AUTHOR	Jukka Husu, Auli Toom
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Ethics, moral, and politics in teachers' virtuous pedagogical practice

Jukka Husu and Auli Toom

ABSTRACT: Teaching is seen as a morally significant endeavour but there is a lack of clarity about the entire domain. While teachers usually do not develop a refined professional knowledge base or vocabulary of the moral work of teaching (Sanger, 2017) during pre- and in-service teacher education, there is a need to explore more in detail what kind of expertise is required and employed in the moral work of teaching, and how the components of that expertise are related to each other. The purpose of our theoretical chapter is not to present the "foreground", that is the results of "what works" but instead to highlight the "background" of teaching profession. We note that the complexities of teaching can be structured through the relational viewpoints of *ethical principles*, *moral judgments*, and *virtuous policies*. From these three standpoints, that often appear separate and disconnected, we try out a constructive synthesis. Our framework denotes that teaching is a peculiar kind of relationship that brings with it special ethical guidelines, moral judgements, and constant considerations of how to realize human well-being in the real-world dilemmas of teaching.

KEY WORDS: teaching profession, ethical principles, moral judgements, virtuous policies

Introduction

Over a decade ago, Colnerud (2006) invited those interested in the moral dimensions of teaching profession to discuss and renew the field of teacher ethics. Her invitation did not mean that the research on ethical/moral issues in teaching has been weak or futile. Rather her aim was to foster investigations into why is it so hard to be a (morally) good teacher. Systematic research on this crucial topic has been scattered. So far, research has revealed that most teachers are not always aware of the impact of their actions and decisions (Jackson *et al.*, 1993; Husu, 2005; Toom, Husu & Tirri, 2015). Furthermore, teachers have reported that they are ill-prepared for dealing with ethical dilemmas that they identify in their work (Lyons, 1990; Husu & Tirri, 2001; Bullough, 2017). Teachers are called upon to mediate many private and public interests pertaining to personal, professional, organizational, and societal values. Teachers distribute resources, mete out punishment, evaluate performance, make

curricular choices, and deal with comparatively immature and vulnerable students in school settings. Their work often presupposes mediation of conflicting values that relate to guarding and promoting "the best interests of students" (Tirri & Husu, 2002).

The modern pedagogical task of teaching is both demanding and ambiguous because contemporary policy perspectives and public discourses on education tend to focus on issues that are largely external to teachers' daily concerns: productivity, accountability measures, instructional technology, and so on (van Manen & Li, 2002; Skedsmo & Huber, 2019). These perspectives and orientations do not adequately reflect how teachers and students experience their tasks and duties amidst everyday school life. In their experience, teachers' concerns deal mostly with the success of their students, their personal relationships with students and colleagues, and the interpersonal and emotional dimensions of their actions (Männikkö & Husu, 2019). Thus, teachers' work can be seen as a pedagogical challenge to knowing how to deal in appropriate ways with the contingencies of everyday events of school life (Jackson, Boostrom & Hansen, 1993; Kennedy, 2016).

Seen in this way, pedagogy makes the practice of teaching possible in the first place. According to Simon (1992, p. 62), pedagogy itself is an ethical vision. Such a viewpoint makes teaching a reflective practice, and accordingly, school teaching is "deemed to be an interpretative or deliberative science – a branch of moral or social philosophy" (Hamilton, 2001, p. 121). This kind of reflective practice presupposes that philosophical analyses should be attentive to pedagogical practices taking place in schools, and consequently, that pedagogical approaches and actions should be responsive to philosophical discourses. However, philosophical and pedagogical modes of inquiry are seldom brought together to gain a better understanding of teachers' professional practices in school life (Husu & Toom, 2021).

Naturally, we must keep in mind that the nature of problems within this field is such that they cannot actually be solved. But when problems are made explicit and analyzed, we have change to understand them better, and thus, we can formulate more nuanced opinions about them. Exploring the conditions of pedagogical practices can make teachers' work more visible and give them more control over what they are doing. However, the purpose of our paper is not to present the "foreground", that is

the results of “what works” but instead to highlight the “background” of professional action and teacher ethics. Our goal is to try out a constructive synthesis of various positions that often appear separate and disconnected or even in conflict. However, we do not intend to propose a final static or inflexible state of affairs. What we will try to do is to present a temporary condition in which dialogue between different positions can encourage discussion and hopefully lead to new understandings of teachers’ professional actions.

The topic area: The core elements of good and caring pedagogical practice

The concepts of *ethics* and *moral* are distinguished in our presentation according to the meanings they have been given by current discourse. It is well known that the term ethics comes from Greek (*ethikos*, *ethos*: character, standards, custom, convention), while the term *moral* comes from Latin (*mos*, *moris*: convention, custom, conduct). Both refer to human conduct and are expansive in their meanings. However, usually ethics has come “to denote the theory of morality and the considered principles of conduct while moral has come to cover everyday, not often reflected, conduct” (Colnerud, 2006, p. 367). Here, our purpose is to keep these terms separate, both in their usage and in their meanings. We see that one task of educational research is to provide conceptual tools in order better to understand and analyze moral issues embedded in school life.

Teachers and students are not free to do anything they want; there are certain responsibilities and duties that belong to the educational context (Husu & Toom, 2021). Teachers’ work is carried out within schools, and with these institutions come certain aims and goals that direct the process. The term “pedagogical” refers to this bounded system, and it is accompanied by certain values. Teachers and students are expected to act according to these values.

Pedagogical also means taking stands. In educational contexts acting means making decisions continuously, and it also means choosing between competing alternatives in order to arrive at a certain result. As mentioned, educational decisions need some criteria. However, it is important to note that not all criteria can be stated explicitly. In fact, the pervasiveness of pedagogical situations is such that a great deal of teaching

depends on personal presence of teacher and teacher's perceptiveness of what to do in a given situation (Husu, 2003; Clandinin & Husu, 2019). It is part of teachers' professional task to be attuned to these experiential dimensions faced all the time in their work. Thus, making ethical judgments can be understood as an ongoing aspect of teachers' daily work. This suggests that all teacher action has an inescapable moral dimension (Sockett, 1993; Jackson *et al*., 1993; Hostetler, 1997; Hansen, 2001; Sanger, 2017). Here, what matters for teachers is to keep open the question of how they understand the ethical content of situations, and how they see their moral responsibilities within those situations (Cooke, 2017). Broadly speaking, the ethical/moral is their answer to the question of "How should teachers live and act in their work?"

Accordingly, our viewpoint is practical and we rely on old, solid ground, namely Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (N.E., 1140a24-1140b12). *Phronesis* refers to deliberation about values with reference to practice. According to Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 57), *phronesis* covers practice from many angles: first, it is intellectual activity that is most relevant to practice. It focuses on things and issues (in specific cases) that are constantly changing, on that which cannot be encapsulated by universal rules, even if one acknowledges that rules are often needed and are useful in themselves. Second, *phronesis* requires interaction between general (abstract) principles and concrete practice; it requires consideration, judgment, and choice. Thirdly, more than anything else, *phronesis* requires experience. According to Aristotle, "[w]e may grasp the nature of prudence [*phronesis*] if we consider what sort of people we call prudent. It is thought to be the mark of a prudent man to be able to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous" (N.E., 1140a24). The stance focuses on the question, "What should I do in this situation?" Therefore, in order to understand what *phronesis* means, we must look at a person who possesses it, the *phronimos*. That person is in "a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things which are good or bad for man" (N.E., 1140b5).

The different interpretations of this statement are indicative of the different directions in which the educational applications of *phronesis* can go. Next we concentrate on three interpretations of teachers' professional practice and their educational applications: *ethical perspectives* based on a rationality code, *moral practices* that rely

on character interpretations, and *virtue policies* that are based on a situational code (Noel, 1999). We hope that the process of interpreting our topic through different perspectives will provide a forum for comparing the similarities and differences that emerge from different viewpoints.

Ethical perspectives: a teacher's guiding principles and norms

Professional ethics concerns those norms, values, and principles that should govern the conduct of teachers. It emphasizes the inherent normative meanings that determine the appropriateness of teachers' professional practices. These kinds of ethical principles have even been stated explicitly in order to strengthen the status of teacher profession (Toom, Husu & Tirri, 2015). The normative core of professional ethics, therefore, provides ways to appraise the merits and to judge the significance of educational practices taking place in schools. However, positioning normative ethical judgments has a tendency to make ethics programmatic in its orientation to education: "A set of duties or obligations that if well-enough defined and well-enough followed will produce the desired behaviour" (Todd, 2001, p. 436). In to this view, education is seen as a fulfilment or a failure of prior principles of goodness and rightness – in prior actual encounters between teachers and students. What tends to be forgotten is the uncertainty and unpredictability of the pedagogical encounter itself (Reid, 1979; Husu, 2002).

Within this kind of ethical rationality, the teacher approaches the problem of what to do in a given situation with actions based on reason that are mainly ethical by their nature. When examining how a teacher does or explains her/his actions, we are interested in the rationality evident in them. This approach can be called the "reasons-giving" approach to the analysis of teacher behavior. The interpretation calls for aspects of rationality that make actions intelligible because "these actions are based on at least one proposition (major premise) which is held as a guiding principle" (Audi, 1989, p. 25). This provision of reasons makes the action sensible to the teacher. As Fenstermacher (1994) emphasizes, such reasoning may show that an action is "the reasonable thing to do, the obvious thing to do, or the only thing one could do under the circumstances" (p. 45). This kind of ethical rationality interpretation seeks to structure teachers' experiences and actions. It relies mainly on explicit accounts of

appropriate guidelines of how to act. The stance provides a certain authority in teachers' decision-making. It gives the standards by which ethical actions and decisions are made.

At this stage, "ethical" means conscious deliberation and sticking to ethical ideals and principles, regardless of the consequences. If we think that ethical codes require actual, real-life decisions – which we call judgments – then this stage is not place for them. Rather, we may see these activities as thinking and/or reflection. And consequently, problem finding and problem understanding are activities needed at this stage. This is ethics at a descriptive level. There is no need to belittle its value and merit, but our point is that reflection of this kind does not necessarily involve the vital activity of judging "what has to be done in this particular situation".

Here, it is important to note that professional educational literature is full of praise of reflection. The formula presupposes that the process of reflection in itself highlights a teacher's conscious choices about how to act in a classroom. The concept of reflection is used vaguely in connection with teachers' minds and work: the term reflection refers to thinking in general terms (Parker, 1997). As Lynch (2000) argues, "being reflective is often claimed as a methodological virtue and source of superior insight … or awareness" (p. 26). Consequently, teacher reflection tends to be seen as an ideal solution to the problems teachers face when it comes to reviewing their teaching. It is often supposed that teacher reflection actually *does* something, or that *being* reflective has some sort of transformative power regarding a prior "unreflective" teacher condition. Teacher reflection is thus seen as having considerable power and potential for professional development. But, as Lynch emphasizes, what teacher reflection can do and what it can reveal all depend upon "who does it and how they go about it" (*ibid*.).

Here, Max Weber's (1978, pp. 212-215) notion of "ethics of intention" describes the scene. The ethics of intention is concerned with sticking to ethical principles and ideals and how these actually work, not mixing them with practice. If we want to characterize ethical activities at this stage, we are *trying* or *attempting* to bring something about, or we are *aiming* at something; the ethics of intention are the upshots that are the *point or purpose* of the action; they are part of our *plan* (Shaw,

2006, p. 188). However, ethics of intention is not what is actually done in moral practice of teaching.

Moral practices: a teacher's characteristics and responsible judgments

The question of how to translate ethical principles and codes into pedagogical practice arises as we enter into practice of teaching. It is a well-known fact that single-minded pursuit of ideals and principles is not a good thing in a classroom and may lead to undesirable consequences. Situations should also be interpreted through a calculation of the probable positive and negative consequences (short and long term) of a particular educational decision and action. Once the likely outcomes are predicted, the alternatives that provide the greatest benefit and least harm may be chosen. The best interests of students are served if the negative consequences are minimized and positive benefits are maximized. According to Weber's (1978) distinction, it is important that teachers are not choosing between ethics and practicalities; they operate between two sorts of ethics. Embedded in moral practices of school life, teachers should not do away with their ethical principles and ideals (ethics of intention). Rather, their purposes need to be completed by their concern for consequences (ethics of responsibility). As Weber (*ibid*.) states:

> No system of ethics in the world can avoid facing the fact that "good" ends in many cases can be achieved only at the price of morally dubious or at least dangerous means and the possibility, or even probability, of evil-side effects (p. 218).

The problem of attaining a fair and just resolution that also works often means the balancing of the pros and cons of a particular situation. The circumstances usually compel teachers to choose between competing goals and values (Cook-Sather & Barker-Doyle, 2017). Teachers may choose a solution that aims to maximize the desired results across a range of students involved, but usually, some will suffer at the expense of others. In many cases, teachers' aims for any particular student are entangled with teachers' aims for each of the others in the class and in the school's professional community. As Page (1999) reports, in their work, teachers cannot see their goals as a neat dichotomy between one thing and another and making clear choices on their job.

The problems teachers face in their work relate most closely to the class of questions referred to as "uncertain practical questions" (Gauthier, 1963; Reid, 1979; Floden & Clark, 1988). These are problems that have to be answered, even if the answer is a decision to do nothing. The grounds on which decisions should be made are often uncertain. Nothing can tell teachers infallibly which method should be used, what evidence should be taken into account or rejected, what kinds of arguments should be given precedence, and so forth (Toom & Husu, 2020). In addition, teachers always have to take the existing state of affairs into account. Teachers are never free from past or present contexts and their arrangements.

Teachers have to take their stances. What distinguishes pedagogical judgment from mere descriptive thinking and reflection is that judgment in moral practices involves some evaluation of a situation and of persons in question: it is a *discriminating* and *normative* form of thought and action. (Hostetler, 1997, p. 8; original emphasis). Due to its force, teachers have to be careful how they understand the moral content of pedagogical situations and their responsibilities within those situations. According to Weber's (1978) terms, it is a question of "ethics of responsibility" that is concerned with the consequences of action based on, or aiming at, some prescribed aim or ideal. And even if teachers find themselves in a situation in which moral practices might outweigh their concerns for ethical principles, that does not mean ethical considerations are irrelevant. As Hostetler (1997) states,

> Even if we must dirty our hands, we must also recognize that we are acting in a way that is "morally dubious" and not excuse ourselves by saying that ethics does not apply to our situation. Even if we must decide to be "practical", we might also need to feel ethical guilt or regret about it (p. 4).

Consequently, the circularity between (ethical) rationality and virtuous character is evident. According to Sherman (1989), this circularity aims "to capture the way in which the sentiments and practical reason together constitute character … [and] to demonstrate that character is inseparable from the operations of practical reason" (p. vii). Aristotle laid the foundations for this interpretation by stating that "it is evident that is impossible to be practically wise without being good" (N.E., 1144a29 b1). Thus, ethical reasoning is not a concept that can be used or determined separate from the individual. Rather it lies in the person and is part of how one goes about everyday life.

Moral competence is not solely a cognitive capacity that a teacher has at her/his disposal. Rather it is closely bound up with the kind of person that the teacher is. The teacher's actions and opportunities can only be found within particular situations, informed by particular histories and school institutions. The actions of the teacher are made strong by repeated encounters with those actions and opportunities. Consequently, the teacher sees it not only as a way of behaving in particular contexts, but also as a "way of being" that arises in those situations. As a result, moral competence for a teacher has "its own personality which is rooted in a definite ethos with its own favored dispositions and habits" (Dunne, 1993, p. 273). How a teacher acts allows for the development of her/his knowledge and moral character. Without this standpoint, a coherent moral dialogue between teachers and their contexts cannot take place.

Politics: a teacher's virtuous policies in schools and classrooms

As presented before, moral action in schools is not just a cognitive or technical task. It is not simply a matter of knowing how to achieve what is right or good for pupils just because the matter of ethical questioning concerns what is right or good in the first place. And what is right can only be known in the immediacy of a situation. This can be considered with the concept of *politics*, which refers to the science of good sense applied to public affairs, *ta politika*, which, because it is forever changing cannot have fixed principles. Or this can also be considered with the concept of *policy* – or policies – meaning a way of prudent management or plans of action. Thus, teachers face the question, "What should I do in this situation?" Answering that question means focusing attention on the circumstances. The stance requires perceiving all that is involved in a situation and emphasized by Aristotle when he wrote that "practical wisdom is concerned with the ultimate particular which is perception" (N.E., 1142a25-27). The necessities of daily school life presuppose that teachers must take into account many different things when they consider their situations. Teachers need practical perception to determine what types of circumstances they are in and what types of actions they are actually doing. Pendlebury (1990) calls this "situational apperception." Pedagogical situations requiring actions are often full of possibilities

and perils, and teachers should be capable of perceiving those events and (often) weak signals embedded in them.

Instead of merely perceiving what is present, the situational code focuses on how things appear to teachers. Teachers cannot live by ethical principles alone. The consequences of acting on principles must be considered. Here, “both emotions and imagination play an essential part in the proper grasp of situations” (Pendlebury, 1990, p. 147). It is through imagination that teachers discern an event in the school context as something that requires their practical concerns or interests. In this sense, the situational code allows teachers room for flexibility and improvisation.

Today schools exist in a sociopolitical arena in which teachers, pupils, parents, public (and extending private) administrators and the public at large are all stakeholders who feel that they have a legitimate claim to participate in the construction of educational goals and practices. This active participation of all stakeholders in the educational enterprise is also seen as necessary for the achievement of optimal learning results.

The school is a principal site for early encounters between social contradictions and their tensions, thus placing students and teachers on the frontline of social problems. In this light, schools can be seen as sites and instruments through which practical actions, cultural responses, and material conditions are played out (Coburn, 2003). Schooling is not only a “pedagogical instrument”, it is also a site for many contradictory forces and forms.

Consequently, we need to recognize that the teacher’s role is in part political in sense that politics has been aptly described as “the art of the possible”. While we do not encourage teachers to take an active and public stance on political issues (in the first place), rather we are suggesting that teachers should accept the political nature of their position and their professional practice. As Hostetler (1997) states, this view of politics can be traced back to Aristotle. For him, “politics is not a retreat from ethics but an advance from ethics. Politics is putting ethics into action in the everyday world” (p. 103). Politics is not just about governing but about constant in considering how to realize human well-being in the real world.

A virtuous political stance calls for prudence, and, according to Aristotle, "[w]e may grasp the nature of prudence if we consider what sort of people we call prudent. It is thought to be the mark of a prudent man to be able to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous [for others]" (N.E. 1140a24). For Aristotle, prudence meant practical wisdom: practical in sense that it had to take into account the real world, and not just the ideal world. Thus, prudent teachers are teachers of integrity, but they are sensitive to the complexities and uncertainties of the world, yet willing to engage with others in order to contribute to their betterment. Within this process, ethical principles and ideals should inform teachers' actions, and, conversely, the consequences of teachers' interactions should inform their principles. Naturally, this kind of situation is difficult to realize, and frequently, problems between contending parties cannot be solved without conflict. *Negotiation* is all that is left, also as a result. Teachers' ethical codes and their moral practices thus become politics. Figure 1 illustrates the elements and the complex process of teachers' virtuous pedagogical practice.

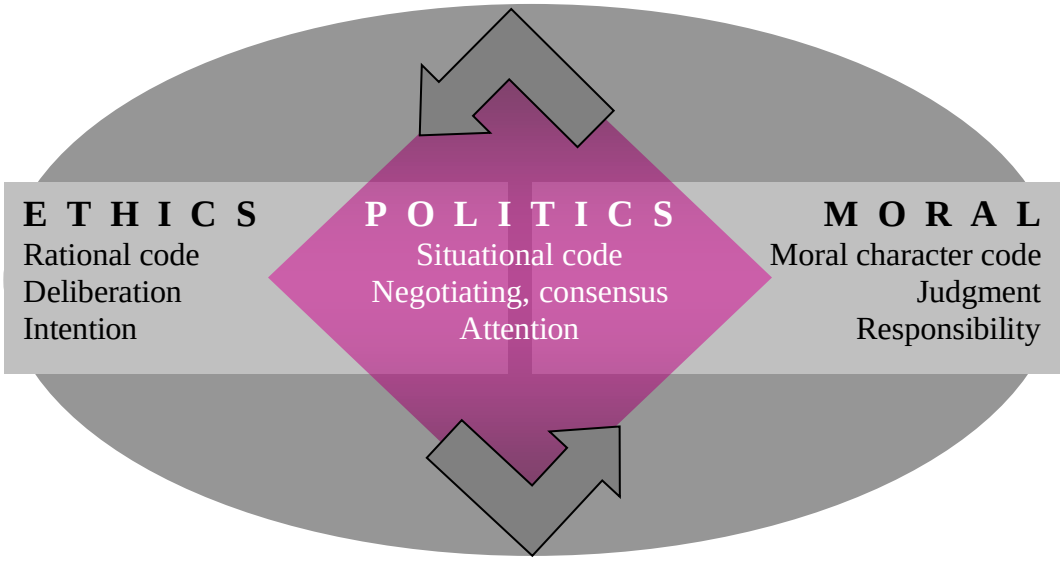

Figure 1. The elements of teachers' virtuous pedagogical practice.

As Brown (1997) states, being political in this sense does not mean that teachers have to jump on every bandwagon. What it does mean is that whenever possible, teachers should be "sensitive to the needs, interests, and values of others whose views are different in an effort to arrive at a mutually acceptable accommodation" (p. 83). In many ways, politics within educational practice is about handling disagreements and

dilemmas: How should teachers respond to those disagreements? According to Hostetler (1997), political stance stresses a conversational response as opposed to an argumentative one. This is because contingencies exists in all pedagogical situations, and thus, teachers have to take into account the opinions, values, and needs of others in solving educational problems in practice. Consequently, regarding students and parents (and other stakeholders), there is a lesson to learn: teachers cannot do it *for* you, but they can – or at least should try – to do it *with* you. The attitude helps us to see teacher integrity as a "relational property", according which it is important for teachers to compromise and be "open to change for the sake of preserving integrity in relationships with other people" (Hostetler, 1997, p. 70).

Discussion

As we have shown in this chapter, a teacher's daily pedagogical practice and its complexities can be structured from the viewpoints of *ethical principles*, *moral judgments*, and *virtuous policies*. Adopting ethical principles is an assumed and integral part of teachers' professionalism. In addition, teachers' moral characteristics and ability to make moral judgments and manage virtuous policies are traits of a competent professional. An interesting question is what would happen if one of these three elements would be shaken or even missing from teachers' actions? What kind of pedagogical practice would result? What would happen if teachers would lose their prolonged educative ideals and aims? Would a teacher's actions turn out to be a survival game in the classroom?

From the viewpoint of teacher education, for teachers to aspire to a unity of ethics, morals, and politics in teachers' thinking and action sets high demands and great challenges. Deliberated and rational ethical codes and intentions can be mediated for student teachers, at least to some extent. It could also be possible to discuss moral characteristics, judgments, and responsibilities of a good teacher as part of teacher education. The third element, virtuous policies, in which ethical principles and moral perspectives are intertwined with practical policies, is a skill-like activity. This means that student teachers could be taught and guided towards learning and embracing this kind of behavior (Cooke, 2017; Thornberg, 2017). But ultimately – it is up to their

own deliberation and choices as to the kind of orientation to their work they will follow.

In many cases, teachers do not necessarily think that their virtuous policies and actions in the classroom are also fundamentally political and normative, although they should, and thus, adopt critical attitudes toward education matters. How can teachers keep this circle of good and caring pedagogical practice unbroken, harmonious, and complete?

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