

THE PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS REGARDING THEIR ROLES AS MORAL AGENTS

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In the Spring of 2001, sixteen teachers from two school districts were interviewed and asked three questions: 1) Please describe a moral dilemma you have encountered in the classroom, 2) Why is that a moral dilemma, and 3) What did you learn in your teacher education program that has helped you deal with moral dilemmas? The responses to these questions were somewhat surprising in that teachers seemed rather ill at ease with the questions asked. This led to a second study aimed at understanding some of the reasons for this discomfort. In the second study, twenty-five teachers were interviewed and asked the three original questions as well as additional questions to ascertain their perceptions of acting as moral agents in the classroom. It became clear that while teachers do see themselves as moral agents in the classroom, they are not sure that this is a recognized part of their work. Thus, rather than understanding how teachers reasoned through moral dilemmas, which is what my first study hoped to ascertain, I learned that the moral domain is experienced by teachers as a moral dilemma. This is particularly the case for younger teachers.

Three themes developed regarding moral dilemmas teachers encounter: (a) contrasts home and at school, (b) conflicts between the role of parents and the role of teachers, and (c) conflicts principles of the school and Nel Noddin's ethic of caring. Regarding barriers to their moral agency: (a) the complexity of the moral domain in a pluralistic society, (b) the fusion of religion and morality, (c) relationships teachers have with some administrators and some parents work to censure teachers and in doing so limit their moral agency. The findings of this study suggest a need for teacher education programs to address teachers' moral agency. Three areas were identified as needing to be addressed in teacher education programs: (a) the relatively new

phenomenon of teachers no longer seeing their work as intrinsically moral, (b) an increasing awareness on the part of educators of the complexity of the moral domain, and (c) institutional constraints on teachers' moral agency.