Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională
ISSN: 2066-7329 | e-ISSN: 2067-9270
Covered in: Web of Science (WOS); EBSCO; ERIH+; Google Scholar; Index Copernicus; Ideas RePeC; Econpapers; Socionet; CEEOL; Ulrich ProQuest; Cabell, Journalseek; Scipio; Philpapers; SHERPA/RoMEO repositories; KVK; WorldCat; CrossRef; CrossCheck

2024, Volume 16, Issue 2, pages: 45-55 | https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/16.2/845
Submitted: October 14th, 2023| *Accepted for publication:* December 14th, 2023

Ethics for Early Education: Core Concepts for Approaching Ethical Issues

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Abstract: *Early Education is a strategic area for individual and social development. Kindergartens are spaces for ethical practice, where teachers make decisions for the children they are responsible for. The major aim of this theoretical study is to propose approaches to ethical decision-making in working with young children, with the role of improving self-reflection for teachers and future teachers. The secondary aims of the study are: 1. To identify the values and ethical guidelines for ethical-decision in Early Education; 2. To establish core concepts for approaching ethical issues, including the use of ethical codes; 3. To propose case studies in order to stimulate teachers' ethical reflection. A set of basic ideas of professional ethics in Early Education is presented below: (a) The Early Education profession is primarily an emotional, relational and ethical practice. Teachers bring to school their personal values, from the places where they live. (b) In order to make ethical decisions teachers need to understand the difference between the professional ethics area and the personal area. (c) Teachers should not confuse personal dilemmas with professional ethics dilemmas. Our study can provide guidelines for developing a professional learning protocol to support teachers' ethical reasoning. Reflection on issues of ethical practice exposes teachers and future teachers to various perspectives, expanding their knowledge of children and teaching.*

Keywords: *Early Education; ethical decision-making; case-studies.*

How to cite: Ghiațău, R. (2024). Ethics for early education: Core concepts for approaching ethical issues. *Revista Românească pentru Educație Multidimensională, 16*(2), 45-55. https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/16.2/845

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Introduction

All over the world, considerable efforts are being made to increase the quality of Early Education. Early Education is a strategic area of individual and social development, with impact on numerous levels (Camilli et al., 2010; Melhuish et al., 2015). After many attempts over time, Early Education came out to be considered a distinct profession, in the sense that profession means occupation with a significant contribution for society (Bloch, 2018).

The major aim of this theoretical study is to propose approaches to ethical decision-making in working with young children, in order to improve self-reflection for early childhood education teachers and future teachers. Ethical self-reflection is a defining feature of pedagogical work. Self-reflection facilitates educators' work in the conditions of current value pluralism (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia, 2012). The secondary aims of the study are:

1. To identify the values and ethical guidelines for ethical-decision in Early Education;

2. To establish basic elements for approaching ethical issues, including the use of ethical codes;

3. To propose case studies in order to stimulate teachers' ethical reflection.

Professional learning through case studies and ethical codes are frequently used strategies for acquiring professional ethical behavior in Early Education (Husu & Tirri, 2003; French-Lee & Doole, 2015). Exploring case studies, educators acquire a new moral understanding and professional ethical behavior.

Teaching has an ethical nature, and ethical culture can support professional decision-making. Ethics is a very practical issue that must form the foundation for early childhood education policies and practices (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Giovacco-Johnson, 2011). Commitment to ethics is an important criterion for every professional. All kindergartens are spaces for ethical practice, where educators make decisions for the children they are responsible for (Dunn, 2003; Vasconcelos, 2006).

The motivations for naming basic elements for approaching ethical issues are numerous. First of all, empirical studies regarding the ethical aspects of Early Education in Romania are completely lacking, which is also explainable by the few theoretical elements addressed in the pre-service and in-service teachers' training in Romania. And theoretical works are extremely rare, citing Stan & Ghiaţău (2016) as an exception. Ethics courses for

teachers are also rare in the educational curricular frameworks of the faculties. Some notions are taught tangentially to developmental psychology or curriculum theory, but it is not enough. As tools of ethical management, early childhood educators can only use general documents, such as the Statute of teaching staff, the Code of Ethics and the Curriculum for Early Childhood Education. But these policies are not directly focused on pre-primary education, which makes the mission of forming an appropriate ethical culture more difficult. Romania has to cover a conceptual and normative gap related to the area of ethics in Early Education. Carrying out specific research and programs could help to overcome it. Second, researches demonstrate that teachers can change the way they identify and resolve ethical dilemmas as a result of participating in professional learning (French-Lee & Dooley, 2015).

Ethical values and ethical decision in Early Education

In a recent research, Gunnestad et al. (2022) have explored values promoted in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) policy documents of thirteen countries. Three categories of values were highlighted:

• Political and society-related values: "national heritage and culture" or "national pride" (i.e., "love of one's nation"), democracy, personal freedom, and equality, care for the environment, respect for nature, and conservation or sustainable development.

• Educational values: values through the lens of religion, global values as holistic child development and play.

• Individual and relational values, which refer to moral values related to living together, self-care, and care for others. Depending on the area, these were: respect and consideration, compassion, empathy, tolerance, social responsiveness, kindness, honesty, patience, forgiveness, sense of wonder, gratitude.

Beyond these more general values, famous authors of professional ethics in education, such as Sirotnik (1990), Strike & Soltis (2009) named: caring, inquiry, knowledge, competence, protecting for harmful conditions, intellectual freedom, democracy, integrity, freedom and social justice.

Ethical decision-making in Early Education often refers to two normative ethical orientations: the ethics of justice and the ethics of care. Each orientation builds its own model of the child, its own protection measures and directions in which education should go (Taggart, 2014). *Ethics focused on justice* starts from the strong tradition of understanding ethics as justice, rules, equal rights. Therefore, teachers must follow values and rational principles to substantiate their decisions. They will define their

professional responsibilities by prioritizing the value of justice, knowledge of regulations and prescriptions (Dalli, 2008). Educators who prefer solving moral dilemmas in terms of justice perceive moral conflicts as primarily involving a conflict of rights, which can be resolved through the impartial application of a general principle, laws or regulations. Most often they do not like to make exceptions based on extenuating circumstances. The advantage of this orientation is that the problem is viewed logically and impartially, and educators are considered fair and rigorous. The disadvantages are related to the fact that certain interests of the children may be lost sight of and mistakes may even be committed in the name of the same principles invoked by the law.

In the ethics of care, the focal point is the child, with his needs. Neuroscientific research demonstrates the fundamental role that caring interactions provide in young children's development (Fredrickson, 2013; Maselko et al., 2011). Therefore, *love and care are considered fundamental values in early education*. Care is defined as: "a moral-emotional relationship of complex responsibility" (Van Manen, 2002) or "anything that helps the other to develop and supports the ability to live in an attentive, responsive and respectful way" (Engster, 2005, pp. 54–55). Noddings (1984) states that in many life situations, justice is not the essential criterion of the ethical decision. Everyday ethical practice reflects a natural feeling for others and a desire to create, maintain and enhance relationships. *The ethics of care can be unreservedly considered an appropriate ethics for Early Education, since a fundamental need of children is the emotional need, the need to feel loved, protected.*

Core concepts and basic elements for approaching ethical issues in Early Education

Several concepts are being used to name ethical challenges encountered by teachers: ethical dilemmas, moral temptations, responsibilities. Ethical dilemma can be defined as an obstacle caused by the conflict between two ethical principles of equal importance for teachers (Ghiaţău, 2017). A better clarification on this definition is needed. First of all, let's not confuse moral temptations and ethical dilemmas. Moral temptation involves a moral decision between good versus evil and is clearly based on a person's fundamental values. Ethical dilemmas are defined as choices between good versus good and constitute our most difficult choices. Secondly, a characteristic element of the authentic ethical dilemma is the absence of official regulations for its solution, or, possibly, the ambiguity of the norms presented in these regulations.

Feeney and Freeman (2005) distinguish between "ethical responsibilities" and "ethical dilemmas" in Early Education. Ethical responsibilities involve the notions of good and bad, correct and incorrect, but they are situations that are addressed in the ethical code of the profession. This document provides advice on what a teacher should or should not do. Ethical dilemmas are situations that have more than one resolution to defend, each of which can be justified from a moral point of view. The specific question is "What should a teacher choose?" (Feeney & Freeman 2005, 34-35).

First basic element: Understanding the fundamentals of professional ethics for Early education

We have summarized below a set of fundamental ideas that constitute the essence of professional ethics in early education (Newman, 2002; Feeney et al., 2008). We believe that before knowing other procedural frameworks for approaching ethical issues, educators must know and understand these elements.

• The Early education profession is primarily an emotional, relational and ethical practice. Moral commitment plays an essential role in working with young and vulnerable children.

• Teachers bring to school their personal values, from the places where they live. Taking this into account leads to understanding the diversity of their practices, behaviors and judgments. Several solutions are possible for the same situation, depending on the context.

• Teachers must understand the difference between the professional ethics area and the personal area. When an individual chooses a profession, he agrees to abide by the profession's standards, code of ethics and the profession's values. Understanding the difference between personal moral values and professional moral values is crucial.

• Teachers should not confuse personal dilemmas with professional ethics dilemmas. The dilemmas appearing in terms of professional ethics are conflicts related to the exercise of professional rights and obligations, while personal dilemmas relate to teachers' personal values, preferences and beliefs. Professional status takes precedence in all situations related to students. Ideally, the teacher's personal values (religious, political, etc.) should not affect the professional performance.

• Despite ethical theories (utilitarian, deontological, rights, etc.) Early Education teachers should first of all take into account the principle of care - compatible with the best interest of the child - an essential principle in working with young children.

Second basic element: Investigating the problem by using decision-making frameworks

Feeney & Freeman (2005), famous authors in the field of Early Education ethics, present a framework for making ethical decisions. As benchmarks, teachers can take into account the stages established below (Feeney & Freeman, 2005):

1. Identify the problem and determine whether it involves or not professional ethics;
2. Decide whether the issue is a professional responsibility or an ethical dilemma;
3. If it is a dilemma, identify the parties affected by the situation, the agents involved;
4. Brainstorm as many solutions as possible. Consider ethical finesse, a way to meet everyone's needs with creativity and good faith at the same time.
5. Look for guidance in the texts of the ethical codes, which will help you focus on the ethical values and principles of the teaching profession;
6. Identify the solution, taking into account the recommendations in the code, but also your professional judgment.

Also Cardno (1999, 2020) advocates a curriculum of ethical dilemma management, including intellectual, emotional and practical dimensions. Obviously, going through this curriculum is a sequential and demanding process, as each step of the learning experience is based on knowledge and skills that are progressively acquired.

Third basic element: Researching ethical and legal documents available locally (ethical codes, laws, regulations)

One of the most valuable ethical documents containing resources for ethical decision-making is the code of ethics (only a few countries have adopted such codes). Feeney (2010, p. 73) defines a code of ethics as "a document that maps the profession's responsibility to society. It conveys a sense of the mission of a field and acknowledges the obligations its members share in meeting their responsibilities". The best known ethical codes for early education are: *National Association for the Education of Young Children code of conduct* - NAEYC (USA), *Code of Ethics* (Revised April 2005, Reaffirmed and Updated May 2011), *British Association (2021) for early childhood education* (United Kingdom) and *The Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics* (Australia). These ethical codes are accompanied by guidelines/brochures that support their implementation in everyday situations.

Decision-making in ethical issues is a complex process, which will require both theoretical knowledge and practical skills from educators. We next present a series of case studies that pre-service teachers and in-service teachers from Early Education can use to practice solving ethical issues, but not before going through the suggestions provided through essential elements.

Table 1 Ethical issues in ECE: sample for case studies

Special educational needs: The teacher already has a large group of children, but the kindergarten principal brings two children with special educational needs, without a support teacher. *The alphabet:* Peter's mother gives the teacher a set of cards with the alphabet and suggests that she could introduce the study of the alphabet for the Lower Kindergarten children, as Peter learns at home and is already very good. *Boys and girls:* Two little girls are playing outside, after the mandatory kindergarten program. Leo, who was playing alone next to them, started talking to the girls and begging them to join. A little girl says: No way, we don't like boys. *Photo:* A parent of a Lower Kindergarten child asked the teacher not to allow the child to sing Happy Birthday to another child, as this practice goes against the family's religious beliefs. The parent was shocked to see a group photo on the board, which included his child singing at his best friend's birthday party. She complained to the principal about this problem. *Halloween:* The early childhood educator does not like the Halloween holiday, but the children and parents make proposals about it in the daily activities. *Breakfast milk:* The school serves milk at breakfast and lunch. Along with other children, Catherine refuses milk and drinks water instead. One day Catherine's father tells the teacher to make sure that the little girl drinks the milk.

(adapted from Kennedy, 2009; Ghiaţău, 2015; Moravcik et al., 2016).

Conclusions:

These theoretical frameworks can find place in a professional ethics course for future educators or practitioners. The purpose of our theoretical research is to train the reflexivity of teachers and future teachers in dealing with ethical issues. Ethical reflection is a distinctive feature of the teaching profession. Choosing between many courses of action is a complex process because there are often no simple or easy answers.

Our study can provide guidelines for developing a professional learning protocol to support teachers' ethical reasoning. Ethical professionalism requires knowledge, skills and dispositions to make sound ethical judgments (Newman, 2002). It is therefore essential to provide teachers with developmental opportunities in which to connect theory and practice (Lyons, 1990; Tirri, 1999; Tirri & Husu, 2000). Reflection on issues of ethical practice exposes teachers and future teachers to various perspectives, expanding their knowledge of children and teaching.

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