Introduction to ethics in teaching

Applied professional ethics

Professional ethics in teaching, as it is presented in this book, is not a concept to be narrowly defined solely by ethical codes of practice and formalized precepts of behaviour and disposition uniquely relevant to the teacher practitioner. Nonetheless, these should indeed embody fundamental core principles of an ethical orientation so essential to overall moral practice. Rather, professional ethics is conceived of broadly as elements of human virtue, in all its complexity, as expressed through the nuances of attitudes, intentions, words, and actions of the professional teacher. Simply, it is the realization of good and the struggle against bad as they apply to the everyday practice of teachers as individuals and as a collective professional group. In this respect, the focus is on more general principles of ethics, such as honesty and fairness, as they apply to teachers’ work, than on the identification of particular interpretations of ethics that emanate from the profession itself (such as the oft-quoted imperative to avoid interfering in a colleague’s domain of authority).

In his *Practical Companion to Ethics*, Anthony Weston notes that, ‘ethics asks us to live mindfully: to take some care about how we act and even about how we feel’. He further explains:

Despite the stereotypes, the point of ethics is not to moralize or to dictate what is to be done. Ethics is not another form of dogmatism. The real point of ethics is to offer some tools for thinking about difficult matters, recognizing from the start – as the very rationale for ethics, in fact – that the world is seldom so simple or clear-cut. Struggle and uncertainty are part of ethics, as they are a part of life.
In our struggle as teachers to contextualize within classrooms and schools our own moral dispositions, problems and uncertainties inevitably emerge. It is at this point that applied professional ethics becomes both a descriptor of the inherent dimensions of moral teaching and a potentially useful guide in the resolution of problems. Referred to also as ‘practical ethics’, applied professional ethics provides teachers with the means to reflect wisely on the moral implications of what they say or do not say and do or do not do, not only in dilemma-type situations, but also in the course of their routine work.

The emphasis in this book is on the practical expression of ethics and morality in teaching, as opposed to the study of meta-ethics and questions about the character of morality itself. Hence, this is not a study in philosophy in any classical sense, although the issues, realities, and concerns addressed are essentially philosophical in nature. We must address such an area of significance in an accessible way without ‘fear of becoming mired in arguments about moral philosophy and moral theory’, as some have suggested. The need for this is both fuelled and partially fulfilled by a rapidly increasing body of scholarship that attests to the pervasiveness of the moral domain in teaching. Accounts of the ethical dimensions of schooling provide details about moral agency, moral purpose, the moral authority of practice, and the argument that ‘the components of teaching as a knowledge endeavour and as a moral enterprise are essentially inseparable’. As Hansen concludes, ‘The notion that teaching is a moral practice constitutes one of the world’s most enduring understandings of the work . . . the activity of teaching is itself saturated with moral significance, and it is so in ways that illuminate both the beneficial and the harmful influence teachers can have on students’. While it is the intention of The Ethical Teacher to illustrate primarily the former influence, this is often best achieved by juxtaposing some contrasting depictions of the latter.

Given the reality that teaching is inherently a moral and ethical activity, an interesting distinction has been introduced between applied ethics and ‘implied ethics’. Todd argues that since ethical principles are not applied, as in laid on to, the conditions of classroom life to make it ethical, the daily details of this life should instead be seen, in and of themselves, as implying ethics. In other words, ethics emanates from the realities of teaching, rather than being applied to these realities. While this observation sensibly captures the embedded and unconscious nature of many of the moral transactions that transpire spontaneously in classrooms, it obscures an important point. That is, professional ethics, as defined by the moral practice and conduct of teachers, should not be left to chance as an inevitable state of being. There are times when professional teachers need to ‘apply’ principles of ethics to the conceptualization of their work consciously, visibly, and with commitment and determination. And, at the very least, they need to recognize how such principles do actually ‘apply’ to their work. This double use of the term
‘apply’ situates the notion of applied professional ethics within the context of ethical knowledge addressed throughout this book.

The concept of ethical professionalism has been addressed more broadly within occupations and professions other than teaching, although educational ethics as an area of interest to policy makers, researchers, and practitioners has received heightened attention in recent years. Within the scope of the professional literature more generally, there is fairly consistent agreement that ethical professionalism is both based on a shared appreciation for a wide range of commonly accepted moral virtues, and grounded in ethics reflective of the professional practice itself. Thus, we may raise the distinction between the specific ethical demands on the professional and the moral responsibilities of any citizen to themselves and other members of society; we may conclude, as MacMillan has, that professionals are ‘bound by a sense of the ethical dimensions of the relations among professionals and clients, the public, the employing institution, and fellow professionals ... [based on] a conception of what constitutes the profession’s purposes and characteristic activities’. However, a critical point for my discussion of applied professional ethics is that such ethical obligations are in addition to, not substituted for, the expectations of moral behaviour for any private individual. Bayles refers to this distinction as the difference between professional ethical norms and ordinary ethical norms, and rightly concludes that professional norms can, in no way, be justified if they are independent of ordinary ethical norms. Therefore, the ethical professional is also an ethical person.

But, what of the ethical person who, upon assuming the role of the professional, somehow transforms their behaviour and attitudes in ways that neglect the very dispositions that guide moral action in other non-professional circumstances? As Coombs wisely observes:

Just as some business persons may not exercise the same sensitivities in their business dealings as they do in other contexts, educators too may leave important moral sensitivities at the school door. Actions they may see as insulting, belittling, arrogant, patronizing, or unfair in other contexts may not be perceived as such in the educational context. Consequently an important aspect of the task of enhancing the moral sensitivity and perception of educators is that of engaging them in a consideration of how the educational context, with its particular constellation of power, authority, and responsibility relations, affects the applicability of their moral concepts.

Perhaps such individuals would be best served by focusing attention more on the ‘ethics’ aspect of professional ethics than on the ‘professional’ aspect, if indeed they perceive the two to be separable. They may be strengthened by becoming familiar with Edwin Delattre’s excellent explanation of integrity
as central to all ethics and the highest achievement of individual character. In maintaining that the principles of right and wrong conduct are the same regardless of whether one is concerned with ethics in private or public life, he states that there is not a ‘distinct set of principles that make up something called business ethics in contrast to science ethics in contrast to education ethics, and so forth. Ethics is ethics. We need to know relevant facts about each specific walk of life to understand how to apply the principles of ethics in it, but that does not change the fundamental principles that apply’. Therefore, professional ethics is the extension of everyday ethics into the nuances of the professional’s practices. The ethical knowledge of teachers, as addressed in this book, is what illuminates such relevant facts about school life and the teaching role, thus facilitating the application of ethical principles to one’s professional work.

This application of ethical principles to practice is one reason why we might conclude that professional ethics, while fundamentally the same as general ethics, also entails certain unique moral considerations peculiar to the profession. As many who have written in this area note, membership in a profession obligates individuals to adhere to the ethical principles and standards inherent in the technicalities of the profession. Their duty to behave in an ethical manner not only includes but also extends beyond the regular moral conduct expected of any person to encompass elements of competence and service ideals. Sometimes dubbed ‘professional virtues’, such ideals, nonetheless, still have at their core such general principles as fairness, integrity, moral courage, compassion, honesty, patience, and various adaptations of the ancient principles definitive of the medical ethical tradition: autonomy, justice, non-maleficence, and beneficence.

In anticipation of the expanded discussion of formalized ethics and professional associations in Chapter 6, I note briefly that, in all the numerous statements of professional ethics found on various websites for a diverse range of professions, lists of core ethical principles, such as those stated above, are often presented as the foundation of moral practice for the specified profession. They share many of the same virtue-based ethics that one might apply to everyday life. For example, one statement from the medical field highlights compassion, dedication, honesty, integrity, courage, wisdom, and self-sacrifice, and argues that, ‘it is difficult to imagine physicians who practise the above listed attributes and values in professional life, but not in personal interactions with friends, family, and other people. Congruence between professional and personal values is essential’. Another offers a framework for universal principles of ethics that divides applied ethics into three co-existent, overlapping, and occasionally conflicting categories: principles of personal ethics, such as honesty, respect for the autonomy of others, and being fair; principles of professional ethics, such as impartiality, diligence, and duty of care; principles
of global ethics, such as social responsibility. In each of these cases, there is scope for appreciating how the principle base of applied professional ethics is relevant to the practice of education and the profession of teaching.

In their examination of professional ethics in teaching as principles that should govern the conduct of educators, Strike and Ternasky describe how principles, such as fairness, justice, and care apply directly to routine classroom-based decisions. They ask what constitutes fairness in evaluation and discipline, how a teacher might equitably allocate time and attention to students of differing needs, whether it is ever appropriate for teachers to punish whole classes for the misbehaviour of an individual student, and other similar questions. These kinds of issues, which are empirically illustrated in subsequent chapters, challenge teachers to apply their sense of professional ethics in ways that hopefully make the best use of ethical knowledge. Such knowledge is based on a sound grasp of moral principles and an experiential foundation that provides the link to such principles or virtues.

It is probably apparent that this discussion of principles or virtues assumes a level of universality and a general rejection of ethical relativism. In this respect, it echoes Soltis’ assertion that ethical relativism and subjectivism defeat the very notion of professional ethics, and that ‘the specter of ethical subjectivism needs to be dispelled if we as a profession are to have an ethic and be genuinely ethical practitioners ... it would make no sense to teach principles of professional conduct as if they were arbitrary or subjective’. While this is not an uncommon position in the field of ethics, it is by no means uncontentious or without its detractors.

Knowing the difference between right and wrong

Often in discussions about issues of right and wrong, either within academic circles or as part of the wider public discourse, one of the most pervasive questions to surface is ‘Whose values, anyway, should define what is right and what is wrong?’. In its most belligerent form, this question is intended to stifle all expression of moral and ethical values by implying that they represent the subjective proclivities of individuals bent on controlling others rather than the accumulative wisdom gleaned from centuries of philosophical reflection, debate, and historical experience. By implication, any reference to virtue is equated with the oppressive imposition of strident, unflinching, and inflexible opinions whose veracity is very much in doubt. When asked relentlessly, the question may render reasonable and rational people, who believe generally that it is wrong to deceive and abuse other
people and that it is right to be kind, fair and trustworthy, confused and defensive as they try to explain such principles as something other than self-evident.

Most people of good will do not want to seem like doctrinaire absolutists out to push their moral agenda on others. So, with the best of moderate intentions, they embrace the ubiquitous ‘whose values?’ question as an apparently legitimate cautionary warning against extremism. If that is all it were, then there would be good reason to consider it. Unfortunately, as an instrument of moral relativism, subjectivism, and nihilism, it also undermines the confidence and conviction of those who exercise a fairly mainstream appreciation of right and wrong, consistent with the laws of the land, informed by reasoned and humane judgement, and supported by a legacy of philosophy and historical precedent, both heroic and horrific in nature. In the moral muddle that ensues, attempts to articulate even core ethical principles that essentially form the foundation of how human beings should treat one another become paralyzed as, bit by bit, we come to stand for nothing, right or wrong, either as individuals or collectively as a society.

For some of those writing in the areas of professional ethics, the moral nature of schools, and moral education, the ‘whose values?’ question becomes tedious as it advances an implied moral equivalency between zealous fanatics out to indoctrinate others in their own narrow view of the world and benign and thoughtful teachers striving to be fair and kind while showing students that in civil society, we exercise patience in listening to each other, we don’t hit someone because they make us angry, we take turns, and we don’t cheat and steal from one another. There seems little point in seriously addressing the moral agency of teachers, the ethical obligations inherent in teachers’ professional practice, and the overall moral and ethical nature of schooling if one’s conceptual starting point maintains the relativity of all moral and ethical principles as self-justified expressions of opinion, feeling, and preference bounded only by the shifting beliefs of individuals and societies and, therefore, not in any universal or objective sense binding on us all.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge a distinction between moral and ethical principles as the focus here and those social norms, customs, traditions, trends, fashions, and biases that may or may not reflect such principles. A tendency to clump all of these together as more or less equivalent ‘values’ helps propel the ‘whose values?’ question and the confusion it spawns. In his study of children and adolescents from a range of cultural and religious backgrounds, Nucci identifies the distinct domains of the moral and the social. The moral domain has at its centre knowledge of right and wrong and involves a transcendent universal set of values around issues of human welfare, compassion, fairness, and justice. While the social domain may encompass moral areas of social regulation (hence the term
sociomoral'), it is defined also by non principle-based conventions or personal preferences, unlike the moral domain which includes only a ‘basic core of morality around which educators can construct their educational practices without imposing arbitrary standards or retreating into value relativism’. Nucci found that children across the diverse research sample uniformly made the same distinctions between issues of essential morality, whether or not these are viewed through a religious or secular lens, and conventions, rules, and practices specific to a particular religion or society. Only the former were seen to be universally applicable, and they all related to foundational principles or virtues such as honesty, justice, integrity, respect, kindness, and trustworthiness. It is with these and other virtues as they are woven into the fabric of teaching in all its complexity that The Ethical Teacher is concerned.

Increasingly critical of the rampant relativism embraced since the late 1960s that has undermined the articulation of such principles as virtues, many philosophers and researchers interested in the moral dimensions of education assume, as part of varying ideological and conceptual frameworks, that at least a basic distinction between ethical right and wrong does not need a detailed defence. In other words, in insisting that a good teacher is neither cruel nor unfair, we need not haggle over why this is essentially a moral imperative, rather than merely a culturally and socially constructed norm reflecting the interests of some over others. As Fenstermacher states in his identification of honesty, compassion, truthfulness, fairness, courage, moderation, and generosity as among the exemplary virtues expressed in a teacher’s manner, ‘I leave open here the very important issue of why these particular traits are to be regarded as virtues, doing so with the philosophically lame but empirically compelling claim that the literature, customs and norms of the vast majority of world cultures hold these traits in high regard’.

The theoretical premise underpinning The Ethical Teacher similarly adopts such a position. It is based on the assumption that ethical principles embedded in the empirical illustrations presented or addressed in the overall discussion need not be justified as such; rather, there is an expected recognition of their goodness or, as in the case of their violation, badness. In other words, by way of a polarized example, the teacher who addresses students with kindness and respect is assumed to be doing a good thing, and the teacher who ridicules and disparages students is assumed to be doing a bad thing, even if the latter teacher believes it is an appropriate way to exercise one’s professional authority. As Clark reminds us, ‘In the moral domain, however, one opinion is not as good as any other . . . Overarching principles have been agreed on in our society and within the teaching profession – principles dealing with honesty, fairness, protection of the weak, and respect for all people’.
Similarly, others have also generated lists of core ethical principles that should guide human interaction. For example, in their respective accounts of what constitutes the ethical school, Starratt identifies responsibility, honesty, tolerance, loyalty, courtesy, compassion, integrity, care and respect; while Haynes refers to both the overarching values of non-maleficence (do no harm) and beneficence (promote human welfare, prevent harm) and specific universal values including justice, honesty, respect, and so on.\(^{27}\) The core ethical principles cited are usually in agreement, although tolerance, for example, is frequently flagged as potentially problematic as a virtue. Understandably, for those of us who believe in more objective and universal orientations to ethics, tolerance is a questionable principle in its own right as it would compel us to tolerate the intolerable, that is, those practices and views that are harmful, dishonest, or unjust.

General consensus on core ethical principles in an abstract sense should not be seen to imply that there is no disagreement over their interpretation and application. It is not in any way inconsistent with the non-relativist framework of this book to acknowledge and accept that reasonable people can and do disagree over issues of right and wrong. In the context of daily life, moral issues may conflict, and we do not always know with certainty how a particular ethic applies to a specific problem or situation. We may have differing interpretations of what it means to be fair or what the essence of caring is. Uncertainty and complexity are inevitable aspects of adjudicating between right and wrong in one’s personal and professional life. However, this complexity does not invalidate the concept of ethical right and wrong. As medical ethicist Margaret Somerville states in her rejection of moral relativism and her support for what she calls the secular sacred: ‘Recognition of unavoidable uncertainty is not incompatible with regarding some things as inherently wrong’.\(^{28}\) And in teaching, as in medicine and other fields, that which is inherently wrong is that which harms, deceives, manipulates, deprives, neglects, cheats, intimidates, and uses others for one’s own ends.

Clearly, ethics is not simply a matter of private choice or personal satisfaction. As Reitz argues in his discussion of moral crisis in schools: ‘When morality becomes a totally private affair, a personal sense of right and wrong diminishes to a point of no return. If I am responsible only to myself, nothing can be wrong’.\(^{29}\) Contrarily, moral and ethical standards are inherently public; they define what we do to, for, and with one another. Additionally, they influence our treatment of non-human life. Because of this, as Fasching notes, ethical reflection requires us to deliberate with others and engage ourselves in the responsible and reasoned intention to discover what is right. He further claims, however, that we can do this only if we are prepared to be mistaken and ‘to recognize both our own fallibility and our common humanity’.\(^{30}\) On one hand, ethics seems easy and straightforward, especially...
in the most extreme of situations; on the other hand, it is fraught with
tensions and uncertainties that have challenged us for centuries to think
deeply about the contextual realities of our lives as they influence our ethical
knowledge.

Before addressing ethical complexity as an integral characteristic of
teachers’ knowledge, I should clarify briefly my use of the terms ethics/
ethical and moral as both expressive of principles of right and wrong. Some
scholars and researchers use only the term ‘moral’ to refer to the nature of
teaching, the dimensions of education, and the agency of teachers. Some
regard ‘moral’ to be concerned with the rightness and wrongness of specific
conduct or character, while ‘ethics’ refers to a broader, more universal and
all-encompassing understanding of such moral standards and principles. Of
these, some use ethics only in what I consider to be an excessively narrow
and restrictive sense to mean formalized codes of practice. I too make a
small distinction in my use of some terms. For example, I refer to profes-
sional ethics, not professional morals, thus acknowledging those who may
regard morals as more individually and personally conceived and ethics as
more collective and public. Similarly, I refer to an individual teacher’s moral
agency, not ethical agency. By entitling this book, *The Ethical Teacher*
rather than *The Moral Teacher*, I am exercising my preference for the ter-
minology of ethics as more strongly indicative of the collective sense of
professionalism I hope to inspire by illustrating the moral practice of some
individuals.

Nonetheless, having said this, I essentially do not distinguish conceptually
between the terms; both address virtue and basic principles of right and
wrong as they influence belief, intention, and behaviour. Hence, I frequently
refer to the moral and/or ethical nature of teaching, moral and/or ethical
dilemmas and issues, and moral and/or ethical exchanges in classrooms,
for example. In this respect, the terms are used here, for the most part,
interchangeably. There is ample support in both the moral philosophy and
professional literature to justify this usage.

One term that I generally choose to avoid, unless it is modified by the
adjective form of moral or ethical, is ‘values’. Like many others writing in
the field of professional ethics and the moral domain of education, I regard
values as those non-moral preferences individuals hold in relative ways. As
the great conceptual equalizer of all preference, opinion, belief, and attitude,
‘values’ as a term does not fit well with a virtue-based discussion of profes-
sional ethics and moral agency in teaching. As Hunter argues, ‘The very
word “value” signifies the reduction of truth to utility, taboo to fashion,
conviction to mere preference; all provisional, all exchangeable’.

*The Ethical Teacher* is not based on a compelling need to justify philosophically
why treating students unfairly, for example, is wrong and not merely an
individual value choice on the part of a teacher. It is for this reason that the
‘whose values?’ question introduced at the beginning of this section is seen as potentially so destructive of any collective professional attempt to distinguish between right and wrong in the often complex and uncertain context of teaching.

Ethical complexity as knowledge

If we are to make teachers’ ethical knowledge more visible as exemplary of virtue-based professional practice, we must recognize and accept the moral layeredness of teaching, the complexities of classroom and school life, the occasional uncertainty of teachers striving to respond to conflicting demands in ways that are fair and caring to all, and the fact that people in teaching, as elsewhere, have varying and competing perspectives on what constitutes right and wrong, good and bad. Ethical knowledge encompasses divergent orientations, but is not so diffuse that it ignores its fundamental rootedness in core principles or virtues such as honesty, justice, compassion, dedication, diligence, integrity, courage, and other components of moral pluralism. However, disagreement over the interpretations of such principles and confusion as to their applicability to specific contextual situations are inevitable in teaching as they are in wider society. As Hostetler argues, ‘A teacher’s ethical world simply isn’t precise. However . . . such imprecision does not mean that ethical judgment is irrational, arbitrary, or merely subjective and that even if situations exist to which there is no one right response, that does not mean we cannot identify wrong responses’. The point of illuminating ethical knowledge is not to attempt to eliminate such imprecision, but rather to illustrate how teachers may work within it, despite conflict and disagreement, to enhance moral agency built on an appreciation of how moral principles are embedded in practice in a variety of ways.

As has been claimed by many philosophers in education and in other fields, it is not in any way inconsistent to hold to a belief in objective ethical principles while accepting that reasonable, rational individuals of good will and thoughtful intention may hold differing views about morality. In some instances, they may not know what to believe. I would assume that most of us have experienced such uncertainty and lack of clarity even though we have not lost faith in the abstract value of core virtues. As Sirotnik reminds us, in his defence of moral imperatives, ‘An antirelativist position, however, does not automatically resolve fundamental questions, dilemmas, and issues’. It is perhaps because of this that public discourse, consensus, and debate over ethical concerns have prevailed since the era of Aristotle. The exploration of teachers’ ethical knowledge replicates such moral deliberation as it applies to the contextual realities of teaching and the interpersonal dynamics in schools.
While teachers as professionals may agree on the objective principles of fairness and honesty, for example, they may, within the context of their own individual schools and classrooms, interpret them differently in the course of their daily practice. What one teacher may regard as a caring alternative to treating all students equally because some are more needy than others, another teacher may see as a violation of justice that demands impartial and equal treatment of all. Furthermore, an individual teacher may believe both of the above and function in a fluctuating state of dissonance and self-doubt about inconsistencies in their own practice. While two teachers may fundamentally agree on the need to be honest, one may be more sensitive than the other to a potential conflict between telling the truth about a child to another teacher and the principle of confidentiality and respect for the privacy rights of students and their families. Two teachers, both believers in the virtue of loyalty, may become opponents in a situation that tests one’s collegial loyalty against the moral expectation to safeguard the well-being of students. Teachers’ own philosophical orientations, conscious or not, to moral and ethical issues will ultimately determine how they interpret their professional obligations and their role as moral agents.

Inevitably, discrepancies among perspectives are based, either deeply or superficially, on the philosophical and ideological complexities of competing conceptual paradigms. One’s view of ethics may be rooted in neo-classical objective principles of universal worth, as is the case in this book. Or, it may reflect a more constructivist orientation that defines ethics relationally and situationally as perspectives. Within these two broad approaches, one may be a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicist, a utilitarian consequentialist, a Kantian advocate of deontology, a care theorist who, while sharing much of the respect for virtues that virtue ethicists have, nonetheless sees care not as a virtue per se, but as a relation-centred concept, or a social justice ethicist rooted in political critique and critical theory, just to identify several competing frameworks.

*The Ethical Teacher* deliberately situates its discussion of ethical knowledge, moral agency, and applied professional ethics within the contextualized practice of teaching. Moral and ethical principles are both embedded and engaged in the complexities, and often uncertainties, of this practice. While I appreciate that principles and virtues have broader significance in the realm of moral philosophy, I have chosen not to engage in an expansive theoretical description or analysis of specific paradigms, such as those mentioned above. Rather, the focus is on the ethical dimensions of teaching and teachers’ understanding of how these relate to their own professional work in both formal and informal ways.

While the behaviours and beliefs of teachers may encompass a variety of theoretical perspectives, ethical knowledge as it is described here relates to attitudes and interpersonal dynamics that essentially speak to a concern for
right and wrong as embedded in what I have been referring to as core principles or virtues. In this respect, I do not use the term ‘principle’ to mean a law, precept, or maxim. Principles are not positioned here as motivators of action, but rather as descriptors of the knowledge and conduct of the ethical teacher.

If we are to embrace ethical knowledge as the knowledge base for a renewed professionalism in teaching, we must continue to accept and describe the embedded nature of much of what teachers do to reflect virtues and core principles. Many of the most prolific scholars who have addressed over an extended period of time the moral dimensions of teaching, such as Gary Fenstermacher, David Hansen, Robert Nash, Nel Noddings, Kevin Ryan, Hugh Sockett, Kenneth Strike, and Alan Tom, view ethics as central to the very essence of teaching, not as a by-product of the teaching process. Nonetheless, rather than leaving such dimensions embedded as part of an overall description of the inevitable moral nature of teaching, we must also draw heightened attention to them through the practice of some teachers more than others. In making moral practice visible, teachers themselves may explore the ethical implications of their work. They could build on the knowledge that some teachers (who can articulate clearly and precisely in ethical terms their behaviour and beliefs) exemplify, in order to harness such ethical knowledge to inform and enrich the profession as a whole.

Sockett describes professional teachers as ‘experts’ precisely because of their ‘professional virtue’, which he defines as ‘a sustainable moral quality of individual human character that is learned’. In sharing their ethical knowledge as it is grounded in the realities of practice, teachers may further learn from one another more about the connectedness between their own moral dispositions or intuitions and the work that they do in schools. Similarly, Carr claims that:

The knowledge and understanding which should properly inform the professional consciousness of the competent teacher is . . . a kind of moral wisdom or judgement which is rooted in rational reflection about educational policies and practices and what is ethically, as well as instrumentally, appropriate to achieve them.

Presumably, this knowledge is, in one respect, what all moral people should possess, yet it is necessarily seen as professional knowledge in a specialized way because of its application to the context of teaching in all its complexity and uncertainty.

If ethical knowledge is to become recognized and promoted as the cornerstone of professionalism in teaching, then the inevitable embeddedness of the moral dimensions in schools should not be equated with a lack of awareness or consciousness on the teacher’s part. As Sizer and Sizer emphatically declare, teachers have a profound moral contract with stu-
dents and therefore ought to be aware of what they are doing. Heightened alertness to the nuances of practice and policy seen through the lens of more widely shared ethical knowledge may advance this professional obligation.

As is probably apparent, in both its title and its conceptual orientation, the focus of *The Ethical Teacher* is on the singular individual’s moral practices, ethical perspectives, and professional obligations both as an individual and as a member of a collective body of other professional teachers. This is quite distinct from a focus on institutional and systemic realities within which individuals exist, and where a critique of organizational structures supplants a concern for individual moral responsibility. While I do not discount the significant influence that contextual elements of an organization’s culture have on the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, my discussion of ethical knowledge is situated not as a statement of institutional culpability, but as an exhortation to teachers to examine the ethical realm of their work and foster with other teachers a collective sense of professionalism based on the principles and virtues embedded in their own practice. This is entirely consistent with Sommers’ sharp criticism of the ideology that views the ‘seat of moral responsibility’ as being found in society and its institutions rather than as a matter of individuals’ virtue. She writes strongly against ‘the shift away from personal morals to an almost exclusive preoccupation with the morality of institutional policies’. This position raises some provocative questions about whether one could be an ethical teacher in an unethical school and, conversely, whether one could engage in immoral behaviour in an environment based on a seemingly moral foundation. My immediate answer that both scenarios are entirely possible will be explored in greater detail in the latter part of the book.

Interestingly, at the time of writing this book, some members of the business community in North America were coming under close scrutiny, moral condemnation, and, in some cases, legal prosecution for gross breaches of ethics that threatened the companies under their control and robbed shareholders and members of the public of millions of dollars. Ironically, some of these companies had been singled out for praise in the past for championing currently trendy causes and public relations schemes identified as being ethically (equated with socially) responsible. Yet, it is the behaviour of individuals, the clear violation of such ethical principles as honesty and integrity, that put the well-being of others most at risk.

*The Ethical Teacher* is concerned with the moral and ethical complexities of the practice of teachers as individuals and as members of a larger professional group, as well as their unique interpretations of these complexities. In the chapters that follow, illustrative snapshots of teachers’ practices, reflections and beliefs are offered as empirically grounded descriptions of moral agency in teaching. However, as stressed throughout Chapter 1, ethics, while...
straightforward on one level, is rarely simple in application. For example, what one teacher regards as a morally charged critical incident, another may interpret solely in terms of classroom management strategy. As Halstead and Taylor confirm, ‘The indirect moral influence on children is deeply embedded in the daily life of the school, either within normal teaching activities or within the contingent interactions at classroom level… The process is further complicated by the fact that the same incident may have moral meaning to one observer and not to another’. So how does one discern between the moral and the non-moral?

When describing the moral nature of classrooms and the ethical dimensions of teaching, one should resist the temptation to over-interpret all nuances of teaching as morally significant in and of themselves and, thus, be conscious instead of narrowing the interpretation. However, I also agree with Hansen’s sensible observation that ‘not everything that teachers do necessarily has moral significance, but any action a teacher takes can have moral import’. From my point of view, the moral and ethical character of a teacher’s demeanour, attitude, expression, or behaviour becomes evident once we clearly associate it with either the advancement or the violation of core ethical principles or virtues.

Once we see a teacher’s prompt return of assignments as a sign of respect and care for students, rather than a mark of efficiency, we are getting a glimpse of moral agency. Once we recognize a teacher’s efforts to allow all students time to answer questions in class as a quest for fairness, rather than a sound pedagogical strategy, we are made conscious of the moral complexity of teaching. Once we see a teacher temper the disciplining of a badly behaved child with compassion and understanding of the child’s unhappiness, we cease to see only a classroom management technique. Once teachers themselves see such things, they start to define the foundation of a virtue-based applied professional ethics, they start to claim as their own what is explored throughout this book as ethical knowledge in teaching.