

# Professional Ethics and Teaching Community

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**Abstract** This article has minutely discussed professional ethics, values and dire straits of the teaching community while discharging professional responsibility either individually or unitedly. Teachers are caught in a maze of volatile situation facing ineluctable imbroglio demeaning professional dignity and violating sacramental integrity as a teacher. With the change of time and with the influx of ideas, values, culture, views and opinions, outlook and attitude, selfishness and philanthropy, mundane interest and holistic humanity, ethics of teachers have undergone changes. The motto of this article is to look into the ethical complexity teachers have to face as professionals. This article aims at a hairsplitting analysis of the problems and dilemmas teachers face while discharging their missionary responsibility coming from a society mired in selfishness, parochialism and deviousness, and exploring avenues to come out therefrom.

**Keywords** Professional, Ethics, Dilemma, Pupils, Interests, Strike, Enforcement

## 1. Introduction

Teaching has been considered as a great and noble profession for the aeon of time. Teachers are the conscience of a nation. They should not desecrate their profession chasing for mercenary benefit profaning professional philosophy. But social evils and selfish ill-motives engulf the sacramental spirit and ideals of teaching community. The conflicting dichotomy of professional ethics and personal interests evokes intellectual analyses and microscopic queries. Moral dilemma and moral lapses, rotting and jerking the edifice of teaching profession to be a weighty matter is worth being discussed.

## 2. Ethic for Education

The terms 'ethics' and 'morality' are closely related. According to Velasquez, we may define ethics or morality as the standards that an individual or a group has about what is right and wrong, or good and evil (Velasquez, 2002). But the normative function of educational philosophy is something more. It remains incomplete without mention of the ethical tactics of the teachers in giving effect to the over-all strategy of education. The teachers have to maintain many personal relationships with his students, colleagues, and other people specially parents, managing committee members in which conflicts of interest arise. What ethical standards shall the professional and the layman hold in resolving these conflicts?

We might sample a number of situations to be more accurate about the kinds of personal relations involving ethical considerations. Let us consider a very striking illustration--the teachers "strike". Is it ethical for the teacher to withhold his services from the pupils? In whose interests he is doing that? Is he doing it to facilitate his pupil with "achievement of the values incorporated into the ultimate and proximate aims of education"? (Sanders, 1940) Notwithstanding that high purpose an inevitable ambition arises. When he withholds services, is the teacher really acting in the interest of his pupils or rather in his own personal interest? Clearly the interests of pupil and teacher overlap and interpenetrate and thus it is difficult to discriminate the exact motivation. How is the teacher to sort-out these interests to ensure a judgment about them which is just and fair? This is obviously an ethical problem.

We know that these are general ethical principles which could be invoked to guide the teacher's conduct. But the question arises whether such general principles are enough or whether the practice of education presents special circumstances which require some added qualification of general ethical principles. Does the relation of pupil and teacher present unique problems not ordinarily found or recognized in the relations of people generally to one another? Such a unique relationship is available in the relation of the doctor and his patient, of the lawyer and his client and of the clergyman and his parishioner. Do the similar circumstances obtain in the case of education, which lead to our going beyond a general to a professional ethic?

## 3. Dimensions of a Professional Ethic

If the professional person were to consult only the maxims of general ethics he would have at hand a very good rule by

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which to guide his relations with layman seeking his services. That rule is embodied in the famous imperative of Immanuel Kant. "So act as to treat humanity," he added, "Whether in thine own person or that of another, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only". (Kant, 1797).

By treating the individual as an end, we may assume that Kant considered that individual to have intrinsic value. His injunction, therefore, charges us to respect this value and always to act with the other fellow's best interests in mind. So long as we remember this directive, it will be unobjectionable if incidentally we use others to our own advantage, that is, make them means to the realization of our ends.

The Kantian imperative is addressed to everyone without qualification. Nothing is said about one imperative for layman and another for professional people. Since the Kantian standard is of the highest, we may well wonder in just what way the adjective "Professional" is intended to modify the noun "ethic". To meet this query it will first be necessary to explicate the nature of a profession. What distinguishes a profession from other occupations is the fact that it is learned. Its members possess a special competence based upon a long period of rigorous theoretical training. We should note that special competence alone without exacting intellectual preparation is not enough, for a craftsman might have that. The *ad hoc* routine of the craftsman is foreign to the professional, where actions constantly require recondite and frequently creative judgment. (Broudy, 1956)

In what way, then, does this definition of a profession modify the ethic requiring that persons be treated as ends? We may note several different directions which modification might take. Ordinarily the layman can be trusted to be the judge of whether he is being treated as an end, whether his best interests are being served by another. Self reliance in judging one's own interest works reasonably well as long as both parties have approximately equal knowledge of the probable motivations and consequences involved in social interaction. But obviously this is not the situation where a professional exercises his peculiar competence for a layman. The professional knows so much more than the layman that the latter is at a most complete disadvantage in determining whether the professional service he is receiving is to his best interest or not. As a matter of fact, only the professional has a sound basis for judging the best interests of the layman. Hence, since the layman's judgment is an inadequate check against the professionals the professional person must take almost sole responsibility himself to see that the Kantian ethic is fulfilled. This is a heavy responsibility. The adjective "Professional", therefore, modifies the noun "ethic", not by restricting its content but by adding to the professional's obligation to abide by it.

An important corollary of this obligation is the necessity for recognizing the autonomy of the professional. As his expert knowledge makes him alone competent to determine what service is good for a particular layman, so too it must be left to him to set appropriate standards for professional practice in general. Naturally this autonomy must extend

also to determining criteria for admission to the profession and programmes of training suitable for that purpose. For the layman to prescribe through the legislature or otherwise for the professional in these areas would be assuming ethical prerogatives for which he is unfitted.

As the professional seems uniquely charged with being the exclusive custodian of a large segment of public welfare, the question may arise who takes custody of the custodians themselves? In other words, what assurance has society that professional people are faithfully executing the weighty ethical obligation which their advanced training has thrust upon them? Ordinarily the guarantee of professional integrity is found in the professional's disinterested dedication to the welfare of his public. Presumably he proves this disinterested dedication by dispensing his expert services primarily for the benefit of others. His own personal advancement and material comfort must be unequivocally subordinated to the public he serves. He must positively leave no confusion in his own or the public's mind as to whose interest he is primarily serving.

This brings forward the question of financial remuneration for the professional. It has often been stated that the essential difference between a craft and a profession is that the former is carried on primarily for financial gain, while the latter always counts financial remuneration of secondary importance. This denigration of crafts was extended at one time to professions also and to some extent still attaches to them. As evidence, note that another meaning of the word "professional" has quite a different emphasis from the one employed so far. This meaning denotes a person who not only takes pay for his services but probably would not perform at all except for pay. In this vein Socrates denounced the Sophists of his day for accepting pay for their teaching; and we can easily understand that pay was demeaning in a society where freemen lived off the labour of slaves. Even through today it is considered dignified to live by the sweat of one's brow, good form still demands that the professional be motivated primarily by the idea of service rather than of gain.

To account for good form on ethical rather than socio-economic grounds, we may commence with a distinction made by Aristotle between activities that are "honorable" and those that are merely "useful". The value of honorable activities is that they are self-contained they result in perfecting the self of the doer. The value of useful activities, on the other hand, is that they lie outside the self; they are contingent on someone or something else. Which kind of activity is teaching? When a student earns his way through for instance, he usually performs a service for someone for which he is compensated. The transaction is obviously a "useful" one. Does the same situation obtain when the teacher teaches? Does he teach for his pay cheque? No doubt there are teachers who do just this, and to the extent that they do we can at least say their actions are "useful" But if the teacher teaches out of a sense of self-fulfillment, if he feels that he must teach to realize himself, we can add that his action is "honourable". He is like Professor George Herbert

Palmer, who once said that if Harvard did not pay him to teach, he would gladly pay Harvard for the privilege of teaching. Teaching is more fully professional some think if the teacher is propelled by “honorable” rather than utilitarian motives (**Adler, 1951**).

The kind of pay the teacher gets may even have subtly ethical implications. If he is paid a salary a polite word for wages—there is a strong inference that he is being compensated for energies expended and therefore that the transaction falls in the category of usefulness. Ordinarily the professional person is paid a fee or an honorarium. An honorarium, particularly, implies that it is difficult or impossible to compute the value of the service performed and therefore to recompense it. Services that are honourable—that redound to the development of the performer quite apart from their usefulness to someone else can hardly be assigned a price. For this additional reason, perhaps, the professional person may be expected not only to place pecuniary motives second but on occasion to dispense with them altogether.

#### 4. The Enforcement of Professional Ethics

Obviously a breach of professional ethics not only rings up a moral lapse for an individual teacher, but casts a shadow on and weakens the whole corporate body of the profession. In most breaches of professional ethics, however, there is no infraction of any statute law. Hence no remedies are enforceable at law. This is just as well, for there are nuances of ethical relations which perhaps the grosser and more cumbersome machinery of the law could never judge anyhow. Professional organizations have long taken the view that the organizations itself is the only effective agency for disciplining its members. It is the ethical duty of every member, therefore, to report instances of unprofessional or unethical conduct to the committee in charge, to be dealt with as the rules of the organization provide.

The most difficult cases of enforcement arise where the profession disciplines, not its own membership for infractions of its code of ethics, but the community for tolerating conditions inimical to the maintenance of high professional standards.

The reference here is chiefly to the case of the teachers’ strike. Strikes have principally occurred over salaries. At first glance it would appear conclusive, from the principles already lay down, that a teachers’ strike is definitely unethical. To strike for higher pay appears not only to put the teachers’ personal interests ahead of those of their pupils but at the same time to do the pupils positive harm by withholding instruction from them. This harm is the more threatening since by reason of their advanced training and state certification teachers have a virtual monopoly over their art.

To this indictment defenders of the strike reply that, although the immediate incidence of the strike is to advance

the teachers’ private interests, the long-run effect is to benefit the child. By insisting on salaries which enable teachers to afford the personal sacrifices incidental to high ethical standards, teachers are really putting the interests of their pupils first. This is well said, if true, but even at best an inherent ambiguity remains in the situation which lies open to misinterpretation even by the well-intentioned. Most people, therefore, think that, there should be a separate and standard pay-scale for the teachers of the third world countries especially of Bangladesh with a view to attracting the most brilliant and ethical sections of the society to teaching because ill-paid teachers who are incapable of meeting their fundamental needs usually do not have an intrinsic motivation to teach better. Policy makers must not forget that if education is the backbone of a nation, a brilliant and honest teacher is the backbone of education and the guardian of a civilization (**Bhattacharjee, 2013**).

Any way, teachers would not be caught in this embarrassing dilemma if they really enjoyed all the prerogatives of a professional person. If they were members of an autonomous profession, they would have the prerogatives of setting their own hours of employment, owning their own professional equipment, and above all regulating their own rate of compensation. Because of these circumstances the conventional professional person has within his own control the financial conditions necessary to maintaining professional standards. Public school teachers, on the contrary, do not. They are employees whose hours and wages are regulated by the Ministry of education. If negotiations to raise sub-professional conditions of employment fail, teachers can protest only by striking or quitting the profession. If the strike of public employees is outlawed by statute, then the only protest left teachers is to seek employment in some other line. This, of course, is an intolerable conclusion for both teachers and the community to teach. Teachers are thwarted in their calling, and the community loses talented teachers. To avoid such an admittedly intolerable situation, many think the strike, while still unethical and an evil, is at least the lesser evil.

Less apologetic are those who forthrightly claim that teachers should recognize themselves, not as professional persons, but as members of the labouring classes. Hence they should organize themselves along economic rather than professional lines; they should organize as a union rather than as a profession. If they were to do so, then they would be less hampered by the sort of ethical misgivings considered so far. Indeed, there are substantial reasons for making this reappraisal of themselves. As already indicated, teachers do not regulate their fees; they are paid a salary or wage as in the case of other labouring groups. Today, furthermore, when nearly every calling is becoming increasingly complicated by science and technology, the line between trades and professions is growing very thin. It grows even thinner, excessively thin in fact, when any occupational group finds itself exploited by another social group, whether private employers or government authorities. Hence teachers’ ethics may be due for amendment. After all, professional codes of

ethics are no more than the expression of the best ethical practice of the times. When times change, codes must change with them. But if historical precedent were needed for the strike, it can easily be found in the right of *cessatio* at the medieval university. There the profession of scholars did not hesitate to cease holding classes if the townfolk did not provide satisfactory conditions for carrying them on. Teachers enrich the society with intellectual and, in the long run, with worldly resources and, therefore, their physic and mind must be kept fresh and enlivened at any cost. And this responsibility fully lies on the community or society, as Dr. Anisuzzaman, a prominent educationist indicates (Anisuzzaman, 2015).

## 5. Conclusions

It is observed that usually more attention has been paid to codes of professional ethics for teachers than to the ethical philosophy underlying them. Considering the ethical relations of the teacher with his followers, it is important to note at the outset that, though these relations only indirectly affect a child, ultimately they are governed by the same ethical imperative of keeping one's eye single to the best interests of the child. It will be difficult for any one teacher to continue to make this sacrifice if he observes colleagues who do not seem to restrict themselves similarly. Therefore, in order to reinforce every teacher in his high ethical resolve toward the pupil, each must owe a duty to the other not to act in any way which will make it difficult or embarrassing to maintain a high level of professional ethics. Again, most breaches of professional ethics, however, there is no infraction of any statute law. In spite of this, teachers should not get themselves embroiled in embarrassing moral dilemma defying their holy responsibility and commitment to the pupils. Teachers may resort to strike to advance their private interest, but they should not trample the interest of their students. Teachers generally maintain a high degree of morality and are always determined and cautious to uphold

the value of the truth and beauty. Decency remains in the core of their heart. Sacrifice benevolence and a philanthropic feeling always guide the teachers. All the time it is the teachers who make ceaseless effort to do good for their disciples as well as other people of the society. Again, it is said that everybody can not be teachers, but some enlightened and blessed people can. Thus the teachers are always different and teaching as a profession indicates a different dimension of honor and dignity. These tolerant and judicious people always stand by his pupils and other fellows in all their weal and woe. That's why what the teachers think and do matter and people adore them with respect and veneration. Hence teachers' ethics should be due for amendment and emulation.

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