

Students learn more than curriculum in class

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Many people think of ethics in terms of religion or philosophy, but other areas of life also involve ethical thought. There are medical ethics, political and business ethics, and there are ethical codes among competing real estate salespeople, competing newspapers, and yes, there are even ethical codes among used-car salespeople.

As a former teacher and educator, I am interested in codes of ethics for teachers.. When someone from our own group fails to live up to the expected ethical codes of our profession, the trust and dignity of others within the profession are damaged. A recent example of unethical behaviour was described in the London Free Press of March 17, page A3, under the title, *Greed earns three years*. The article refers to a teacher who violated his profession by spending over \$800,000 of public money for his own purposes. As a former teacher, I can easily imagine how medical doctors or priests feel when one of their own profession fails to act ethically. We feel disappointed and let down by one of our colleagues.

So what are the ethical codes that teachers and educators ought to follow. Being a teacher places one in a position of trust. Parents and students trust that teachers will do their best to encourage and support students in their learning. Teachers are expected to help students acquire knowledge, think critically, and develop habits of civility and pride in their country. As a Moderator for the Educational Quality and Accountability Office in Ontario (EQAQO) I know that one of the first tasks of teaching is to present school subjects such as reading, writing, literacy and mathematics with enthusiasm and clarity. These tasks are the basics of education. That is, they are the starting point but not the end of education.

In the process of teaching the “Three Rs” teachers are in the fortunate position of transferring a range of useful skills for living. Because teaching usually occurs in classes with groups of students working together, there are inevitable opportunities to teach lessons involving socialization, respect for democracy, responsibility, development of life skills, respect for others, acceptance of fellow students who appear or speak differently, and respect for our country. This is a lengthy list, but even so, it is not all that is required for good citizenship.

Some of my colleagues will say that they are already overworked by teaching the

regular course work set out in the curriculum. I have sympathy for this point of view, especially when challenged students require more time and patience so that all students in the class will be knowledgeable about the basic subjects on the curriculum. However, in most schools, teachers meet in classes which are social groupings. Students inevitably learn some good and bad social and ethical lessons from each class, whether or not the individual teacher is aware of the non-curricular messages within the group.

From the teacher, they will learn about whether each student is respected. Students will learn whether, in their oral responses, good sentence structure is expected, what type of humour is acceptable, whether sarcasm is okay, and whether lateness is accepted. Students perceive whether there are favourites in the class, whether the teacher accepts late assignments, whether reasonable exceptions are made for illness or for problems within the student's home environment. From their fellow students, they will learn about bullying, sharing, courtesy and humane attitudes. They will learn about whether it is important to tell the truth and to be respectful towards those of different religions or colour.

There are many parents who would love to have the opportunity to discuss with their children for an hour or so the things they need to think about and to learn on their journey towards their children's ethical development. What a wonderful, yet challenging, opportunity for teachers to have a positive influence on those in their care. What an important privilege teachers have to honour and protect the trusted position that good teachers need in order to do their job well. Teachers who are unethical not only let down members of their profession, but more importantly, they let down their students and the parents who put their trust in the teaching profession.