

October 1980

Questions of Ethics

Allen Berger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

Recommended Citation

Berger, Allen (1980) "Questions of Ethics," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol14/iss2/4>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

QUESTIONS OF ETHICS

Allen Berger

This essay, based on a paper Dr. Berger delivered at the World Congress Reading in Hamburg, Germany, is reprinted with permission of PITT, published by the University of Pittsburgh.

Nearly half a century has passed since Stuart Chase, who is better known for *The Tyranny of Words*, wrote an essay called "The Luxury of Integrity." Believing that some people can afford integrity more readily than other people, he made a scale ranking the amount of freedom for integrity to be found within occupations and professions. He placed professors about midway on the scale.

That essay I found while searching for information on ethics in education. In addition to the usual clearinghouse sources, I had collected newspaper articles that I had come across containing the word "ethics" in headlines. In examining my newspaper collection I found articles relating to law, medicine, journalism, athletics, business—but except for some on values clarification and moral development there was none on education.

It is possible that in my random search I had overlooked news articles on ethics in education. Not to mention the possibility that we in education have solved our ethical problems ahead of other professions. Rather unlikely, since philosophers have been struggling with the problem of ethics for centuries. In medicine, only last year Sissela Bok, who teaches at Harvard Medical School, explored the problem in a 326-page book as well as in three essays appearing in *The New York Times* (April 18-20, 1978).

Several months before Bok's articles appeared in *The New York Times*, there appeared an extraordinary article on ethics on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* (February 10, 1978). Not just any news story, mind you, but one entitled "Donald Duck Faces a Morals Charge in Western Europe," with the subtitle "German Defenders Say Hero, Albeit Bottomless, Never Laid a Hand on Daisy." The news story originated in Hamburg, West Germany.

For those unfamiliar with the front-page story, the lead sentence explains that "there's a bit of a row in Western Europe over whether Donald Duck, Walt Disney's famous cartoon character, is immoral."

The story continues:

"In Finland, the Helsinki youth committee has found that Donald's 50-year engagement to Daisy Duck, plus the uncertain parentage of Donald's nephews Huey, Dewey and Louie, plus the sailor's suit Donald wears that leaves his feathery bottom uncovered, constitute a racy life style inappropriate for viewing by youth. At the committee's urging, the Helsinki city council has cancelled library subscriptions to Donald Duck comic books at youth club libraries.

"But here in this northern German City, Hans von Storch, a 28-year-old mathematician and founder of the 100-member Donald Duck Club, calls the morals charge 'ridiculous', pointing out that Donald doesn't drink, smoke, take drugs, or have sex with Daisy. Mr. von Storch says, 'Donald is one of the most moral ducks in history.' He has written the Finnish ambassador to West Germany demanding that the Helsinki council reverse its decision."

While awaiting the outcome I decided to reflect on the meanings of "morals" and "ethics" as explained in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*: "Moral pertains to personal behavior. . . . Ethical approaches behavior from a philosophical standpoint; it stresses more objectively defined, but essentially idealistic, standards of right and wrong, such as those applicable to the practices of lawyers, doctors and businessmen."

So how Donald and Daisy behave in private says something about their morals; how each relates to the rest of the world tells something about their ethics.

Turning away from written sources I thought that I would ask practicing teachers their views about ethics in education. To a group at a conference I posed the question: How honest can you be and still be a successful teacher? Put another way, I asked if your principal makes a decision based upon financial or political expediency, and you know that the decision is not educationally sound, that it is not in the best interest of students, what do you do? The teachers in the group were old, young, tenured, non-tenured, union; and with only one exception all agreed that it is not too smart to be too honest.

Now I am aware that in sharing thoughts about ethics in education I am leaving myself open to being criticized for sounding moralistic, or for possessing a holier-than-thou attitude, or for making judgments. Yet I would be the first to admit that I know little about morals and even less about judging the ethical behavior of others. If teachers say that it is not too wise to be too honest, that is better to be quiet—what can I say other than acknowledge the fact that they seem quite tuned in to the ways of the world. Was Descartes so wrong to keep silent after observing what happened to Galileo? If angels fear to tread, why should we?

And yet, if we take honesty out of ethics what is left except hypocrisy? and if action does not follow honesty, we might well heed Shakespeare's warning of too much thought and too little action culminating in the tragedy of Hamlet; as well as too much action and too little thought, the tragedy of Laertes and Horatio.

What does all this mean for us in education? Could Donald Duck, who this year is celebrating his 45th birthday, have been so wrong in his life style? Could Stuart Chase, observing the scene half a century ago, have been right in placing professors only midway on his scale for

continued. . .

integrity? Yet tenure provides the luxury of integrity, the academic freedom to ask ethical questions:

Do we encourage an honest exchange of ideas between and among faculty, students, staff, and administrators?

Do we encourage researchers to pursue long- as well as short-range goals?

What do we do if we are pressed to change marks (whether or not we have a yen to do so)?

What do we say when articles and books are ripped off? When copyright laws are violated?

Or when people are *used* in research, labeled *subjects* (a concept not too far removed from objects), have their privacy violated?

What do we do if we see image passing for substance? Educational fads? Misleading claims?

Do we remain silent when we hear back-biting or character assassination? When meetings are conducted in an unbusinesslike manner, wasting taxpayer and university time and money?

Do we arrange conditions so that all who are in higher education can strive for excellence?

If administrators do not wish to have their performance reviewed by those whose performance they review, what else can one say other than that they do not wish to improve?

Do we restrain ourselves from speaking up for fear of reprisal, in effect imposing upon ourselves a devastating and ignominious censorship?

The questions of course are endless. We each have our own lists.

The maxim that "speech is silver; silence is golden" may tell us how to get ahead in the world, but it says little about ethical behavior.

In all facets of educational life there are some people who find it easy to ask thoughtful, disturbing questions and confront the answers. They are the ones, whether faculty, students, staff, administrators, who are fulfilling their responsibilities as leaders in the educational community. Others who find it difficult to do so, even under the aegis of tenure, might prefer to transfer to a person or group the responsibility of asking trenchant, ethical questions—a concept not too far removed from that of the loyal opposition which is an integral part of many governments in the British Commonwealth and elsewhere in the world. The upshot of whatever happens appears clear, that the extent to which we are willing to speak up is a measure of the spirit of our freedom and a revelation of our confidence in ourselves and humanity.

TEACHING READING: IS IT ALL THAT BASIC?

Leonard Kaplan

*Leonard Kaplan is a Professor
of Education at Wayne
State University*

When asked to write this article, I immediately responded with, "every-one teaches reading." Before you jump in with "everyone teaches reading," permit me to respond with, nonsense! If anything, the "back to basics" movement has developed an elite that not only sees itself as the primary teachers of reading, but makes it clear that what we really need is more courses in reading at the pre-service and in-service levels taught by specialists. Only a passing look at journals that advertise for college instructors would indicate that methodologists are in, especially in the communication skills. Seemingly one-half the positions are for reading experts, the rest seem to be in mathematics. Special education and bilingual education are "in" but that seems to be due to funded programs. Their

continued success remains in doubt in spite of P.L. 94:142 or the desires of the National Association of Bilingual Educators.

In preparing for this writing I examined a number of texts that are used to "train" teachers of reading. The topics were overwhelming. Chapters included: *Readiness, Language Experience Approaches, Comprehension, Organization, Word Attack Skills, Diagnosis, Evaluation, Content Reading, Selecting Reading Materials, Phonics, Linguistics, Structural Analysis, and Contextual Analysis*. I'm sure that a few have been left out, but the list is fairly inclusive and certainly representative of the literature.

In the literature search I kept

looking for a chapter that discussed the nature of the learner. The joy of reading, or how to teach children that reading deals with personal values or how one feels was missing from the majority of texts. A few of the prefaces or introductory statements in the books made passing comment in these areas, but few if any gave the discussion of *Affect* any real commitment. I kept remembering the look of excitement on the face of Leland Jacobs, one of my professors at Teachers College, Columbia University, when he would read to us from a children's book in his reading classes. We felt his enthusiasm because he brought joy to his reading. Somehow our teaching of "basics" doesn't find this very basic.

continued. . .