

National Implications: Implementing the Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning as an Ethical Decision-Making Process to Improve Academic Achievement - Ten Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Many educators equate academic achievement in terms with certain assessments. Unfortunately, that is also how the majority of society views it. There is such a major focus on the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and standardized testing scores, that the true scope of a school curriculum is being buried. There are so many other facets involved in the curriculum. Without diminishing its importance, a curriculum entails philosophical areas that may enhance or improve academic achievement. It is the right of every child to be taught as a whole child and it is the responsibility of an educator to oblige. This focus of this article is to discuss the implementation of the ways of knowing through the realms of meaning as they relate to ethical decision-making.

Introduction

Knowing and thinking, which ultimately leads to meaning, seems to go hand in hand due to each referring to the mind in similar ways. One can't help but consider epistemology when alluding to knowing. Epistemology explains how one knows. There are several ways to acquire knowledge. Dr. William Kritsonis has identified six realms in the book *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* (2007).

When considering education, ethical decision making across and with the curriculum should be carefully considered. Often when it comes to teaching, an educator's limited thinking may cause students to miss what may be critical aspects of their education. The meaning of what we all do and learn is essential, even in schools. It is important for students to know and practice relevancy to life and to design thematic lessons within the curriculum. When one thinks of ethics, he or she usually confounds it with feelings or religion or may even view it as moral law (Ross, 2004, Introduction section, ¶ 1). Ethics is not following the law, it is not science, it's not following culturally accepted norms, it's not religion, and it's not the same as feelings. In a recent article, the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics defined ethics as referring to standards of behavior that tell us how human beings ought act in the many situations in which they find themselves as friends, parents, children, citizens, businesspeople, teachers, professionals, etc. (Andre' et al., 2006). Many may wonder if ethics are not based on the above, on what standards are they based? There are several different standards that should be utilized when practicing ethical behavior but the mere basis of them all is making right decisions.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss the implementation of the ways of knowing through the six realms of meaning as they are related to ethical decision-making and to offer ten recommendations as to how they can improve academic performance in schools. A school curriculum usually consists of core subjects such as Mathematics, Reading, Science, Social Studies, and course electives such as Art, Music, or Drama. According to Kritsonis (2007), within each realm, a specific subject will support and guide the basis of the relationships. The realms are also viewed as competencies that should be developed in every person. When a curriculum develops these competencies, it is able to suit the needed human need for meaning, since its primary goal is to analyze the very nature of meaning (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 10). Meaning should be addressed in each realm.

The First Realm Is Symbolics

Symbolics is a realm that can effectively be practiced in school as well as other real life situations because it is comprised of ordinary language and various types of non-discursive symbolic forms such as gestures, rituals, and rhythmic patterns (Kritsonis, 2007). It is also comprised of what's considered "ordinary language" (Kritsonis, 2007), which is everyday speech and writing. While this may be factual, the subject of math is also essential when relating to symbolism. When a person knows a language, it means that he is able to use meaningful symbols for communication (Kritsonis, 2007, p.112). The effectiveness of implementing and practicing language and math depends how well one understands the meaning of each. As an educator, the key to effectively teaching language or math is to understand the meaning in order for the students to understand. They both should also be practiced and modeled by the teacher.

One compulsory area that is extremely important today is communication as it relates to symbolics with language and math. Ways of communicating vary based on an individuals understanding. For instance, a person who is hearing impaired would communicate differently from one who hears. Sign language consists of symbols that are used to communicate. Writing is also a form of communication in language. Various words and letters are symbols that are used to convey messages one to another. The communication may not be effective if one communicator does not possess the knowledge of sign language or is illiterate, thereby decreasing the meaning of symbolism.

Unlike ordinary language, "mathematics does not yield facts, only conclusions" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 139). Because of its abstractness and as a discursive symbolic form, math may seem to be a bit more challenging for students to comprehend and teachers to instruct. It totally operates on the use of symbols. "Mathematics applications, no matter how useful, are secondary and incidental to the essential symbolic meanings" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 134). Therefore, in order to grasp a complete understanding of Mathematics, one must first understand the meaning of the symbols being utilized. One may be recognize simple numbers and the single meaning of some math symbols such as a + or = sign, but once pooled with various formulas and equations, it changes the overall meaning.

Recommendations

- When relating to ethics, it is best practice and a responsibility as an educator for teachers to deliver lessons to students to the best of their abilities, which would require gaining knowledge of a particular subject that is being taught. If effective communication is expected from students, a teacher must utilize effective communication by modeling in the class. That may be through speech or writing. This will then enable students to effectively communicate in their everyday language.

- Often when math is being taught, symbols are introduced because we generally equate math with calculation. Mathematical concepts should be learned through the use of hands-on manipulatives prior to commencing symbols. Not only will a teacher employ the needed basis and framework of the subject but also may be able to address multiple learning styles which would ultimately lead to improving academic achievement.

The Second Realm Is Empirics

Empirical meaning in science is based on observation rather than theory. In short it's based on practical experiences. "Physical science provides descriptions of the world as experienced through the activity of physical measurement. By 'physical measurement', is meant the quantitative assessment of material objects by reference to agreed upon standards of mass, length, and time" (Kritsonis, 2007 p.180). Our world is made up of physical science. When addressing this subject in a general school curriculum, since it based upon the standards of mass, length and time, physical science can become thematic, thus incorporating it into other subjects such as math. The use of various subjects crossing the curriculum produces relevance to students.

Biology is the study of life. "Biological meanings arise from the special subject matter studies, namely, living things (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 203). When referring to life, there are several characteristics that are also associated and considered: Metabolism, self-perpetuation, nutrition, respiration, synthesis, reproduction, and adaptation. We may often think of only human life when these characteristics are pointed out, but they also refer to plants. It's essential for students to know that they are coupled with living things such as plant life.

Author Ruby Payne quoted a fellow author in one of her works that stated, "It is possible to have a brain and not have a mind. A brain is inherited; a mind is developed" (Payne, 2002, p.4). Psychology is the study of the mind. According to Kritsonis, (2007), psychologists think that the mind may be thought of as nothing more than the activity of the brain. "In a classroom the teacher controls what the student sees and hears and has a great influence on what the student speaks. Does this really allow the teacher to mold the student's mind" (Kritsonis, 2007, p.226)? I would answer yes to that question. The development of the mind is that one learns in his or environment. Once something is learned, it is acted upon, which is why it is so difficult to reverse this process if something is learned incorrectly. Ethically, teachers should be obliged to teach what is right.

Most likely viewed as the most relevant of the sciences to students, social science enables students to conduct self-examinations in terms of their culture and society. Ranging from geography to economics, social science is in the area of the sciences of man. This is one area that a teacher can allow or assist students in viewing themselves as productive citizens as a result of learning social sciences in academia. "Much of how

people interpret their social position when they are young is carried on for life” (Kritsonis, p. 258).

Recommendation

- In education, a teacher is taught to teach the whole child. “Education is essentially a moral activity. It’s that medium through which essential beliefs, practices, and moral judgments and principles that define culture are passed from generation to the next. Teachers must model values such as honesty, fair play, consideration of others, tolerance, and sharing. They must also have a moral core so students not only know which values are good, but why. The ‘why’ helps students develop moral reasoning skills necessary to participate in a democracy, so they can grapple with social and political issues” (Hancock, 2005, ¶ 8).

The Third Realm Is Esthetics

As the study of art, esthetics is in the eye of the beholder (Lansauer & Rowlands, 2001). It’s important because it has existed throughout all of recorded history. “It’s unique to humans due to our unique way of thinking. Esthetics also allows us to see the world in a different but clear way.

Students should be allowed to develop their talent, even in the classroom. Esthetics deals with subjects that are usually selected as class electives such as music, visual arts, and drama or theatre, and literature. Esthetics can be incorporated into any of the general core courses. For instance, musical lyrics are in written form, which relate to language and it’s produced as a result of patterns and rhythms, which ultimately relates to math. “Enrichment through music deepens esthetic insight” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 294).

Art has a way of expressing feelings without any sound or even words. Included in visual arts are painting, drawing, graphic arts, sculpture and architecture. Each can be analyzed through color, depth, or composition and can range from primitive to modern. Because it’s accepted individually based on one’s own perception, it cannot be specifically defined. Due to such, a teacher may obviously impede a student’s ability to effectively impart his or her gift.

The art of movement when referring to the realm of esthetics is usually considered as dance while the body is used as an instrument (Kritsonis, 2007). Although in education, physical education can be considered. “The goal of such education is personal wholeness, or organic well-being of the mind and body, which is the essence of health” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 334) Allowing a student to express himself through the form of art enables him to display what most consider a well-rounded education.

When one thinks of literature, he may confuse the term with ordinary language since it deals with words. However, literature in the form of art deals with the imagination opposed to being taken literally. “The term ‘imagination’ does not necessarily imply the use of language to evoke mental images, though this effect may occur. The term is intended to refer more broadly to the use of language to create new forms of experience” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.365). Characteristics of literature include images, symbols, metaphors, analogy, and double vision, plot, characterization, and setting, and rhythm as in poetry. The works of William Shakespeare are often relative in this realm. Most students view literature in this form as abstract, which may cause an embracing it to be somewhat challenging. Literature should be a form of education that fosters creative thought in a student’s mind.

Recommendations

- Esthetics is based on what is felt and therefore should be assessed as such. Grading in school can be extremely subjective; therefore a teacher should strongly consider the student’s interpretation or their attempt to convey a message uniquely through art form opposed to what the teacher feels it should be.
- In order to merge esthetics into a language arts class, a teacher can instruct a student to write lyrics for a song, draw a picture based on a reading, or act out or create a scene of a reading. In math class, patterns and rhythms can be established to create music. Physical education focuses on health and movement just as the art of movement. In literature, students should be also exposed to various types of essays, poetry, and novels. Teachers have a responsibility to assist a student in developing his or interests as it relates to art, for it is a phase towards academic achievement.

The Fourth Realm Is Synnoetics

In order for students to grasp concepts of lessons that are being taught, not only is it necessary for them to simply have an understanding of it, but also there must be engagement. As in other realms, such as symbolics, empirics, and esthetics, knowledge is said to be objective, meaning they depend on relationships that are engagement of subject-object. Synnoetics relates to subject to subject (Kritsonis, 2007). I-Thou and I-It shows the contrasts of subject to subject and subject to object. This realm offers concrete meanings opposed to abstract, which may cause students to understand the total concept better. Unlike the others, the realm of synnoetics fosters personal knowledge on a one-on-

one basis. “Personal relations presuppose the uniqueness of the persons who enter into relation” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 404).

Existentialism reveals reality as concrete existence. This knowledge is acquired by simply being or living. “A person is what he does” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 419). In essence, a person is responsible for his or her own actions for actions are based on decisions. It’s important for students to understand that they are responsible for their own actions. Although they may have the freedom to choice, every decision produces an outcome, whether positive or negative.

Recommendations

- Self-reflection is usually recommended for teachers; however, it is just as important for students to be taught to do the same. In order to understand the world around us, we must first understand ourselves. Students are often concerned with what others think of them and may constantly aim to please others in order to be accepted. Encompassing responsibility for own actions and self-love, a student is more likely able to understand the function of synnoetics.
- Teachers need not be the cause of a student’s lack of self-esteem as this can so often occur. Students should not be compared to others based on academic performance; they should be viewed as individuals.

The Fifth Realm Is Ethics

Also known as moral knowledge, ethics is simply doing what is right. Ethics is how we sort our values and place them. Often one may observe an individual who seems unable to obtain a goal or just seems to be completely aimless. It may be a result of irrational ethics. Due to its being the means of deciding a course of action, ethics is a requirement for human life.

Ethics becomes a form of morality by asking the questions “How”? or “What do I do?” If this question is answered with a sort of effective methodology, morality is then formed. Ethics and morals must be viewed as positive rather than negative. If not, one can live an “anything goes” sort of life. If this happens, there is no method to choices, thereby decreasing or causing cessation of achievement of values. According to Kritsonis (2007), in the modern world, moral meanings may mean nothing t some because our lives are saturated with what’s contemporary and doubts about the basis of moral commitment.

Ethics sets a standard in schools. Every educator including support staff as well as students is obligated to practice a code of ethics. By practicing ethical behavior, students

are able to make decisions that are beneficial to themselves as well as society. A trend of character education is widely being practiced in schools. At times it may be difficult for certain students within a particular age group to ascertain the difference between right and wrong actions relating to their education. Morals are taught. It's critical to begin this process at an early age in order for students to be able to accept responsibility for any wrong actions that are taken. "Guilt is a normal human emotion. Most people inherently try to do what they believe is right and are consciously aware of it when they do not. When people do wrong and are punished for it, society generally believes they deserved it. If an existing rule is broken and the child is not punished, what does the child learn about society's moral convictions or about importance of the rule" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 468)? Freedom and voluntary actions in ethics are constituted as one makes decisions on his or her free will and should therefore be subject to judgment based on that decision. "What obligation does a teacher have to set an example of total moral adherence to students" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 450)? One may often hear a parent or teacher say, "Do as I say." A child may do that very thing, but more importantly, due to the manner in which our minds function, a child will more likely do what they see another do. As a realm of ethics, moral leaders are often acknowledged and looked to for direction. Teachers are often viewed as such, which is one main reason for modeling ethical behavior for students.

There are four main areas of moral concern in the ethical realm:

- Human Rights - The United States Constitution has afforded these rights. "The fundamental human rights, no matter how stated, are those that are intended to secure the freedom, integrity and dignity of an [individual] as a person against unjust coercion of any kind" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 455). Although ethics is not law, but how one chooses to follow, if a constitutional right is violated, it is punishable by law, causing one greatly endure major consequences.
- Sex and Family Relations- Often when conception of a child takes place, little thought is given to morals and ethics. As a result, a child is brought forth into the world without parents considering how he or she will be nurtured. One may often hear that effective moral behavior starts in the home, but often it is left up to teachers to solely bear the responsibility of teaching it in the schools. "Since the family is the elemental social institution in which persons are born and nurtured, it is essential that the relations between the sexes and among the members of the family be carefully considered and wisely ordered" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 455).
- Class, Racial, Religious, and Vocational Groups- This particular concern involves relationships within each of the aforementioned and is usually based upon one's cultural beliefs. As a society, one may often judge another without considering another's cultural values. Not only does this hold true in everyday life but in academia as well. Cultural values and beliefs may play a major role in a child's learning. If cultural competence is cultivated, a teacher is then able to effectively apply strategies that not

only addresses' a student's particular culture but also to enhance the lack of knowledge for other cultures that may be in the same setting.

- Economic and Political Life – These areas afford an individual the rights to property and equitable goods and services. In essence, a person is given what's due him or as some may refer to as a person's just due. In education, every student is afforded a right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). This is law. If this law is not followed, schools are guilty in violating students' rights.

Recommendations

- Educators should constantly model ethical behavior for students. The thought of the old "do as I say" rule should be eliminated because students will do what they see you do. Teachers may not view themselves as role models but they are, whether they are seeking to undertake the task or not. All should follow the code of ethics set forth by the school or district and encourage students to do the same.
- Every student has a right to learn. Careful consideration should be given to those who may not fit the mold of the norm in classes today. A person's culture may be largely responsible for the way he or she learns. All teachers should seek cultural competence.

The Sixth Realm Is Synoptics

How will one know where he or she is going if they have no knowledge of where they have been? History is what has happened in the past in terms of time. History like existentialism offers concrete events and stories, which makes for a less cumbersome task for students. "Each event begins, proceeds toward its end, and is completed: (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 484). It's essential for students to be able to recognize certain events of the past, for they may have had or currently have some influence on what happens in the future.

Teachers may have somewhat of a challenge getting their students to fully and effectively gain an understanding of past events because they are events that have passed. It's important for a teacher to know that history repeats itself while Kritsonis states that "the task of the historian is to restore that past as faithfully as may be, and make it live again as though it were present" (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 490). Although history offers concrete events, much of what a student learns of history is based on past interpretations. Therefore, a teacher should allow the student some autonomy for abstract thought to develop his or her own ideas.

Recommendation

- “Not all [historical] events were or will be considered to be noteworthy. It is the teacher’s job to convince the student of the noteworthiness of events of the past” (Kritsonis, 2007, p.492).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, each of these realms can be adopted as disciplines in the schools in order to enhance the curriculum. Since there are so many variations in student learning, each realm can be viewed as a means to accommodate even those who are not considered general education. The book *Ways of Knowing Through the Realms of Meaning* by William Allan Kritsonis, PhD has the ability to be applied to all academic areas. It is the responsibility of an educator to attend to the needs of those with special needs just as it is with those in general education. Each realm possesses the ability to extract some form of knowledge of a special needs child. “No one curriculum is the best for all people and for every culture and situation” (Kritsonis, 2007, p. 582).

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