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The Ethic of Care and Inclusive Education

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Abstract

This article deals with the ethic of care in education, with a specific focus on classrooms that include students with disabilities. After a brief overview of historical and legal issues which led to the inclusive education movement, the discussion focuses on what an ethic of care involves from a biblical/theological perspective.

Introduction

The ethic of care espoused in this article should be evident in every classroom, preschool through university. This ethic is especially significant to classrooms in which students with disabilities are included. I begin by briefly reviewing historical and legal issues which led to the movement toward inclusive education, and continue by considering issues of moral development important to understanding the ethic of care. Finally, I discuss biblical principles which are foundational aspects to an ethic of care in the classroom.

Legal and Historical Background Leading to Inclusion

Arguments regarding inclusion are generally founded on ideas of social justice and equal rights, following the same logic as prevailed in the movement toward desegregation (Anderson, 2006; Schaffner & Buswell, 1996). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990) required that students with disabilities be included in regular classrooms to the extent possible. This position was argued largely from an ethic of justice in response to the history of injustices inflicted on students with disabilities, which ranged from denial of access to public schools, to being “warehoused” in institutional settings, to advocating elimination of some disabled persons. These unjust practices were thought necessary to build a strong society by eliminating or isolating certain people groups. The eugenics movement of the early 1900s even received judicial support through the infamous ruling of Oliver Wendell Holmes, which concluded:

Still, it is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes. . . Three generations of imbeciles are enough. (Buck v. Bell, 1927, Opinion section, para. 6)

This ruling shows a distinctly negative view of people who had disabilities. It is reasonable to argue that the eugenics movement is still “alive” in the U.S. and other countries in the form of prenatal assessment and the recommendation to terminate pregnancy rather than give birth to a child who may have a disability.

Over time the approach to serving children with special needs changed from having them in the regular classroom “to the extent possible” (which, arguably, still cast a negative pall over those with disabilities) to the language of inclusion. The definition of inclusion preferred for the purpose of this discussion is one that recognizes that inclusion refers not simply to placing individuals with disabilities in the regular classroom, but to a change in school culture such that all teachers accept responsibility for the learning of all children, including those who have typically been excluded (Mittler, 2000).

What Is Needed for Inclusive Education?

A change in school culture such as Mittler envisioned has direct implications for the ethic of care in the classroom. Pudlas (2009) wrote of “Head and Heart and Hands” as necessary elements of inclusive education. I have used this model in helping teachers in Christian schools in Kenya transition into inclusive programming, but added a fourth “H” to emphasize that when the head, heart, and hands work together, they result in *habits* of

teaching and interaction that benefit both students with a disability and students with conventional minds and bodies. Simply stated:

Head focuses on the teacher's knowledge of curricular content, teaching methodology, and disabling conditions and their impact on various areas of functioning;

Heart refers to the teacher's convictions, such as worldview and beliefs, their attitudes and values in regard to students (with and without disabilities), and the teacher's inclination to do things in a certain manner;

Hands relates to the customary practice and conduct of the teacher in implementing various teaching methodologies;

Habits refers to effective educational practice that follows when the head, heart, and hands consistently work together.

Teacher preparation programs typically emphasize the "head" and the "hands." Students preparing to serve as teachers commonly take many courses in general and/or special education and conclude their educational preparation with one semester of student teaching. Assessment of their teaching ability is primarily through course exams and observation of their performance in a student teaching or practicum setting to evaluate the adequacy with which the head and hands function. Assessment of the heart may be limited or absent, since it is difficult to measure this aspect objectively. Many who have been involved in preparing teachers over a period of years can recall students in whom the "head" and "hands" were firmly established, but whose "heart" seemed cold to the *persons* with whom they worked. The heart, however, is the most important and should guide the head and the hands toward developing the habits desired of Christian teachers. True inclusion begins not with what we know (head) and are able to do (hands), but with *who we are*, i.e., the heart. The heart is the fount out of which the ethic of care flows.

Ethic of Justice v. Ethic of Care

Owens and Ennis (2005) defined caring as "a set of relational patterns that foster mutual recognition and

realization, growth, development, protection, empowerment, and human community, culture, and possibility" (p. 393). They maintained that teachers should be expected to establish an ethic of care in the classroom, but noted that the ability to care is "assumed rather than nurtured or taught" (p. 392). They proposed that teaching on the ethic of care should be included in the teacher-training curriculum. Their point is valid, but needs clarification: teaching them *to care* is not directly a part of the teacher-training curriculum, but teaching the *how* and *why* to be caring is important and should be modeled in our preparing students to become teachers.

In presenting their position, Owens and Ennis contrasted the work of Kohlberg (1981) and Gilligan (1982) on moral development. Kohlberg focused on the concept of fairness and suggested a developmental process moving from an egocentric attitude of fairness based on individual needs, to a more principled understanding of fairness resting on the ideals of equality and reciprocity. Kohlberg essentially equated morality with a broadly, though not necessarily biblically, understood concept of justice. For a fuller discussion see, for example, Anderson (2012). Gilligan, on the other hand, was unsatisfied with Kohlberg's conclusions. Based solely on his study of male subjects, Kohlberg's system tended to show females as morally less developed. From her study of female subjects, Gilligan attributed the observed difference in moral development between males and females to dissimilarities in how boys and girls are socialized. She suggested an ethic of care is more central for females than the "cold" justice Kohlberg described. The voice of care, as Gilligan described it, understands moral judgment to be context-specific and based on sensitivity to a person's needs and on interpersonal relationships.

Both Kohlberg's and Gilligan's ideas are pregnant with implications, but Gilligan provides more direction for an ethic of care in the classroom. Morris (2001), whose life-experience includes becoming disabled, claimed that recognition of interdependence, relationships, and responsibilities is central to a "feminist" ethic of care (as per Gilligan), and spoke critically about the "masculine" view (as per Kohlberg) which

separates individuals from one another because of its emphasis on autonomy, independence, and individual rights. With regard to inclusion, Morris argued that an ethic of care acknowledges the common humanity of able-bodied and disabled persons and pointed to negative consequences for both groups of denying equal human rights.

Noddings (2003) argued that ethics should be based on “natural caring” and grounded her approach in a longing for goodness rather than simple moral reasoning (as did Kohlberg and Gilligan). She argued that schools should encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving (and lovable) persons (Noddings, 1992). Noddings (2003) identified four major components of education from a care perspective:

Modeling: demonstrating for students what a caring relationship “looks like” through the teacher’s behavior

Dialogue: calling attention to actions or words (the teacher’s or other students) that reflect caring for others, or asking students to evaluate their own behavior as to its “caring” nature

Practice: giving students opportunity to display caring behavior to their peers; e.g., peer-to-peer tutoring and group activities to help shape caring behaviors and relationships

Confirmation: affirming and encouraging students as they engage in “caring” behaviors

A Biblical Basis for an Ethic of Care

Noddings, as noted previously, spoke generally about establishing an ethic of care in the classroom. Seeking to establish a biblical basis for an ethic of care is consistent with her suggestions, but has deeper implications (and importance) since it is based on the Word of God.

What Gilligan (1982) and Morris (2001) described as a “feminist” ethic of care is more consistent with biblical teaching than Kohlberg’s theory. Caring is

eminently biblical, not something we have invented. God reveals himself as a “carer” throughout scripture, most prominently in and through the ministry of Jesus, but God’s caring nature is evident from the beginning of time. After creating the Garden of Eden, God provided a watering system (Genesis 2:10–14) for the plants and animals. God then “placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it” (Genesis 2:15), to “*keep it in order*” (Peterson, 2002, emphasis added). Adam’s appointment as manager or steward of God’s creation made mankind responsible to care for God’s creation. Adam’s naming the animals (Genesis 2:20) also suggests a responsibility of care, while simultaneously helping Adam realize he was without a suitable co-worker or companion. Creating Eve and presenting her to Adam evidences God’s care for Adam, and Adam’s recognition of their unity (“one flesh,” Genesis 2:24), implies a caring relationship between the couple. Even expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden was an act of care and grace on the part of God (preventing them from eating of the Tree of Life, Genesis 3:22–24). Though Adam and Eve had “fallen,” their responsibility to care for God’s creation — and for one another and their progeny — remained.

Some people see God portrayed in the Old Testament as an angry God who brings judgment on the nations. However, the history of Israel bears further witness to God’s ongoing care for his chosen people, even though that often meant disciplinary action on God’s part.

Jesus’ incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection most clearly demonstrates God to be a caring God. Jesus’ announcement of his mission in Luke 4:18–19 reveals the scope of his care:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come.

The Gospels make Christ’s care for all clearly evident: diseased, disabled, outcasts, widows, Jews,

¹All scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are the New Living Translation.

Gentiles, tax-collectors, adulterers — all who are kept in any form of bondage or oppression. Christ provided a model which all Christians are called to emulate — a call to love and to care for others.

How Does this Apply to Teachers?

What God is determines what we ought to be (Wiersbe, 2001). Since God is characterized by love and caring, these qualities must be evident in our interactions with our students and others. Teaching is a way of expressing God's love to others and demonstrating our love for God. Caring love leads us to seek the best interest of those with whom we work. In this sense, teaching is caring. Shurley (2017) spoke of caring as a Christian's calling:

God wants all of God's children to take good care of each other. God's desire is not simply a gentle invitation: it is a directive, a summons, a call . . . all Christians are called to give care to and receive care from one another as a reflection of who they are as the body of Christ. (p. 1)

This call to be caring is not restricted to how we interact with other believers, just as God's love and care is not only for those who respond to the gospel message. Caring should be a prominent characteristic of our life, in and out of school. The role of Christian teachers is not limited to teaching facts and concepts, but includes (demands?) establishing a caring classroom and school community. Such a community can lead to the transformation of unjust societies in which historically marginalized people, such as those who are disabled, "have an equal place at the table" (Cohall, 2012, p. 15). The actual methods of teaching used by a Christian teacher will not necessarily be different from those of other teachers, but being a Christian should flavor our demeanor such that a mood of caring pervades the classroom, influencing the manner of teacher-student, student-student, and teacher-peer interactions in the educational community.

Establishing an ethic of care in the classroom is "good news" in action. It is an aspect of spiritual care for others: *spiritual* because it impacts both our students' spirit and our own; and *Spiritual*, because we act in the power of and in response to the Holy Spirit who seeks to conform us to the image of

Christ. All people, including our students, have the same basic spiritual needs: to love and be loved, to forgive and be forgiven, and to find meaning and purpose in life (Shelly, 2000). Being a (spiritual) care provider is the job of every Christian; our faith uniquely equips us to relate to the needs of others (Haugk, 1984).

God's love is a love of intention (Womack, 1998). It is an all-encompassing characteristic of God by which he continually gives of himself to others, seeking their benefit. Educators' love and care for students must involve self-giving as well. God has poured his love into our hearts (Romans 5:5), and that love should spill over into our relationships with others, especially those we teach. Love and care should infuse our thoughts, attitudes, and actions (Galatians 5:22) such that we "walk" in love (Ephesians 5:2). As agents of the kingdom of God, our work as teachers should attest to the characteristics and values of God's kingdom (Snyder, 2004), displaying unconditional love and creating an environment where students feel welcomed and accepted by teachers and by one another. The ethic of care and love means seeing our students, including those with a significant disability, as having value in themselves and helping others in the school community to see this as well. Our interactions must communicate respect for all students as individuals made in the image of God. We allow for their weaknesses, imperfections, or difficulties, accepting our students where they are (developmentally, academically, behaviorally), though not being content to leave them at that level, but seek their betterment (Anderson, 2012).

Ethics and morality are not merely derived from human or social thought, but are dependent on God (Estep, 2010). The author of Hebrews tells us Jesus "radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God" (Hebrews 1:3). Christ is our model for ethical, caring behavior. To display the ethic of care and in our lives and classrooms requires patterning our love of others after God's love and care as we see it embodied in Christ. Christian teachers should be a visible representation of Jesus — his grace at work; his love outreaching; his desire for people to be free from oppression and to be reconciled with and to serve one another.

What Are Characteristics of a Classroom Founded on an Ethic of Care?

Teachers must actively seek to promote in the classroom a community of acceptance, respect, and caring. Ethics is more than making right decisions; its scope includes affect and behavior (Estep, 2010). Anderson's (2012) discussion of a theology of special education relates to all classrooms and teachers, especially given the emphasis on including children with disabilities in general education classes. The ethic of care should be evident at all levels of education, and "felt" by everyone involved: teachers, administrators, school board members, students, and families. In classrooms established on an ethic of care several qualities will be evident.

Compassion

Inclusive programming requires the display of unconditional love. Teachers must create an environment where all students feel welcomed and accepted by the teacher and by their peers. Interaction with the students must communicate respect for them as individuals made in the image of God (Anderson, 2012). Benevolence will have a prominent role as teachers seek to give each student what he or she requires in order to learn effectively. Using various teaching methods and approaches, or creatively developing a new approach may be necessary, along with providing constructive and compassionate affirmation of the students.

Long (1997), whose primary focus was children with behavioral problems, wrote of the importance of kindness, which he described as "the source of energy that maintains and gives meaning to humanity" (p. 242). Kindness is the outworking of compassion and is linked to forgiveness. Both are crucial to maintaining a classroom informed by an ethic of care. Acts of kindness help students who struggle academically or behaviorally because of disability to establish trusting relationships with others.

Presence

An ethic of care requires teachers to be physically and emotionally available to their students. The teacher must actively listen to the student and reflect on teaching-learning activities by "listening"

to the teaching-learning activity that does not go as planned. Care for the student's development should lead to questioning whether something was overlooked in the lesson planning or missed in assessing the student's strengths and weaknesses.

Teachers who manifest an ethic of care understand that fairness does not mean all students are treated (or taught) equally, as if all are alike or have the same needs. They recognize that to be fair requires that the needs of each student be considered and seek to furnish what is needed for the student to learn effectively. Above all, caring teachers will, through their attitudes, actions, and words communicate hospitality and acceptance of all students.

Interdependence and Hospitality

An ethic of care highlights the interdependence of all people. The ethic of love, as expressed in reconciliation, acceptance, and interdependence promotes inclusive education through community building. Interdependence recognizes the mutuality of responsibility and interconnectedness of each member of the classroom community.

The biblical concept of hospitality expresses the classroom environment desired, one in which students with disabilities and other marginalized students are effectively incorporated into the "body" of the class. Hospitality is a necessary quality for classrooms to be truly inclusive by creating a milieu that conveys welcome, acceptance, and belonging for each student. An hospitable classroom will present a welcoming environment in which all students, with or without a disability, feel valued and safe within a "shelter of relationship" (Pohl, 2002). Critical to hospitality is "maintaining an open and ready heart" (Reynolds, 2006, p. 201).

Relationship

The relationship teachers establish with students is paramount in the ethic of care, and begins with recognizing the worth and dignity of every student, including those with a severe or profound impairment. A classroom infused with an ethic of care recognizes and promotes the human rights of persons with impairments. A caring attitude must also be maintained when offering assistance to students whose disability may interfere with their success, so that such students are not seen as a

“need” or as a drain on limited resources. Pairing a non-disabled student with one who has a disability shows care for both, but the pairing should be bi-directional recognizing that sometimes students with a disability may be able to assist their non-disabled peers. This counteracts the mistaken idea that disability always means dependence. An ethic of care encourages students who have a disability to do as much as possible for themselves, thereby gaining a sense of self-achievement and self-control while at the same time fostering interdependence, relationships, and mutual responsibility (Morris, 2001). A caring teacher-student relationship requires that teachers believe in the potential of their students and cultivate mutual trust and confidence between the students and themselves.

Authenticity

For teachers to “be real” requires knowing their personal strengths while also acknowledging their weaknesses. Authenticity includes a willingness to admit and take responsibility for mistakes or misjudgments, and a readiness to try something new. Modeling this authenticity affirms that both teacher and students are unique human beings, individually designed and loved by the God who created them both, whether disabled or able-bodied. Teachers who show themselves to be authentic persons become a “source of life” (Steensma, 1971), a motivating force for students with disabilities, by displaying an encouraging attitude, confidence that the students can be successful, an unwillingness to give up on the students, and a preparedness to search for or create new ways of teaching that may enable students to demonstrate their learning and growth. Authentic teachers will keep their expectations of the students high but realistic, accommodating to the student’s needs but not “settling” for minimal gains. The authentic lifestyle of the teacher becomes a powerful tool in working with students, with or without disabilities, as well as with the student’s parents and other professionals. Authenticity promotes the establishment of relationships and puts teachers into a better position to advocate for others.

Service

The Bible is unambiguous in its emphasis that Christians are called to serve others. As servant-leaders, Christian teachers are servants first, and in

serving, they lead, out of concern for the needs and welfare of the students (Anderson, 1997). Teaching is a ministry to which God has called and equipped us. As we exercise our teaching gifts we demonstrate obedience to God’s call to be a part of his grand mission. In the ministry of teaching we directly serve our students, and indirectly serve God as we exercise the gifts he has bestowed on us. Serving our students involves caring for them, seeking to promote their growth and development, academically, socially, and emotionally, and championing their inclusion in the educational community and beyond. We also serve society at large in helping to develop an educated and responsible citizenry.

Conclusion

An ethic of care can also be called an ethic of love, or even an ethic of life — a commitment to upholding the dignity of each person as someone created in the image of God (see for example Gathje, 2006). Christian teachers, as care givers, become advocates of God’s presence as they create a “healing” community in the classroom by extending grace in practical ways to their students. Caring as Jesus cared involved reaching out to people at their level, coming alongside, being present to them and entering into their experience as best we are able.

Shortt (2014) wrote metaphorically to describe the Bible as an environment that shapes each Christian, but especially emphasized how the Bible shapes us as teachers in the classroom. Paul’s exhortation in Colossians explains the desired effect of this shaping: “whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus” (3:17), and “work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people” (3:23).

In Colossians 3:17 and 23, Paul uses a form of the Greek word *ergon* to describe our work or labor — what we do. But in 1 Corinthians 9:1, Paul uses the *ergon* in a different way, to refer to the *result* or *product* of work: “Isn’t it because of my work that you belong to the Lord?” Paul is using the word to describe the Corinthian believers themselves; literally, he calls them “the work of me.” What difference would it make to think of our students as “the work of us”? Establishing an ethic of care in

the classroom would seem essential if this was how we thought of our students and our work.

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