

Exploring the Value Implications and Practical Dilemmas of Contemporary Teachers' Professional Ethics

Yutong Li

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu, 730070, China

ABSTRACT

As teacher professionalization advances, the notion of teachers' professional ethics has gained increasing attention. It seeks to strengthen ethical knowledge, awareness, competence, and sentiments, enabling teachers to act ethically in their professional roles. Yet, deeper research reveals unresolved issues. This paper addresses three key questions: the relation between professional and fundamental ethics, the choice between an ethics of care and an ethics of justice, and whether professional ethics reflects external regulation or self-discipline. These inquiries highlight both the value orientation and practical dilemmas of teachers' professional ethics.

KEYWORDS

Teachers' professional ethics; Value orientation; Ethical dilemmas

1 The Value Implications of Teachers' Professional Ethics

The Chinese character *lun* (伦), composed of the radicals “亻” and “仑,” originally denotes the order and sequence among people of the same kind or clan. Its extended usages, such as in *lunbei* (伦辈), *lunxu* (伦序), *lunpin* (伦品), and *lunwang* (伦望), reveal the intricate web of relationships it connects—between individuals, between humans and their fields of practice, between humans and society, and even between humans and nature. The character *li* (理) refers to the intrinsic patterns and layers of things, signifying the inherent order of the material world; it also conveys the meaning of rules, principles, and standards of right and wrong. Thus, *li* concerns not only the inner essence of things but also the external norms and laws that shape human development. The concept of ethics (*lunli* 伦理) refers to the principles and rules that govern relationships among individuals, between individuals and society, and between humans and nature. It represents a set of guiding ideas for conduct and, from a conceptual perspective, constitutes a philosophical reflection on moral phenomena. Ethics encompasses both behavioral norms in social relations and the deeper rationale for regulating behavior in accordance with established principles.

Professional ethics, unlike general ethics, refers to the ethical reflection and regulation of human behavior and relationships within a specific professional domain. With the continuous advancement of teacher professionalization, the unique social value and moral responsibility of teachers have become the foundation for redefining the professional nature of their work. Consequently, teachers' professional ethics has emerged as a crucial standard for regulating teacher conduct and for determining whether such conduct meets the criteria of professionalism. The transformation from “teachers' occupational morality to professional ethics”^[1] and the reconstruction of ethical norms “according to professional standards” have thus become fundamental trends in the professional development of teachers. As a normative framework, teachers' professional ethics specifies the behavioral standards and principles that teachers, as members of a professional community, should observe in their interactions with one another as well as with other social groups and individuals. This process must be grounded in a reflection on the moral significance and ethical relations inherent in professional teaching activities. It requires careful consideration of how teachers carry out their professional practices and of the potential impact of these practices on others—especially students. These constitute the concrete realities that teachers' professional ethics must address.

In sum, teachers' professional ethics is a form of ethical morality rooted in fundamental moral principles and guided by the rules and norms governing interpersonal and social relations. Anchored in professional standards, it regulates teachers' conduct through both self-discipline and external constraints, thereby fostering their ethical awareness and promoting professional development.

2 The Practical Dilemmas of Teachers' Professional Ethics

In order to ensure the moral integrity of professional practice and relationships, as well as to safeguard professional prestige and autonomy, professional communities need to establish codes of conduct with normative authority to provide ethical constraints on their members. Whether in formulating ethical norms for teachers or in making professional judgments and choices, it is essential to take ethical value orientation into account. This orientation constitutes both the

logical starting point and the decisive factor in the development of teachers' professional ethics.

2.1 Ethical Dilemmas in the Dimension of Theoretical Values

2.1.1 The Transition from "Basic" to "Professional"

So-called basic ethics essentially refers to the moral consensus of humankind, a form of universalist ethics. It embodies the essence distilled from diverse cultural traditions and ethical systems, serving as a shared value resource across different ethical heritages. As such, basic ethics constitutes universally applicable and binding moral norms for all humanity. It encompasses both the general moral value systems embedded in various ethical traditions and the ethical consensus that emerges in response to new practical challenges. By contrast, teachers' professional ethics refers to the fundamental ethical relationships formed in the course of teachers' educational and instructional work, the basic ethical principles and norms they are expected to uphold, and the professional dispositions developed on this foundation^[2]. As Victor Hugo observed in *Les Misérables*, "To be a saint is an exceptional case; to be an upright man is the normal destiny of man." For teachers, who are ordinary yet socially significant individuals, it is essential to embody the basic ethics demanded by society. From a professional perspective, professional ethics is a defining attribute of any mature profession. Yet teaching, compared with many other occupations, is more complex, more multifaceted, and carries a greater weight of responsibility. If teachers fail to uphold even the standards of basic ethics, it is difficult to speak meaningfully of professional ethics. Thus, a teacher who aspires to professional ethics must first be grounded in basic ethics—that is, must first learn how to be a morally responsible person. The challenge, therefore, lies in how to elevate basic ethics into professional ethics, a transformation that constitutes a central dilemma for teachers.

2.1.2 The Choice between "Care" and "Justice"

Teachers' professional ethics emphasizes the consideration of the norms and principles that teachers ought to uphold and pursue within educational contexts. However, differences among ethical value systems inevitably lead to dilemmas in professional practice, the most prominent of which is the tension between an ethics of justice and an ethics of care^[3]. As two major ethical paradigms, they differ in their underlying virtues as well as in the kinds of problems they prioritize and the approaches they adopt in addressing them. The ethics of justice is grounded in individualism and follows a rational logic: it approaches problems from universal and abstract moral principles, employs reasoning and analysis, and makes decisions that aim to persuade "through reason." By contrast, the ethics of care emphasizes relationships and follows a contextual and affective logic: it situates ethical dilemmas within specific circumstances, relies on intuition and empathy, and makes decisions that persuade "through emotion." Both paradigms have long been reflected in the Chinese educational tradition. The ethics of care finds expression in Confucian thought, particularly the core idea of *ren'ai* (benevolence), which advocates "loving others" and "extending oneself to others," as well as in Mohist principles of universal love. It represents a value system suffused with compassion, where teachers' love for their profession and care for students occupy a central place. Yet the ethics of justice is equally indispensable. Much like the balancing force of yin and yang, it functions as a scale that ensures fairness and rationality in education.

Therefore, teachers' professional ethics should, in practice, seek to balance and integrate both orientations in light of specific contexts. Nonetheless, the fundamental differences between the two mean that achieving a seamless integration remains a persistent dilemma for teachers' ethical practice.

2.2 Ethical Dilemmas in the Dimension of Complex Relationships

Teachers' professional ethics involves complex social relationships and is shaped by interactions with multiple stakeholders, including the government, schools, the market, and other relevant social entities. This paper primarily explores the dilemmas in the development of teachers' professional ethics from three perspectives: society, the school, and the teachers themselves.

2.2.1 Ethical Tensions at the Societal Level

First, the government plays a significant role. Across current trends in educational reform worldwide, the government's responsibility in education has not diminished but rather increased, and its influence on educational governance is indisputable. Through policies and regulations, the government strongly guides teacher professionalization and promotes the development of mainstream values in teachers' professional ethics. In this sense, governmental authority exerts a substantial impact on teachers' ethical practice. Second, the market exerts considerable influence. The talents cultivated by teachers ultimately enter the labor market, which inevitably imposes its own requirements on their qualities. In responding to these demands, teachers may prioritize values such as competence and fairness, but risk

neglecting care, benevolence, justice, and equality, potentially placing disadvantaged students in more vulnerable situations. Thus, determining the appropriate balance between vocationally oriented education and academically oriented education becomes an ethical challenge for teachers. Third, parents, as primary stakeholders in education, naturally shape teachers' professional ethics through their expectations and preferences. In contemporary credential-driven societies, parents often emphasize academic performance and the ability to gain university admission, thereby imposing a values orientation that prioritizes achievement and capability in teachers' professional practice. Finally, other social entities, such as the media, communities, and various social organizations, each uphold distinct ethical values and interpret the moral significance of educational activities differently. Through the power of public opinion, these social groups monitor teachers' behavior, exerting substantial pressure on ethical practice and, in extreme cases, affecting the personal well-being of individual educators.

2.2.2 Balancing Ethical Demands within Schools

A school functions as a microcosm of society, and individual teachers primarily face three sources of influence: the administration, colleagues, and students. First, school administrations, through mechanisms such as administrative management or salary and promotion systems, often transfer external pressures directly onto teachers, thereby shaping their professional ethical practice. Under the guidance of school values such as graduation rates and pass rates, teachers may feel compelled to adjust their educational practices to align with institutional demands. In a context dominated by slogans like "scores," "efficiency," and "survival of the fittest," teachers inevitably struggle to meet the diverse learning needs of all students. Limited by time and energy, they tend to focus on those most likely to succeed academically, making it difficult to exercise moral judgment that balances school expectations with student rights. Second, teachers may easily critique or correct the inappropriate actions of colleagues. However, in order to maintain professional authority and group cohesion, they may sometimes tolerate improper behavior. Over time, this can foster skepticism toward holistic education ideals and even lead teachers to adjust their own educational values. Finally, teaching involves a professional service component, and students, as direct recipients of this service, possess certain rights to evaluate and influence both the school and the teacher. This dynamic generates additional ethical pressure. The compression of teachers' autonomy, combined with the need to balance competing interests within the school's complex relational environment, can lead to stagnation in the development of teachers' professional ethics.

2.2.3 The Elevation of Normative Self-Discipline

Having professional ethical standards alone is insufficient. While such norms provide guidelines, they are inherently limited; in the face of the infinite possibilities presented by complex educational contexts, teachers must still exercise timely and context-sensitive ethical judgment. Moreover, the rules embedded in professional ethics often function like "laws," representing the minimum standards of professional conduct. They cannot exhaustively regulate all professional behaviors and may create the impression that anything not explicitly prohibited is permissible. Since modern times, China's long-standing moral traditions have undergone dramatic shifts, moving from the cultivation of virtuous and accomplished individuals toward generalized social ethical norms—so-called "baseline ethics." In this transition, social norms became separated from individual moral cultivation; the focus shifted from the actor to the act itself, and from values to codified rules^[4]. Accordingly, teachers' ethical standards must not only address basic ethical expectations but also respect teachers' human needs, dignity, freedom, and the realization of life meaning and personal value.

Thus, the core of teachers' professional ethics lies in the understanding of the educational significance of their work. Its form is a realm of freedom rather than passive obedience; its motivation is self-transcendence rather than fear of punishment; and its cultivation occurs through reflection, experience, and insight rather than through coercion or commands. In essence, professional ethics represents a process of moving from external regulation toward self-discipline. Determining how to achieve this transition remains a key dilemma in the development of teachers' professional ethics.

3 Conclusions

Yang Xia and Fan Wei point out that^[5] from a historical perspective, although teacher ethics in China and the West have undergone different developmental trajectories, both have gradually recognized teachers' professional ethics as an independent research topic, increasingly emphasizing the self-growth of teachers within their professionalization. As the foundation and driving force of education, teachers' moral conduct and professional demeanor constitute the foremost criteria for evaluating the quality of the teaching workforce. Since the inception of the teaching profession, societies and nations have consistently imposed a range of ethical and moral expectations on educators. Some of these principles have endured across time, such as the spirit of unwavering dedication to the nation, the compassionate devotion to both

teaching and students, the exemplary conduct embodied in mentorship, the commitment to inclusive education regardless of social background, the pursuit of intellectual truth, and the aspiration to cultivate societal harmony through education. Others, however, evolve with the times, reflecting distinct contemporary characteristics. Nevertheless, professional teacher ethics cannot be reduced merely to ethical knowledge or the competence derived from its application. Rather, it is built upon a foundation of subject-specific knowledge and skills, as well as pedagogical expertise. In this sense, professional teacher ethics may be understood as the willingness and capacity for continuous self-transcendence and the ongoing improvement of educational practices.

The professional nature of teaching imposes high ethical standards on educators. A competent teacher must first be morally qualified, while an exemplary teacher should model ethical behavior both in pedagogy and in personal conduct. The influence of teachers on students depends not only on their professional knowledge and skills but also on their moral character and integrity. Good teachers should aim high, emulate virtuous models, continually cultivate their moral character, enhance their personal qualities, and impart correct values to their students. Teachers must lead by example, guiding students to develop proper worldviews, life perspectives, and value systems. Schools also play a key role by strengthening teachers' ideological and political education, respecting teachers as autonomous subjects, and guiding them through theoretical study and practical experience to practice ethical conduct. This fosters teachers' self-discipline and enables them to serve as role models through both words and deeds. Simultaneously, society should adopt a more tolerant attitude toward teachers, recognizing that they are both professionals and individuals. Teachers must engage in rational self-reflection, accurately define their professional identity, plan effectively, and adjust themselves to achieve ethical awareness.

In the development of teachers' professional ethics, efforts should begin with self-restraint, clarified responsibilities, and cultivation of virtue, and through dialogue, a balance between self-discipline and external regulation can be achieved.

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