lear’s *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* documents a destruction of Native Americans categorically more violent and absolute than anything happening in mainstream education, but nonetheless provides educators a valuable perspective for understanding the uncertainty that drives so much fear and anxiety among students today. His eponymous understanding of hope is radical because “it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is.”<sup>11</sup> This would be a wildly powerful concept to equip teachers with as they navigate technological breakthroughs and AI disruption, societal transformations, and other as yet unknown unknowns that are surely soon to come.

## **Learning from Students**

Youth themselves are humanity’s epicenter of adaptability, imagination, and radical hope, so educators must look to them for wisdom and inspiration as we orient towards these principles in our ethical decision making. Appeal to these ideas alone will not always illuminate right or acceptable answers, but they can provide educators with a richer understanding for how to navigate the moral challenges of our field.

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<sup>1</sup> Weissbourd, R. and Jones, S., (2014). The children we mean to raise: The real messages adults are sending about values. Making Caring Common.

<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). The Costs of Tragedy: Some Moral Limits of Cost-Benefit Analysis. *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 29(2), 1005-1036.

<sup>3</sup> p. 206, Zacka, B. (2017). *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>4</sup> p. 196, Herzog, L. (2018). Self and Role: Transformational Agency in Organizations. In *Reclaiming the System: Moral Responsibility, Divided Labour, and the Role of Organizations in Society*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> What is Practical Ethics? (297). In *Ethics at Harvard 1987–2007*. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from <https://ethics.harvard.edu/what-practical-ethics>

<sup>6</sup> p. 368, Noddings, N. (1995). A morally defensible mission for schools in the 21st century. *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1995, 76(5), pp. 365-368.

<sup>7</sup> p. 14, Heifetz, R. (2010). Leadership. In R. Couto (Ed.), *Political and Civic Leadership: A Handbook* (pp. 12-23). Sage.

<sup>8</sup> Bloom, P. (2014). Against Empathy. *Boston Review*. Retrieved from <http://www.bostonreview.net/forum/paul-bloom-against-empathy>

<sup>9</sup> pp. 20 -21, William McAskill, "The Case for Longtermism," Chapter 1 in *What We Owe the Future*

<sup>10</sup> p. 366, Noddings, N. (1995). A morally defensible mission for schools in the 21st century. *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1995, 76(5), pp. 365-368.

<sup>11</sup> p. 103, Lear, J. (2006). *Radical hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation*. Harvard University Press.