Review of

Dilemmas of Educational Ethics: Cases and Commentaries

Edited by Meira Levinson & Jacob Fay. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016

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Dilemmas of Educational Ethics: Cases and Commentaries, edited by Meira Levinson and Jacob Fay, is a new compilation of normative case studies and commentaries that address a variety of ethical dilemmas that arise in K–12 educational contexts. The editors' stated goal is to engage a wide array of educational stakeholders—from teachers to philosophers to empirical researchers to policy makers—in a collective conversation about ethical questions in educational policy and practice. The reader is invited to consider a series of richly described ethical dilemmas, along with responses written by practitioners, policy makers, philosophers, and social scientists. Collectively, the cases and commentaries are intended to provide a model for practical ethical inquiry in education that will prove useful in a variety of settings from teacher preparation, philosophy, and sociology courses, to professional development settings, faculty meetings, and school board trainings and that will also advance the field of educational ethics. Levinson and Fay succeed in providing a fruitful way forward for the field of educational ethics, while also leaving room for further development.

Case-based pedagogy and research have long been popular in a variety of areas of applied ethics (e.g., bioethics, business ethics), as well as in professional education (e.g., business, medicine, law).[1] Previous treatments of educational ethics—such as *The Ethics of Teaching*, a popular text in teacher preparation courses, by Kenneth Strike and Jonas Soltis (2009)—also use case-based approaches. However, Levinson and Fay's treatment of the cases is distinct. They employ what they describe as a *phronetic* approach to practical ethics (p. 3–5). They build off the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom, "which is embodied in a practical understanding of particular cases" (p. 4), to propose a phronetic *method* of engaging in ethical inquiry in education that is grounded in specific practical cases and incorporates insights from diverse theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives. Their phronetic method marks a contrast to approaches to ethical inquiry that focus more narrowly on the application of abstract ethical theories to particular cases of practice. This book, thus, provides a valuable update to the resources available for teaching educational ethics. Their approach also reflects current trends in the fields of educational ethics and applied ethics more broadly, in which there is a

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[1] For example, in this text, Brendan W. Randall discusses the history of case-based teaching across professional areas at Harvard University (p. 31).

push to recognize that the direct application of abstract ethical theories is not adequate to address dilemmas of practical ethics.

The structure of the book is guided by the editors' methodological approach. They advance phronetic inquiry through the use of empirically-grounded normative case studies and the incorporation of responses to the ethical dilemmas posed in the cases from commentators with diverse areas of expertise. The book includes six case studies, each grounded in or inspired by a real case and each followed by six commentaries. Topics covered in the cases include: grade inflation/standards in two distinct socioeconomic contexts (Chapter 1 and Chapter 4), teacher compliance with zero-tolerance policies (Chapter 3), inclusion and balancing the competing needs of students (Chapter 2), distribution of access to public schools (Chapter 5), and evaluation and expansion policies for charter schools (Chapter 6). The cases raise ethical questions at a number of levels of educational decision-making: classroom, school, district, and state. Each case ends with one or more questions about the central ethical dilemma, which invite readers to put themselves in the position of the teacher, teacher team, administrator, district, or state policy maker and to consider what they would do. Themes identified by Levinson and Fay that recur across the cases and commentaries include the role of individual students' and teachers' voice, social stratification, race, teacher integrity, and structural inequality (p. 214).

For each case, the commentaries include perspectives from individuals with backgrounds in teaching, administration and/or policy, social science, and philosophy. The diversity of expertise represented by the commentators serves to create a complex treatment of each case. When taken in the aggregate, each set of commentaries raises further questions for the reader to consider by identifying different aspects of the ethical dilemma proposed and often competing recommendations for ethical action. By providing more questions than answers, each chapter leaves ample opportunity for further discussion in classroom or training contexts. The final chapter of the book provides guidelines for its use, including pedagogical suggestions for selecting readings, structuring discussions, and guiding questions based on the cases in the book. The book closes with an invitation to practitioners and researchers to advance the case-based methodology, providing guidelines for constructing new cases.

Levinson and Fay's approach of including a wide array of commentaries for each case and leaving the reader to draw conclusion raises some interesting questions. The commenters provide three distinct levels of analysis, considering questions relating to (1) individual decision-maker(s), (2) the role of broader systemic context, and (3) the case method itself. In the first four chapters that pose ethical questions at the individual- or teacher team- levels, the commenters' moves to consideration of systemic or social context occurs in two ways. For example, "Stolen Trust" (Chapter 3) asks the reader to consider whether a teacher should report a student she suspects of stealing her cell phone in the context of a school that follows a zero-tolerance policy. The importance of considering the potential systemic impact of individual decisions is evident in responses to the case, including David J. Knight's call on us "to imagine new forms of action and social relationships in order to disrupt biased and unjust systems" (p. 93). Systemic considerations also arise in "Promotion or Retention?" (Chapter 1), which asks whether an eighth-grade team of teachers should sacrifice standards and promote a struggling student to the ninth grade or retain her and increase her risk of dropping out. Several commentaries move away from the decision question as posed in order to consider what is needed to improve the system so that this type of dilemma does not arise at all.

These two types of moves from consideration of the specific decision context described in a case to broader systemic questions raise some important implications for both the methods and pedagogy of

educational ethicists. Given the non-ideal conditions that prevail in our education systems, considerations of personal and professional ethics must be aware of the risk of perpetuating systemic injustices. This awareness should be reflected in the selection and construction of normative case studies. Methodological considerations along these lines are also embedded in some of the commentaries throughout the book (coming not surprisingly from the practitioners and empirical scholars and not from philosophers). Brendan W. Randall, for example, claims in response to "Promotion or Retention?" that "the case study's narrative structure initially diverts the reader's attention away from broader social justice issues" (p. 33). Several other commentaries question whether the case model, by focusing too narrowly on a single ethical dilemma, has limited practical import.[2] These critiques both challenge the case construction methods used in the book, but also reinforce the value of Levinson and Fay's phronetic approach, which aims to improve inquiry in educational ethics through meaningful engagement with individuals representing diverse perspectives and areas of expertise.

By incorporating cases that represent a variety of K–12 educational contexts and ethical dilemmas facing not only teachers, but also administrators and policy makers, *Dilemmas of Educational Ethics* follows through on its intention to offer something for a wide array of educational stakeholders. Each chapter begins to model an approach to collaborative ethical decision-making that draws on the expertise of scholars and practitioners, a model that could be applied to authentic decision-making contexts. The specific cases included make the book particularly useful for teaching practical ethics for prospective teachers or administrators.

The volume does have some limitations with regards to the representation of educational contexts and decision-makers in the case studies. The cases focus on urban or suburban educational contexts, ignoring distinct ethical dilemmas that arise in rural districts, which represent over half of the regular school districts and include about a third of the public schools in the United States as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2013a). In particular, the two policy cases (Chapters 5 and 6) both center questions surrounding school choice within an urban school district in which some parents may threaten to exit the system by moving to surrounding suburban districts. Thus, neither policy case engages questions that are relevant to rural contexts, where school choices are much more limited and the trend is toward consolidation rather than proliferation of schools. Rural teachers, schools, and districts face unique challenges, ranging from teachers being relied upon to teach more than one subject to funding and assessment challenges due to state and federal policies not being responsive to the structure and context of small, rural schools.

Additionally, in all three of the cases that are framed around an *individual* decision-maker (Chapters 2-4), that decision-maker is a woman. These women are described in varying levels of detail as follows: Ms. Brown, a "respected veteran" at a high-SES school (p. 41); Ms. Jennifer Smith, "petite, White, twenty-five years old and recently married" and teaching at a low-SES school that enrolls primarily students of color (p. 75); and Dr. Adina Heschel, a "Princeton alumna" from Alabama who is the new academic dean at a Jewish day school (p. 110). Ms. Smith is the only teacher whose racial identity is explicitly identified. By not explicitly describing the racial and ethnic identity of the other individual decision-makers, the real practical impact that social constructions of race and ethnicity play in our education system risk being ignored. Additionally, the impact of gender constructions on individual

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[2] See, for example, the commentaries by Elisabeth Fieldstone Kanner (Chapter 2), Andres A. Alonso (Chapter 5), Christopher Winship (Chapter 5), and Frederick M. Hess (Chapter 6).

ethical decision-making warrants deeper consideration. The cases leave unexplored the active role that men—who comprise almost half of principals and a quarter of teachers across public and private elementary and secondary schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013b; 2015)—can and should play in creating just school environments, and how their gender affects their agency. These cases risk erasing important realities about the impact these constructs have on ethical decision-making in education. "Stolen Trust" presents the most robust consideration of the impact that an agent's identity has on the ethical course of action, through its exploration of Ms. Smith's responsibilities to her students and colleagues as a white woman teaching in a school that is led by a black man and serves primarily students of color. This case presents a model for how to construct a case that engages with these important elements of practical ethical decision-making.

Among the other three cases, one focuses on a team of teachers—Ms. Castro, Mrs. Angly, Mr. Rodriquez, and Mr. Beecher—as the decision-makers, some of whose ethnic identities are implied but not stated (Chapter 1). And two consider policy questions and do not describe specific decision-making agents. Across the book, no people of color are explicitly presented as individual decision-makers, a notable absence in the representation of agency in the cases. These gaps in representation are examples of choices made in case construction and selection that impact the ethical inquiry that ensues. It is of course challenging, if not impossible, to construct a small set of case studies that meaningfully represents the many forms of diversity that characterize schooling in the United States. However, insofar as the limitations in representation in this volume are indicative of similar limitations across the field of educational ethics, they point to the need for more case studies, and more diverse representation, particularly of decision-making agents, in those case studies.

The final chapter of the book provides practical guidelines for using the cases in educational and professional contexts, which also leave some room for expansion. In particular, the authors suggest several pedagogical strategies for case-based teaching and discussion including large and small group discussions, fish bowls, town halls, and online discussions. In addition to these options, it would be valuable to consider more robust project-based case teaching for classroom contexts, building on models from other fields, such as medicine and law.[3] For a given case study, teams of students could identify the central empirical and normative questions embedded in the case that would guide their decision-making, including questions about the legal and social contexts, about evidence from social science research in education, and about relevant philosophical considerations. After dividing up these questions among the team members, students would seek out relevant evidence, take on the role of the various "experts," and report back to their teammates, before engaging in a group discussion about the options for ethical courses of action in the situation presented in the case. This type of case-based project is designed to occur over several class periods, giving students time for independent, outside research, as well as ample group discussion time. This model is ideal for formal course settings for prospective teachers, administrators, and educational scholars. It may also provide a model for how working practitioners and policy makers can engage in ethical inquiry about local ethical dilemmas that they encounter, another area that stands to be further explored.

Levinson and Fay provide a valuable contribution to the resources available to guide ethical inquiry in education. One question that remains unanswered is how to create structures within educational systems that facilitate the kind of phronetic ethical inquiry that they propose. I look forward to their

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[3] For example, this approach has been used successfully in an interdisciplinary team-taught course on human trafficking at Stanford University.

further explorations of the applications of this method and second their call for more collaborative, case-based ethical inquiry in education.

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