Ethical commitment in educational action

Introduction

> "Educational action, in so far as it is a free act, like other free human acts, is a moral action."
>
> (Fuentes, 2020, p. 21)

As Adela Cortina puts it, the social and moral importance of professions lies, first of all, in the **specific good** that each one provides to society. In this regard, the author includes **teaching** among the ten key words in deontological ethics (Cortina & Conill, 2000).

But what specific good does the teaching profession provide to society? According to Ibáñez-Martín (2017), this good would be promoting the full development of the personality of the educator. Achieving full development requires not only the cultivation of intelligence, but also the development of moral capacities, civic virtues and ethical values (Fuentes, 2020, p. 48). In this way, the academic dimension of learning must be developed in harmony with the human, cultural and civic dimension, taking into account that education is a relational process between people (*ibid*).

Therefore, the teaching role cannot be limited to the effective transmission of a certain knowledge, but must help and promote the full development of the student as a person through the teaching of the subject being taught. A teacher who aspires to become not only a **good, competent practitioner**, but also an **ethically good practitioner** must be both an expert in the content and teaching of their subject as well as a professional who understands that ethical aspects are part of their everyday life and a key component in the construction of their **professional identity** and **the excellence of their profession** (Hortal, 2002).

If the purpose of education is to practise the **pedagogical good**, ethics must be one of the main factors driving the excellence in teaching. The **ethical shift** in education posed by Ibáñez-Martín (2015) –which has been in place in Spain especially since the 1990s– has to do with the adoption of a conceptual framework for education and the role of the educator, removed from the dominant scientific and technical paradigm, and where commitment to ethics plays a significant role in responding to the challenges of a complex, liquid and uncertain world (Bauman, 2003).

In this process, we refer to Van Manen's (1998) concept of *pedagogical tact*, a teaching proposal that sees the educational act from a broad perspective. This process involves preparing the child or young person for life, through their growth and maturity as a person in their cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. According to Van Manen, the tact or pedagogical thoughtfulness of the teacher is important for building the learner's character. This tact is expressed in teachers' attitudes and behaviours, as well as in the body and verbal language used in their teaching practice. Therefore, the use of pedagogical tact promotes the emotional and ethical dimensions of the educational process.

Accordingly, teacher training must emphasize not only preparation for the **know-how** –focused on the theoretical, instructive and instrumental dimensions of teaching practice– but also for the **know-how-to-be**, which has to do with cultivating the affective, attitudinal and moral dimensions of the future teacher (Jordán, 2015).

This teaching material, based on testimonials from in-service teachers, aims to have students reflect on the ethical principles that guide the professional practice of teaching, while exploring solutions to possible critical incidents or ethical dilemmas common to educational action.

The interviews are structured around six axes that aim to address some of the key issues of the ethical orientation of educational action. These axes are as follows:

Axis 1. Professional teaching identity	Axis 2. Vocation and the teaching profession	Axis 3. Social responsibility	Axis 4. Professional ethics and deontology for the teaching profession	Axis 5. Critical incidents and ethical dilemmas	Axis 6. Ethical challenges of ICT

Before reading the interviews, it is important that you learn about the contextualization of each of these axes.

Axis 1. Professional teaching identity

Who is the professional teacher? Who is behind the task of education? We can use these two questions to contextualize the concept of *teacher identity* associated with the challenges of today's world.

In the words of Joseph Rassam (1979, in Fuentes, 2020, p. 29), "we educate based more on what we are rather than what we know; we also teach based more on who we are than what we say". Therefore, from the ethical perspective of the teaching profession, it seems essential to reflect on the identity of the individuals involved in teaching.

By addressing this concept, we become aware of the educator's identity, encompassing both **personal and professional experiences**. However, we are not interested in the identity of the person as an individual, but in their identity as having taken on the task of accompanying the growth and preparation of a child or young person for life (Fuentes, 2020, p. 32). This task is more than simply a profession as specialized work (Cortina & Conill, 2000) as it becomes the **art of educating**: getting the learner to want to learn. This is the only art that can arouse and mobilize in the learner the desire to learn and the will to know (Meirieu, 2009), the result of the teacher's *savoir- faire*. When this occurs, it is because the teacher has been personally involved in their profession. They have put into play the identifying features (*) that distinguish them from a person who simply acts as an educator.

Thus, to understand the multi-faceted concept of *teacher identity*, it is key to focus attention on the **interpersonal encounter between educator and learner** (Fuentes, 2020), on the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student (Meirieu, 2009) and on **other relationships and interactions** that also influence the transformative power of educational action: the relationship with the other agents in the educational scene, the context and social image of the teaching profession or even the professional practice itself.

> "Teachers are key figures on whom possibilities for transformation rest. They, in turn, must recognize the agency of their students to participate, collaborate, and learn through their shared pedagogical encounters. To carry out this complex work, teachers need rich collaborative teaching communities, characterized by sufficient measures of freedom and support."
>
> (UNESCO, 2022)

Therefore, the role and **shaping of teacher identity evolves** as the social function of teachers has been gradually reformulated. Today, it is a collaborative profession where full-time education and the social context we live in have influenced teaching. This is one of the reasons why professional training has a clear attitudinal ethical dimension, one which is directly linked to the perceptions, beliefs, and expectations that must be kept in mind when shaping this identity.

> "It calls for a revision of one's beliefs and even one's own personal and professional identity, applying the reflections on diversity and inclusion to ourselves. We need to work by listening and recognizing everyone with whom we share educational spaces, showing empathy and assertiveness, accepting and offering help."
>
> (Blanes et al., 2022)

Based on these initial approaches, we assume that shaping an individual's teacher identity is not a simple or linear definition since a wide range of experiences, interactions, and contextual elements influence it's development.

Right now, you are starting to develop an identity as teachers. In this regard, in the following reflective task, we ask you to think about the reason why you want to be trained as a teacher, reflecting on whether this reason is somehow related to the **art of teaching**.

Axis 2. Vocation and the teaching profession

> ❝ "In this way, the concept of vocation can strengthen an ethical orientation related to a way of life, of being, and of doing that commits the person."
>
> (Fuentes, 2020, p. 50)

The dialogue between vocation and the teaching profession has resulted in ambivalence and dialectic encounters over the years.

Historically, the role of the professor has been more closely linked to the idea of teaching as a need to help others, as a **call to teach** with a sense of vocation and moral commitment to the teaching profession (Hansen, 1994, 2001). And that is why vocation introduces an ethical dimension to the daily duties of every professional.

But the passage of time and social transformations, as well as the needs of current teachers and educational institutions, seem to move away from this more spiritual understanding of education as a vocation. It is no longer seen as the only possibility, and it also aligns with the idea of **teaching as a profession**.

> ❝ "The changes taking place in society impact the demand for a redefinition of the teacher's job and probably the profession itself, their training, and their professional development."
>
> (Marcelo, 2006, p. 20)

It is clear that vocation does not replace the professional training that teachers need today. Therefore, the historical dilemma between vocation and profession no longer makes sense.

More than a century ago, Max Weber (1969) described a profession as the specialized activity that a person engages in that earns them "support". But clearly, **the (teaching) profession is more than that**. Teaching is an activity that has a purpose in itself (educating), is carried out by a group of people (education professionals), and gives both identity and a feeling of belonging to the professional who engages in it (the educational community) (Cortina & Conill, 2000).

Then, is the task of educating **a vocation? Or is it a profession?** Perhaps the answer lies in **synergy, a dynamic balance between the two**: professionalism may be lacking in vocation, and vocation may be lacking in professionalism. But what really highlights this synergy is that true vocation entails the ethical demand to acquire teacher professionalism (Fuentes, 2020). This means not losing sight of the fact that the teaching profession will always be a **caring profession**, which, first and foremost, wants to favour the integral development of individuals. This requires being intellectually committed and being able to identify new areas of research and innovation to generate new pedagogical practices, as pointed out in the report entitled *Reimagining our futures together. A new social contract for education* (UNESCO, 2022).

After having examined the complementarity between vocation and profession in the context of education as a caring profession, you will be asked, in the following task, to reflect on this issue.

Back in 2020, Xavier López i Ortín, current director of the Octavio Paz school in Barcelona, published *Mestres d'un Mestre* (Barcelona, 2020). The synopsis of the book reads:

> "The memoirs of a teacher so passionate about education that he completely transformed a school, which now sets the standard for education in Spain."

Xavier López i Ortín, director of the prestigious public school Octavio Paz in Barcelona, tells us first-hand about his vocation as a teacher and how he turned the school around (which earned him major educational awards). A teacher made by teachers who takes on the challenge of accompanying our children in the construction of a better world, and does so with enthusiasm, conviction and without fear.

To complete the task, read «L'encàrrec», the first chapter of *Mestres d'un mestre* and try to identify and relate the elements of vocation, profession, and care the author expresses in the first person through his life story.

- Was it easy to distinguish between them?
- What was your reason behind choosing each element?
- What role does the ethical demand of the teaching profession play in this story?

Axis 3. Social responsibility

Under the umbrella of their educational institution, education professionals **cannot isolate themselves from contemporary social dynamics** nor from the space and time they had to live in: critical social movements, progressive emergence of increasingly aware citizens, demand for sustainable social and ecological realities, etc. (Sauvé, 2014).

Back in 2015, when the United Nations' global plan for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda was established through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), there was a new ethical shift in education. It was associated with a concern to incorporate or strengthen issues related to ethics, sustainability, social responsibility, gender perspective, or inclusion in teaching plans at all educational levels.

In this context, schools cannot remain on the sidelines; they have the **social responsibility to commit to ethical values** and educate children and teenagers to act as citizens in these uncertain times of constant change.

The task of educating, understood only as the possession of knowledge, has been questioned for a number of years. Over the last few years, adherents to the concept of a *knowledge society* have taken multiple approaches to the term. As of today, the social responsibility of the educational institution consists in **shaping a new, complex knowledge** that allows establishing relationships in the face of the global and complex phenomena present in the world today. According to Morin (1994), "intelligence that separates what is connected atrophies comprehension and reflection, thus reducing the chances of corrective judgment or a long-term view". Today, the knowledge that is modifying our societies is not old, accumulated and unreflective, but new, one that favours the capacity for action in children and teenagers. This calls for educational institutions capable of accepting change (Innerarity, 2011).

> " "One of the ways of referring to the new demands that the knowledge society poses to human beings is formulated as an ability to innovate or creativity. In line with this objective, organizations –schools, universities, political parties or parliaments– are called upon to set themselves up as learning communities and to generate knowledge."
>
> (Innerarity, 2010)

As an organization, the educational institution has a clear educational and ethical component in itself: how it organizes itself, manages control or decision-making, responds to its participants, etc. (Syrian, 2002). Only if the educational institution is able to take responsibility and assume the need for transformation that is demanded by society will it be able to respond to today's challenges and "help" learners build this "new" knowledge.

Following this idea, Alfaro and Rivera (2011) (in Fuentes, 2020) highlight four areas of action that educational institutions should consider, keeping this ethical will and social responsibility in mind:

- The organizational method.
- Education and everything that affects it.
- The relevance of knowledge transfer and teaching innovation.
- The ease of social participation within the institution.

Today's society is complex and interconnected, and we need schools to break with the rigid and uniform organizational models that have characterized much of their history over the last two centuries. Renovation is of utmost importance.

"Schools need to become places where everyone is able to form and realize their aspirations for transformation, change, and well-being. Above all, schools must allow us, individually and collectively, to explore unforeseen possibilities. In many parts of the world, increased access to schooling has provided transformative opportunities for individuals and entire communities. It has raised their consciousness, helped them develop new skills and understanding, and taught them to envision new trajectories of learning and development. Too often, however, today's schools serve to entrench inequalities and widen disparities that need to be unlearned and corrected."

(UNESCO, 2022)

Next is a set of reflective questions that can guide your inquiry into the social responsibility of the school where you are doing your teaching practicum.

- How does the school's educational project determine what occurs in the classroom, both in the curricular and methodological fields (work methodologies, organization and curriculum hierarchy, etc.)?
- Is the centre part of any innovation or pedagogical improvement network?
- What kind of collaborative relationship does the school have with the local community?

Axis 4. Professional ethics and deontology for the teaching profession

> "What is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious practice of freedom?"
>
> (Foucault, 1984)

Although the concepts of *professional ethics* and *deontological ethics for the teaching profession* are often used interchangeably, there are easily distinguishable.

> "*Deontological ethics* comprises a series of moral principles and ethical ways of acting in a professional environment. It is part of what we call *applied ethics* insofar as it intends, on the one hand, to apply the principles of general ethics to each sphere of professional action. But on the other hand, given that each activity is different and specific, it includes one's own good, goals, values, and habits in each field of professional action."
>
> (Bolívar, 2005, p. 96)

Thus, professional ethics includes one's own good, goals, values, and habits in the teacher's field of action. On the other hand, deontology is the part of ethics that deals with the duties and obligations that affect the teaching profession and are articulated in a set of rules. Professional ethics is therefore not limited to deontological ethics, to a set of norms that govern the behaviour of those who carry out the educational action, although it can and must take into account the relevant contributions that come from the different professional ethics that have been elaborated so far (Martínez, 2010).

The ethical shift in education in Spain during the 1990s, as elucidated by Ibáñez-Martín (2015), is closely linked to the proliferation of ethical codes within the teaching profession, which have been developed by diverse groups of professional educators. The common goal of these documents is to reassess the professionalism of educators based on the idea that every professional demands **knowledge**, **know-how** and **ethical knowledge** to endorse their action in society (Fuentes, 2020, p. 73). However, Fuentes (2020) points out the need to assume the regulatory role of these documents as an instrument that generates a **professional** *ethos* based on the **autonomy** of moral judgment and professional competence of the teacher. Far removed from the technical understanding of the role of the teacher, the typification of norms and guidelines of action through ethical codes seeks to leave nothing to chance and the need to decide.

In this regard, although knowledge and compliance with ethical codes are essential requirements for the teaching profession, rather than recognizing rules and submitting to codes, it is critical, as a key component of professional identity, to develop **ethics of responsibility or co-responsibility.** These can guide the teaching action and enable the teacher to apply, with autonomy, the principles of general ethics to solve specific situations or moral dilemmas they encounter while teaching (Apel, 1992). It is not, therefore, a question of comprehending a series of external ethical values and patterns of thought, but rather of learning them, making them their own and incorporating them into their professional practice in a meaningful way (Martínez et al., 2002, p. 26).

To learn more about the educational context in Catalonia regarding the teaching profession's ethical codes, visit:

- Deontological ethics of the teaching profession, elaborated by the Col·legi Oficial de Doctors i Llicenciats en Filosofia i Lletres i en Ciències de Catalunya in 2021.
- The ethical commitment of teachers, elaborated by the Federació de Moviments de Renovació Pedagògica de Catalunya in 2021.
- The deontological code of ethics of the Col·legi Oficial de Pedagogia of Catalonia, published in 2013 as a revision and ratification of the version elaborated in 2006.

In the following task, you are asked to check and analyse the three deontological codes mentioned above, taking into account the following criteria:

- Whether the objectives and contents of the codes are clearly laid down.
- Whether the recipients of the code are clearly identified.
- Whether the code is applicable to teachers' daily professional practice.
- Whether the code takes into account essential contemporary issues.
- Which of the codes do you think best represents your professional *ethos*?

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Axis 5. Critical incidents and ethical dilemmas

What is a critical incident?

The *critical incident* (CI) technique, which was first developed in the early 1990s, was designed as a way of learning what work behaviours adopted by aircraft pilots influenced the success or failure of their missions during World War II (Flanagan, 1954). Flanagan defined the critical incident technique as:

> "[...] a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles. The critical incident technique outlines procedures for collecting observed incidents having special significance and meeting systematically defined criteria."
>
> (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327)

Although this technique arose from the development of studies in the field of Aviation Psychology, its application has spread to several disciplinary fields over the years. In education, it was first used during the 1990s (Tripp, 1993) in the context of reflective practice, and one of its leading exponents was Schön (1992).

During initial and ongoing teacher training, critical incident analysis as a qualitative approach has enabled us to identify and reflect on the most common problems that arise in operational contexts. It is applied as a tool to reflect on attitudes and values, manage conflict situations and enhance teaching leadership in the classroom. As Monereo states,

> "[...] for a critical incident to take place, there must be a situation that the teacher perceives as conflicting and that may involve other educational actors (e.g. students, colleagues, management, inspection, parents) but also, and especially, the teacher themselves."
>
> (Monereo, 2010, pp. 160-161)

In both the Spanish and Catalan educational contexts, a lot of research has been done on the application of the CI technique in teacher training (e.g., Navarro, López & Barroso, 1998; Monereo, 2010; Fernández, Elórtegui & Medina, 2003; or, more recently, Canelo & Liesa, 2020). The common theme running through these proposals is the design or application of guidelines or protocols to identify and analyse critical incidents: the unforeseen events, conflict situations or specific problems that most destabilize and worry teachers. These proposals provide teachers with effective tools to deal with these situations and a wide range of possible situations of similar nature (Bilbao & Monereo, 2011).

The results of a recent study of students completing their Practicum at two Catalan universities (Canelo & Liesa, 2020) reveal that, for example, the most frequent CIs reported by the students concern:

- The management of interpersonal relationships between students (especially solving verbal or physical conflicts involving students).
- The management of student behaviours (especially disruptive behaviours).
- The mastery of teaching and learning content (related to the concerns of teachers in training, not knowing how to respond to new content or issues raised by the students).

What is an ethical dilemma?

We have already pointed out that professional ethics are not limited to deontological ethics. In this regard, deontological codes may help in forming the teacher's moral conscience, but they daily have to make decisions that generate ethical dilemmas towards others or themselves (Martínez, 2010).

An ethical dilemma arises when two moral values stand in conflict with one another and the professional, in this case the teacher, must **deliberate** and choose one of the options, while taking responsibility for the negative consequences of discarding the other option. Therefore, the teacher must do their best to compensate for the possible negative effects of their choice. This is exemplified by the conflict that could arise from a clash between the teacher's moral convictions and the institutional requirements established by educational laws or the rules of the educational centre.

Cobo (2001, pp. 133-138) identifies four steps to determine, analyse and deliberate on possible ethical dilemmas associated with the practice of professional teaching:

1. **Face the problem responsibly**. Understand and accept that the situation may cause in the teacher a moral conflict of conscience: they may have to face two principles that cannot be reconciled, and no matter what course of action is taken, some ethical principle will nonetheless be compromised.
2. **Correctly identify the nature of the problem and the circumstances**. Do not rush into quick judgments and actions, but rather identify the nature of the problem and the underlying circumstances. This identification is necessary, both to avoid making mistakes and because it often sheds light on the solution. Moreover, often times, this identification helps determine the solution to the problem.
3. **Predict and assess, comparing the consequences of each response to the dilemma**. Take responsibility for choosing one of the possible options and try to compensate for the harm that may arise from the decision taken.
4. **Choose with conscience**. Once the previous steps have been taken and no way to solve the dilemma has been found, the teacher has to choose an option by weighing out the *benefits* and *drawbacks*. They must also take responsibility for the choice made and enforce the appropriate measures to amend or compensate accordingly, as much as possible.

Based on these definitions, we can conclude that not all critical incidents necessarily generate ethical dilemmas, and that not all dilemmas necessarily emerge from a critical incident.

In this regard, and as reflective practice, visit CRITIC EDU page and find examples of critical incidents in secondary school classrooms. Choose one of these CIs and analyse whether or not it generates an ethical dilemma for the teacher(s) involved.

Examples of the application of the Critical Incident Analysis Guideline (PANIC) proposed by Monereo (2010) can also be found in some of these CIs.

Axis 6. Ethical challenges of ICT

For more than three decades, the incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICT) in educational contexts has been justified by:

- The need to adapt teaching to the demands of contemporary society, called *knowledge society* or *information society*.
- The need to prepare students in the face of new digital cultural mediums.
- The increase and improvement of the quality of teaching and learning processes.
- The innovation of teaching methods and materials, among others.

However, the integration of ICT to produce significant changes in the educational context requires much more than a good technological infrastructure and training aimed at developing technical skills in the use of specific software or hardware. The pedagogical value of ICT depends on the role it is assigned and the manner in which it is utilised within a specific educational context. In this regard:

> "[...] the development of interpretation frameworks, thinking tools that allow the student to contrast and situate the information and accumulated knowledge, recognize the codes and languages of the different types of knowledge and learn to use them to express their understandings and arguments, make ethical judgments and continue to learn throughout their lives, is presented as one of the fundamental challenges of a formal education that does not shy away the problems of its time."
>
> (Sancho, 1998, p. 42)

Therefore, it is necessary to articulate integrated and complex visions that are free from technical reductionism, that take into account the set of dimensions that interact in the teaching and learning processes, and that help to promote an ethical reflection about the meaning of education in the technological society and the meaning of technology in education.

As Yanes & Area warn:

> "The introduction of new information technologies in a context of instrumental rationality will make them instruments of alienation rather instruments of liberation and human emancipation for teachers and students."
>
> (Yanes & Area, 1998, p. 28)

The response that teachers must articulate to the ethical challenges posed by ICTs is mentioned by Hargreaves (2003), who calls for teachers to be catalysts and counterpoints to the challenges of today's society. In their role as **catalysts**, teachers must:

- Encourage deep cognitive learning, creativity and inventiveness among students.
- Foster research, networking and teamwork, and ongoing professional training.
- Promote problem-solving, risk taking, trust in the collaborative process and the ability to face permanent change.

As a **counterpoint**, teachers must be concerned, at the same time, with character and results; with emotional learning and cognitive learning; with personal and professional development and professional learning; with group life and group work; with preserving continuity and safety; and with promoting risk and change. In short, being a teacher means practising a profession that not only provides values, but, with or without the use of ICT, must also be guided by values in their daily practice.

For this task, in order to understand your relationship with technology and to apprehend it as a social and historically-located process, prepare a **techno-autobiography**, a personal, vivid, authentic and reflective account. Answer the following question while shaping an autobiographical digital narrative (by means of a timeline or video, for example):

How has technology influenced your life from birth to today?

You can find examples online of techno-autobiographies made by teachers in initial training.

It is crucial that your reflection be guided by a broad and complex vision of technology that does not only take into account its dimension as an artefact, but its symbolic and organizational dimensions as well. To expand your knowledge and learn more about this issue, read Sancho-Gil's (2019) *De la tecnología para aplicar a la tecnología para pensar: implicaciones para la docencia y la investigación*.

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