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Guide for Designing Ethics Cases For Younger Students

Elementary School

Case-based ethical inquiry in upper elementary and early middle school (grades 4 -6) aims to foster genuine inquiry around short (250-350 words) authentic ethical dilemmas. These cases should touch upon topics that are relevant to and age-appropriate for students ages 9-12. The language and sentence structure should also be accessible for this age group.

Writing ethics cases allows for a broad interpretation of "ethics." Cases may be fictional or factual, and may focus on values, right vs. wrong, character traits, obligations/duty, and how we ought to live. Make sure cases address substantive ethical issues (rather than legal, scientific, or procedural technicalities).

The Core Elements of an Ethics Case for Young Students

Every ethics case, regardless of its specific topic, relies on four interdependent structural elements that build moral tension to help motivate classroom dialogue.

1. Conceptual Title

Make sure the title names the core ethical tension in an open-ended format (e.g., Truth vs. Harmony, What Do We Owe Animals? The Ethics of Taking Credit)."

2. Narrative Content

a. Background Information: Make sure to include enough background set up to establish characters and their relationships, context norms, past decisions/beliefs before introducing the conflict that brings rise to the ethical dilemma. It is important that students engaging in this case study see it as having genuine stakes.

b. Ethical Dilemma (Catalyst): Introduces a specific incident that creates competing obligations or a forced choice in such a way that every option carries a real ethical cost. The description of the dilemma should be well-rounded so as to not skew students engaging in the case study to one particular answer. Try to maximize tension to make the stakes clear. For example:

- **A Prior Commitment or Established Rule:** An existing expectation or obligation.
- **A Competing Catalyst Event:** A sudden opportunity, discovery, or command.
- **Constraints:** Time pressure, social risk, or physical limitations that prevent a simple “compromise” solution.

3. Case Question

The end of the case should invite students to evaluate the immediate ethical decision facing the main character. The question should allow for multiple possible answers and not force a choice between two options.

Questions can be framed, for example as:

- What should [character] do?
- Should people be able to _____ ?
- Is _____ ethical?
- Is it always wrong to _____?

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4. Study Questions

Each case should also include a list of 3-5 questions that can help guide students (and the teacher-facilitator) through thinking about the ethical dimensions of the case. These questions can progress from story-specific questions to more abstract questions about principles, impacts, and concept definitions.

When thinking about what to include as study questions, consider these categories:

- **Core Duty & Action** - What is the primary moral obligation in the story? (e.g. Was [character] obligated to act in [xyz] way? Why or why not?)
- **Competing Values** - Weighs conflicting moral principles or relationships. (e.g. How should we balance [value A] against [value B] when they conflict?)
- **Stakeholders & Impact** - Asks for the consideration of who is involved (stakeholders) and examines impact/consequences for others. (e.g. How would [character's] decision affect [stakeholder]?)
- **Systems & Rules** - Explores institutional rules, authority, or social norms that could influence the possible decision. (e.g. What makes the [a rule/authority/tradition] important to follow in this situation? Can it ever be okay to break this rule/authority/tradition?)
- **Concepts & Definitions** - Work on defining ethical concepts and making distinctions between like / commonly associated concepts. (e.g. What makes someone a reliable friend? What is the difference between [concept x] and [concept y]?)

Sample Case

The following case study demonstrates how the framework for developing authentic and age-appropriate ethics cases studies in practice.

Ethics Case: *What Does Friendship Require?*

Taylor and Jordan met in kindergarten and have been friends ever since. Their parents are friends, and Taylor and Jordan spend a lot of time at each other's houses.

In the first months of fourth grade, Taylor has started to make some new friends. Taylor's new friends don't really enjoy spending time with Jordan, who doesn't have many friends. Taylor understands that not everyone likes Jordan. But Taylor does. He wants to spend some time with Jordan and some time with his new friends.

One Friday, Jordan asks Taylor to come over after school and spend the night and watch movies together. Taylor says yes, but then his new group of friends invites him to a carnival in a nearby town. This is the last night the carnival will be there, and Taylor really wants to go. He feels badly not asking Jordan to come along, but he knows his new friends would not be happy if he invites Jordan.

Question: What should Taylor do?

Study Questions:

1. When we make a commitment to a friend, are we always required to keep it? If not, when is it okay to back out of a commitment?
2. How should we respond to the demands of his old and new friendships? Should one or the other take priority?
3. When, if ever, is it ethical to let go of a friendship?
4. Does the way in which we spend time with friends matter?
5. Do we have special obligations to friends who don't have many other friend opportunities?