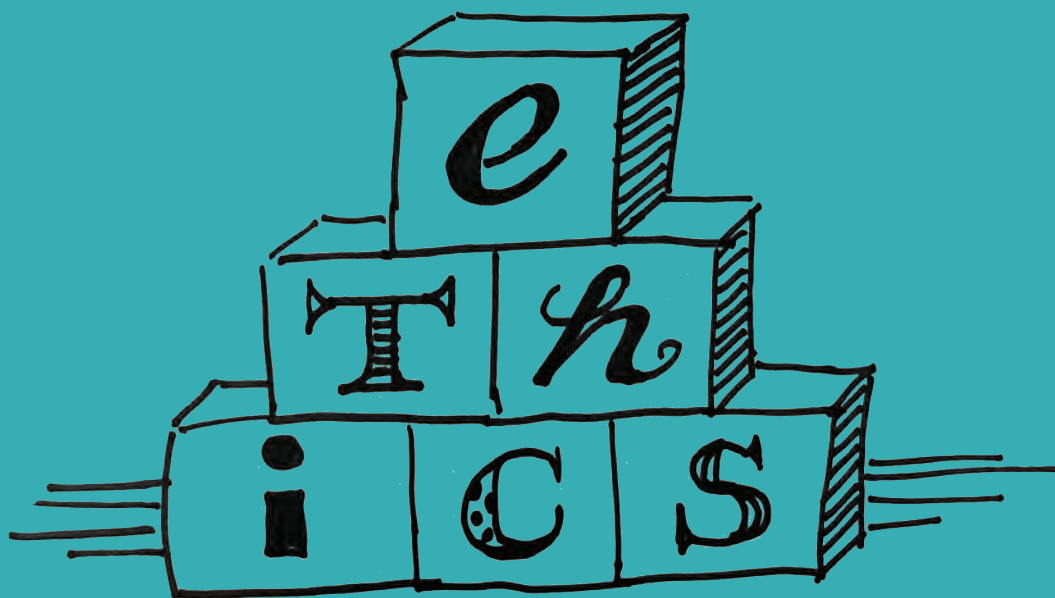


Chapter 1

Becoming Ethically Literate



1.1 Courtesy of the author

What Is Ethical Literacy?

This chapter focuses on building ethical literacy and reasoning. To become literate or fluent in a language, one must understand that language's vocabulary.

Likewise, to become ethically literate, it is critical to build vocabulary and understand ethical concepts pertaining to decisions and behavior. Although behavior is often simplistically labeled right or wrong, considering behavior from an ethical perspective is not simply an either-or dichotomy; actions more likely fall somewhere on a spectrum ranging from ethically prohibited to ethically ideal. Ethical reasoning is an active process, and the ethical decision-making strategy introduced in this chapter is one approach educators can use to help develop ethical reasoning skills.

The following questions serve as a framework for this chapter:

- What is ethical literacy?
- What are ethical principles?
- What are ethically prohibited, acceptable, and ideal choices?
- What is the ICED ethical reasoning strategy?

Literacy is competence in or knowledge of a specific subject or discipline. For example, to be literate in a language one must master vocabulary, gain an understanding of how to communicate, and learn to apply terminology in spoken or written form. Therefore, achieving ethical literacy begins with the acquisition of knowledge drawn from the field of ethics. Developing ethical literacy will not guarantee ethical behavior, but it is important to have a strong foundation to build upon before applying reasoning to inform one's actions. Like any form of literacy, ethical literacy requires mastery of relevant terminology, key concepts, and theories, as well as practice applying new skills.

It is important to acknowledge that many respected thinkers from myriad times and cultures have defined the word *ethics* in various ways. To avoid confusion, this book uses ethics scholar Dr. Deni Elliott's definition: "Ethics is the study of how people *should* act toward one another, other species, and natural systems."¹ Elliott further states that ethics involves more than simply following a set of moral rules, because ethical decisions require reasoning. Indeed, thinking through the ramifications of our decisions rather than simply following our

intuition can help us avoid causing harm to ourselves, others, and the environment.

Scholars argue that ethics sometimes align with—but are not necessarily the same as—emotions, religious beliefs, the law, or society’s conception of acceptable behavior. Although it is a universal desire of humans to be treated with respect and compassion, the case studies throughout this book illustrate clearly that ethical behavior is more complicated than just being nice to one another or treating everyone the same way. Educators, like all professionals, have role-related responsibilities that sometimes require them to make difficult, even unpopular, decisions. That is why becoming ethically literate is important: this knowledge can help individuals make well-informed choices in service to themselves, their professional obligations, and their communities.

To begin building ethical literacy, the following section examines five foundational principles that guide ethical decision-making: autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity.

TEACHER TALK

Emotions and Ethics

Although emotions can influence your actions, it is important to clarify that ethical behavior may or may not align with your emotional reaction to a situation. Acting in an ethical manner is more complex than allowing your feelings to dictate how you treat another person. For example, if you are angry with a colleague, it would be unethical to “forget” to invite that person to group meetings or neglect to share key job-related information. These actions could cause harmful consequences to both your colleague and the group.



1.2 Courtesy of the author

Five Ethical Principles

A **principle** is a foundational concept within a system of beliefs or behavior. So, ethical principles serve as guidelines for making ethically reasoned decisions. Simply stated, ethical principles are rules or ideals to live by. Bioethicists Tom Beauchamp and James Childress identify five foundational principles that are applicable to ethical decision-making in any field:

- 1 Autonomy** People should have the freedom to make choices regarding the way they live their lives, and those choices should be respected as long as they do not harm others.
- 2 Nonmaleficence** People should do no harm to others or to the environment.
- 3 Beneficence** People’s behavior should benefit and support the health and well-being of others.
- 4 Justice** People should act in a just manner, treating others and the environment as they would like to be treated. This principle also encompasses honesty, fairness, and telling the truth.
- 5 Fidelity** People should be faithful, truthful, loyal, and respectful, and they should keep their promises.²

Although these five ethical principles serve as a central foundation for ethical reasoning,

TERMS TO KNOW

Religion

Religions are systems of beliefs and values often based on faith in an omniscient controlling power. Religious values can strongly influence people’s choices and actions. Although many religions espouse clear moral ideals through their teachings, such as not causing harm to others, acting in a virtuous way, and living a good life, strong religious convictions do not guarantee ethical behavior. A quick online search reveals dozens of examples of religious figures who have been convicted of crimes including embezzlement, fraud, sexual misconduct, psychological abuse, and various forms of corruption.

they should not be viewed as set in stone, as some circumstances or situations may call for exceptions. To illustrate this idea, consider “Parental Role–Related Exceptions to Ethical Principles,” page 19.

Autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity are important foundations to guide ethical reasoning; however, they do not always lead to a clear-cut “right or wrong” answer, as there are often important exceptions to consider as part of our thinking process. While these five principles can guide ethical reasoning, under what circumstances

TERMS TO KNOW

Laws

Laws are rules that articulate how individuals in a society are expected to behave for the greater good of all. Laws generally take ethical ideals, such as not causing harm to others or restricting others' freedoms, as a foundation for their construction. But there have been times throughout history when societies have passed and enforced clearly unethical laws. For instance, pre-Civil War slavery laws were unethical because they oppressed and caused harm to an entire group of people. Yet slavery was legal in many U.S. states until 1863.

Socially Acceptable Behavior

Societies develop unwritten behavioral rules—expectations for how their members should behave toward one another. People meeting for the first time in the United States usually look each other in the eyes and shake hands—that's a very basic expectation. Acting in an ethical manner does not always align with socially acceptable behaviors, however. For example, ordinary citizens allowed or enabled horrendous human atrocities during World War II. Yet some individuals risked their personal safety to aid vulnerable groups. Many of their fellow citizens labeled their actions both illegal and socially unacceptable. Others claimed these individuals behaved ethically, as they prevented unjustified harm to others.

might educators have to consider exceptions to these principles? Throughout the case studies in this book, consider how autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity guide your ethical reasoning.

Ethical Actions: Ideal, Justified, or Prohibited?

While professional conduct is often described as having only two clear possibilities—right or wrong—it's evident that ethical reasoning and actions are complex. Indeed, ethical actions may fall on a spectrum that ranges from ethically permitted to ethically prohibited.³ Following this logic, some actions could be described as better or worse than other actions.

Ethically prohibited choices are actions that are wrong because they will cause unjustified harm or inflict suffering on others. Examples of ethically prohibited actions are behaving with the intent to cause harm through a malicious act (e.g., murder) or through an unjustified neglect of a person's role-related responsibilities (e.g., a parent abandoning their child).

Parental Role–Related Exceptions to Ethical Principles

Under what circumstances might parents have to consider exceptions to the five ethical principles? Consider the examples below, then fill out the chart on educator role–related exceptions, page 20.

Ethical Principle	Questions to Ask Yourself	Exceptions Due to Parental Role
Autonomy	Are my actions and/or opinions interfering with another person’s choices?	My child does not want to go to bed. I could allow her to go to bed whenever she chooses, but as a parent, I must make decisions that my child might not like but that I believe to be in her best interest.
Nonmaleficence	Are my actions harming others or the environment?	I accidentally pulled my child’s hair while brushing it. Although it caused her pain, I believe it is in her best interest to keep her well-groomed until she can do so for herself.
Beneficence	Are my actions benefiting or helping another person?	My child did not do her science fair project. I could do the project for her, but I do not because it is important that she learns responsibility.
Justice	Are my actions fair? Am I being honest/truthful?	My teen is wearing an outfit that is inappropriate for school, and I make her change. She yells, “That’s not fair! All the other kids wear this!” I still make her change because I know the school will send her home.
Fidelity	Am I keeping my promises? Am I behaving respectfully and loyally?	I promised that I would attend my child’s next home game, but the time changed and now conflicts with my work schedule. My child is angry and claims that I broke my promise, but I have a responsibility to be at work.

Educator Role–Related Exceptions to Ethical Principles

In the chart below, describe situations that call for exceptions to the five ethical principles in order to carry out an educator's role-related responsibilities.

Ethical Principle	Questions to Ask Yourself	Exceptions Due to Educator Role–Related Responsibilities
Autonomy	Are my actions and/or opinions interfering with another person's choices?	
Nonmaleficence	Are my actions harming others or the environment?	
Beneficence	Are my actions benefiting or helping another person?	
Justice	Are my actions fair? Am I being honest/truthful?	
Fidelity	Am I keeping my promises? Am I behaving respectfully and loyally?	