

ETHICAL ISSUES OF COLLEGE TEACHING PROFESSIONALS



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Colleges have undergone numerous changes over the last few years. One of these consists in the renewal of the faculty caused by the retirement of teachers hired in the years following the inception of the college network. Consequently, in many places, efforts are made towards professional integration and the measures needed to foster it. However, and even more profoundly, the sense inherent in the professional life of CEGEP teachers needs to be examined in order to clarify the understanding of work expectations, of training practices that allow for the achievement of educational mandates leading to diplomas and certain guidelines required by one's profession.

Beyond or underlying the characteristics linked to the various subjects and programs taught, one constant sits at the heart of teaching practices: the relational dimension. Teaching implies relationships with others: students, colleagues and management, at the very least. When in a relationship with someone else, ethical questions may arise. For example, a teacher may recall being hesitant at a specific moment, unsure of the behaviour that should have been adopted in a situation that seemed somehow delicate, where normal behaviour did not seem adequate under the circumstances with the person or persons involved. Suddenly, what was obvious no longer seemed to work. A conflict in values, a conflict between the pursuit of two goals, had arisen in his mind. How could he successfully resolve the conflict and decide what action to

take in a professional situation that apparently could not be solved? We believe this situation is indicative of ethical issues that other teachers could face in the exercise of their profession.

This article highlights the fact that the teaching profession entails such ethical questions and we summarize those found in the literature. Then, within the scope of our research, we succinctly describe how we go directly to collect data to find out what college teachers understand as the ethical issues that they encounter in the exercise of their profession.

AN EMERGING INTEREST IN PROFESSIONAL TEACHING ETHICS

Some time ago, we used to speak about the professional moral issues in the exercise of a profession; today, increasingly, we speak of professional ethics. This idea is not new, as there has always been some intention to identify guidelines in the supervision of professional practices. The Hippocratic Oath, for instance, has been for centuries, and still is, the basis for self-regulation of the medical profession. More recently, in 1990, the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (CSE) emphasized that schools, from elementary to university level, should develop students' ethical competency. The CSE defined ethical competency as a capacity for research and dialogue, for critical thinking and creativity, and for autonomy and commitment. The fact that teachers are called upon to take part in the development of students' ethical competency would imply that they possess it themselves. Since the release of this report, however, discussions on the ethics of teachers have focused on the professionalization of teaching interventions and the ways they can take on the responsibilities inherent in this process.

One way of consolidating professional ethics is to do so from the perspective of professional identity. Consequently, the question of professional teaching identity was raised within the scope of the debates on the reform of study programs in Quebec and the renewal of the teaching profession. Gohier, Anadón, Bouchard, Charbonneau and Chevrier (2001) defined professional teaching identity as a personal and social identity, based on the images that each teacher has of himself or herself as a person, of other teachers and the teaching profession. These images refer to the teacher's relationship to his work as a professional in education/learning, his responsibilities, his relationships towards learners and colleagues, and towards the faculty and other people involved with the school as an institution.

The question of responsibility, especially with regard to students and colleagues, raises other questions on ethical behaviour and professional ethics since the relational dimension is at the core of educational interaction. Ethics and its connection to professions, especially the teaching profession, has been the subject of many discussions. Some have opted for the more regulatory aspect of professional ethics, while others focus on its reflective side, or an amalgamation of both. In many instances, the arguments in favour of a regulatory dimension are based on methods proposed under the *Professional Code*, a basic statute adopted by the Quebec legislature in the 1970s (Gouvernement du Québec, 2006). Each



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professional order is responsible for the self-regulation of its members to ensure the protection of the public. Therefore, every legally recognized profession must develop its own code of ethics with clear guidelines for acceptable behaviour and unacceptable behaviour. It must have clearly identified sanctions in the case of ethical breaches or professional errors. Those who favour a more reflective dimension of ethics claim that beyond the rules and principles guiding professional action, we must deal with values and objectives that are linked to the profession's social mission and actualized by professional intervention.

To date, many works on the ethics of teaching have dealt with the question from a theoretical and reflective perspective. It is now necessary to call upon all those concerned by the teaching profession and find out what they consider to be the major ethical concerns of their profession. This is consistent with an applied ethics approach that is not only sectorial but also inductive and interactive and assigns the main role to the people involved in the situation (Parizeau, 1994; Desautels, 2005). This approach demands that they be active in and directly concerned by the determination of ethical issues in their profession. The only empirical study done on this subject is by Jutras, Joly, Legault and Desautels (2005), who brought to light the representations that teachers in elementary and high schools have of their practices as a professional function. Much remains to be done in order to determine the ethical issues as they are perceived by those involved in the educational process.

THE ETHICS OF COLLEGE TEACHING

The lack of data on ethical issues originating from teaching professionals applies particularly to the 10,362 permanent or full-time teachers working as regular college teachers—9,789 in the public sector and 573 in the private sector (MELS, 2004), who are concerned about the ethical dimension of educational interventions. In fact, college-level teaching is specifically intended to assure basic training relative to contents and learning processes, and provide general training beyond the specificity and diversity of programs. In 1993, the concept of training to acquire competencies was added to the mandates colleges have had since their creation (Gohier 1990; Gohier and Laurin, 2001). Considering this mandate that includes sensitizing students to the question of ethics, as well as the characteristics of students enrolled in regular teaching, mainly adolescents and young adults (aged 17-19), the ethical dimension of the educational interaction becomes important—as in other levels—specifically with respect to the education of the person and the citizen. However, the development of a student's ethical competency is not merely the result of training. It is also developed through relationships with teachers and the implicit representation of a relationship with others, and more broadly, the relationship to ethics that teachers convey (Giroux, 1997; Sylvain, 2001).

In this sense, the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (1990, 1991, 2004) underlines the importance of developing teachers' ethical competency when it affirms that it is one of the main factors that gives teaching its professional character. The approach is also supported by the *Ministère de l'Éducation's* orientation document on initial

and continuing education for teachers (2001). The document identifies ethical competency, the capacity “to act in an ethical and responsible manner in the exercise of one's functions”, as one of the twelve competencies to be developed.

Other authors have underlined its importance in works on the relationship between ethics and the teaching profession. Some, like Goodlad, Soder and Sirotnik (1990), or Hare (1993), emphasize teaching's moral character. Authors also insist on the importance for teachers to possess professional qualities. In all cases, the need to take this dimension of educational intervention into consideration in teacher education is recognized (Gohier, 2005b; Lessard, 1999; Macmillan, 1993; Strike and Ternasky, 1993).

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In Quebec, the *Comité d'orientation de la formation du personnel enseignant* (COFPE, 2004) recently published a statement underscoring the importance of an ethical framework for the teaching body, as well as the importance of orienting training on the development of a collegiate spirit by opting for discourse ethics. This is not an easy task since it is an established fact that teachers feel a sense of isolation at all levels of teaching when it comes to sharing difficulties experienced in the exercise of their functions, whether these difficulties are of a pedagogical, relational, or ethical nature (Abraham, 1993; Louvet and Baillauquès, 1992). This is even more so for college teachers who are trained in their respective discipline with only a sketchy teacher education.



THE PRESENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ETHICS AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

Several authors insist on the need for teaching professionals to take into account the ethical dimension of teaching. However, the notions of ethics are quite varied. Furthermore, the relation between ethics and morals, both relating etymologically to the terms *ethos* or *mores*, goes back to more than two millennia of reflection in western philosophical thinking. Both terms deal with customs, behaviour, and relationships to others. In a widespread consensus, moral principles are considered prescriptive and determined by social standards whereas ethics is considered more reflective, implying appropriation and distancing by the individual from a moral standpoint, based on personal values and experience (Gohier, 2005a).

As far as we are concerned, given that we are interested in knowing what the teachers perceive as ethical issues, based on their experiences in the exercise of their profession, we will focus on ethics rather than on morals because it leaves room for individual experience and reflectivity. In a contemporary context, we will retain the definition of ethics proposed by Ricoeur, a leading thinker in this field. Inspired by Aristotle, Ricoeur (1991) defines ethics as the pursuit of a “good life with and for others in just institutions” (p. 257). This definition can be completed with Beaudoin’s definition that was inspired by Auroux (1990, quoted in Baudouin, 1994, p. 20), stating that ethics is “the theoretical study of principles that guide human behaviour in contexts where choice is possible”. On the one hand, ethics is about the type of behaviour to adopt and the type of actions to take that will reach the “good life” objective; on the other hand, ethics is

about principles that guide the actions where recommendations to act are deduced from ethical principles. In both cases, it is a reflective activity about behaviour in relation with others.

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It is within this reflective exercise on behaviour towards others and in keeping with aiming at a “good life with and for others in just institutions” that it is relevant to ask oneself what are the ethical issues in the exercise of the teaching profession. The “ethical issues” discussed here refer to questions and even dilemmas about one’s behaviour toward others. These issues can be seen through the prism of the internalized professional ethics or through the filters provided by one’s viewpoint and scale of personal values.

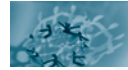
For the teacher, others can represent a number of entities: initially, a student, but also a colleague, the establishment’s management or a parent, in keeping with the prior definition of a teacher’s professional identity. This is why we are discussing the ethical issues of the college teaching profession and not strictly ethical concerns relating to teaching. The following table identifies several ethical concerns that emanate from the reflections of several authors already mentioned, such as Giroux, Goodlad *et al.*, Strike and Ternaski, Hare, as well as works by Desaulniers, Jutras and Legault (2005), reflections on setting up a code of ethics, like those of Jeffrey and Gauthier (2002) and reflections on training teachers in ethics (Gohier, 2005b). Recommendations made by the *Conseil supérieur de l’éducation* (1990, 1991, 2004), those of the *Ministère de l’Éducation* (2001) and those of the *Comité d’orientation de la formation du personnel enseignant* (2004) provided a source of inspiration.

ETHICAL CONCERNS IN RELATION TO TEACHING

- Keep disciplinary and pedagogic knowledge up to date.
- Select knowledge that is pertinent and current.
- Adopt a non-doctrinal attitude.
- Select pertinent and adequate evaluation methods with regard to competencies targeted and students’ level.
- Make pedagogical choices based on clearly identified educational objectives.
- Clarify one’s own grid of values.
- Possess professional qualities such as good judgement, humility (to recognize the limits of one’s knowledge), courage (to go against ideas received), impartiality, open mindedness, empathy, enthusiasm and imagination, authenticity.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

- Ethical issues in relationships with students:** respect for the person, their rights, a non-discriminatory attitude, respect for confidentiality, responsibility, equity.
- Ethical issues in relationships with colleagues and school administrators:** respect, collegiate attitude, conviviality, cooperative spirit, responsibility.



The notions of relationship to teaching and to others are connected and not as distinct in practice. They are presented as examples. Based on elements identified as dominant, we can attempt to define the underlying ethical concept, utilitarian or personal for example, reflective or pertaining to the ethics of discussion or responsibility. These are simply suggestions and creating a classification will no doubt prove difficult. However, what is important is to identify ethical concerns that have been formulated by those in the profession in an inductive process, as was previously mentioned, that echoes the preoccupations of applied ethics in the professional world (Legault, 1997; Desautels, 2003).

► EMPIRICAL RESEARCH UNDERWAY

The previous considerations on the question of ethics and the teaching profession, especially in colleges, and on the lack of documentation as regards representations that teachers have on the ethical dimensions of their profession, have led to a research on the ethical concerns identified by college teachers in relation to their professional activities. In this empirical research, two methods of collecting data will be used in complementary fashion: the focus group and the survey.

THE FOCUS GROUP

The focus group method (Krueger and Casey, 2000) or targeted group discussion will be used initially to identify the ethical concerns as they have been perceived and experienced by teachers. A focus group brings together between six to twelve teachers in a context of a thematic discussion led by a moderator/researcher. In this context, the discussion is open and allows for the formulation or wording of a large spectrum of concerns. This formulation is not performed in a vacuum, but rather in a context of a discussion that promotes exchange and reflection with peers.

This data collected from a restricted sample of the college teaching population during the 2006-2007 school year will then be compiled and integrated to formulate the questions that will be included in a questionnaire addressing a larger sample of the teaching body.

THE SURVEY

The survey makes it possible to reach a large number of respondents. The questionnaire, administered during the 2007-2008 school year, will be used to collect data. It will include closed questions, with answer scales and choices, and open questions. An analysis of answers to the questionnaire will help determine if the issues brought to light by the discussion groups are also perceived by a statistically significant number of teachers (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 1998).

► CONCLUSION

This research will contribute to increasing our knowledge on ethical issues in the teaching profession as identified by college teachers. Identifying these concerns will allow the development of a thematic repository for these issues that can serve as a theoretical or practical frame of reference, for example to perform similar research in other teaching levels, or to develop material to be used for ongoing formal and

informal training of college teaching personnel. Ethical competency being one dimension of the teacher's professional identity, an awareness of ethical issues will help enrich the understanding, and definition of this identity. Furthermore, having college teaching institutions take this repository into account to establish open discussions between teachers will contribute to developing their ethical competency and the college spirit that characterizes a strong professional identity.

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We are counting on the idea that the ethical dimension is an integral part of teachers' professional identity and they must be given a voice in order to understand this reality beyond the interesting reflections that have been made to date on the subject. From their discussions and answers to the questionnaire, there will emerge a portrait and an energizing project: Will you take part in this survey if by chance you are included in the sample? ♦

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