We [teachers] have a lot of moral obligations to our students and we are very serious about them. I don’t come here [school] to collect a pay cheque and go home. Everybody works because we all need to get paid. But, there is some sense of satisfaction in what you do when I can walk out of here feeling good about what I do. Sometimes, however, I feel terrible because I worry that I wasn’t fair to somebody during the day or that I didn’t get back to somebody who needed to talk to me. I’m always scared of giving messages to students that might be taken the wrong way. So, you find that your day is all over the place and you think, what did I do today? What did I get accomplished because it just seemed like such a hectic day? I’m not a superhuman being, but I too have to make sure I make good choices. — (elementary school teacher)

INCREASINGLY, LITERATURE FROM BOTH THE ACADEMIC AND THE PROFESSIONAL fields has focused attention on the moral dimensions of teaching and the ethical demands they place on the daily practice of teachers. On one hand, consideration of ethical intent and behaviour seems quite simple and self-evident. Consequently, I, like many others who write in the area of applied professional ethics, reject moral and ethical relativism. In teaching, as in life more generally, core principles relating to virtues such as honesty, justice, fairness, care, empathy, integrity, courage, respect, and responsibility should guide conduct and interpersonal relations. On the other hand, ethics is also highly complex, as we struggle to interpret and apply such virtues in consistent and defensible ways in response to the varied situations, challenges, and uncertainties that we all face.

Being an essentially good person with an intuitive, general sense of right and wrong does not, in itself, equip the professional teacher to appreciate the layered nuances of classroom and school life in terms of their moral and ethical significance. In order to navigate the complexities of daily practice, teachers need to cultivate the ethical knowledge so central to the conceptualization of teaching as a unique profession.

DEFINING ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE

We’re all such delicate human beings, and teachers play such an influential role in a student’s life. I remember my grade 9 English teacher; I think I’m glad I had him because I know from him what not to do as a teacher. He said that my handwriting was horrible and it was too big. Well, you know, I had problems with my eyes, and I needed new glasses, and he was so insensitive to that to say in front of the whole class, “Redo it because your writing is too big.” This crushed me, and I don’t want anybody in my class to ever feel that way. — (secondary school teacher)

By virtue of their professional role, teachers work in an inevitable state of moral agency. In broad terms, moral agency encompasses two distinct, yet interrelated, commitments on the part of the teacher. The first pertains to the exacting ethical principles and virtues that the teacher as a moral person and a moral professional should uphold. The second relates to the teacher’s implicit role as a moral educator, both by example or modeling and by deliberate instruction. The connection between these two aspects of moral agency is evident as teachers live out through their actions, attitudes, and words the same virtues they hope to instill in their students. As one secondary school teacher explained, “If I don’t want kids to yell at me, then I have to make sure I don’t yell at them. It’s as simple as that. If I want them to care about each other, then I have to show care towards them; so, sometimes I do things for them. As a simple example, if a kid drops her pen, I’ll get it for her. I don’t say, ‘Well, you dropped your pen, get it yourself.’”
Ethical knowledge is the term I have given to the heightened awareness that teachers – some more than others – develop in response to their recognition of their role as moral agents. As a kind of virtue-in-action, ethical knowledge enables teachers to make conceptual and practical links between core moral and ethical values such as honesty, compassion, fairness, and respect for others and their own daily choices and actions. It moves teachers beyond viewing teaching solely in technical, pedagogical, curricular, disciplinary, and evaluative terms to appreciating the potentially moral and ethical impact their practice has, both formally and informally, on students. As I have claimed elsewhere,

The ways in which ethical knowledge may be expressed and illustrated are as numerous as the teachers, students, and daily interactions in schools themselves. Perhaps it is exhibited by the teacher who uses caution in the choice of sensitive or controversial curricular materials, or perhaps it is seen when a teacher exercises care in selecting and displaying student work, equitably allocating time, attention, privileges, and duties to students, organizing small work groups to ensure fairness, enforcing school and classroom rules with consistency, or evaluating student achievement with honesty and kindness. Thoughtful teachers continually adjudicate between the dual responsibilities of being fair to individual students and being fair to the larger class group. Situations in which the two may seem to be in conflict are common. Does fairness translate into equal treatment or differential treatment of students? Often, it means both.

One can also hear ethical knowledge in the tone of a teacher’s voice, the terms of politeness and respect that are used, and the conveyed understanding that humour and sarcasm are not necessarily interchangeable. Many teachers refer to the ethical need to avoid publicly embarrassing, humiliating, or singling out students for derision or ridicule. They recognize also that negative staffroom gossip about students and their families is not professional conduct. Ethical knowledge is also reflected each time a teacher consciously reminds, admonishes, corrects, and instructs students on how their behaviour affects others. The teacher’s effort to cultivate a civil and caring climate in the classroom represents more than an organizing strategy for an efficient community of learners; it represents a sense of moral purpose.

Not surprisingly, teachers cannot be ever cognizant of the moral and ethical implications of everything they do in the course of a day. Teaching is enormously demanding, frequently frustrating, occasionally overwhelming, and always an eclectic mix of planned formality and spontaneous serendipity. It is fast-paced, even in its seemingly slowest moments, because the teacher can never be fully certain of what might happen next in terms of the complex

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social interactions in schools. Intuition does not always prepare us either to recognize or to react instantly to morally charged occurrences. Alternatively, ethical knowledge, honed through the reflective application of moral sensibility to the experientially based and dynamic details of daily practices and even routines, can help teachers anticipate the moral nuances and challenges in their work. Possibly, it can minimize what Buzzelli and Johnston refer to as “blind spots in our ability to perceive the moral in situations.”

PROMOTING PROFESSIONALISM THROUGH ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE

Ethics . . . we sort of touched upon it when we had someone come in and discuss law in terms of what teachers are responsible for doing and what the law is in a classroom and how we should be. Other than that, I haven’t had an ethics discussion in any other class that I can remember . . . That really isn’t any sort of moral discussion, that is just what the law says which may or may not be moral. — (student teacher, secondary division)

(There was one class where) we were really taught to be aware of some of the things in our classrooms and what is ethical in terms of how we speak to our students, how we speak to colleagues, and how we have to maintain professionalism at all times, whether it’s in the classroom or outside of the classroom. We have to hold a certain standard as teachers. They tell us it’s a little bit different from other professions because other people’s children are basically placed in our care for most of the day and that’s why the profession is raised to a different standard of morality and ethics. — (student teacher, elementary division)

It is often observed that teaching is unique among the professions, not least because of the moral expectations of societal trust placed on it. In addition to the compulsory nature of schooling, the particular vulnerability of the profession’s primary “client,” and the unusual environment in which the professional serves these “clients” more or less collectively rather than independently, teaching’s educative mission is inherently moral as well. Unlike the doctor or lawyer, not only must the teacher practice virtuously, but also model, inspire, and even inculcate in others a respect for virtuous conduct. Professional ethics for teachers is not a separate and discrete set of standards to be applied to the technical or professional knowledge base. Rather, it is inextricably woven into that professional knowledge base. Ethical knowledge, as the expression of professional ethics in practice, has the potential to define teacher professionalism and indeed the essence of teaching itself.

If we are to enhance teacher professionalism through the cultivation and articulation of ethical knowledge within the practitioner field, we need to clarify how other interpretations of what constitutes professional ethics are insufficient as the bases for ethical knowledge. First, codes of ethics and other formalized versions of ethical standards (while possibly inspirational and valuable if they are well designed and avoid the all-too-common bureaucratic, legalistic, or union-centered emphases) do not provide the specific guidance that experience filtered through a virtue-oriented and principle-based lens can. Ethical knowledge highlights moral virtues such as justice, truthfulness, and compassion as they are reinforced – or from a negative perspective, compromised – through the nuances of daily practice, regardless of how mundane they may seem. Where codes appeal to generalities and overall visions, ethical knowledge attends to the details. The same is true with educational law. While it is important for teachers to understand their professional duties as defined by law, they would be greatly mistaken to believe that such necessarily narrowly defined precepts constitute the limits of their ethical responsibilities.

Finally, there is a prevalent belief among many teachers that “ethical” and “professional” are synonymous terms in relation only to the dominant attitude that teachers should never criticize their colleagues. However, unquestioned obedience to this norm of collegial loyalty, enforced within an ethos of solidarity, creates anxiety-filled ethical dilemmas for teachers who stand by, silently and uncomfortably witnessing the negative or thoughtless conduct of their peers. Teachers need to find a better way to honour the virtue of loyalty without compromising their moral duty to students, thereby becoming collectively responsible for professional conduct in schools. The sharing of ethical knowledge may enable this.

Some teachers who have developed their ethical knowledge can articulate with clarity and precision a sense of self-awareness of what they do as teachers in moral terms. Others are less proficient and seem oblivious to the moral dimensions, intentions, and possibilities of their own practice. This does not imply that they are bad people; it simply means that they lack the ethical knowledge needed to connect the daily practice of teaching with the moral implications embedded in this practice. In order to make the enhanced ethical knowledge of some teachers more visible to all, teachers need opportunities to engage in a level of collegial group reflection within their school communities. After all, they collaborate on other areas of academic,
social, cultural, and behavioural importance; why not expose the moral and ethical aspects of schooling to communal scrutiny as well?

Regularly scheduled open forum discussions, peer coaching, and “school ethics committees”, in which teachers form internal communicative networks to discuss professional ethical matters and moral dilemmas as they arise, may provide avenues for the cultivation of ethical knowledge within a renewed professional climate. And certainly teacher education programs, traditionally seen to be inadequate and haphazard in their capacity to acquaint student teachers with the moral and ethical dimensions of their future profession, need to be centrally concerned with engaging practicing teachers in cooperative discussions around ethical knowledge.

Of course, this is all much more complex than such a brief discussion implies. As I have stated previously, teachers, individually and collectively, must take hold of themselves in the name of professional self-determination and embrace ethical knowledge as the measure of independent choices and the building block of renewed school cultures. This will require the examination and possible replacement of old norms and attitudes; it may initially make teachers feel more vulnerable as they share ideas, experiences, and dilemmas with each other and expose themselves to potential peer critique.

Nonetheless, the challenge to enhance ethical knowledge within the culture of teaching is worth pursuing as inseparable from the ideals and imperatives of professionalism. I gratefully acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its support of research projects that have informed this article.

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Notes
1 Elizabeth Campbell, The Ethical Teacher (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2003), 46
2 Ibid., 40.
3 Ibid., 37.
4 Ibid., 22.
6 Unpublished interview data from a current research project (Elizabeth Campbell, principal investigator).
7 Ibid.
9 Campbell, 115-116.