

MY CORE VALUES

For me, identifying my core values has not been about choosing which values are “good” and which ones are not. What I feel is more important is the consistent application of them. While I have narrowed them down into what I feel are three categories that encompass my teaching pedagogy and philosophy, that isn’t where they end for me. Identifying and knowing what one’s core values are the first step. After that, it is the consistent application of them that truly matters and what will make a difference in your students’ lives.

To begin, I want to first acknowledge the Northfield and North Star in teaching (Fenstermacher, 2000). My overarching goal, my Northfield, is that my students develop the ability to think mindfully and critically for themselves. My ideals, my North Stars, are all of my core values that are deeply embedded in my teaching philosophy: social justice, community, and citizenship. In regards to Fenstermacher’s (2000) cluster star of wonder, curiosity, and imagination, those are my reasons for teaching. These three things are why I have always wanted to become a teacher. For without a child’s (or dare I say adult’s) wonder, curiosity, and imagination, I don’t believe there would be a reason for being.

Social Justice

My first core value is social justice. I have come to hold this value as I continue to see, hear, and read about the struggle for equity and peace in this world. As cited in Sandel (2011), an ethics of justice includes fairness, equality, individual rights, and the consistent application of them. The ideal, or North Star, of social justice fits well with the ethics of justice approach to moral education, because it outlines all of its qualities. Sandel (2011) further explains that justice is not so simple. In order to “achieve a just society, we have to reason together about the meaning of the good life, and to create a public culture hospitable to the disagreements that inevitably arise” (Sandel, 2011, p. 1310). Justice is hard, important work and doesn’t mean treating

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everyone the same. The “good life” in justice means giving everyone the tools they need to succeed. As a teacher, you need to be able to recognize the diverse needs of your students and support them accordingly. You simply cannot paint them all with the same brush.

Pragmatic discourse is another approach to moral education that is useful when thinking about social justice. Teachers ought to debate the best ways and most effective means to achieve student success (Coulter, 2002), which will not and should not look the same for everyone. According to Greene (1978), being moral means “thinking critically about what is taken for granted” (p. 2). Teachers ought to think critically about what in their classroom, the lives of their students, the education system, and greater society is taken for granted in order to best support the needs of their students. We cannot think through a utilitarianism lens, however. Your actions as a teacher are not simply “right” if they result in happiness or success for the majority of your students. Social justice means thinking about and advocating for the minority, which I feel is an important responsibility of any teacher.

Community

Next I think it is necessary to talk about educational relationships in the context of building community in the classroom. Having community as a core value also means taking into account the needs of all students, demonstrating that utilitarianism is again an unhelpful approach. However, in a communal context it is useful to understand care ethics as a powerful approach to moral education. An ethic of care means cultivating attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and caring relations (Noddings, 2010). The last point is what is most vital when creating a positive classroom community with your students. Yes, teachers must consider individual needs, but they must also consider how they are cultivating relationships.

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Teachers must start with the collective in order to create a communitarian ethic to guide their students toward moral education (Noddings, 2010). That being said, it is important to not let an ethic of care “blind us to the problems within our own communities and make it more difficult to appreciate the views of outsiders” (Noddings, 2010, p. 390). Teachers need to cultivate care through empathy, engage people successfully in caring relations, and model it through dialogue practice and confirmation (Noddings, 2010).

Additionally, I feel that it is important for teachers to create a safe, communal space for students to explore and create. As Coulter (2002) states, “they need to try on and try out new roles; they need opportunities to succeed and to fail; they need to work and play with others and to be able to retire to some sanctuary. They need to be sheltered from some of the consequences of these attempts, so they feel confident to keep trying” (p. 27). I believe that engaging in moral discourse ethics could be a way to accomplish this. As Coulter (2002) further explains, the central question in moral discourse is how to merge different values and norms. This is also a central question for a teacher: how to merge the different values and norms of each individual student with the entire class community? Greene (1988) suggests creating a space of dialogue where the aim is to communicate openly with others. We want our students to care for and be in dialogue with one another. I believe this is achievable in the classroom and that teachers ought to intentionally create this space of dialogue so that an ethic of care and community can emerge.

Citizenship

Lastly comes citizenship, which truly connects all of my core values together. I consider it the “final step” in student achievement, just as Fenstermacher (2000) considers it the third and final North Star. The first North Star entails cultivating the child’s capacity to reason. The second North Star fosters moral discernment and right action. (Fenstermacher, 2000). Both of these stars

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link to my previously discussed moral values of social justice and community. When we arrive at the third North Star, we have begun to cultivate citizenship (Fenstermacher, 2000), which I find to be impossible without the cultivation of the two former. Aristotle's virtue ethics is a way teachers might think about citizenship. How can teachers provide the moral language that education needs? What, how, and why do we teach? What will contribute to our students living a worthwhile human life?

I believe citizenship to be the summation of the cultivation of social justice and community. I also consider it to be everyone's moral duty. Using deontology to help students understand that it is everyone's duty to be moral human beings and that expectations (or "rules", although I try to refrain from using this word) can foster respect, dignity, and ultimately citizenship. Ethical discourse is also important, as it helps both teachers and students question how they might fit into a particular community, like the classroom (Coulter, 2002). Engaging in ethical discourse, along with self-reflection, enables students to call their learning into question. By connecting social justice and community to one's moral duty through self-understanding and reflection, I believe that teachers can use their North Stars to guide their students to the Northfield of mindful and critical thinking.

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References

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