

Preparing to Be an Ethically Minded Educational Psychologist: Examining Conceptualisations of Social Justice and a Reflexive Exploration of Values

Shahinaz Mahdi

Trainee Educational Psychologist, University of East London

This paper originated as an essay written to partially fulfil the requirements of a Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. Trainee Educational Psychologists were invited to consider the ethical questions that arise from following the moral principles that underpin the practice of educational psychologists, namely social justice, beneficence and autonomy. The TEP chose to focus on social justice. This was explored by drawing on three theories or principles: Utilitarianism, Rawlsian Redistribution and Communitarianism. These were considered within the context of the diverse communities educational psychologists work with. Vignettes from personal and professional experiences were offered and used by the TEP to explore the sources of her values and to consider how her identity and values influence her work. This reflexive exercise is undertaken in the first term and in the first year of the TEP's training, in preparation for her becoming the ethically minded psychologist she intends to be.

Introduction

One of the main aims of the training provider's Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology is to enable trainees to become the psychologists that they want to be. Having spent some years working in education prior to starting my journey as a trainee educational psychologist, I know that for me it is important that I make a difference to the lives of the children and families I work with. I am also interested in the wider education system, especially as it relates to the education of diverse communities and those from disadvantaged social and/or low socioeconomic groups. Of the three moral principles that underpin the work of educational psychologists (autonomy, beneficence and social justice) I have chosen to focus on social justice.

Through writing this article, I hope to develop my understanding of some of the different theories and perspectives on social justice and to consider how different conceptualisations of social justice apply to the practice of educational psychology. I will revisit vignettes from personal and professional experiences and apply a reflexive lens to explore the sources of my values and consider how my values and identity have influenced my work with children and families, and how they could impact on my practice as an educational psychologist. I do so in my first year and first term as a Trainee Educational Psychologist in preparation for the complex ethical dilemmas I am likely to encounter in my practice as an educational psychologist.

Shriberg et al. (2011) described two perspectives from which social justice can be viewed. The first is from an individual perspective in which just societies allow individuals to conduct their lives with minimal intervention from the state

or formal institutions. The second takes a wider systemic view which advocates the manipulation of social systems in pursuit of justice. I have chosen to focus on two perspectives of social justice that reflect these two positions. The first is a Utilitarian perspective, and in particular, Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle. The second is a distributive model based on Rawlsian principles of social justice. In addition, I will discuss the Communitarian perspective, in recognition of the role that communities can play in promoting social justice.

Utilitarian Perspective of Social Justice

Utility or the Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness (Mill, 1861/1987, p. 278).

According to this perspective, actions are considered ethical if they engender the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people and cause the least amount of unhappiness for the fewest number of people. Utilitarianism places intrinsic value on individuals whilst it recognises the ethical weight of multiple individuals as greater than the weight of one individual. It focuses on outcome (happiness) rather than intent, in contrast with deontological perspectives which encompass concern for the adherence to rules or duties that govern the way in which members of a liberal society behave in a morally just way. Utilitarianism presents a tension between needs and rights of the one and the many which is played out in discussion about exclusion in schools.

For example, teachers may say that a child has to be excluded for the wellbeing of the other pupils. It is also written in the SEND Code of Practice in the form of efficient use of resources and the right not to name a school if a child's attendance would be incompatible with the education of others.

Recent emphasis on the promotion of wellbeing in schools is a welcome development which adheres to Utilitarian principles. Educational psychologists play a significant role in promoting the wellbeing of children and advocating for children's rights. As an educationalist and as a parent I strongly feel that children's happiness, their wellbeing, is an important and valid goal within itself, rather than just a precondition for academic achievement. But is happiness everyone's goal? Does everyone strive for individual success?

When my first child was born my mother, delighted to meet her grandson, said a prayer in Somali which is used when welcoming a new baby, "May you be blessed with piety and may you serve your people well." I had heard this said many times before, but I paid attention to its meaning for the first time as a mother. Little of my mother's heartfelt prayer was actually for my son as an individual.

One of the theories that I have regularly come across in my work, particularly in the context of promoting the wellbeing of newly arrived immigrant communities, is Maslow's hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow (1943), individuals fulfil their potential/achieve self-actualisation when their more basic needs are met, namely physiological, safety, belonging/love and esteem. Maslow's theory has some basis in utilitarian thinking in that it privileges individual goals. Given the diverse communities that educational psychologists work with, it is worth considering whether all communities would give self-actualisation the prominence that Maslow's theory does.

In action research I conducted whilst working as a class teacher, I explored the views of Somali parents whose children attended a primary school in an inner London Borough. I found that parents wanted their children to succeed in their formal education and that informal education aimed at developing religious and cultural identity and moral character was seen as equally important, if not more, by most respondents. Many children attended supplementary community schools and/or received instruction at home. These parents were considered "hard to reach" or less engaged by their children's school when their engagement was evaluated against the school's preconception of what an engaged parent looks like, for example attendance at the school's events and membership of the Parent Teacher Association. Although the Somali parents in the study were engaged with their children's education, they had values and aims that differed from the school's. Given that educational psychologists work with di-

verse communities and different clients (for example children, parents and schools), the example above highlights the importance of cultural competence. It also highlights the complexity of identifying goals that can be considered as beneficent. What assumptions do we make and why? When working with multiple clients and with diverse communities, whose values should prevail?

One of the criticisms levelled at utilitarianist principles of social justice is the difficulty in predicting the consequences of actions and, in particular, which actions will produce happiness — the felicific calculus. Applied to educational psychology, this principle would determine the justness of a psychologist's actions based on the extent to which the action maximises utility; the consequence determines if the action is just. Earlier, I proposed that, when determining goals, it is important to consider differing values and cultural goals. It is also important to acknowledge the power relations involved in the day-to-day work of educational psychologists and the powerful positions in which they are placed. Positioning educational psychologists as "experts" can be problematic. Previously, I posed the question: whose values should prevail? Positioning educational psychologists as experts negates the need for this consideration — the expert prevails. However, this paternalistic approach is contrary to the SEND code of practice (2015) and the emphasis it places on partnership working, the promotion of pupil and parent voice and autonomy. It is also contrary to the psychologist I want to be. Yet, parents and teachers who may have waited a long time to meet with an educational psychologist to help them with complex issues may have an expectation that a solution will be offered. The term "positioning" was discussed in several of our taught sessions during the first few weeks of training. Davies and Harré (1990) described positioning as "the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines. There can be interactive positioning in which what one person says positions another. And there can be reflexive positioning in which one positions oneself" (p. 48).

It is with this newly acquired awareness that I reflect on a time when I felt I was positioned in a way that caused me significant discomfort and recognise this as a result of being positioned contrary to my values.

I return to the primary school where I previously established that the school would have had a clearer understanding of the motivations and goals of Somali parents had they considered their value systems. This time, the same group of parents were withdrawing children, particularly girls, from Sex and Relationship Education. Again, different value systems fed into what constitutes a wellbeing outcome. From the school's point of view, providing SRE would be

a beneficent act as it would promote the children's long-term health and wellbeing. The parents considered SRE maleficent as it was perceived to be in contradiction to their beliefs. Furthermore, they expected me to empathise with them and endorse their views as they channelled their complaints through me. But I didn't agree with them. I felt that the children were entitled to an education that will empower them to make decisions that are safe and healthy; as an educator, I could not advocate withholding this knowledge.

"The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amendable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of course, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign" (Mill, 1859/1997, p. 48).

It is at difficult times that we recognise what values we hold in high esteem; for me, autonomy is something I value. When practising as an educational psychologist, I expect situations will arise where I will be positioned by others (e.g., by a school in opposition to parents) and I will endeavour to be alert to this, particularly when the positioning of myself or others risks the subjugation of the voice or interests of a child or a young person.

Autonomy

It is important for educational psychologists to be reflexive and aware of how their values influence their practice. The process of writing this paper has brought to the fore a tension that I was aware that I experience in my personal life but had not until this point reflected upon how it could affect my professional practice: the tension between my up-bringing which prioritised duty and community and my personal values of freedom and autonomy. As a teenager and a young adult growing up in England, where dominant value systems acknowledge happiness as a legitimate goal and individual freedoms are revered, autonomy became something I relished. I live a largely autonomous life and I aspire to the same for the children and young people I work with. But at times promoting children's autonomy can be complicated, particularly when the wishes of parents can take precedence where young children are concerned.

Charlie is a nine-year-old boy with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. He lives with his mother and stepfather. He has not been informed of his condition as his parents are concerned about the emotional impact the disclosure would have on him. They are finding it difficult to come to terms with his diagnosis and believe that God could cure him if their faith is strong. Charlie enjoys school and has a positive relationship

with his teacher. He is becoming increasingly frustrated as he struggles with physical tasks; he can walk unaided and run for a short distance, although he gets very tired. He is aware that, instead of improving over time, his ability to perform physical tasks is deteriorating. He has started to question why he takes daily medication. His parents do not want anyone at school to know of his condition, apart from the headteacher and SENDCo. They reported that Charlie was seen by a physiotherapist and an occupational therapist and consented to allowing the school to draw on other professionals' expertise to provide for Charlie's needs in principle. His class teacher reports that he struggles to concentrate and that he is fidgety, he also has social communication difficulties and struggles to adhere to social boundaries. He was back-classed by one academic year. Charlie recently ran away from home and was found outside his paternal grandmother's house. He disclosed that his stepfather had been locking him up in his bedroom in the dark and that he wanted to see his birth father (whom the school wasn't aware of until this point). Charlie was also found taking food from other children's lunch boxes as he craved sugary treats. He has been hiding his PE kit to avoid participating in the lessons. His birth father does not know of the diagnosis. Charlie's mother and stepfather agreed to an Early Help Plan.

I was the SENDCo involved in the vignette above. I felt that, had Charlie been informed of his condition, he could have had the chance to come to terms with it and made some decisions about his care. He could be educated to manage his symptoms and receive help to become more prepared for changes in the future. What this case highlighted to me was that at times autonomy and beneficence can compete. In this case, the parents' reluctance to engage with health professionals in order to prevent their son from knowing of his condition was a safeguarding concern.

With time, they consented to some support; they agreed to informing key adults in school who could support Charlie day to day. Charlie, however, still didn't have an explanation for his deteriorating physical abilities. I felt Charlie's rights were not being respected, and I felt somehow complicit. I reflect on this case often, particularly since I started training as an educational psychologist. How would I do things differently? I don't have all the answers, but as I took part in learning activities as a TEP about systemic and narrative approaches I thought of Charlie's family. Also, on reflection, I can now see that Charlie could have been involved in making decisions about his school life, and he could have been

supported to advocate for himself without knowledge of a diagnosis. Perhaps my own values and beliefs about what is “right” and paternalism blinded me to the possibilities for promoting Charlie’s autonomy within his existing situation.

Rule Utilitarianism and Tackling Disadvantage

In contrast with Act Utilitarianism, which focuses on the consequence of individual actions, Rule Utilitarianism dispenses with the need to perform a felicific calculus every time an action is taken so long as we adhere to rules that we know, on the whole, maximise utility and minimise unhappiness. For example, a society in which a small number of people may be under threat, for instance, from state-induced violence could find that this arrangement is threatening to the majority of citizens’ sense of security, compared to a society where rules and laws ensure the security of all citizens. Knapp (1999) states that rule utilitarianism “would require rules to protect individuals and minorities . . . the general protection that every member of society feels will, in the long run, some argue, create a society that produces greater happiness” (p. 386). This may be true if the issue being considered is one that any member of society will or could be exposed to. For example, when considering care for the elderly, we would all be happier knowing that we will be cared for in our later years. But this principle overlooks the rights of minority groups, particularly where acting in ways that increase utility for them comes at a cost to the majority. For example, providing for the needs of children with learning disabilities does not provide happiness to the majority. Indeed, from a utilitarian perspective, one could argue that the majority of children would benefit if cash strapped local authorities did not fund expensive education settings that cater for children with significant disabilities.

Although I am an advocate of individual freedoms and autonomy, I could not describe myself as a utilitarian. Thanks to my upbringing, for me, duty and good intentions matter. I have a strong sense of belonging to my community and a sense of responsibility towards wider society. My chosen professions reflect this (teaching and educational psychology) and so does my commitment to social justice for all, not just the majority. In the following parts of the paper, I will consider how other perspectives of social justice address disadvantage, focusing on Rawls’ Theory of Justice and Communitarianism.

Redistributive Social Justice (from a Rawlsian Perspective)

Rawlsian social justice is concerned with how, despite having different positions, people can live together in a just and stable society where:

1. each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with similar liberty for others; and
2. social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: a) they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and b) they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society — the difference principle.

Redistributive models form the basis of several education policies that redistribute resources such as Pupil Premium and High Needs funding. Redistribution of power can be executed through ensuring representation of disenfranchised groups at decision-making levels within organisations and addressing power imbalances. Teachers may devote additional time and harness expertise to provide interventions aimed at pupils that have been identified as in need of additional support. This perspective of social justice strives for equal outcomes as opposed to equal treatment.

As a postgraduate student working toward an MA in Education Policy, I was introduced to redistributive social justice, and I felt that this perspective agreed with my personal regard for fairness. At the time, I also taught in London at a school where many lived in deprivation. I knew, through my studies, that low socioeconomic status was consistently shown to be the most salient predictor of educational achievement in the UK. I felt strongly that something ought to be done to address inequality in education and was particularly interested in issues and debates around class and ethnicity in education.

I felt that redistributive models of social justice offered an opportunity to redress imbalances in educational outcomes. The “veil of ignorance position” advocated by Rawls appealed to my value of fairness. At the time, during the financial crisis, significant cuts were introduced to the public sector, and the role of the state was shrinking; the education landscape was changing rapidly as a result. These developments were in contradiction to what I felt were the obligations of government under a “social contract”. A redistributive model of social justice was useful in enabling me to critically analyse the policy developments in the field of education. In my day to day practice as an educator, however, this way of viewing social justice alone was not sufficient in helping me through some of the ethical and moral dilemmas I faced in my direct work with children and families.

For example, when I worked as a class teacher, I recall a discussion with a teaching assistant who complained that children who didn’t adhere to the school’s behaviour expectation got more rewards and attention than children who consistently followed the rules. She referred to one of my students with SEMH needs, whom I will call Ali, and lamented the amount of time and effort spent on keeping him in school. That same afternoon, during a Circle Time discussion with the children in my class, one child commented that he was happy because Ali was being “good” and that they’d played

well together at break time. A conversation followed about how Ali had changed with several children making positive comments. What the children in that cohesive class had felt was not that they'd been somehow disadvantaged by the additional attention Ali required, but that they were pleased for Ali. When I think of that class, I recognise that, although Ali had taken a lot of my attention and time and that of the other adults, the whole class gained from the inclusive ethos. They felt cared for, and they showed care to one another. This wasn't redistribution; everyone gained. I recognise that the realities of the classroom have changed since; many teachers no longer expect to have additional adults, and exclusions figures are at a record high. But what I did know about this school is that it did not just redistribute resources, the leadership consciously worked to create an inclusive ethos. There was a collective sense of responsibility for the children in our care and the school and the community worked well together. It was a community school.

When I took on a job as a specialist teacher, visiting different schools in my local authority, and later, when I moved to a different local authority in a similar role, I noticed over time that some schools were more open to accommodating and including children with diverse needs than other schools with similar resources. And, as a visiting professional offering advice and guidance, I was aware that these schools were better at implementing advice from professionals and following through with actions. In order to effectively promote social justice as an educational psychologist, I will need to be aware of organisational values and consider how to build capacity in teams to work for social justice. I expect that further ahead in my educational psychology training and practice I will consider the workings of organisations and gain skills in this area. My experience so far and discussions with tutors suggest that leadership is key.

Communitarian Social Justice

According to this perspective on social justice, each member of a community has responsibilities to the rest, and the community has a responsibility to each of its members. A just society, therefore, requires responsible individuals and a responsive community. Communitarianism emphasises the "common good", in contrast with liberal perspectives on social justice, such as utilitarianism, which emphasise individual goals. Perhaps this perspective of social justice is the one that I feel is most aligned with the way I have conducted myself as a professional working within a community to further the education and welfare of the least advantaged. I have been most effective when I have worked well with other professionals and parents. The responsiveness of the community to the needs of its member would, according to this perspective, ameliorate the effects of disadvantage. Critics of communitarianism would suggest that membership of communities can be oppressive and limit individual liberties. A

further concern is that the overreliance on communities can diminish the role of formal institutions in providing for the needs of the least advantaged. Not all communities have the same resources and capabilities. Furthermore, not everyone belongs to a community.

Essam is a 7-year-old boy with spina bifida. He is able to walk short distances unaided, and he requires regular clean intermittent catheterisation, including during the school day. Essam speaks English as an additional language, and he has a speech and language difficulty. He is able to access a carefully differentiated curriculum within his Year 2 mainstream classroom. His class teacher reported that he is beginning to make progress academically, but he is increasingly socially isolated as he struggles to keep up with his peers at playtime. He wears a nappy but feels embarrassed about this. On the advice of a urologist, Essam's mother requested that the school catheterises Essam during the school day but the headteacher feels that this request is beyond what the school can provide.

This vignette describes a case in which I felt least able to help because of the absence of a collective sense of responsibility. Again, I was a SENDCo involved with the case. My attempts to co-ordinate Essam's health needs fell in the gap between the Health and Education systems. Although health professionals were available to give advice and offer training on how to perform clean intermittent catheterisation, they were not able to allocate a health professional to perform daily CIC at school; this was considered to be the school's responsibility. On the other hand, the headteacher could not insist that school staff took on this role. Essam's mother, a single mother of four children who did not speak English and had recently enrolled at an ESOL class, was forced to quit in order to come to school on a daily basis to catheterise her son. That did not seem just. Perhaps an alternative system guided by communitarian principles would bridge the gap between individual services to respond to the needs of children with physical disabilities in mainstream schools. But I also suspect that some redistribution of power (through advocacy for example) would redress the balance in favour of Essam's mother so that she could fight for more adequate support. Often parents who have a limited understanding of SEND systems and don't possess the "correct" forms of cultural capital can be most disadvantaged in a complex education system that is poorly funded.

Conclusions

Lindsey (2017) suggested that EPs need to consider ethical principles, their own values and those of others and use these to develop an ethical decision-making framework

which can be integrated with problem-solving frameworks. He recommends that EPs undergo this process from day one of their training in preparation for the wide range of issues and ethical dilemmas they are likely to face.

I considered three perspectives on social justice: Utilitarianism, Rawlsian Redistribution and Communitarianism. I started with the intention of finding one perspective that is closely aligned with my values and envisaged that I would refer to it when faced with ethical dilemmas. In truth, I was almost certain that a Rawlsian perspective would be the one. After all, in my previous studies, I had considered social justice at length and applied Rawlsian principles to policy dilemmas. But the emphasis on practice that educational psychology demands, and particularly ethical practice, calls for a more nuanced and reflexive approach. I found that no single perspective on social justice could prevail in the face of the complex and varied casework of an educational psychologist. I have also learnt that, in the pursuit of social justice, different values can compete and the question of “who is the client?” is ever present.

I have realised that despite perceived tensions between my upbringing, which favoured duty, and my choice to pursue individual goals, both the values of my childhood and those that I acquired later in life can and do coexist. Furthermore, they can be applied to the benefit of children and families in my work as an educational psychologist.

Through thinking reflexively of my values and how they are played out, and critically engaging with moral principles and theories of social justice, I have seen new understandings emerge when revisiting dilemmas from the past. I aim to apply a similar process to the complex casework I am likely to encounter and to the ethical problems I will face as I strive to become the ethically minded educational psychologist I wish to be.

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