

Ethical Reflection and the Power of Practice

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Reprinted from SEE News, Fall 2000 Vol 4(1)

"The students have been profoundly changed because they have seen how important these kinds of [service] acts are for people who are less fortunate." A teacher in SEE's Youth: Ethics in Service (YES) Program made this comment at the end of their school project. This was a positive observation as it provided evidence that our project goal of ethical reflection was being practiced.

Ethical reflection is a powerful tool to develop a respect for the concerns of others and has long been recognized as an important goal of character education. Thomas Lickona summarizes his own observations about ethical reflection and notes the ability of children with greater maturity in ethical thinking to help those with less maturity to develop their ethical awareness¹. This process requires sustained practice and is assisted by well-designed reflection activities. Mature ethical reasoning is generally defined by those who recognize the concerns of others, as opposed to those with less mature thinking, who focus on punishment and rewards. Employing the ethical thinking of mature students can be achieved during guided classroom discussion, reflection on in-class activities, or reflection during and after service activities.

Practicing ethical reflection is a necessary requirement to promote maturity in ethical thinking. During the YES program, teachers recognized that improvement of ethical reflection skills required multiple practice sessions. The application of a practical ethical decision-making framework also assisted the reflection process. The framework used during YES included values such as respect, honesty, and caring stated as behavior goals along with the principle of the Golden Rule.

Guided discussion using good literature is another useful strategy to cultivate ethical reflection. Robert Coles describes some of the reflection activities which have followed the reading from a short story The Old Grandfather and the Grandson by Leo Tolstoy². Coles notes, "In time, after we've talked, I've asked the students to write an essay about the Tolstoy story, about its meaning to them, about what they imagine themselves doing with the story if they were parents or teachers. Soon enough,...I am reading introspective memoirs or suggestions for this or that course of action - all of us become witnesses, with Tolstoy's help, to the moral imagination at work."(pg 12)

Class discussion within the traditional curriculum along with well thought out questioning strategies can also help cultivate moral thinking. Phil Vincent in Developing Character in Students provides excellent examples of graphic organizers to link ethical reflection to academic content³.

Ethical reflection can be employed during and after service-learning activities, class discussion about literature, or during a variety of academic subjects. The skill becomes more powerful with practice and a focus on core values as outcome goals. Parents and teachers are encouraged to include reflection about character issues to cultivate ethical maturity. Regular ethical reflection can help all of us put our ethics in action.

1 Lickona, T. (1991). Educating for character.

2 Coles, R. C. (1997). The moral intelligence of children.

3 Vincent, P. F. (1999). Developing character in students.