

# THE COLLECTIVE COGENCY OF PROFESSIONAL SUSCEPTIBILITY: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-TEACHERS' CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*This qualitative research study presents a content analysis of 52 undergraduate students' reflection logs that stemmed from a case-based inquiry process. Participants were enrolled in a university professional teacher preparation program in Ontario, Canada. The systematic examination of the case dilemmas led to two central findings identified as (i) participants' collective and acute attentiveness to the relational context of teaching, and (ii) their awareness of the difficulty of interpreting complex ethical dilemmas. The study underscores participants' profound cogency of their susceptibility as prospective teachers given the multiplicity of ethical considerations that the role of educator entails.*

## INTRODUCTION

Case studies are intended to illuminate student-teachers' awareness of what Shulman (1986) describes as "theoretical principles, maxims, and norms" (Orland-Barak, 2002, p. 452; Shulman, 1992; Sykes & Bird, 1992). Student teachers benefit from a variety of opportunities to contextualize the complexities of teaching, including case-based pedagogy (Caruso, 1998). As Garrahy, Cothran, and Kulinna (2005) suggest, providing the combination of observations in the field, preliminary exposure to teaching situations, and the respective coursework, "teacher educators can help pre-service teachers interpret their new knowledge" (p. 61; see also O'Sullivan, 1996; Pagano & Langley, 2001). Discussions regarding case-based inquiry express recurring concerns that instruction for teachers be intermingled with ethical issues that foster independent analytical skills and conceptual thinking (Burger, 1992; Friere, 1998; Katz, 1998; McClain, 2003; Morse, 2000; Shulman, 1986; Simon, 2000; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). The cases employed in this research study were edited by the Ontario College of Teachers and entail real-life dilemmas that infer the Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and the standards of practice that inform the profession for Ontario's 200,000 teachers (Ontario College of Teachers,

1999). The cases “facilitate deeper awareness, understanding, and integration of the standards” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006, p. 4).

The literature on case-based pedagogy as a means to espouse epistemological considerations has been seemingly exclusive to graduate level studies in education and post-baccalaureate teacher preparation programs. This research study employed a multidimensional case inquiry process to examine undergraduate students’ (enrolled in the third of a five-year concurrent education program of study whereby education courses are combined with undergraduate-level courses) ability to link abstract educational theory to the eventual circumstances of professional practice. The case-based pedagogy under discussion was especially conducive for the critical examination of ethical practice and for the consideration of theory that founds it (Shulman & Colbert, 1988; Shulman, 1992). The case inquiry process not only induced participant reflection but also served as a means for them to deconstruct, construct, and eventually reconstruct meaning (Shulman, Whittaker, & Lew, 2002). This research recognizes the discourse of undergraduate education students to capture their perspectives on how educational theory implicates with their preconceived notions, the opinions of their peers, and their critical reflections. The qualitative research design is especially appropriate for domains where relatively new research is explored (Firmin & Wilhelm, 2006; Ten Have, 2004). An objective of the study was to be attentive to the content of participants’ discourse as they described the evolution of their critical thinking in their reflection logs. The study was directed by the following research questions:

1. What are the implications for concurrent education students of engaging in a systematic examination of case studies?
2. How has participants’ critical thinking been influenced by the ethical dilemmas presented in the case studies?

## METHODS

### Participants and Setting

Fifty-two undergraduate students enrolled in a concurrent education program at a midsized university in southwestern Ontario, Canada participated in the study. All participants were in their third year of study and had chosen the intermediate/senior division as their area of concentration. They ranged from 20 to 23 years of age. Each participant engaged in four case studies between September 2005 and September 2006. Each case inquiry session lasted two hours. The case-based process employed in this research design was facilitated by professional educators not directly involved in this project.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Participants’ reflection logs for each of the four case inquiries represented the data for this study. Each participant was provided a copy of the case at the beginning of the session, its complementary commentaries written by various

experts in the field, and a reflection log page consisting of four columns including Thoughts about the Case, Thoughts about the Case following the Case Discussion, Thoughts about the Case after Reading the Commentary, and Thoughts about the Case after the Commentary Discussion. Participants were prompted at various intervals to read the cases and their respective commentaries before documenting their critical reflections in each of the four columns. The process allowed for individual rumination, peer interaction, and retrospective critical reflection. It facilitated for participants a means to actively deconstruct both the contextual relevance and ethics of the case, but also their judgments throughout. Each participant had the opportunity to review their responses for a member check of the data. There were no extensive changes.

The data were subjected to a content analysis (Patton, 1988). The reflection logs were hand-written and ranged from one to three pages in length. Participants' reflections were transcribed verbatim. Each log was examined as a text first as it pertained specifically to its respective case and then as it responded to the research questions. The text of each log was re-read and labeled by category. Themes and patterns between categories and across logs were considered (Patton). Properties within the categories were distinguished as descriptors. The logs were subjected to a second critical reading before being coded by theme. The themes were juxtaposed to the emerging categories and analyzed for applicability and hence, the suitability of the themes and properties within each category determined their relevance. Qualitative content analysis of this sort indulges in the discreet manner whereby language influences perceptions, shapes critical thinking, and creates a specific interpretation of what is real (Avdi, 2005; Johnstone & Frith, 2005). Selected extracts from the data that best represented participants' authentic reflections are cited in the paper.

Investigator triangulation was factored to increase trustworthiness measures. A research associate not involved in the project but well versed in these qualitative methodologies agreed to engage in this inductive exercise. The significant categories were identified after all of the data, analytical notes, and decisive discussions between researchers were consolidated. Since each of the responses was considered a "textual whole," themes were coded separately as they emerged in participants' rhetorical constructions of their critical reflections (Hilden & Honkasalo, 2006).

As one example, the inductive content analytical process for the first research question identified three subcategories, including factoring the underlying issues of a case, challenging participants' personal comfort zones, and the importance of multifaceted reflection for participants involved in the study. These subcategories and their respective properties (numbering nine in total) were collapsed into one dominant category described as participants' collective momentum towards a heightened attentiveness of the relational context of teaching. Following the same mode of inquiry for the second research question, the two subcategories were described as accounting for the ambiguity

in each case, and sustaining ethical practice to address all the circumstances in each case. A dominant theme emerged; namely, participants' difficulty of interpreting complex ethical dilemmas.

Various procedures addressed the trustworthiness of the study. Participants could edit and revise responses during a member check of their reflection pages. Also, data triangulation was addressed in the collection of four separate data sets after each case study analysis. Further, as a consistent component of our discussion, we investigated for the presence of negative cases that countered the dominant themes and eventual categories. The triangulation induced a comprehensive view of participants' perceptions and voice during this initial stage of student-teacher development (see Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## RESULTS

One significant category emerged for each of the research questions.

### The Relational Context of Teaching

Participants consistently reflected that the core problem in each case represented latent tensions in the relational contexts of teaching and learning. On numerous occasions participants admitted that the subjects and series of events in the case narratives forced them into a critical assessment of personal and occupational knowledge as it related to the ethical interests of their decisions, and hence realized that "it's not just a matter of making a decision, but about being informed and about informing others in terms of where you stand." Participants cited their expectation that their inexperience will be "tested and questioned daily" as beginning teachers, and suggested that the case-inquiry process enlightened for them the difficulties of managing their roles given the pressure and accountability measures from administration, parents, and students. Another individual aptly summarized, "in this business it seems that every decision we make has a ripple effect on others." Participants felt personally engaged in the negotiation of these tensions that, as one participant stated, "involved issues that could not be swept under the rug." There was a genuine recognition on the part of participants that as complex as ethical considerations were a complete consideration of various implications that each outcome entailed could not be jeopardized.

Interestingly, however, the stressful conditions perceived as complicating teachers' roles were articulated from a different conceptual paradigm as participants' gained experience with the case-based inquiry process. More specifically, the constructive involvement of their peers, as a community of prospective teachers, seemed to diffuse their individual anxiety and operationalize a sort of group consciousness fuelled by a collective momentum that cultivated differences of opinions, varying theoretical principles, and opposing epistemological stances. As this individual stated, "it helps me to hear

my classmates and to know what they are thinking.” Another participant wrote, “even though I think some opinions are way out there, I can collect my own thoughts. Sometimes I even have to look at things from a fresh perspective.” Particularly telling was this reflection: “after we begin to share our thoughts and hear from the experts [referring to the case commentaries] the class just kind of gets going. The conversation picks up and people are coming in everywhere.”

Participants empowered themselves to become directly involved in the collective momentum of the case discussions. They arrived at varying levels of awareness and critically reflected upon the cases’ complex socio-relational circumstances in collaborative dialogue that sustained the discourses’ collective momentum. While references surfaced that “teaching is going to be difficult” given what was described as “the challenges of an inclusive classroom,” “unreasonable parents,” “unruly kids,” or “hyper-vigilant principals,” it was telling that on multiple occasions participants noted “how comforting it was to hear that other people were just as perplexed,” or as another individual stated, “that I’m not alone in thinking that this is a no-win situation.” One individual shared that she “got into the flow of the conversations because there was so much to talk about.” Participants did not perceive the case material as being exclusive knowledge but rather, felt there were many opportunities for entry-level participation throughout the dialogue. The conversation fuelled learning in a risk-free and participatory pedagogical stance. It provided participants with opportunities to comprehend their theoretical and often more pragmatic perspectives in a constructive and engaging manner. Indicative of others was this participant’s reflection: “It’s neat to see how the talk turns into discussion and eventually this group approach to making sense of it. It’s not that there is ever total agreement, but the different opinions about how the teachers in these cases are affected help me to learn.”

The significant category that emerged in response to the second research question was identified as participants’ difficulty of interpreting complex ethical dilemmas.

### Naming and Interpreting Ethical Dilemmas

Implicit in participants’ logs was an awareness of the difficulty in translating the educational concepts, learning theories, and instructional models learned in coursework to the unpredictable and spontaneous ethical circumstances embedded in professional practice as they were depicted in the case stories. Participants were candid in confessing their confusion during times when they “could not figure out how to bring what we learned over to Mr. Harris’ [a subject-character in the case] classroom.” Another stated, “I can’t believe how much there is to think about based on what we read, what we talked about, and the kids themselves.” While they for the most part professed to have a firm understanding of abstract theory and conceptual thinking, the transition of applying those constructions of meaning to their prospective practice was far more challenging. The case pedagogy under discussion exposed participants to

both the complexity and severity of the various tensions that are entrenched in teaching and that implicate upon the learned theory of their coursework.

Further, participants struggled identifying with the convoluted realities presented in the case. They commented in the early stages of the case pedagogy particularly upon their resistance to shift from their idealistic frames of mind and perceived themselves and their peers as compulsively adhering to self-constructed meanings. Typical of the comments cited in the logs proceeding the first case study was this one: "Sometimes I wondered what I would do and where I was coming from. I used to think that people [referring to classmates] were making things too complicated....like one of my high school teachers would give this situation all this thought?" In the final collection of reflection logs proceeding the fourth case study, however, the following entry was more indicative: "If we don't take all the information and resources we have as teachers, and if we don't recognize the differences in our classrooms, we are going to be in trouble." Another wrote, "I guess this kind of thinking is what is expected of us. It's not about me or what I think about certain schools and topics. I have to recognize the bigger picture." Participants, through dialogue with their peers, wrote that reconciling theory and idealism with the often-confused realities presented in the cases profoundly challenged their personal limits. The ethics-based cases generated perplexing insight and creative tension between what was learned, assumed, and presented as unpredictable.

The social context of studying cases and naming experiences in this individual and collective manner forced participants to make sense of their preliminary reflections, others' perspectives, and eventually of their more discriminating awareness. "It is good at the end of all discussion about the case and expert views to sit back and take it all in....To see where you stood and where you are in the final analysis." Another participant reflected, "whether you are opposed or agree with what is discussed you have a better understanding of the relationship between teachers and students and how education involves much more than what happens when you close your [classroom] door." Participants professed to invest a personal involvement in naming contextually relevant teaching experiences. They understood that the process of meaning-making was only as purposeful as it was relevant to their prospective role as teacher. "I have to be prepared for students like Scott [a subject in the case] and understand the importance of grounding my decisions properly." The dialogue assisted participants in mediating their thoughts and addressing the commentaries and contributions of their peers. Ultimately, the ethical dilemmas presented in the cases challenged their self-centered paradigms and evoked an authentic consideration of the multiplicity inherent in moral decision-making.

### Discussion and Implications

The intent of this study was to analyze the content of concurrent undergraduate education students' reflection logs during a series of intensive individual and collaborative case-based inquiry sessions more commonly used,

according to the literature, to elucidate preservice students' theoretical paradigms. The participants in this study, unlike those students in post-bachelor and one-year teacher training programs, are not at a defined stage of professional development as it has been described in the literature since the early stages of the 20th Century (Bagley, 1922; Burden, 1990; Burn, Hagger, Mutton, & Everton, 2000; Caruso, 1977; Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Brown, 1975; Fuller, Pitgrim, & Freeland; Innaconne, 1963; Pendry, 1997; Sacks & Harrington, 1984). The two significant themes that serve as the findings of the respective research questions allude to the fact that participants shared a profound common social cogency of their susceptibility as beginning teachers given the ethical considerations that their roles will entail. The case-based inquiry resulted in the exploration of theoretical principles, the discussion of viable alternatives, and the discovery of a speculative awareness of what it means to adhere to the ethical standards of the profession. This complements the fact that the case discussions "develop[ed] a greater appreciation for real-life examples" and as another individual wrote, "to see things through someone else's eyes and then dissect on our own exactly where our thoughts are situated and how we got there." Participants related to their original viewpoints, harbored others' viewpoints, and reconsidered the ethical dilemmas to arrive at an informed opinion. Further, the presentation of theory in their education courses assumed a greater significance since, as this individual concluded, "the process enabled us to fully analyze the circumstances of each case while absorbing the information from our readings into our thinking." Especially noteworthy was this same participant's subsequent statement: "And we did it without really knowing it."

Furthermore, participants (through individual and group reflection) came to terms with a moral conceptualization for each of the respective cases to gain a more comprehensive understanding of teaching and learning. As this participant wrote, "I want to be ethical in all that I do and in what I represent for students....but I worry about having to factor all that I have learned in the decisions I will make." Another participant echoed this concern: "We are just beginning. Sure, when I have 20 years of teaching experience under my belt some of these considerations might be second-hand. For now I feel like we're just going to be out there having to learn by our mistakes."

Although participants felt redeemed by the fact that there existed a collective awareness of their susceptibility in terms of negotiating the ethical complexities involved in teaching, they consistently reflected upon the sensitivity of their interactions with students and staff. "We must be so careful that our behaviour and even the way our behaviour is perceived are seen as moral by the community." A different participant suggested that she underestimated the extent to which the teaching profession was a social activity "highly determined by the ethical standards." Upon analyses into the implications of the various subject-teachers' behaviours, participants felt that they will have to mobilize their feelings of susceptibility by being cautious of their interactions. By engaging in

the vicarious experiences that the case-dilemmas and respective commentaries offered, participants' feelings of susceptibility stemmed from the realization that simple and sole solutions to ethical dilemmas do not exist in "the process of thinking like a teacher" (Campoy, 2005, p. 4; Yin, 2003). Given the case-based pedagogy under discussion, participants' descriptive and reflective entries were testament to the fact that the curriculum of the teacher-education program was meaningfully aligned to professional practice (Cooper, 1995) and contributed to participants' repertoire of experiences (Eckerman Pitton, 1998; Rand, Shelton-Colangelo, 2003). In this constructivist learning paradigm, participants were active in their diagnoses of the various case circumstances and engaged in a problem-solving process from a reflective point of view. As this participant wrote, "I had to come to grips with the case first and understand it on my terms. By talking and sharing, I came to see some of the more controversial issues that made the cases especially challenging from an ethical point of view."

#### Recommendations

The study concluded that a positive collective momentum evolved from participants' discussion that fostered a sensitivity towards the relational context of teaching and learning, as well as in interpreting ethical dilemmas. Particularly noteworthy was the shared understanding between participants of their susceptibility as beginning teachers to successfully manage the ethical responsibilities expected from the profession.

Several recommendations can be drawn from this research. To begin, the study may be replicated since all participants were students from a centrally located province in Canada and were predominantly White and middle class citizens. Further research may be considered with more diverse populations and in other Canadian provinces. Second, research on a larger scale involving other undergraduate education students may provide a more thorough depiction of the critical commentary that affects thinking and reflection. Last, that concurrent preservice education programs provide opportunities for undergraduate students to trace their critical and reflective thinking using a similar case-based inquiry process particularly when introducing prospective teachers to matters of professional ethics.

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