



# Preparing university students for the moral responsibility of early years education

Carla Solvason, Geoffrey Elliott & Harriet Cunliffe

To cite this article: Carla Solvason, Geoffrey Elliott & Harriet Cunliffe (2021): Preparing university students for the moral responsibility of early years education, Journal of Education for Teaching, DOI: [10.1080/02607476.2021.1989982](https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2021.1989982)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2021.1989982>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 10 Oct 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Preparing university students for the moral responsibility of early years education

Carla Solvason, Geoffrey Elliott and Harriet Cunliffe

School of Education, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

## ABSTRACT

This research collected the voices of students in a UK university, better to understand their perception of their 'moral responsibility' as trainee early years educators. The UK Early Years Framework states that practitioners will instil in young children an understanding of what is 'right and wrong'. This is a formidable expectation in itself; yet early years educators are also expected to work ethically, sensitively and respectfully with a wide network of colleagues and stakeholders. This research, carried out through a fully anonymised survey, provided the opportunity for some student teachers to share that where ethical responsibility was concerned, they *just didn't get it*. The research found that an understanding was often assumed by tutors and that a more conscious effort needed to be made more explicitly to explore these concepts, and the associated lexicon, within module content.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 December 2020  
Accepted 19 May 2021

## KEYWORDS

Teacher training; moral responsibility; early years; teacher preparation; ethics

## Introduction

If values may be seen as the guiding principles we live by, and if virtues may be understood as the transformation of those values into living practices, then the choices we make about these things transform into personal ethics that inform our ways of living. (McNiff 2015, 1)

Those of us involved in training the future early years education (EYE) workforce, prepare student teachers for teaching roles that are loaded with expectations of high moral standing and virtuosity; yet we do this within a modern culture in which such standards are often fluid or even ethereal. We prepare student teachers within a culture where individuals' streams of consciousness are shared instantaneously, with limited censorship of 'appropriateness', on numerous social media platforms (Czarniawska 2013). What is and what is not classed as acceptable behaviour shifts daily; the lines have become increasingly blurred. It was consideration of this lack of clarity that prompted the research that follows.

Our concern was that as tutors in Higher Education (HE) in the UK, on a practice-based course, we can often assume that student teachers understand what it means to take on the moral or ethical responsibility of their teaching roles (Solvason 2016, 45). We presume that it is clear to them what it means to 'Demonstrate and model the positive values, attitudes and behaviours expected of children' as outlined by their teaching

standards (National College for Teaching and Leadership 2013, 2) and that they will be clear what, exactly, this entails. We anticipate that student teachers are ready to deal with the requirements of confidentiality intrinsic to their daily role, as well as the complex ethical parameters of research. We tend to discuss concepts theoretically, based upon the ideas of other academics, just like any other aspect of knowledge to be imparted. But do our student teachers, most of whom have grown up in a culture which is saturated by the complex and borderless world of social media, share our understanding of their professional ethical responsibility, or is there a generational divide? After all, there are 'an infinite number of ways of living and being ethical' (Bazzul 2018, 474). Through this research our aim was to discover our student teachers' perceptions of their own moral responsibility as early years teachers (EYTs), in order better to prepare them for their future role.

Within this paper we aim to raise awareness of the ethical basis of the practice of education, and contribute, through our scholarship, to a better understanding of the lived experience of student teachers and their specific needs, as they prepare for a role of ethical and moral responsibility. We agree with Koc and Buzzelli (2014, 28) that teachers are the main protagonists of the moral stories in schools, 'because the practical life in a classroom may include a variety of specific situations that require teachers' active moral thinking'. We also acknowledge the significant responsibility that our student teachers face, in the fact that 'what [they] do or abstain from doing is not indifferent to the life of others' (Bauman 2000, 1). Because of this we question why teaching has largely been conceived as an instrumental activity in Western cultures (Carr 2000, 2003), free from moral and ethical influence; a naive approach which overlooks the complex decisions about what is 'good or right' that our EYTs face day-to-day in their care for those perceived to be the most vulnerable in our society. We also ask whether this tendency to overlook a key aspect of their professional responsibility during their training leads to student teachers feeling 'ill-equipped, isolated and unsupported in navigating ethical realities' (Cliffe and Solvason 2021, *no page*).

This research is a small-scale case study, in the sense that it focuses upon a specific group of student teachers on one course at a single university; but it still provides some insight into the lived experience of 'ethical responsibility' upon those who are living it (Denzin and Lincoln 2018) within their academic studies. In this case, the actors are students training to be early years teachers (many of whom will take up posts in nurseries and similar pre-school settings), on a three-year Bachelor of Arts course at a university in central England. Dahlberg and Moss (2005, 66) define ethics as the 'categorical distinction between right and wrong' and this is how the phrase is used within this discussion, whilst still acknowledging that in reality there are countless ways of acting ethically (Bazzul 2018, 474) or perceiving ethical behaviour.

Early Education created a *Code of Ethics* for early years educators in the UK. This *Code of Ethics* (Early Education 2011) sets out *fifty* ethical standards for early years educators. The expectation is that ethics saturates every aspect of an EYT's role, it is at the core of what they do. Cliffe and Solvason (2021) discuss how the very nature of EYE is built upon intrinsic ethical and moral values and principles. In this research we aimed to discover how (or even whether) student teachers comprehend this responsibility.

The data used in this discussion is limited, this is because the research was conducted over the time-period when the Covid-19 pandemic peaked. Shortly after the start of this research, as Covid-19 impacted, we could have pressed on, urging student teachers still to complete planned focus group interviews via media platforms. But this was a time of great anxiety and upheaval and that would have been neither ethical nor kind. With a genuine belief that the purpose of research is to bring about good (Bloor 2010) and that researchers have a responsibility to care (Costley, Elliott, and Gibbs 2010) we chose, instead, to tread softly. The approaches taken, and changes made, are further explained in the methodology section.

As we feared, because of the pandemic, responses were limited. The issue of low survey response rates in our field of higher education has been thoroughly examined in the theoretical literature and we agree with Nulty's (2008) view that where the aim of a survey is to enhance educational practice, 'the response rate is technically irrelevant'. As such we were happy to gain a glimpse of the 'beliefs, experiences and meaning systems' (Brink 1993, 35) of a modest number of student teachers through survey, and to use that as a platform from which to consider our teaching, and to identify avenues for future investigation. Our findings do not represent the entire sample, but they do, at least, raise points for further consideration. We employ the words 'ethical' and 'moral' interchangeably throughout this work, just as they are used in much of the teaching literature and just as they would be used within teaching sessions.

## Literature review

The centrality of moral purpose in human beings has, since early times, been one of the cornerstones of philosophy in general (Kant 1998), and the philosophy of education, in particular (Dewey 1909; Peters 1966; Pring 2001). There exists a compelling body of theoretical literature that draws attention to the ethical basis of teaching (Aubrey et al. 2000; Carr 2000; Campbell 2008; Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Hansen 2001; Malone 2020; Niesche and Haase 2012). James, Davison, and Lewis (2005, 20), for example, discuss how those that teach must have 'good character', that those responsible for moulding the minds of the young should have 'better motives than ordinary people'. Nowhere is this concern more compelling than in the field of EYE, which combines not only responsibility for cognitive development and character formation but a duty of *care*. Taggart (2011) has been influential amongst a number of scholars (for example Page 2011; Shin 2015; Solvason 2018) in arguing that 'work with young children has a moral seriousness akin to that of other "caring professions" and that, along with skills and competence, this dimension needs to be a central plank of professionalism'. This concern goes far beyond abiding by formal codes of ethics, most often manifest in confidentiality and anonymity, to the notion of *moral character*. Ethics frameworks, although a useful starting point for research, are not sufficiently nuanced to deal with the complex circumstances of everyday interactions and relationships between individuals, in unique and diverse professional settings (Banks and Gallagher 2009; Cliffe and Solvason 2021; Solvason, Cliffe, and Bailey 2019). Aubrey et al. (2000) discuss how, despite the complexity of this area, developing an understanding of ethical behaviours remains conspicuously absent from teacher preparation programmes; or, as Malone (2020) points out, it is rarely addressed in any depth.

### **Ethicality – intrinsic or extrinsic?**

There is relatively little evidence in the theoretical literature as to what approaches may be effective in preparing teachers for addressing ethical and moral issues in the classroom. Despite the prevalence of a discourse of love and care (Liston and Garrison 2004) and the acceptance of the moral nature of teaching (Stenberg et al. 2014), Taggart (2011) argues that: ‘such virtues as care, courage, hope and wisdom are rarely named, discussed and cultivated within professional development and as a result, care comes to be understood as a largely adventitious ingredient in the personality of the successful practitioner’. Virtues are simply part of a ‘good’ nature; suggesting that ethical practitioners are born, not trained.

As such, it remains unclear in literature whether the ‘skills’ of morality or ethicality should be a facet of EYE practitioner training, or whether they are purely happenstance. Davies and Heyward (2019, 379) warn that changing student teachers’ values and beliefs is fraught with difficulty and urge teacher educators to move away from a focus on students’ good character and goodwill, since these are insufficient for ethically responsible professional conduct. Instead, they advocate curricula that promote grappling with ethical problems intellectually, curricula that ‘promotes students’ cognitive moral judgment development, making them more likely to find the most rationally defensible solutions to ethical dilemmas’.

Some studies reviewed, such as Koc and Buzzelli (2014, 29), point to a disturbing unpreparedness amongst those choosing to enter the education and care professions for this moral facet of their work, with the result that both new and serving teachers ‘are often unaware of the moral aspects of classroom life, or if cognizant of them, may not know effective ways of resolving the moral dilemmas they face’. And yet, ‘teachers, by virtue of the power they hold in schools, are constantly required to make ethical choices about the “right” way to proceed in a myriad of situations’ (ibid). Elfer (2015) refers to EYE as emotional labour. Unpreparedness for this aspect of an EYT’s responsibility can, as Taggart (2011) warns, lead to crippling feelings of anxiety and incompetence.

The complexities of ethical dilemmas are vast, due to their contextual and fluid nature. Each generation of EYTs will be faced with a range of emerging dilemmas that reflect the unique political, historical, and social settings of their practice. This range of contextual factors means that a formulaic approach to ‘preparing trainees, even when based upon the mindfulness and self-awareness identified in Haddad’s (2005) study, may be insufficient. Instead, our time working with EYE students might be better spent listening and building relationships with students in order to achieve a better understanding of *their* situations and events. Through sharing it is possible to reduce the feelings of isolation and inadequacy that student teachers can feel when ‘navigating ethical realities’ (Cliffe and Solvason 2021, *no page*). This is where empathetic reflective practice becomes key.

### **The role of reflection in EYE preparation**

Reflective practice is already a key strand in EYE training in England. In fact, the first of all the subject-specific skills outlined in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Subject Benchmarks for Early Childhood Studies (QAA 2019, 9) is: ‘reflect upon a range of psychological, sociological, health, historical and philosophical perspectives and consider

how these underpin different understandings of babies and young children and childhood'. Yet reflection is notably absent from the curricula of those student teachers preparing to teach school-aged children in the UK, and it would seem in the US, where Cummings et al. (2001) found that students in the field of teacher education had lower levels of reflection and moral reasoning than those of students on other courses, for example, history or sociology. They reasoned that this was due to trainee teachers being *passive* implementers of curricula.

Yet this expectation of conformity, or passivity, is completely at odds with an EYE curriculum, which claims to celebrate the uniqueness of every child and their specific context and needs (Department for Education 2020). An instrumental approach to EYE also fails to recognise that a lived ethicality, built upon the fluidity of relationships, is multifaceted and challenging and does not always sit comfortably within the prescribed parameters of legislation (Moss 2019, 57). As such, EYTs straddle two competing contexts, the responsive environment of individualised care and the prescribed expectations of national curricula.

In this literature exploring the moral and ethical landscape of the EYE curriculum and the role of the EYT we believe that a significant gap is the paucity of theoretical or empirical exploration into the moral and ethical understanding of EYE students. We argue that suitable preparation for EYEs to work effectively in settings must take into account students' own understandings and awareness of ethical and moral issues as this will be central to their day-to-day practice. If not prepared then we place the 'professional integrity and self-esteem' of our fledgling EYTs at risk (Ribers 2018, 896).

## Methodology

The university in which this research took place is medium-sized and serves a very mixed range of students; from those living locally with parents (in the wide range of urban, suburban and rural locales within a short distance of the university), to those who have moved from other areas of the UK or even from other countries, to live in university accommodation whilst studying. Although gender is not a facet of this research discussion, it just so happens that all current students in this research sample ( $n=75$ ), are female.

Teachers are frequently viewed as implementers, deliverers of curricula, not *true* academics (McNiff 2012, 131) but, additionally, EYTs are frequently additionally perceived as 'less than' (Nutbrown 2013, 8) other educationalists within academic and policy discourse. This research was an attempt to encourage EYE practitioners to speak and to recognise that they have the intellectual freedom to challenge McNiff (2012) and to change their own educational experience, and the experience of EYTs to follow. If, as tutors, we could better understand their perspective, then we would be better placed to work with them to design a curriculum that could better support their professional development.

Because we wished to approach our topic through the lens of the student practitioner, our research took an interpretivist approach to accessing the 'rich and contextually situated understandings' (McChesney and Aldridge 2019, 227) of our student teachers in relation to their ethical responsibility as practitioners, through a case study approach. We focused upon qualitative data as 'there are areas of social reality which such statistics cannot measure' (Silverman 2001, 32). Case studies are not intended to be universally

applicable, instead they are illuminating, providing detailed insights into the chosen topic within the study context (Wellington 2015). The holistic accounts shared can then form the basis of reflections, in order to improve practice (Ebbutt, Worrall, and Robson 2000) but can also identify questions for further deliberation. Our enquiry has a single, and we believe critical, purpose, to enable our student teachers to feel confident in pedagogical contexts that will inevitably present them with complex and challenging moral choices (Sanger and Osguthorpe 2011).

Our original research was planned around gaining initial views through survey and then probing these further through focus groups. We were fortunate enough to have a research student working with us on the research who could neutrally facilitate the discussion groups and enable an open space for sharing. The idea was to gain 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) of our students' perception of their own moral responsibility within their own practice experience contexts. However, as has already been touched upon in the introduction, it was not possible to proceed with the focus groups during a period of extreme anxiety and instability. We acknowledge that this curtailed our access to fuller descriptions and has meant working with a 'thinner' range of data obtained only through survey.

The questions that we asked the student teachers were developed from our own teaching and wider professional experience, our own and others' work on the ethical basis of learning, teaching and management, and from an interest in social justice. Our aim was that through better understanding the student perspective we could better fulfil our responsibility to prepare them for the emotional demands of practice. As such we designed a set of questions which we hoped would begin to probe this unexplored aspect to heighten student teachers' critical self-awareness in relation to ethics and moral responsibility. Full ethical clearance was obtained by the university prior to the research and the British Educational Research Association (2018) *Ethical Guidelines* were closely followed.

The questions were delivered through anonymous online survey, which, as Harcourt and Sargeant (2012) argue, removes some of the pressures of being a research participant. Gallagher (2008, 25) recognises the 'domination and subordination' roles that exist between teacher and child and we, as tutors, are aware that these often persist into higher education. Despite every assurance offered through our detailed Participant Information Sheet, that all views would be valued and helpful to our understanding as tutors, we acknowledge that inevitably power differentials exist between student and tutor and that this may have influenced responses.

The survey comprised a mixture of closed and open questions. The closed questions required a simple yes/no response. Examples include: 'Have you encountered the term "moral responsibility" before arriving at university?' and 'Do you find any particular aspects of this moral responsibility problematic?' More open-ended questions provided the richness of data necessary to tap into the 'contextually situated understandings' (McChesney and Aldridge 2019, 227) of the students. These questions asked them to explain what elements of their previous education had prepared them for this responsibility, or to explain *why* they may have found the responsibility problematic.

Only 12 of the 75 student teachers responded. There are several possible reasons for the relatively low response rate (in comparison with our usual module feedback), including the onset of the turmoil brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, but there may also

have been apathy towards subject matter which they perceived *as not being relevant to them*. If this were the case, then the absence of data becomes important data. After a period of immersion and reflection the data collected were reduced into key themes (Wellington 2015) through a data reduction grid. This grid identified all aspects emerging from the data which appeared to be significant, and then drew together all instances within the data which evidenced this. This visual representation of data facilitated the illuminating of those themes that were most prevalent. The themes benefitted from the verification of all three researchers to generate reliability (Geertz 1973) and are explored below. We again acknowledge the limits of this data and present them as a starting point for future explorations. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

## Data presentation and analysis

### Former experience

Intriguingly, only a very small number (two) of our sample had encountered the term ‘moral responsibility’ before they joined the BA course. However, on drilling further into the data, it was clear that once they had begun their programme, the term had connotations for most students. Lucy honestly shared that she had no idea what the term meant, admitting ‘I have never heard of it before’, whilst Danielle was ‘not sure’. Ten students were able to interpret moral responsibility in terms of their own situation, although these responses varied widely, from being reliable to having a positive influence:

- ‘responsibility to do your work and turn up in lectures’ [Megan]
- ‘being responsible in something you believe in’ [Emma]
- ‘what I need to do to take control of my own actions and work’ [Abbie]
- ‘to bring about good’ [Katie]
- ‘having a duty to do the right thing’ [Amandeep]
- ‘shared responsibility’ [Kirtee].

Whilst considering whether any of the students’ education to date had prepared them for a role of moral responsibility, we found that they drew upon a broad range of experiences. One student tracked right back to her primary school, where ‘we learn about our morals and what society expects of us, and this then forms part of our moral responsibility’ [Katie]. However, most respondents identified their more recent teaching placement environments as more influential. For example, Leela shared how: ‘while at work we have had times where we have done something because of our moral responsibility and not because the responsibility lies on us to’. Hannah identified the process of working in teams as particularly influential, in that she ‘learned how important it is to be ethical at work’ and that ‘ethicality [was] a significant part of integrated working’. Safeguarding training had taught Clare ‘about the ethical procedures and what my moral responsibility within this work is, as a whole, and what I need to be mindful of’. Interestingly these responses span all aspects of morality, from being ‘a good person’ to following ethical and safeguarding frameworks. But significant for us as tutors is that they are firmly based in practice, not study.



### *Acceptance of responsibility*

Although two-thirds of our sample had not considered that moral responsibility would be part of their training course, there were no students who stated that they were *not* happy to take on moral responsibility as practitioners. In fact, Abbie explained that ‘understanding the importance of it now being at university I am happy to take it on’. It is clear from the data that the drivers for students to take on moral responsibility are extremely varied. Several students related it to living a ‘good life’, with responses including that it was: ‘part of being a virtuous human being [Katie]’ or ‘part of my day-to-day responsibilities’ [Kiran]; whilst for others, the focus was more clearly upon their practitioner responsibilities. Responses included:

- Moral responsibility is important and keeps me and everyone I work with safe so I am happy to do what I can to stay morally responsible [Clare]
- Within Early Years we all have a duty to do good [Amandeep]
- We are expected to be professional and ensure that children are safe. I feel that this is something that should be more common sense than a responsibility [Lucy].
- I will make sure I practice ethicality at all times [Hannah].

The fact that ‘safety’ is mentioned twice here suggests that some students believe there to be a connection between morality, or ethicality and keeping themselves and others safe. Not all students were able to articulate an understanding of their moral responsibility, though, with one remaining ‘unsure what it means’ [Kirtee].

### *Barriers to fulfilling responsibility*

We were interested whether any of our students found the concept of moral responsibility as educators particularly problematic. Unsurprisingly, given the complexity of moral responsibility and, as we argue in this paper, the potential unpreparedness of our students to realise the full implications for their teaching practice, a range of problems surfaced. Two of these, in particular, warrant further exploration. For Katie, there was tension between extrinsic and intrinsic influences, as she explained ‘sometimes you are unable to fulfil what you perceive as your moral responsibility due to external forces or pressures’. This suggests that far from extrinsic legislative and policy structures providing an ethical scaffold, they can sometimes cause conflict. And Emma explained that because of the range of responsibilities that early childhood practitioners are expected to take on, ‘sometimes you can take on too much or your moral responsibilities can lose meaning’. It would have been fascinating to have explored what, exactly, Emma meant by this through further discussion. It would also be interesting to unpack the implications of Clare’s response where she shared that Early Childhood Education and Care ‘is always changing and that makes it hard to keep up within the sector’. She seemed to equate ‘moral responsibility’ with fulfilling the requirements of EY policy, which has changed rapidly over recent years; to perceive it as an extrinsic set of rules to be followed. Kirtee remained ambiguous, admitting that she didn’t ‘know if it (moral responsibility) can cause problems’ whilst Abbie reported with clarity, ‘I think it is simple to take responsibility, and once understanding what responsibility is needed, I believe it is simple’.

### *How we prepared students*

It was crucial to find out whether we sufficiently addressed moral responsibility in our teaching, and it was reassuring to find that three-quarters of our sample thought that we did. However, on closer examination, the students' responses reveal some markedly different perceptions about moral responsibility. These differences range from lack of understanding both before and during their course, with some admitting that they were 'still unaware of what moral responsibility is' [Kirtee], or 'I'm not sure I 100% understand it' [Leela], to students who appear quite au fait with the idea of moral responsibility, such as Katie stating that 'it is an embedded aspect of our practice and is therefore a key component to the course'. Crucially, Lucy shared that she had:

... never heard of the term until today so it's not something which is talked about as a whole. It seems more like an expectation that people should know about it when in fact they might not.

This suggests that discourses around ethical responsibility need to be less 'embedded' and that the lexicon of ethicality and morality needs to be unpacked more explicitly by tutors on the course.

Moral responsibility as a dynamic concept comes through in Emma's response when she says: 'I believe when you become more academic you gain more about yourself which means you can work towards your moral responsibilities'. It is highly likely that the 'more academic' phrase used here relates, in fact, to the concept of reflection, which is embedded throughout the BA in EYE. Returning to the theme of complexity, though, one student recognised that moral responsibility is not a fixed or static notion. She explained:

[Moral responsibility] is covered in every year of teaching and the importance of it is made clear however I think it is a hard thing to be taught and made prepared for. It is constantly changing and something I will have to continue my learning in whilst I am working in this sector [Clare].

This reflects the concept of ethics as a personally experienced and created notion that cannot be grasped through extrinsic expectations or regulations.

### **Discussion and emerging conclusions**

Because only 17% of our students responded to this survey, with at least two of those sharing that they still didn't really 'get' the idea of moral responsibility, it does raise the question of how many more students may have opted not to complete the survey because they did not fully understand the focus; or how many felt that this was a topic that did not entirely apply to them. The word 'moral' was purposefully used in the survey, so that it did not become conflated with the ethical aspects of research, but in hindsight we may have made presumptions about the students' understanding of this term. This may be an example of the generational divide. Perhaps this was why some students were not able to recognise that they are actually engaging with it on their course; it is an example of the 'mystery', or the 'intangibles' that Campbell (2008) referred to. Or it may be that moral decisions and ethical thinking are simply something that is 'done' within 'the practical life in a classroom' (Koc and Buzzelli 2014, 28)

and because we do not carve out sufficient space within our modules to properly unpack those practice experiences, that is where they stay. A small number of students on our course find it particularly difficult to make cognitive links between the practical and the theoretical, and the data would suggest that such is the case with ethical and moral issues. This highlights a gap in our teaching, where, as tutors, we should use more contextually experienced examples to fully explore the phrases that we are using through their multiple manifestations in practice.

Key data to emerge were those that indicated that students sometimes felt 'pressures' not to fulfil moral responsibility. Difficulties which may prevent students from acting in a morally responsible way certainly require further investigation. The concept of taking on so many responsibilities that they lose meaning, or being hampered by changes in the sector are ambiguous. How would these factors stop students from making the 'right' decisions? What did the students mean, exactly, by the phrases that they used? Although we were not able to explore these aspects more thoroughly through the planned focus group interviews, they do give us starting points for discussion with our students, and for further research.

The data collected for this study, although limited, does suggest that the researchers' fears were founded. There is a tendency to thread a lexicon of morality, or ethicality throughout our pedagogy, without stopping to consider the student perception of this. As tutors we can sometimes make assumptions, for example that by including the word 'ethical' in a set of learning outcomes students will osmotically absorb the vast complexity that the term represents (Sanger and Osguthorpe 2011, 385). We can assume that the links between ethicality and moral responsibility are as obvious to students as they are to us as tutors. Our data reinforces that this is not the case.

Reflecting on the literature, and the glimpse that we gained of student perception, it is clear that we, as tutors, need to do two key things. First, we need to spend more time exploring the students' practical experiences; helping students to understand what an ethical or moral issue can 'look like' in practice and the emotions related to that. We need to model making the cognitive links between the students' experiences in practice and the language of the ethicality literature. We need to develop a shared understanding of lexicon as a basis for meaningful discussion and reflection. Then, by 'openly discussing and analysing the factors that contribute to the emergence of ethical dilemmas' our students can 'develop greater confidence in being efficacious ethical decision-makers' (Sanger and Osguthorpe 2011, 385). In this way, when they graduate as independent professionals, they will be more prepared with 'effective ways of resolving the moral dilemmas they face' (Koc and Buzzelli 2014, 29).

By better understanding what an ethical or moral dilemma might *look*, or perhaps more importantly, *feel* like when in practice, students will be better placed to decide how they should act; realising that ethics is personal and interpersonal and requires prioritising 'individual responsibilities and relationships, over unification and legislative codes and regulatory guidelines' (Cliffe and Solvason 2021, *no page*). Although, in saying this, we do empathise with Punch's (1994) conclusion that ethics is a swamp which it is impossible to chart on a map. Without a clear idea of what might arise we cannot begin to advise the direction of travel, but we can begin to broaden our knowledge through the exploration of similar instances.

The second thing that we need to do as tutors is to listen more and talk less. We need better to understand that whilst we may be able to cite a range of theory, if this does not resonate with the students' lived reality, then it is meaningless. Rather than 'delivering'

what we believe to be important lessons about ethicality, we should encourage understanding by building upon the students' 'personal beliefs about the moral nature of teaching' (Stenberg et al. 2014, 215), making opportunities to listen to their experiences. By doing this, we model for our students that in order to make the best decisions about how we treat people, we need to understand how things look from where they are standing. We also model that regardless of context, all deserve a voice when deciding what is 'right or wrong', not just those with the privilege of power (Freire 1994).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## References

- Aubrey, et al. 2000 *Early Childhood Educational Research: Issues in Methodology and Ethics*. London: Routledge.
- Banks, S., and A. Gallagher. 2009. *Ethics in Professional Life: Virtues for Health and Social Care*. London: Palgrave.
- Bauman, Z. 2000. "Ethics of Individuals." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 25 (1): 1–11. doi:10.2307/3341912.
- Bazzul, J. 2018. "Ethics, Subjectivity, and Sociomaterial Assemblages: Two Important Directions and Methodological Tensions." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37 (5): 467–480. doi:10.1007/s11217-018-9605-8.
- Bloor, M. 2010. "The Researcher's Obligation to Bring about Good." *Qualitative Social Work* 9 (1): 117–120. doi:10.1177/1473325009355616.
- Brink, H. 1993. "Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research." *Curationis* 16 (2): 35–38. doi:10.4102/curationis.v16i2.1396.
- Campbell, E. 2008. "The Ethics of Teaching as a Moral Profession." *Curriculum Inquiry* 38 (4): 357–385. doi:10.1111/j.1467-873X.2008.00414.x.
- Carr, D. 2000. *Professionalism and Ethics in Teaching*. London: Routledge.
- Carr, D. 2003. "Moral Educational Implications of Rival Conceptions of Education and the Role of the Teacher." *Journal of Moral Education* 32 (3): 219–232. doi:10.1080/0305724032000136653.
- Cliffe, J., and C. Solvason. 2021. "The Messiness of Ethics in Education." *Journal of Academic Ethics*. doi:10.1007/s10805-021-09402-8.
- Costley, C., G. Elliott, and P. Gibbs. 2010. *Doing Work Based Research: Approaches to Enquiry for Insider-Researchers*. London: SAGE.
- Cummings, R., L. Dyas, C. D. Maddux, and A. Kochman. 2001. "Principled Moral Reasoning and Behavior of Preservice Teacher Education Students." *American Educational Research Journal* 38 (1): 143–158. doi:10.3102/00028312038001143.
- Czarniawska, B. 2013. "Cyberwork: Cybernization and Cyborgization in News Agencies". Paper presented at the 8th Researching Work and Learning Conference, Stirling.
- Dahlberg, G., and P. Moss. 2005. *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. Oxford: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Davies, M., and P. Heyward. 2019. "Between A Hard Place and A Hard Place: A Study of Ethical Dilemmas Experienced by Student Teachers while on Practicum." *British Educational Research Journal* 45 (2): 372–387. doi:10.1002/berj.3505.
- Denzin, N.K., and Y.S. Lincoln. 2018. "The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research." In *Fifth Edn*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Department for Education. 2020. "Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage". Accessed 02 July 2020". London: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/896810/EYFS\\_Early\\_Adopter\\_Framework.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/896810/EYFS_Early_Adopter_Framework.pdf)

- Dewey, J. 1909. *Moral Principles in Education*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Early Childhood Education. 2012. "Development Matters". London: <https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Development%20Matters%20in%20the%20Early%20Years%20Foundation%20Stage%20-%20FINAL.pdf>
- Ebbutt, D., N. Worrall, and R. Robson. 2000. "Educational Research Partnership: Differences and Tensions at the Interface between the Professional Cultures of Practitioners in Schools and Researchers in Higher Education." *Teacher Development* 4 (3): 319–338. doi:10.1080/1366453000200129.
- Education, Early. 2011. "Code of Ethics. Accessed 03 April 2020. <https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf><https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf>" <https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf>
- Elder, P. 2015. "Emotional Aspects of Nursery Policy and Practice –progress and Prospect." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 23 (4): 497–511. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2013.798464.
- Freire, P. 1994. *Reprinted 2014. Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Bloomsbury Revelations.
- Gallagher, M. 2008. "Power Is Not an Evil: Rethinking Power in Participatory Methods." *Children's Geographies* 6 (2): 137–150. doi:10.1080/14733280801963045.
- Geertz, C. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief* 3: 143–168.
- Haddad, A. 2005. "Teaching for Enduring Understandings in Ethics." *Journal of Physical Therapy Education* 19 (3): 73–77. doi:10.1097/00001416-200510000-00010.
- Hansen, D. T. 2001. *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching: Towards a Teacher's Creed*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Harcourt, D., and J. Sargeant. 2012. *Doing Ethical Research with Children*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education.
- James, A., J. Davison, and M. Lewis. 2005. *Professional Values and Practice: Achieving the Standards for QTS*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Kant, I. 1998. *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: Critical Essays*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. (Original work published in 1785).
- Koc, K., and C. Buzzelli. 2014. "Turkish Teachers' Accounts of Moral Dilemmas in Early Childhood Settings." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 14 (1): 28–42. doi:10.1177/1476718X14523751.
- Liston, D., and J. Garrison. 2004. *Teaching, Learning and Loving: Reclaiming Passion in Educational Practice*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Malone, D. M. 2020. "Ethics Education in Teacher Preparation: A Case for Stakeholder Responsibility." *Ethics and Education* 15 (1): 77–97. doi:10.1080/17449642.2019.1700447.
- McChesney, K., and J. Aldridge. 2019. "Weaving an Interpretivist Stance Throughout Mixed Methods Research." *International Journal of Research and Method in Education* 42 (3): 225–238. doi:10.1080/1743727X.2019.1590811.
- McNiff, J. 2012. "Travels around Identity: Transforming Cultures of Learned Colonisation." *Educational Action Research: Narrative Inquiry and Action Research* 20 (1): 129–146. doi:10.1080/09650792.2012.647751.
- McNiff, J. 2015. "Editorial." *Educational Action Research* 23 (1): 1–3. doi:10.1080/09650792.2014.994341.
- Moss, P. 2019. *Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood*. London: Routledge.
- National College for Teaching and Leadership 2013. "Teachers' Standards (Early Years)" Accessed 23 April 2020". [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/211646/Early\\_Years\\_Teachers\\_\\_Standards.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/211646/Early_Years_Teachers__Standards.pdf)
- Niesche, R., and M. Haase. 2012. "Emotions and Ethics: A Foucauldian Framework for Becoming an Ethical Educator." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44 (3): 276–288. doi:10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00655.x.
- Nulty, D. 2008. "The Adequacy of Response Rates to Online and Paper Surveys: What Can Be Done?" *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 33 (3): 301–314. doi:10.1080/02602930701293231.

- Nutbrown, C. 2013. "Shaking the Foundations of Quality? Why 'Childcare' Policy Must Not Lead to Poor-quality Early Education and Care". Retrieved from 21st October 2020, [http://www.crec.co.uk/docs/Shaking\\_the\\_foundations\\_of\\_quality.pdf](http://www.crec.co.uk/docs/Shaking_the_foundations_of_quality.pdf)
- Page, J. 2011. "Do Mothers Want Professional Carers to Love Their Babies?" *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 9 (3): 310–323. doi:10.1177/1476718X11407980.
- Peters, R. S. 1966. *Ethics and Education*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Pring, R. 2001. "Education as a Moral Practice." *Journal of Moral Education* 30 (2): 102–112. doi:10.1080/03057240120061360.
- Punch, M. 1994. "Politics and Ethics in Qualitative Research." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N.K Denzin and Y.S Lincoln, 83–95. London: Sage.
- QAA. 2019. *Subject Benchmark Statement Early Childhood Studies*. Gloucester: QAA.
- Ribers, B. 2018. "The Plight to Dissent: Professional Integrity and Ethical Perception in the Institutional Care Work of Early Childhood Educators." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 26 (6): 893–908. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2018.1533707.
- Sanger, M., and R. Osguthorpe. 2011. "Teacher Education, Preservice Teacher Beliefs, and the Moral Work of Teaching." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27 (3): 569–578. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2010.10.011.
- Shin, M. 2015. "Enacting Caring Pedagogy in the Infant Classroom." *Early Child Development and Care* 185 (3): 496–508. doi:10.1080/03004430.2014.940929.
- Silverman, D. 2001. *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Solvason, C., J. Cliffe, and E. Bailey. 2019. "Breaking the Silence: Providing Authentic Opportunities for Parents to Be Heard." *Power and Education* 11 (2): 191–203. doi:10.1177/1757743819837659.
- Solvason, C. 2018. "Just How Important Is Ethics within Early Childhood Research and Professionalism?" *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 6 (2): 166–176 Accessed 18 July 2019. <http://jecer.org/issues/jecer-62-2017-special-issue/>
- Solvason, C. 2016. "Ethicality, Research and Emotional Impoverishment in a Technological Era." In *Values and Virtues in Higher Education Research*, edited by J. McNiff, 33–47. London: Routledge.
- Stenberg, K., L. Karlsson, H. Pitkaniemi, and K. Maaranen. 2014. "Beginning Student Teachers' Teacher Identities Based on Their Practical Theories." *European Journal of Teacher Education* 37 (2): 204–219. doi:10.1080/02619768.2014.882309.
- Taggart, G. 2011. "Don't We Care?: The Ethics and Emotional Labour of Early Years Professionalism." *Early Years* 31 (1): 85–95. doi:10.1080/09575146.2010.536948.
- Wellington, J.J. 2015. *Educational Research: Contemporary Issues and Practical Approaches*. 2nd ed. ed. Bloomsbury: London.