TEACHING ‘ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING’ IN THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

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General Capabilities

Ethical Understanding:

‘… understanding the role of ethical principles, values and virtues in human life; acting with moral integrity; acting with regard for others; and having a desire and capacity to work for the common good.’
Research question

What understandings do teachers construct when they explicitly teach *Ethical Understanding* in their discipline area?
Curriculum framework: ACARA

Ethical Understanding documentation:

- the philosophical traditions that have been privileged in this understanding
- the organising elements of the framework (Understanding ethical concepts and issues; Reasoning and decision making and actions, and Exploring values, rights and responsibilities)
- the learning continuum
Participants

- 11 teachers:
  - English x 3
  - Science x 3
  - History x 3
  - Mathematics x 2

- Units between 3 and 5 weeks in duration
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<tr>
<th>TEACHER</th>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>YEAR LEVEL</th>
<th>UNIT TOPIC</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>ENGLISH</td>
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<td>Integrity and ‘To Kill A Mockingbird’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dina</td>
<td>SCIENCE</td>
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<td>Heat, Light and Sound - The mosquito alarm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nola</td>
<td>ENGLISH</td>
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<td>Virtue and Justice and ‘The Secret River’</td>
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<td>David</td>
<td>ENGLISH</td>
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<td>Film study: ‘Rabbit-Proof Fence’</td>
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<td>Dan</td>
<td>HISTORY</td>
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<tr>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>HISTORY</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>World War 2: Youth in Nazi Germany</td>
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<td>Julie</td>
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<td>Natalie</td>
<td>SCIENCE</td>
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<td>Andy</td>
<td>MATHS</td>
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<td>Tony</td>
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<td>Yasmin</td>
<td>MATHS</td>
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Normative approaches to ‘Ethics’

- Consequentialist (e.g. Utilitarianism)
- Deontological
- Virtue
Relational and interpersonal paradigm

- Carol Gilligan
- Nel Noddings (ethics of care)
- Annette Baier
- Joan Tronto
- Emmanuel Levinas (the gaze of the ‘Other’)
- Sharon Todd
ACARA framework

The ACARA documentation doesn’t seem to have a personal application – [it’s about] understanding the ethical aspect in theory – abstract and intellectual, not personal. [It won’t be] very useful if it’s only an intellectual pursuit. It seems to be in tension with the fact that they are quoting from the Melbourne Declaration with its emphasis on empathy and respect for others and the need to be self-reflexive.
English teachers

David:
I’m finding myself asking questions about whether right and wrong are absolute or relative.

Nola
…helping students to understand what their set of values and attitudes are and how these might be different from others, and in doing that assist them to develop empathy and understanding for a different set of values and attitudes, as well as perhaps reinforcing their own.
Felicity

To me I have a picture of it – it’s like an internal scaffolding that helps you to maintain your integrity in life… basic beliefs that somehow make up an internal grid in you and keep you standing as a person of integrity.

Dan

I think it’s about what decisions people make and about making the right decisions, about how we live our lives… I’m saying ethics is about environment, what you’re exposed to. Ethics is about creating a society or community where we’re happy, safe and comfortable, where the things that are bad are minimised.’
Mathematics teachers

- Yasmin
  responsible learning and informed decision making about a whole range of topics, life skills, how to function in society, beliefs and values…

- Andy
  (it’s) the consideration for people’s views to be expressed and respected in the classroom environment. The tone of the classroom interactions between students and students and teacher – not necessarily what you’re discussing but how you’re discussing.
Science teachers

- Natalie
  …ethics are your values which then guide your decision making…your ethics are your values around what is important for us as a society, what’s important in terms of human rights, culture, the environment…

- Dina
  I think of what’s right or wrong – just morals. They’re different for different people.

- Tony
  …about interacting with others, the way you present yourself, being a positive member of your community.
Ethics as right and wrong action
Ethics as informed decision making
Ethics as the guide in interpersonal relationships
Ethics as developing virtue in an individual
Ethics as caring for the other
Issues with teachers’ understanding

- ‘The professional learning I feel that needs to take place is something that would enable a faculty or school to discuss and ensure they have a common understanding of ethics and ethical issues so that students receive a consistent message and approach about something that is by nature, full of different perspectives and shades of grey. Otherwise my concern is that we might confuse students rather than clarify this understanding and their ability to engage with ethical issues independent of us and our classroom.’

- ‘The one thing that I worry about is whose morality am I giving them? I’m giving them mine, they’re learning me…It’s just gut instinct, I should look at what I’m trying to do here.’

- ‘…at times I am imposing my value judgements on students based on my general knowledge which may not always be that deep.’
Pedagogy

- Tony
  *From my point I’ve focused on the content – my teaching style and approach has been direct instruction…but this presented more challenges for me*

- Andy
  *Just because you’re a Maths teacher doesn’t mean you can’t do it. Just becoming more aware made me change what I did in the classroom anyway. as I’m not as used to inquiry learning.*

- Nola
  *I’ve moved away from whole class, free-for-all discussions to micro labs and routines that allow consistent discussion and everybody to have a voice in that discussion, so that people aren’t sitting back…*
Pedagogy

- Natalie
  ‘…(we are) changing our style of teaching – usually law comes first then experiment; now experiment is first and we deduce the law. We’re flipping – in doing that we will often bring up an ethical issue to springboard a topic – (this) will increase engagement…

- Dina
  (you) don’t often do role play in Science – fun for everyone, including the teacher.

- Felicity
  …the emphasis (needs) to be more student centred, (you have) to move away from expert lead teaching, (it) puts us on a level playing field.
Pedagogy

- Natalie
  *With some of these activities you’re giving much more control over to your students.*

- Tony
  *I found that the ethics complemented what we were talking about but that I could only allow a certain amount of time and to really get into a more fulsome discussion of it was encroaching too much on the curriculum I had to cover…*
  
  *…some teachers are locked in, under pressure people go to their default setting. You need different pedagogy for teaching about ethics – direct instruction will limit the ability of kids to explore ethical issues.*
Student responses: enhancing disciplinary knowledge

- ‘…might have had the same opinions without the ethics stuff, but they had more of a sense of why they had arrived at their view… (they) had a more rational assessment, rather than just opinion. They could explain why their opinion was as it was.’
- ‘…more complexity in their understanding of the concept of integrity.’
- ‘I don’t think that any girls could finish the topic, as we have in past times, thinking that that could never happen to us, which I think is a really good place to be – it’s greyer, being grey is a more adult place to be.’
- ‘…learning of the Maths was strengthened through this approach.’
- ‘Doing ethics requires the type of thinking skills that should enhance discipline based thinking.’
Student responses: Enhancing engagement

- ‘Engagement jumped dramatically. I was encouraged and slightly surprised that in a Maths lesson with a bunch of kids who didn’t want to do the subject, who were in a survival group, that they were quite prepared to fire up, and it got noisy too…’
- ‘The engagement was greater than when you’re teaching other areas – best I’d seen all year from the students.’
- ‘… it just lead me to think well I could do this a lot more in my teaching because they love it – they love talking…that’s why they got so engaged, they love putting forward their points of view, there were different points of view which was fantastic…’
- ‘No matter what level of class I’ve taught, the ethical engages them – they love to have a voice and to argue.’
Conclusions / moving forward

- Willingness of teachers to step into this space
- Shared understandings
- Breadth of paradigms
- Draw upon teacher knowledge and experience