

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN 21ST CENTURY EDUCATION

Dr. Andrea McCourt, University Studies, Coordinator,
undergraduate academic program in Human Resources
Development

I began my career as an elementary education teacher, so I'll talk a little bit about public education because it's still near and dear to my heart. I've decided to start off with a quote from Abraham Lincoln and then I'm going to move into some issues that I see as key ethical dilemmas that we've been facing in education for quite a while, and then I'm going to move into some thoughts about what are the types of ethical responsibilities we have as we work with young people of all ages.

From Abraham Lincoln: "Upon the subject of education I can only say I view it as the most important subject with which we as a people may be engaged in." And I believe wholeheartedly in this. I believe that education, whether it's a two-year old who is learning, or it is an 82 year old who is learning is very key to what makes us people. Education is the key to solving so many of our problems in the world, whether they are water issues or political issues or whether they are educational, systemic issues, I think that education is the key. And global education is key.

When I was thinking about some of the issues that have continued in education, perhaps because I'm an administrator, funding came to mind. Funding is a constant dilemma that we face because we have so many for whom we want to provide access to our educational systems and yet we have a limited amount of money to do so. We have passed many different laws here in the United States and about our most recent act, the "Every Student Succeeds Act" which was passed in 2015, President Barack Obama said "with this bill we have reaffirmed that fundamentally American ideal that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make their lives what they will." What I love about this quote is the final part about making their lives what they will, because education, if nothing else, should be about opportunity and providing equal opportunity to all of the students, whether they're in the American classroom or in classrooms around the world. But how do you fund those systems? It's a constant issue.

Federal funding has increased to public schools in recent years. Somehow it's decreased in some institutions of higher education, while it has increased in primary and secondary schools. State

funding fluctuates as well. Another ethical issue some states currently face is the lottery system where we create lotteries to pay for education, and then that money somehow ends up in education. We look at state expenditures and how much they fluctuate from state to state. I was raised in the wonderful state of Idaho, which ranks 49th in the states in terms of expenditure per student. This was a big topic in Idaho because the teachers knew that they made less than teachers in Wyoming which ranked much higher in terms of expenditure per student and per teacher.

Moving into higher education, funding is an issue for us as well. How do we continue to offer the services and classes we know students need, when we get different amounts of money every year? I think Bernie Sanders really resonated with a lot of students when he talked about a free college education for everyone. But we all know there is no such thing as a free education. That cost needs to get passed along somehow and the question is, how do we do that? I think the ideal is fantastic. How do we provide a free collegiate education to everyone without saddling them with years of tax debt or student loan debt burden? I don't have an answer to any of these questions, but I think funding is an issue that we are facing now. We faced it hundreds of years ago, and I suspect we will continue to face it as we move forward.

The next issue that we face in education is technology. Technology provides fantastic opportunities. It can help students learn. It can help them learn new things in different ways and learn more effectively. Technology can be a great equalizer. The internet can bring education to people in parts of the world that might not otherwise have access to some of the experts that they can view via the internet or via the online classroom. We've all heard of MOOCs, the Massive Open Enrollment, classrooms, which offer a free, online education where you have some of the leading world experts. MOOCs don't provide college credits, but do provide the opportunity to learn about business, law, ethics, and all sorts of amazing things. Technology can be a great equalizer and yet we know the digital divide still exists. There are some parts of the world that don't have access to computers or to fast internet service. How can we leverage technology? How can we provide technology around the globe so that people who maybe do not have access to these physical classroom structures can still have access to the content and to the experience of learning?

Technology leads to the next ethical issue, one that I hear discussed a lot: academic integrity. We all want our students to act ethically and to turn in their own work, and yet the statistics are terrifying. Dr. Don

McCabe with the International Center for Academic Integrity is one of the leading experts on academic integrity. He has done a lot of research into academic integrity and his numbers are terrifying. He looked at 70,000 high school students and 95% said they had cheated in some way on an assignment or on an exam when they were in high school. We're doing a little better here at the college and university level. Only 68% of undergraduates said they had cheated on a paper or on an exam and by the time we had reached graduate school, it was only 43% of students. So I guess we're showing success as we age if not something else.

Academic integrity is an issue and, as much as I love technology, I suspect that in some ways, the internet and the easy access of some information has contributed to this problem. I know that I have students who have plagiarized in papers because they have cut and pasted off of Wikipedia if nothing else. They think that citing five pages of Wikipedia is the same thing as turning in their own work. So we seem to have this level of confusion about cutting and pasting. We have papers that you can buy online and exams that you can buy online. It's a real challenge for us. How do we balance all of these issues? And, at a different level, how do we teach our students to be ethical? If 95% of high school students have cheated, somehow the system is promoting it. So how do we stop that connection? How do we get students to understand and make the ethical decision to turn in their own work and to turn in stuff that is ethical, that has integrity?

Those are the issues that I thought about. The final thought that I had is, as someone who works in the field of education and I've been in the field of education my entire life, as I was preparing my speech, I asked one of my daughters what I should talk about today and she said "shouldn't you talk about what teachers should do for their students?" And I thought, 'well, that is a great question'. So what are our ethical obligations to our students? We work in this field. We are experts on teaching, or on our subject matter, or on students depending on what we do. So what are our ethical obligations? What should we provide? Well first of all, I think, safety. I think we have an obligation to provide a safe learning environment for our students. Whether that's a safe campus here in America, or it's to be a global safe situation that everyone in every country is safe to pursue an education. How do we provide that? Equal access follows closely behind that. How do we provide educational systems throughout the world that are culturally sensitive but are also available to everyone in that country? How do we guarantee fair and unbiased treatment of all students? So that lines of sex and race and gender and income

disappear and all students really have an equal opportunity for success in the classroom? How do we teach our students to care, rather than to be bullies?

Last week I was reading a story online about a high school student who developed an app called "Sit with Me." It's an app you can download on your phone, and if you're new to a school or just don't have a lot of friends in that school, you can look for people who have marked themselves as friendly people in the cafeteria that you can sit with so you don't have to sit alone at your lunch table. I don't know if I was saddened or delighted to hear about this. I am thrilled that someone created it and that a student cared enough, but I'm also saddened that that need exists.

Moving on with ethical obligations. How do we move beyond standardized testing? Because life isn't standard and while I understand the purpose of standardized tests, how do we teach our students to think critically and to problem-solve on their own, so when they get to life, which is the great test, they can solve those problems? And finally, to go back to my original quote, when we talk about the subject of learning and how everyone should be engaged in it, how do we engage our students? How do we get them passionate about learning so that they become lifelong learners, so that they're always interested in learning more? And to go back to the quote from President Barack Obama, how do we inspire them to make their lives what they will? I think that is our job as educators. To provide them with information and the tools to process that information and then to go and to become the best people they want to be and they can be. I don't have answers to any of those questions. But I think these are the concerns that we should all have. And so when we make our decisions, if we keep these things in mind, I think we'll make the right call.