

Perspectives on the Professions

Vol. 19, No. 1, Fall 1999

Developing a Code for Early Childhood Education

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From 1984 to 1989, a professor of philosophy (KK) and a professor of education (SF) together helped to develop a code of ethics for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a professional association having more than 100,000 members working in early childhood education (ECE). Since its adoption in 1989, the "NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct" has been included in NAEYC's guidelines for teacher preparation programs, referenced in NAEYC's procedures for accrediting early childhood programs, reprinted in ECE textbooks, and extensively treated in two recent NAEYC publications. Copies are at hand in thousands of early childhood settings and consulted when ethical problems arise for preschool teachers. We believe this code has been a remarkable success. What accounts for its success? Codes of ethics, we believe, must meet the twin standards of comprehensiveness and ownership.

Comprehensiveness requires that a code set out practical guidance for all the common ethical problems that arise for practitioners. Some questions are answered directly but others must be settled by combining sound professional judgment with general directions provided in the code. The second standard, ownership, requires that members of the profession generally take the code as defining their shared professional commitment. In this regard, how a code gets developed is at least as important as what it says.

The challenge is to deliver a document satisfying both standards. Few do. What follows is intended as a useful sketch of what was done in this one instance.

Organizational Prerequisites Code development is best conceived as an educational process that can involve thousands of participants. While robust channels of communication are vital to achieving transparency, it is also essential that (1) the membership feel a need for authoritative guidance, and (2) a stable and knowledgeable leadership undertake to advance the profession by meeting that need. Where leadership is unstable - where, for example, governing boards turn over frequently - those in charge at the end of the process will not have initiated it. A visible, trusted structure within the organization must be there to shepherd the code: NAEYC established a standing Ethics Panel.

Professionals may not welcome codes. If they provide unambiguous guidance, they will define some conduct as unprofessional, constraining practitioners. Some professionals may

not want to be told what to do, even by their colleagues. Others may believe their pre-professional morality is all they need. Finally, if a code is desired merely for its public - relations value, there may be no genuine buy-in. No buy-in: no ownership.

Buy-in needs to be nurtured and assessed. After preliminary discussions with NAEYC leadership, we published an article in the NAEYC's journal *Young Children*. The following ethical problem, well-known to preschool teachers, served to capture attention:

The Nap: Timothy's mother has asked you not to let her four-year old son nap in the afternoon. She says: "When he naps, he stays up until 10 p.m. I go to work in the mornings and I am not getting enough sleep." Along with the rest of the children, Timothy takes a one-hour nap almost every day. He seems to need it to stay in good spirits in the afternoon.

We argued that, to grapple with the ethical dimension of their professional work, early childhood educators had to sort out, for example, what was owed to parents and what to children. Reviewing several examples, we asked, in an appended questionnaire, whether NAEYC should undertake to provide practitioners with ethical guidance. More importantly, we asked for ethical problems encountered by those working in the field.

Over 800 questionnaires were returned along with hundreds of problems: a very good response by NAEYC's standards. Having empirically demonstrated membership buy-in, NAEYC's leadership readily decided to support code development. The database of submitted problems served as our basis for a comprehensive code.

The Workshop Exercises With the assistance of NAEYC and a grant from the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, we conducted a series of 3-hour workshops with leadership groups around the United States. These working sessions, with roughly 3060 participants, were an essential part of code development.

We started by describing how professional ethics differs from law, personal values, institutional policies, and personal morality. In ECE, professional ethics can be grounded in a consensus about what good early childhood educators should care about. We divided participants into groups of about 3-6 to develop core value lists. Anyone could nominate a value, but a candidate core value could be added to a group's list only if all others in the group endorsed it enthusiastically. Vetoes tended to filter personal values.

After about fifteen minutes, one small group was asked for a value with strong support. The value was written on a poster. Other groups were then asked for values they had listed that roughly corresponded to the one on the poster. These variations were entered below the first. This done, a second group was asked for a different core value. This was entered on a second poster. Variations were then solicited from the other groups for entry below. This continued until all values listed by the groups were organized and on display.

Participants were commonly surprised by this consensus. In fact, there was so much consensus about the core values of ECE that, after several such workshops, we could

confidently predict the outcome.

Following this “Core Values Exercise”, we redivided the participants into somewhat larger groups. From the hundreds of ethical problems returned with the questionnaire, we had created a set of fictionalized case-studies capturing the salient value questions in ECE. Each group was given one of these and asked to reach consensus on how the good early childhood educator in that situation should respect the core values now on display. Participants were not to appeal to personal morality, personal values, law, or institutional policies. However, new core values could be added to the list if they were needed to resolve the case and unanimously supported by the group.

After this small group work, the full set of cases was distributed to all participants. After each case was read aloud, a group reporter presented the consensus, setting out the favored practical response and the core values supporting it. Discussion followed, but the constraining influence of the core value list made disagreement unusual.

Approached in this way, problems in professional ethics are understandable either as value conflicts or, less commonly, as the product of value ambiguity. In “The Nap,” for example, a well-motivated concern for the child's welfare conflicts with an equally well-motivated concern to respect parental decision-making. Here the profession needs a priority rule. In other cases, however, a single core value is ambiguous. For example, though family confidentiality has to be respected, an ethical problem can arise when a noncustodial parent asks for “confidential” information about the child. Resolution requires the profession to “disambiguate” the term “family.”

In a series of articles in *Young Children*, we presented some frequently occurring ethical problems, solicited help in resolving them, and wrote follow- articles discussing suggested resolutions.

The Code and Its RevisionsAfter looking at other professions' codes, we prepared a draft for discussion at an NAEYC annual conference. The discussion prompted revisions. A revised draft was then published in *Young Children* along with a request for suggestions. These suggestions led to further revisions. A final draft of the NAEYC Code was submitted to the NAEYC Governing Board, which readily adopted it.

The code consists of a preamble and four sections. The preamble introduces the code, articulating some of the basic commitments of the field. The four sections that follow treat the field's constituents: children, families, colleagues, and the larger society. Each section includes “Ideals” and “principles”. The Weals point to the ways in which the profession's values can be furthered, describing exemplary professional conduct. The principles commonly draw lines between acceptable and unacceptable conduct, conduct betraying the profession's core values.

In “The Nap”, the values in conflict pertain to the family and the child. While a family

ideal calls for respecting the family's childrearing values and its right to make decisions for its children, Principle 1.1 reads:

Above all, we shall not harm children. . . This principle has precedence over all others in this Code.

Thus, whether Timothy should be kept from napping turns on whether doing so will harm him. The Nap” calls for a judgment about a child's needs, a judgment squarely within the competence of his knowledgeable teachers.

Every problem we collected was checked against provisions in the code. Comprehensiveness was achieved on the basis of the 1988 problem set. But since then, NAEYC members have forwarded new issues to the Ethics Panel. The Panel regularly revisits the code and has twice incorporated revisions to reestablish comprehensiveness.

The NAEYC deserves credit for sustaining a living channel of communication between its Ethics Panel and the many who have struggled to find their way in a field having more than its share of dilemmas.