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# Ethical Complexities of Classroom and Professional Life: the case of gossip

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EN **Abstract.** An examination of five examples of gossiping within a school context casts doubt on the general view of gossip as either reprehensible or trivial. A discussion of the examples highlights an area of largely unexamined ethical complexity in the teacher's professional life. It reminds us that gossip can promote the goods of solidarity and collegiality, it can be a help to moral deliberation and be instrumental in the uncovering of systemic moral flaws in the workings of the institution. It concludes that gossiping can be permissible and that sometimes, in an ethically complex situation, teachers may decide that it is their professional duty to gossip.



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Gossiping is often damaging to individuals (the gossipers and the gossiped about) and disruptive to the smooth running of institutions. A negative view of gossiping is virtually universal (see Emler, 1994, p. 117, Cuonzo, 2008, p. 131). At worst, it is evil (classed in *Romans* 1:29 with murder and envy) and at best trivial (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 81). The appropriate ethical stance for educators seems straightforward. Gossiping should be treated like bullying. Individual educators should avoid it and educate their students to do likewise. Educational institutions should have professional codes of conduct that proscribe it.

## Problems of definition

But what exactly is it that should be avoided or proscribed? It is hard to pin down gossip with a neat definition that distinguishes it from innocent small talk because the boundary between gossip and small talk can often be blurred (Collins, 1994, 106; Taylor, 1994, 34; Spacks,1985, 4; Westacott, 2012). To open up discussion of the ethical complexities let me offer two rough definitions.

Small talk can be described as casual talk between two people or a group about 'neutral' or 'safe' topics. These topics will vary according to locality. In big cities in rich parts of the Western world with temperate climates they might include the weather, transport problems recently encountered, the décor of the room where they are meeting, perhaps some topical matters in the news. If it involves talk about people it will be a matter of conveying information without a judgemental aspect to it.

Gossip can be characterised as usually two people (but it could be more) talking about a third who is not present. In some cases, the object of the gossip could be several people or a group. The gossipers' talk is not simply an exchange of statements of fact about the person(s) not present but involves some mix of interpretation, assessment and (even if only implied) judgement of their actions. It can include body language as well as speech.[1]

A teacher before a meeting asks a fellow teacher where a third colleague, Eleanor, is. The fellow teacher replies that she is off sick *again*, rolling his eyes skyward, and adds that she was fine yesterday. Indeed, she'd told him she was going to a bowling party last evening to celebrate her sister's birthday. 'Right', the first teacher replies. They exchange quizzical glances. This is gossip territory.

What makes gossip wrong and something to be avoided, it has been argued, is that the gossipers are detached, superior observers distorting and belittling the experience of the person they are talking about and in this way failing to recognize the other person's value and dignity (Taylor, 1994, 45). Given the fundamental commitment to respect for others at the heart of the moral life, gossip can never be acceptable.

But can there be 'innocent gossip' which escapes this criticism? Can there even be gossip in educational institutions that *promotes* collegiality and educational values?

Rather than a blanket prohibition of gossip, a more nuanced approach is needed. Five examples of gossiping move the discussion away from black and white certainties and highlight a grey area of largely unacknowledged ethical complexities in the teacher's professional life.

## Example One: the goods of mutuality and support

Julia, a young teacher and new member of the IT team in her school is enthusiastic about the team's latest project about Online safety. At one of their regular meetings Angela, the team leader, says that it is vital that they find ways of actively involving parents. In response to Angela's request to the group, Julia offers to draft a letter to parents outlining the project. Angela asks to look over this draft before the next meeting. Angela proves to be demanding in her scrutiny of the several drafts Julia produces and revises. There is no acknowledgement on Angela's part of Julia's efforts to put the parents fully in the picture and make the letter clear but not patronising.

Julia begins to worry that her ineptness and the need for endless redrafting is causing Angela more work than if Angela had just done it herself. She begins to have doubts about whether she should be in this team at all, if she can't even manage the first job she volunteers to do. She rapidly loses confidence.

At this point she confides in two of the other teachers in the group about her worries. They reassure her. Angela is desperate for this project to go well as, apart from the obvious point to it, it will be a way of getting more parents involved in the school, something the school is currently particularly concerned about. Angela is also always totally 'task-focussed' and rarely offers words of encouragement. She just assumes that you are as committed as she is to getting the task right whatever it is and you don't need to be cajoled and flattered. And she's a bit of a perfectionist, they agree. Also, she seems to be having relationship problems at the moment, one of them adds. They tell Julia they've had exactly this same treatment in the past and it is a bit discouraging, not to say unnerving, until you understand what's going on and realise it's not you. One of them jokes that Angela is great at getting things done but perhaps needs to go on a people-skills course.

Julia feels reassured. Other more experienced colleagues have had the same treatment, so she has no reason to assume that she is inadequate. After several further re-draftings, at the next meeting Angela thanks Julia, says briskly that she thinks that she has put together a clear draft letter for parents and invites comments. Julia and her supportive colleagues exchange glances.

This can be seen as a situation where gossip (about Angela) promotes a supportive collegiality in the group (vis-à-vis Angela members of the group are all in the same boat), and a worthwhile project goes forward smoothly. But what might Angela think about this if she knew that members of the group were talking about her behind her back? She has had her character pinned down in a certain way and certain 'truths' asserted about her. She has had no chance to amend or correct the beliefs on the basis of which others (Julia) now act.

In defence of this kind of gossip we might say that it is reasonably benign. If she knew, Angela might agree that she is a perfectionist, task-focussed person who perhaps neglects sometimes to keep people on board. She might resent the reference to her 'relationship problems', even if true, since she might feel the gossipers' mention of them implies a lack of professionalism on her part in letting such things affect her work, but she may be prepared to concede that it is not a heinous thing to say about somebody. The substance of the gossip, then, is not untrue, spiteful or seriously damaging. On the positive side, it has helped members of the team to bond and it has kept their work on track.

But a defender of the belief that gossip is never acceptable may maintain that even if Angela were to be tolerant of the fact that some members of the group were talking behind her back, she ought not to be. It is disrespectful, a 'humiliating' situation for her (Taylor, 1994, p 43). Julia, the argument might go, should have confided her worries about whether she is up to the job to Angela herself, saying that she feels that she should not have volunteered to do it.

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[1] A student's feedback about her lecturer given in a face-to-face discussion with course directors is not gossip and neither is a conversation between two examiners talking before a PhD viva about the candidate. These incidents take place within a formal, structured framework that requires the kind of talk described. Gossip, like small talk, takes place outside such frameworks. Students or examiners in these formal situations might, of course, stray into gossip, but then they would be transgressing the rules defining the situation and stepping outside the formal framework. This said, there are also no doubt imaginable borderline cases.

But this is a high-risk strategy for Julia because Angela does not know Julia well and may make all kinds of assumptions – that she wants to back out of the group, that she is a person who 'makes a fuss', not a team player. Since gossip in this case is not obviously ruled out on moral grounds, it seems, all things considered, a benign way of dealing with a tricky situation.

The defender of the zero-tolerance approach to gossip may counter that the scales are not so evenly balanced. In the gossip scenario, if the work of the group proceeds well and no feathers are ruffled, the problems of working with Angela are not confronted. They may occur again and perhaps people will again have to work around them. This is not fair to the team or Angela who is being treated, patronisingly, as someone who cannot deal with anything that seems to be a criticism of her way of working.

But this response assumes that the gossip situation is the final moral resolution of the problem. It does not have to be. The conversation between Julia and the other two teachers serves an immediate purpose in keeping the group cohesively on track with this project. It does not prevent the gossipers from raising issues about Angela's handling of team working at another time. Indeed, probably, from all points of view, there is a better time and place to address them.

In this first example, then, it seems that gossip, though not completely unproblematic, can sometimes be benign (that is, not seriously damaging to individuals or institutions) and produce collegial feelings that are instrumental in helping projects to flourish.

## Example Two: the goods of mutuality and support?

A second case in which gossip fosters solidarity amongst a group is loosely based upon a piece of research into school bullying (Evaldsson and Svahn, 2012). One of a group of 6 eleven-year-old girls, Yaasmiin, is asked to meet with a teacher from the school's anti-bullying team. Yaasmiin is informed that an 'anonymous girl' has reported that she and her friends have been bullying a girl called Emilia. According to the school's policy Yaasmiin's parents and the parents of her friends will now receive a letter.

It is apparent to Yaasmiin from the interview that the 'anonymous girl' is Emilia. Discussing this with her friends, Yaasmiin tells them that Emilia Larsson 'has snitched' to a teacher about being bullied and all of their parents will get letters saying that they have bullied her. The girls are very worried at the thought of the letters home. The group agrees that they have not bullied her. There has been 'laughing and such' but, they agree, Emilia does not know what real bullying is.

In this way, Emilia becomes the offender. She is called a snitch and a liar and mental. The girls see themselves as innocent parties who will now get into trouble with their parents all because of the insane Emilia. They decide that Emilia's action deserves a physical punishment; a member of the group should beat her up. The gossip has served to define Emilia's actions as morally wrong and insane and the friends' view of matters as normal and their actions as justifiable.

This is the gist of the incident described in the paper. It is possible to extrapolate and imagine that the gossip of the group – re-casting Emilia as the offender and themselves as the victims, and anything they have done as being not bullying but 'laughing and such' – makes the girls feel that they have behaved sensibly and normally. They are now somewhat more comfortable about facing their parents. Gossip is providing reassurance, as in the case of the worried Julia in the first example, but it is *not* similarly benign and defensible.

Gossip is being used to build up a 'good story', an alternative account for when the girls have to face their parents. It is different from the Julia case in that the girls involved in the gossip, whilst reassuring themselves that they are innocent victims, are colluding in harming the person gossiped about (Emilia).

A third example suggests that gossip can play a more positive role in institutional life.

## Example Three: a help to moral deliberation

A new young teacher, Robin, sees a senior teacher, Gordon, coming out of a classroom into a corridor shouting belligerently at a classroom assistant to 'get a move on and there won't be a next time!'. She seems on the verge of tears. This troubles Robin as a professional colleague.

On the one hand Gordon's behaviour seems disrespectful, unprofessional, blameworthy, but, at the same time, odd and out of character. But then he wonders whether it really is out of character or whether he may just have a partial picture of Gordon whom he has previously regarded as an amiable, friendly man. Robin does not know him well. He teaches in another department in another school building and their paths do not often cross. He hesitates to approach him directly and raise the incident with him. He is in something of a dilemma because it seems wrong to simply shrug it off and do nothing, particularly because his recent initial training has made him aware that such dismissive attitudes can too often perpetuate a culture of abuse.

Robin decides to raise the issue discreetly with other colleagues. A couple of other young teachers are as surprised as he is and question him closely about exactly what he thinks he has seen and heard. Two older teachers with whom Robin has separate exchanges are at first evasive. They both say that Gordon is highly competent, gets great exam results and so on, but they are not personal friends of his. Each adds, a bit reluctantly, that actually they don't really like him. What they then each go on to say, in slightly different ways, tallies quite closely. Whilst Gordon is thoughtful and courteous with those whom he considers his equals, they have known Gordon on occasion to treat those he considers his inferiors in ways verging on the abusive.

This brief example shows us how gossip may be used in cases of serious moral deliberation. An obvious objection might be that scraps of hearsay and weakly based assertions gleaned from gossiping are hardly helpful to such deliberation. To counter it, let me amplify some features of this imaginary case.

Like Julia in the first example and Yaasmiin and her friends in the second, Robin is deliberating about what he should do. His case is different from these two, though, in that he is not personally involved, he is a bystander. If he is going to do anything at all, he needs to find out what is the case. His concern (unlike Yaasmiin's) is to find the *truth* of the matter. Is Gordon's behaviour really a gross overstepping of professional and moral norms or is there some explanation for it that makes it, if not innocent, at least excusable?

When people use gossip with the aim of trying to understand someone's action(s), they do not simply ask questions and then say 'Yes. I see.' The two young teachers Robin asks about Gordon question him about what exactly *he* thinks he has seen. We can imagine that they ask: are you sure that's what he said? was he really shouting? were there school students around? how did they react?

In the case of the two older teachers he then talks to, Robin will need to do some probing of his own. He will want, for instance, to pursue their reference to Gordon's treatment of inferiors. In answer to Robin's questions they may both mention an unpleasant incident with a coach driver on a school trip. Robin may ask: how do you know about this? Were you actually there? What happened then? Did anyone report this incident to the Head?

At the same time, Robin will have to take into account that both older teachers are not personal friends of Gordon's. They actually say they do not like him. How relevant is this? Do they not like him because of their perception of him as a man whose behaviour is influenced by status considerations or is there some longstanding vendetta between them?

This example illustrates the use of gossip to find out facts needed in one's ethical deliberation. Careful thought is needed about when it should be employed, delicate judgements must be made about what to say to whom, how to say it, and when, and some skill is called for in encouraging disclosure from others. There also has to be a careful sifting and sometimes challenging of what one hears. Code maintains that 'gossip is a finely tuned instrument for establishing truths about people' (Code, 1994, p101) and this example attempts to illustrate that.

The case for Robin's gossiping then is that, in the circumstances, it may be his least worst course of action when trying to decide what to do about this incident in a way which is going to cause the least harm to all concerned in the relatively close-knit community of the school. Robin has also learned that he was right to not just ignore this incident. He can now consider what it is wise to do beyond this point.

## Example 4: a pleasant pastime?

None of the previous examples of gossip is ethically unproblematic. Yaasmiin and her friends clearly overstep moral limits in spreading lies about Emilia and encouraging violence against her. In the case of Julia and that of Robin, gossip can only be defended as the ethically least bad option.

Do parents and teachers, then, have to teach children that gossip is always morally problematic? Is 'the social practice of chatting with friendly acquaintances about third parties known to us and about aspects of their private lives' (Collins, 1994, p106) something that children must learn to avoid? Or can gossip sometimes be an innocent activity, that, on occasion, people can enjoy?

Two young teachers, Trevor and Tamsin, coming into school chat about their head of department who they have heard is getting a puppy, never having owned a dog before. They speculate about what lies ahead for him and his partner: the scratched furniture, dog hairs everywhere, the walks on bitterly cold winter mornings, the vets' bills.

Then they see Cressida, Head of Science, park her SUV in the school car park and knowingly exchange smiles about the fact that her journey to school is all of two miles long. They remind each other of her recent interventions in staff meetings about her newly fitted solar panels and the need for policies to make Sunnyside what she terms an eco-School.

It may seem bizarrely straitlaced to regard the light-hearted gossip with which Trevor and Tamsin start their day as morally problematic, much less evil. But it might be argued, as it often has been, that this kind of gossip is not morally wrong but *trivial*, since communications between people should be more profound, more worthwhile. Kierkegaard condemns gossip vigorously.

> Mr Madsen is engaged and has given his fiancée a Persian shawl; ... Petersen, the poet, is going to write some new poems, ...Marcussen, the actor, mispronounced a word last night.
> This kind of gossip talk is 'non-existent from the ideal point of view'. Silence is to be preferred (Kierkegaard, 1962, p81).

If 'innocent gossip' is just trivial talk, is silence to be preferred? One loss would be the opportunity for this linguistic behaviour to signal recognition of our deeper connection to one another as human beings beyond our instrumental connection as, in this instance, colleagues, or it might be milkman and customer. This is hardly a new point: the importance of such trivial exchanges in affirming or reconfirming social bonds has long been noted (See Elmer's 1994 references to Malinowski, Bales and Berne, 129; also, Dunbar, 1996). It might be argued that this is *small talk* not gossip. But, as we noted earlier, the line between gossip and small talk is not a sharp one. Gossip and small talk are frequently intermingled in conversation, as in Trevor's and Tamsin's case, when from their comments about the new dog owners, they turn to remarks about Cressida that have more of an edge to them. It is the gossip element, it is often claimed, that particularly cements the bonds (Thomas, 1994, 53-54; Post, 1994, p66).

The importance of this kind of intimate, but not deep conversation is emphasised not just by anthropologists and psychologists but also by the philosopher, Kant, whose remarks about moral friendship include the

following observation. Here Kant is considering the fact that a man (sic) might want to talk with others about people with whom they associate but be held back by the thought that this might be used in some way to his detriment. Kant suggests therefore that:

> ... .if one finds a man of good disposition and understanding to whom he can open his heart with complete confidence, without having to worry about such dangers, and moreover with whom his opinions about things are in accord, then he can give vent to his thoughts. Then he is not completely alone with his thoughts, as if in prison, but enjoys a freedom which he misses in the mass of men, among whom he must keep himself to himself (Kant, 1964, 138).

It is possible to see the gossipy exchange between Trevor and Tamsin in this light. Perhaps it echoes others in which they have talked about their mutual distaste for dogs or the contradictions people can get themselves into in attempts to save the planet. It is a relaxed relationship in which neither is worried that these casual remarks are somehow going to be misinterpreted, misreported to others or relayed on social media. They are intended as light-hearted remarks and enjoyed as such.

This raises a related value that gossip can have, humour (Morreall, 1994). Much gossip is not malicious but playful. Contributors to gossip often enjoy sustaining imaginative flights of fancy. The gossip about Cressida's solar panels and her SUV could well lead to stories, woven for mutual amusement, about where Cressida's eco-friendly attitude might take her next. What the gossipers enjoy is not a mildly spiteful remark about an acquaintance but the fantasy to which it gives rise. Such gossip recognizes that we are all after all human. Cressida, as her colleagues see it, is caught up in a contradiction, but that can be true of anyone. Nobody is one hundred per cent consistent in their ethical attitudes. Much humorous gossip implicitly recognizes that 'folly is part of the human condition' (Morreall, 1994, 64).

But, it might be argued, even innocent and amusing gossip can cause harm. In wartime or living in a brutal dictatorship, a general wariness must govern all communication between people. Anything said may aid the enemy or be twisted and used by the secret police to harm the gossiper and others. Personal testimonies relate how the gossiper may later replay in his mind seemingly innocent conversations, wondering if his idle words inadvertently caused recent police raids or arrests. That such extreme situations exist, however, cannot be a reason for a blanket ban on all innocent gossip.

The suggestion is often made that even if gossip is not causing harm, it is an occupation of the idle. Men and employers have, historically, castigated women, servants and employees for idling away their time in gossip (Schein, 1994, 140; Emler, 1994, 138). But this hardly seems to apply to this example of colleagues enjoying a companionable gossip their way to school.

## Example Five: gossiping and 'dirty hands'

Example 5 highlights those occasions when adults choose to gossip knowing that they are deliberately – and for good reasons – choosing to do something that is wrong. This case is unlike Example 2 where the children persuade themselves that, according to their code of honour, Emilia's 'snitching' is wrong and they are the innocent parties. It is also unlike Examples 1 and 3 where the adults, Julia and Robin, are cautiously using gossip to try to avoid doing the wrong thing.

In Example 5 adults know what they are doing is wrong but nevertheless resolve to do it. Is that defensible or excusable?

Rosalind is an experienced teacher, who three years ago joined the staff of a large secondary school as Head of History in the Humanities Faculty. In that time a number of senior staff appointments have attracted a large field of internal and, in some cases, external candidates that often include some applicants from black and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. Some of the latter were actually encouraged to apply by Rosalind, because they impressed her when they were all on a CPD school leadership course at a local college. None of them, despite excellent CVs, have been successful. The school's website currently shows a row of images of white male senior staff and one woman.

Rosalind is concerned about this. At a Faculty meeting when an item 'diversity and the curriculum' is on the agenda in relation to the upcoming Black History Month, she takes the opportunity to raise the failure to appoint any senior BAME staff in the last three years. But this gets nowhere. The Head of Faculty, Jeremy, says that, whilst important, this is not something they can discuss now.

After the meeting he tells Rosalind that he shares her disquiet. He is also concerned that no BAME applicants and, for that matter, few women seem to get into senior positions. He approached the Head with his concerns after a recent Science appointment, because of his worries about the departments – Geography, History and Religious Education – that he is responsible for. He was told that the appropriate procedures are always followed, and out of concern not least for the candidates' privacy, it is not possible to reveal details of the candidates' interviews or the subsequent deliberations of the panel.

Rosalind is left troubled. She needs to see one of the Associate Deputy Heads, Derek, whom she regards as a friendly reliable colleague, about a risk assessment for a school trip. When that business is concluded, she takes the opportunity to raise with him her concerns about the lack of diversity in the senior team. After an uncertain start he is more than ready to talk about the selection process. He reveals that the selection panel tends to be the same people. The Head and Chair of Governors see to that. Some of them have unrecognized prejudices against the way people present themselves. 'Will our children understand that man?' they ask of anyone who is not using Received Pronunciation. Another common response is the judgement that any

hesitation in the way a candidate answers one of the panel's questions is sufficient to show that they are not up to a job in this school.

When in such a case Derek said that he found the answer thoughtful and pointed to the candidate's outstanding CV and highly relevant experience, several members of the panel said emphatically that even if she looks good on paper, it would be unwise to take a risk. Rosalind learns this and much more and begins to understand the obstacles in the way of some applicants.

Derek has overstepped the rules here. He has breached the confidentiality of the process and the trust of his colleagues. He has chosen to break the rules, to do something he knows is wrong. Why? It could be because Derek himself is not happy with the situation and has not so far succeeded in doing anything about it. Perhaps he feels he could have tried harder. Perhaps as a decent, thoughtful man, he lacks the confidence to articulate the stand he would like to take in front of his vociferous colleagues.

Presented with this opportunity by Rosalind, he is prepared to gossip about his view of the workings of the process because he knows it is flawed and should be changed. He can justify breaking confidentiality, he feels, because it could lead to change in these flawed practices. Enough is at stake to make it worth breaking confidentiality.

If Derek is indeed a decent man with knowledge of the serious problems with this selection process, it might be argued that he should have found a straightforward way of drawing attention to its shortcomings. He could, for instance, have put his views in a letter to the Head or Chair of Governors.

Such a response ignores the context sketched here. Derek is the man he is. Short of a character transplant, other routes may not be open to *him* in the here and now. Faced with Rosalind's worries he has found the courage to reveal the problems. He is doing what he feels is the right thing. The situation is reminiscent of the political 'dirty hands' situation where a decent politician may judge they are compelled to engage in some wrongdoing to prevent a greater wrong (Williams, 1978; Coady, 2010, chapter 4). The greater wrong for Derek in this case is the continuance of the flawed selection process.

Some may think that it is no justification at all to say that Derek *feels* it is the right thing to do. A person might *feel* in an unequal society that he should rob a bank. That does not make it right. But can we ask of Derek that he should do what is *really* right and not just what he *feels* is right? Derek has no access to a god's eye view: he can only do what he thinks is best all things considered in the position in which *he* finds himself.

It still might be objected that Derek should not act on what he *feels* is right, all things considered, if this involves something as significant as a breach of trust. This is not a matter of harm to a single individual but to a whole system built on mutual trust. Mutual trust must here trump other values.

But can a professional code categorically rule out this case simply by referring to the importance of the value of trust? Is a further implication that the analogous case of whistle blowing is always wrong, whatever injustices it serves to uncover? This would suggest that Derek's gossip to Rosalind *whatever* entrenched malpractice and harm it revealed, could not be defended, or even excused, because it breached the value of trust. I am not aware of a compelling argument that would support in *all* cases the absolute privileging of trust over an attempt to right gross injustice.

Some people, however, might still want to maintain that Derek should not have *gossiped*. But let us look again at Derek's action. We can accept that Derek is at fault in breaching trust in revealing the flawed selection process but argue that, positively, he is acting to uphold the value of equal respect – a declared value of the school and wider society. He has taken a small step in the direction of support for that bedrock value. (It is after all the value that gives other values their rationale – including trust and confidentiality.) Derek's gossiping with Rosalind now offers them both *an opportunity* to consider, given the values they are deeply concerned about, how they as professionals can best act in this situation. This will call for careful reflection about the breach of trust and the moral and professional values and the practicalities involved in taking matters further.

## Gossip and its ethical complexities in educational institutions

The immediate topic of this paper, gossip, functions here as a way of focusing on the ethical complexities of a teacher's everyday professional life.[2] For this reason the paper has not dwelt on morally reprehensible examples of gossip, like the spreading of lies or unpleasant things about people that could possibly be true, but for which the gossiper has no evidence. It is easy to see the wrongness of such gossip, its harmful consequences only amplified when it happens via Twitter or other social media, as the false child abuse accusations against Lord McAlpine in the UK made all too clear (Solove, 2007). Gossip involving the spreading of lies and rumours (as in **Example 2**) is clearly wrong.

The other four cases fall into a grey area and raise different sorts of ethical complexities. The innocent light-hearted gossip of Trevor and Tamsin (**Example 4**) seems at first sight the kind of interaction that makes workplaces pleasanter than they otherwise would be. Such interactions help to create a good atmosphere and far from suppressing them, institutions should view them benignly. Indeed, institutions should view with some caution any arrangements that cut down on face-to-face meetings, spontaneous encounters on the stairs and the chance to mingle. All of these, with the clues of body language they bring, are sites for gossip and collegiality.

On first inspection, then, innocent gossip seems to get a clean bill of health. But some might argue that perhaps such gossip might do its job all *too* well in an educational institution. It might make for too cosy an atmosphere. Staff with responsibilities for oversight of colleagues' work may, in this relaxed atmosphere, be

[2] For a detailed and judicious philosophical discussion of gossip, see Westacott (2012) who concludes that 'there is more to be said in its favor than is commonly appreciated, and very often more to be said for it than against it' (p 99).

too ready to overlook shortcomings. But any attempt to ban gossip to prevent such slackness seems to have an aspect of sledgehammer and nut about it. There are many ways to encourage school staff to maintain professional standards without banning gossip.

**Example 1** (in which Julia consults her colleagues about her experience with Angela), illustrates the solidarity that gossip can produce, in this case to help to keep colleagues working cooperatively. As the example makes clear the situation is not ethically unproblematic, hence the need for judgement on the part of the teachers Julia consults. They are not *gossips*. They are not people, like those in novels and plays – like Mrs Clackit In *School for Scandal* – who revel in passing on the latest titbit of news, regardless of to whom, when or where. Having regard to Angela's likely feelings and also bearing the collaborative work of the group in mind, the teachers use some discernment in what they say to Julia.

Sometimes, though, a teacher will be confronted by more uncertain situations like **Example 3,** (in which Gordon is seen shouting at the classroom assistant), for which there is no moral slide rule and where the least bad thing to do requires careful ethical deliberation. Robin wants to try to find out what Gordon might be doing so as to determine whether or not he should do anything about it. This is a case for gossip of a careful forensic kind. So important does Kahneman think this kind of gossip is, that he begins and ends his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, by expressing the hope that it will improve gossip around the water-cooler. Specifically, he hopes it will 'improve the ability to identify and understand errors of judgment and choice, in others and eventually ourselves, by providing a richer and more precise language to discuss them' (Kahneman, 2012, 4). This example indicates the kind of delicate inquiry that is sometimes needed in a teacher's professional life.

**Example 5**, (about possible prejudice against BAME candidates), is a case of knowingly gossiping to avert what seems to the gossiper, Derek, the Associate Deputy Head, a much greater wrong. It is gossip of a whistle-blowing variety. Some self-knowledge, fine judgement about others (including Rosalind who raises the issue with him) and a considered view about the likely outcomes of his action are needed to take this step. It also requires courage and a lack of concern for reputational self-preservation at all costs.

This brings us back to **Example 2**, Emilia's snitching about being bullied. This is the only example involving children and shows children doing something clearly wrong. The gossip involved lacks all the features picked out in relation to Examples 3 and 5 – self-knowledge on the part of the gossiper, delicate inquiries to establish the truth, careful questioning of fellow-gossipers, courage and so on. None of the children challenges the re-description of the bullying incident as 'laughing and such'. It is possible to imagine that one child might have said 'Well, it was a bit more than laughing, wasn't it?' No one challenges the view that Emilia is 'insane' by saying even hesitantly that the school's anti-bullying team has asked for children to come forward if they feel threatened by the behaviour of others. The point is that these children are not *using* gossip in the ways identified in the other examples. They are just picking up on what might help them to weave a justificatory story when they must confront their parents about the letter on the bullying incident. This is gossip as self-protection *at all costs*.

Through a discussion of its five examples of gossip, this paper offers a perspective on the ethical complexities of the teacher's everyday professional life. It suggests that teachers *can* gossip innocently, making their own lives and collegial life more congenial. But more important: there may be times when teachers might judge that they should or must gossip.

These occasions may, characteristically, be ones where the gossiper is a subordinate figure in a power structure. The gossiper is keen to do the right thing, but poorly placed to do so because they lack detailed knowledge of the situation (Julia, Robin, Rosalind) and/or are inhibited by qualities of character which get in the way of their taking direct approaches to the problem confronting them (Julia, Derek).

From this perspective, it is worth looking again at Trevor and Tamsin. At

first sight it seems that Trevor and Tamsin are simply colleagues enjoying a gossipy chat. But it has been put to me that, within the institutional setting of the school, it is possible to see these young teachers as building a bond through gossip, perhaps not wholly wittingly, which may stand them in good stead in the future in facing the vicissitudes of professional life. Thus, their gossipy relationship too can be seen as related to the system of power relations in the institution[3].

Such speculation about the connections between power structures and gossip in institutions suggests that we miss something of importance if we view gossip simply as the idiosyncratic choice of an individual. Social context needs to be considered, whether the focus is eighteenth-century society or twenty-first century schools. Empirical research into the kind of structures likely to trigger gossip can only increase our understanding of the ethical complexity of the teacher's everyday professional situation (Ball, 1987).

Finally, to return to the teachers, Julia, Robin, Rosalind and Derek. It seems that for them, within the structure of their institutions, using gossip to determine the right thing to do can be helpful. They lack sufficient knowledge about a difficult situation, are inhibited by character or present circumstances from taking a forthright approach to the dilemma confronting them. They decide, after consideration, that they should or must use gossip as the least bad thing to do in the circumstances, whilst fully acknowledging that engaging in gossip always risks (to a greater or lesser degree) doing moral harm. They know that no codes or rule books can provide explicit and detailed guidance in such situations. In the best case, thoughtful professional pre- and in-service education and a collegial mutual mentoring situation in the school(s) in which they have worked will have provided a backdrop to the many occasions on which, in the end, they can only rely on their own considered ethical judgement that they have a professional duty to gossip, while accepting

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[3] I am indebted to Andrea English for comments about gossip and power relationships at a PESGB branch meeting at Edinburgh University in 2017, where I presented an earlier version of this paper.

responsibility for that decision. As R K Elliott (1989) remarks, we ought not to ask too much, even of teachers. 'Probably it is enough for them to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves.'

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