

Teachers' ethical responsibility in teaching; to guide the children about right and wrong

Marita Cronqvist

To cite this article: Marita Cronqvist (04 Jun 2024): Teachers' ethical responsibility in teaching; to guide the children about right and wrong, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, DOI: [10.1080/00313831.2024.2360901](https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2360901)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2360901>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 04 Jun 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 35



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Teachers' ethical responsibility in teaching; to guide the children about right and wrong

Marita Cronqvist 

Faculty of Librarianship, Information, Education and IT, University of Borås, Borås, Sweden

Abstract

Teaching involves an ethical dimension that tends to remain unspoken and thus difficult to reflect on and discuss. From the perspective of professionalism, professional ethics and a common knowledge base are important to the quality and status of the teaching profession. This descriptive phenomenological study was motivated by the need to know more about how teachers understand their own professional ethics and how this is expressed through their teaching. The essence of the phenomenon is formulated through the analysis of interviews with nine teachers in Sweden who teach children from the age of 1–16. The results show that the teachers' main ethical responsibility is to guide the children about right and wrong. The guidance, a safe learning environment, and relationships with and between the children are dependent on each other. The surrounding society affects the guidance of the children, as well as opportunities for collaboration with guardians and colleagues.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 February 2024
Accepted 14 May 2024



KEYWORDS

Professional ethics; ethical responsibility; professionalism; phenomenology; democracy

1. Introduction

The ethical dimension of teaching is ever-present and as part of teachers' professional ethics, it often remains unspoken and thus elusive (Britzman, 2010; Puroila & Haho, 2017). In addition, the ambiguity is increased when ethics in teaching practice is perceived in many ways (Cliffe & Solvason, 2022). Perceptions of right and wrong might become problematic and teachers rather need to deal with ethics as a gray scale (Cliffe & Solvason, 2022) or based on concepts such as accountability and responsibility (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011). Apart from the fact that ethics has many nuances, it is also unclear what the teachers' professional ethics include. Studies show how teachers experience a tension between taking responsibility for the children based on knowledge goals and taking care of them ethically (Jepson Wigg, 2021; Walls, 2022). Other difficulties in teachers' professional ethics are that demands brought about by diversity in groups of children (Tielman et al., 2022) and among guardians might cause value-based tensions and external regulations might cause moral distress (Ribers, 2018). Dahl (2017) questions cooperation with guardians because they sometimes undermine teachers' ability to practice professional ethics.

When ethics is related to religious beliefs, it can mean that teachers in a distinctly secularized country like Sweden, with curricula that clearly indicate non-confessional teaching, can differ from other countries in terms of knowledge of ethical approaches. However, the research field reveals that personal values, implicit or explicit (Rissanen et al., 2018), influence teaching regardless

CONTACT Marita Cronqvist  marita.cronqvist@hb.se  Faculty of Librarianship, Information, Education and IT, University of Borås, SE 501 90 Borås, Sweden

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

of whether the values are based on religion or politics (Akbari & Tajik, 2012). The demand within professionalism for a professional ethic, formulated as an ethical code in many countries, and the mission in Swedish curriculum, as well as in the curricula of other countries to embody democratic values, constitute the framework for teaching but is practiced based on individual teachers' personal interpretations and positions. The framework for teaching is formulated on a general level and individual teachers' different personal interpretations create a lack of clarity about how professional ethics is exercised in practice. The lack of clarity motivates this study that investigates whether, despite various individual differences and contexts, there is something in common that characterizes teachers' professional ethics. The concepts included in the framework for teaching, namely professionalism, ethical codes, and the democratic mission are presented initially.

1.1 Professionalism

The idea of teaching as a profession is partly based on a foundation consisting of a common knowledge base including professional ethics (Lindström, 2020). In a Swedish context, professionalism means that the professional practice is characterized by quality and that the profession gains a high status in society. Solbrekke and Englund (2011) problematize this idea by separating teachers' professionalism meaning pedagogical quality from professionalization meaning external status and legitimacy. Through the separation, they point out, as well as Lindström (2020), the problem of the dominant external control of the profession that arose through New Public Management (NPM), and which still characterizes the development toward increased juridification. Based on the separation, Solbrekke and Englund (2011) develop two logics, responsibility, which refers to situated judgment in teaching, and accountability, referring to aspects of teaching that are easily recognized and checked. Both logics need to interact but currently, accountability dominates, they argue. In this study, the concept of responsibility is used in the formulation of the phenomenon to emphasize the teachers' own experiences of ethics and their descriptions of how they approach it in different situations.

Another problem is that the ethical dimension must resist both the risk of ending up in a general relativism and of exercising ethics based on intuition instead of systematic reasoning and knowledge (Warnick & Silverman, 2011). The teachers' professionalism requires professional ethics to be based on knowledge (Akbari & Tajik, 2012), and Campbell (2003) claims that ethical knowledge means handling complex situations, being self-aware and aware of one's intentions in teaching. Language is also crucial to understanding, discussing, and developing professional ethics (Sawyer, 2020) and there are different ways of verbalizing the ethical dimension such as concepts, models, and ethical codes (Cronqvist, 2017, 2019b). Policy documents in Sweden state that teaching must be based on science and proven experience, and in this argumentation, evidence has become a central concept. However, Biesta (2010) argues that the teaching profession should be value-based, i.e. what is desired with the teaching, rather than evidence-based, because it is only when decisions about the intentions of the teaching have been made that questions of evidence become meaningful. In the discussion, he assumes that teaching always aims to achieve something and thus becomes dependent on emphasizing certain values. Values are not only an aspect of teaching but constitute teaching, he argues. Steinnes (2011) expresses something similar when she, like Biesta, emphasizes the complexity and importance of the teachers' judgement explaining that when teachers legitimize their actions through evidence, they abdicate ethical responsibility. To be ethically responsible, teachers must act based on their judgment in a complex situation and not rely on general evidence-based knowledge, she argues. McKnight and Morgan (2023) also problematize the concept of evidence-based on how it has been unreflectively transferred from the medical field.

1.2 Ethical codes

Based on the premise that professional ethics is part of the idea of professionalism, attention to ethical codes has emerged in research (Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021). Within the research field, studies show

that teachers' perceived ethical responsibility for the children in teaching relates to expressed ethical codes in several ways. French-Lee and Dooley (2015) identified that teachers in preschool developed their ethical reasoning in relation to a current ethical code through collegial discussion about ethical dilemmas. Another way of relating to codes is to depart from them when caring for the children requires it (Fenech & Lotz, 2018). Social justice is according to Fenech and Lotz (2018) the main guiding light for early childhood teachers' professional ethics and takes precedence over formulations in ethical codes. In a Swedish context, the teachers' unions have formulated an ethical code¹, but it is quite unknown to most teachers. The code has been criticized in research for several reasons (Cronqvist, 2020), among other things for not being based on research and conflation of concrete and abstract levels.

1.3 Democratic values

Value-neutral teaching is challenged by the fact that teachers' mission in many countries is to guide the children to a democratic approach in practice (Castner et al., 2017; Larsen & Hesby Mathé, 2023) and speak for humanity (Chen et al., 2017). As part of teachers' professional ethics, value-based teaching can include both talking about values and embodying values (Rissanen et al., 2018; Tirri, 2022). Results from studies about value-based teaching show the importance of children being allowed to make their voices heard (Mascadri et al., 2021) and being trained to think critically (Rombout et al., 2021). Teachers' embodiment of a democratic approach is favored over neoliberal accountability (Castner et al., 2017). Thus, the teachers' ethical responsibility is subject to many different interests that require taking a stand, but it is unclear how this happens. The complexity and the fact that professional ethics often remains a tacit knowledge and a hidden agenda (Baker-Doyle et al., 2018) for teachers' actions in ethical dilemmas (Chen et al., 2017) justifies this study aiming to contribute knowledge about how teachers perceive their ethical responsibility when they meet children in teaching.

1.4 Aim and research questions

The aim of the study is to contribute knowledge about how teachers perceive ethical responsibility in meeting with children in teaching. The research questions are:

1. What characterizes the teachers' ethical responsibility?
2. How is ethical responsibility expressed in teaching?

2. Methodology

The meaning of the phenomenon is sought through the lived experiences of the participants. Therefore, the study approach is descriptive phenomenological and based on Reflective Lifeworld Research (RLR), an epistemological approach that strives to find the essential meanings of the specific phenomenon, on the basis of variations in the empirical data (Dahlberg et al., 2008). By formulating the essence, when possible, knowledge is provided about the characteristic features of the current phenomenon, teachers' ethical responsibility in the meeting with children in teaching. Through the analysis, in which parts and whole are constantly related to each other, the essence is formulated as a new abstract whole of the structure of meanings that characterizes the phenomenon and distinguishes it from similar phenomena. In addition to the abstract description of how the meanings relate to each other, the phenomenon is exemplified by

¹Lärarnas Riksförbund, 2001, Lärares yrkesetik (lararesyrkesetik.se)

individual nuances from the data. Together, the abstract and the concrete descriptions create a structure for the phenomenon.

Apart from the endeavor to articulate the essence, the use of RLR is justified by the fact that it rests on lifeworld theory, which is central to gaining knowledge from a person's way of relating to and interacting with the world (Husserl, 1970/1936). Not least in the ethical dimension of teaching, in which the personal is balanced against a professional and scientific approach, the lifeworld theory becomes a useful idea and concept to visualize and verbalize teachers' lived experiences of their ethical practice. Values and norms that are part of the teacher's lived experience in different contexts are expressed implicitly or explicitly in teaching. On the one hand, when values are not challenged, they can be part of a natural attitude (Husserl, 1995/1907) and remain unreflected. If, on the other hand, they meet resistance, distance is created and values can be noticed, problematized, and become the subject of discussion and reflection (Dahlberg et al., 2008). In the phenomenological interview, the participants' attention is directed to the phenomenon, and they get to talk about their lived experiences (Cronqvist, 2019a). In these descriptions and in interaction with the interviewer's follow-up questions, reflection is set in motion. In this way, implicit insights can be made visible and provide new knowledge.

2.1 Participants and data collection:

The participants, nine teachers who teach children from the age of 1–16, have been interviewed and recorded via Zoom about their experiences of the phenomenon. In this study, they are called Kristina and Diana (preschool, children aged 0–5), Sara (aged 7–9), Åsa (aged 9–16, subject teacher), Emma, Pernilla and Dan (aged 10–12), Magda (ages 13–16, subject teacher) and Sabina (aged 13–16, special educator). Within phenomenology, variation in contexts is sought, which was obtained in the study by the fact that the teachers' experience varied through different subjects, ages, geographical locations, and school systems for different lengths of time. Following the methodological approach, the sampling process was based on purpose, i.e., to illuminate the phenomenon in dialogs with teachers with due experiences. In connection with being asked, participants were sent information and a consent form that they could sign. During the interviews, the participants talked freely about their everyday experiences of situations in the meeting with the children. The researcher initially directs the participant towards the phenomenon by asking for example: "When you meet the children in the classroom, tell me, what happens?" and then continues the direction through various questions. Follow-up questions were used to make sure that solid explanations and examples were obtained.

2.2 Analysis

After transcription, the analysis is conducted by moving back and forth in the data, in a way that is characterized by reflective openness and an approach which means that one is "bridling", i.e., slowing the pace of, one's own process of understanding. This means that the process is carried out based on self-awareness on the part of the researcher to ensure that the analysis is elaborated and critically reviewed in all parts, in order not to allow the pre-conceptions to take over (Giorgi, 1989). The first step is to read data multiple times and to mark meaningful units. It could be words, sentences, or whole sections (van Manen, 2014). For example, one of the teachers describes herself as a detective, searching for clues to understand the children. Then, the meaning units are organized and reorganized in several mind maps. In this way, different patterns, called clusters, are elaborated, trying to find out what is overarching, what is subordinate, and how different boundaries can be made in the pattern. For example, when conflict management is mentioned in different situations, it could both be about teachers' guidance but also about building relationships. Through a reflective and open attitude, various conceivable patterns are tried repeatedly. The third step means to formulate an abstract essence of the phenomenon that shows how different parts of the whole relate

to each other. Through all steps of the analysis, there is a constant movement between the whole and the parts. This is an interesting but long process when the researcher needs to present data and possible clusters at conferences and collegial seminars to examine whether the patterns are clearly defined or need to be adjusted. The essential meanings capture the phenomenon's "style of being" (Dahlberg, 2006, p.18) based on the variations. In the presentation of the results, the abstract overall picture of the studied phenomenon is supplemented with variations and concrete examples. The parts of the data that most express the results are then translated.

3. Results

The essential meanings of the phenomenon of ethical responsibility in the meeting with children in teaching consist primarily of teachers' guidance of the children. On an overall level, the children are guided by being offered different perspectives, different understandings of what is right and wrong, and understandings of what responsibility means. The teacher guides the children in two ways. The first way is through discussions on various issues with them and by reprimanding them and handling conflicts between them. The second way to guide the children is through the teacher acting as a role model for them.

In the teachers' guidance of the children by being role models for them, it is their own experiences and dispositions that they express in the teaching. While the teachers are in a situation where they want to remain neutral, they have a mission to guide and lay a foundation for the children. They reflect on their role and express the importance of being committed to the children, listening to them, and being open to their differences and needs. The boundaries for teachers' involvement are unclear but need to be set in relation to their own well-being.

For guidance to work, it must include relationship work and the shaping of a safe learning environment. The relationship is characterized by the fact that relationships and a safe learning environment create conditions for guidance and that the guidance promotes relationships and a safe learning environment. The relationship work involves getting to know and understanding the individual child without preconceived notions and setting a limit for the private. Talking about relationships is another part of relationship work that can guide the children in their different relationships.

A safe and respectful learning environment is created by the teacher actively and continuously working to ensure that each child is seen and confirmed, that individual children see each other, and that the group cooperates. The learning environment must be designed so that the children have the opportunity to participate, communication is clear, openness prevails and differences are noticed. The teachers must balance between adapting to the children and challenging them. While the children need space to make mistakes and talk about adversities, the teacher must also highlight the positive and show how the child is developing.

The ethical responsibility in the teachers' meeting with the children is shaped in relation to their interaction with the surrounding society, governing documents, guardians, and colleagues. Values and attitudes that are expressed in the environments where the children move, in turn, influence the children's expression in the meeting with the teacher. The teachers' guidance is based on their own experiences and judgment in the situation, but also on their interpretation of the fundamental values as expressed in governing documents and from collaboration with colleagues. Cooperation with both guardians and colleagues is described and sought but can be problematic and lead to dilemmas. Different viewpoints within these groups must be managed by the teachers.

The essential meaning of the phenomenon of ethical responsibility in the meeting with children in teaching is constituted by the following elements of meaning:

1. Guidance of the children
2. Relationship building

3. Safe and respectful learning environment
4. Influence and interaction

3.1 Guidance

The teacher guides the children by offering them different perspectives, different understandings of right and wrong, and understandings of what responsibility means. The guidance takes place through discussions, reprimands, and conflict management as well as through the teacher acting as a role model for the children.

Variations lie in the fact that guiding discussions can be conducted based on different knowledge content in the curriculum but also based on any content. One reason why the content of the discussions varies widely is that the teachers may have different purposes for them. The teacher may have an intention that is not always obvious to the children. Pernilla tells how she lets the children compare different religions based on certain specific questions:

They should compare the golden rule, for example. Then I might want them to ... I might have something I want them to think about. [...] Maybe my ulterior motive is that they should see that it exists in all these five religions.

She has a hidden agenda with subject content, but in other cases, the content may be secondary to the fact that the children need to practice conversing with each other, regardless of what they are discussing. Then the knowledge is about taking turns, listening, and the like. This learning is considered by the teachers to be knowledge or a prerequisite for making the group work together, which in turn can enable a different kind of learning within knowledge content based on the curriculum. Kristina often begins her teaching by letting the children talk for five minutes about anything, because she believes that 'there will be no learning if you don't have time to talk to the students about how they are feeling.' The conversation becomes a way to draw attention to the children's situation and help them gather their thoughts. The discussions generally aim to strengthen their knowledge and get them to reflect, argue, nuance, and be critical. Discussions either arise spontaneously or are planned by the teacher. When spontaneous discussions arise, the teacher can approve them or stop them, depending on whether the teacher judges that the discussion works at the moment or needs to be prepared first. Magda explains that when the situation gets a little fierce it makes demands on the teacher to handle a discussion where there are many different opinions:

You must dare to be a little brave as a teacher yourself and still maybe discuss an uncomfortable question and be a little informed as an adult in the classroom and listen to different opinions and allow that there are different opinions.

When the issue engages the children and is important to them, she believes that it is a responsibility to bring up the discussion and thereby shed light on important social issues. Many discussions are conducted with a reprimanding purpose with conflict management in focus. The discussions usually take place in class but can also be held at other times because the teacher judges that the children need it for some reason. Diana talks about how a wrong action such as when one child hits another makes other demands on the teacher. She says: 'You still have to reprimand in some way, although you really have to adjust the situation; How can I handle it so that this child will understand ...?' Even when there is a clearly wrong action in the situation, Diana believes that the child needs to understand and not just be told. The teachers have an idea that they should be neutral in their communication with the children and at the same time they are clear about their responsibility to guide them about right and wrong. Magda says:

You need to be a bit neutral as a teacher because if I must express an opinion about something very clearly, then there may be someone who has a different opinion that they do not dare to say so as not to clash with me.

She continues longer reasoning with examples about sexuality, beliefs, and political positions where she realizes that the children still read her opinions because ‘they can figure it out from my signals’. A neutral approach as well as guidance is recommended by the teachers, but it is unclear how this contradiction is handled. Åsa describes that she wants to ‘broaden their way of thinking’ by, for example, questioning norms during conversations with the children. Dan explains that neutrality can be about having to depart from what he personally thinks in relation to both agreements with colleagues and his interpretation of what the curriculum expresses. He describes this approach as an internal struggle. In the teachers’ understanding of themselves as neutral but at the same time role models, there is an ambiguity to relate to. In addition to the teachers’ needing to be balanced or neutral in their positions, the teachers’ responsibility as role models for the children also means being committed to them in various ways; Pernilla believes that it helps the children if she herself dares to fail and make mistakes, while others, including Emma, emphasize the importance of ‘listening, showing interest in them, that they know I see them.’ The ambiguity is not only in the meaning of being a role model but also in what demarcation is needed and is reasonable for the teachers’ commitment. Åsa is the one who is the clearest. She says: ‘I am not a curator. I’m not going to have any deep discussions and dig into someone’s ... , that’s not my training.’ She admits that she once worried about children after working hours but believes that she separates professional life and private life with time. The delimitation of the commitment is thus governed both by the competence she possesses and by the working hours she has.

3.2 Relationship building

Building relationships with the children and between the children is central to the ethical responsibility in teaching. The relationships are built by getting to know the children, seeing and understanding them but at the same time maintaining a professional distance from them. The relationships need to be built for the guidance to work and the guidance needs to contribute to promoting the relationships. In addition to building relationships with those present, the children also need the opportunity to talk about relationships.

The variations in relationship building depend partly on different external conditions such as the number of children and what difficulties arise in the group dynamics. The relationships can be facilitated when preschools and schools are small units because the teachers have more opportunities to get to know all the children. Åsa, who is working at a smaller school knows all the names and has a good relationship with everyone and then it becomes less challenging to give reprimands and have spontaneous discussions. It also becomes clearer which children need a lot of encouragement. For Sabina, who works with children who have difficulties participating in classroom teaching, building relationships is crucial for the opportunities to approach the children. These children often have negative experiences of relationships that didn’t work, and Sabina therefore thinks it is important to talk to the children about relationships and why it sometimes doesn’t work. She says: ‘You don’t work with all people in all situations, that’s just the way it is.’ Perhaps children who experience difficulties in everyday contact need to be told that there is nothing wrong with them. In part, the teachers have different ways of describing and actively working for the relationships. Occasionally different points of view collide. Diana talks about a situation from her education when her supervisor said that she made a mistake in her treatment of a child. She says:

Then I would basically punish this child [...]: “If this child has done that, you can’t sit down and read a book”. While I thought it was great to sit down and read a book, and then be able to talk about what happened.

By diverting the child’s attention from what happened, Diana manages to calm down the situation to then talk about it. Here, two different approaches are made visible, which in one case enables a relationship and an understanding for the child.

Reprimands need to be balanced against confirmation and Diana says that children with difficulties can be appreciated in the group when the teachers ‘also work in such a way [...] that you try to really highlight their positive sides’. This work includes consciously creating situations where a child’s positive qualities become visible and can be expressed in front of the children. Relationships need to be built based on the conditions that exist in the group and for some children, it can be difficult to communicate or cope with different games. Then the teachers need to provide support and Kristina describes how she laid out shovels in different colors to support children to participate in a game that was based on the children knowing the colors. Pernilla sometimes notices that having a small group stay in during the break can stimulate relationships. Then they dare to ask questions and the relationship with them is strengthened. At the same time, she also wants ‘them to see each other’. Just as the teacher needs to strengthen the relationship with the children, it is the teacher’s responsibility to strengthen the children’s relationships with each other. For example, it can be about not letting them consider themselves as victims when someone doesn’t want to play, but instead, like Sara, encouraging them to do some other activity. She also talks to the children about how honesty can at times make relationships difficult: ‘If she tells me, is it nice of me to go and tell that person?’ It can take time to get a group working together, but Emma has noticed changes ‘from not being able to listen to each other at all, it was just me, me and me’ to them being able to hold conversations. Dan talks to the children about taking on a different role at school than at home where they can be more private so that they learn to distinguish how they can behave in different contexts. To build functioning relationships, the children need to be aware of how it may feel for the other person. Sara explains how she talked with the group about how different reactions to group divisions can be felt: ‘It can’t be wrong to show if it makes you happy, right? No, but it will be . . . in the long run, it might not be so good.’ Sara advocates ‘poker faces’ to avoid emotional reactions, both joy and disappointment, leading to children feeling unwanted. The relationships facilitate the guiding conversations in several ways, for example by making it easier to tell what you have been involved in during conflicts and by making it possible to talk about sensitive topics.

3.3 Safe and respectful learning environment

The creation of a safe and respectful learning environment means giving the children the opportunity to participate, to communicate clearly, strive for openness, and to accept differences. There must also be space for the children to make mistakes. The teacher needs to confirm the individual child, show how they have developed, and facilitate the meeting with the others so that the group works together. In the learning environment, adaptations and challenges must be balanced based on the children’s needs.

Variations occur in relation to the external conditions because in some groups a safe learning environment arises without major efforts, while there can be great tension in other groups. Both Sabina and Diana advocate adapting the learning environment to the children’s different needs. Sabina says that there is ‘no right answer, but the right answer is the one that works, no matter what it looks like’. Sometimes it can be difficult to meet different needs without it being perceived as unfair by others, but at Diana’s preschool, they have explained to the children that everyone is different and has different needs. The expression ‘it was best for that child’ is now used both by adults and children among themselves to remind of the different needs. The teacher’s responsibility to adapt the learning environment to the children’s needs is problematized by Dan, who wants to challenge the individualistic mindset he believes has taken over. Instead, he calls for ‘an environment where students are forced to learn to adapt a little to others and somehow create an understanding that you may not always be expected to put yourself first.’ He also believes that adaptations are sometimes made because it can be easier for the teacher than challenging the children. He says that ‘then it’s as if you put labels on the children instead and write that they didn’t pass and therefore the children are never challenged either’. A safe learning environment seems to be about being

able to take on a fight, but at the same time, the participants emphasize that the fight must be balanced, both for the sake of the children and the teacher.

The internal struggle is also waged in the matter of reprimands. Dan believes that it is now and then easier for the teacher to look away when a child breaks the rules. Åsa emphasizes that reprimands depend on which child is concerned, but that a reaction is always required to, as Diana says, 'confirm the child who has been exposed.' The balance in terms of reprimands is a question about when and how they are to be given to provide a safe learning environment. Pernilla believes that when a child needs reprimands in the group, it is important that the teacher does not 'embarrass a child who may have expressed something inappropriate.' Åsa also emphasizes the importance of having a discussion when someone has broken the rules and not start scolding. Security arises when a child feels that 'even if I do wrong, I know that people still like me', as Emma puts it.

According to Magda, the safe environment is characterized by participation in that 'everyone dares to say what they think'. When the children just repeat what their friends have already said in the conversations, Sara tries to encourage them to 'really dare to think differently, which the others haven't said.' She also emphasizes the importance of constantly pointing out what is positive in the learning environment for the children so that it is 'contagious'. She says: 'If you talk about it, they think about it.' According to her approach, the good becomes like rings on the water when she creates an awareness of it. Åsa describes how, already in the planning process, she tries to organize the work in a way that makes it possible for the children to control the content so that she 'can thereby see them as personalities. They can influence their work in the direction they find interesting or fun or at the level they think is good.' Overall, teachers' experiences show that participation contributes to children's security.

3.4 Influence and interaction with guardians and colleagues

The meeting between teacher and child is influenced by own values, teachers' judgments, and values in the environment through interaction with colleagues and guardians. Values expressed in policy documents and among adults the children meet can give rise to tensions between different interpretations and approaches. Tensions and dilemmas that arise in the interaction must be managed by the teacher.

Variations exist in both creating a consensus around certain values and at the same time being open to differences. The individual teacher can influence the contact with guardians and to some extent collaboration with colleagues, but there are large differences in management's initiatives for opportunities for collaboration and joint reflection. The variation is also found in how governing documents are interpreted.

The collaboration is expressed as important so that there should be clarity for the children about what applies, but it varies widely on how this collaboration works and collegial discussions about ethics are essentially missing. Diana expresses the importance of 'all pedagogs treating the children in a reasonably equal way', not in the smallest detail, but with a basic consensus, not least when it comes to rules. Dan brings up the importance of putting common rules before personal opinions and thinks it is problematic when someone deviates. When teachers look the other way, he believes that they 'create [...] a huge imbalance in the entire child group, because then all the other children whose teachers follow these common rules sit and wonder why they can do that when we don't get it.' The consequence is also, according to Dan, that children adopt the view that rules can be broken when you do not feel like following them. Cooperation in teacher teams works for some of the participants, and Magda says about the value-based work that they 'do it together.' While cooperation with colleagues is advocated, the participants raise the problem of rarely discussing questions about ethics. At Emma's workplace, discussions sometimes occur and then it becomes clear 'what different views you have on it anyway', but different nuances in colleagues' views are mostly not verbalized. Sara, who works in a smaller unit, believes that everyone has a shared responsibility for the children and that management needs to organize opportunities for conversation and reflection

among colleagues. When something happens in the classroom, Dan would like to have someone to talk to and expresses that the teaching profession can at times feel lonely. He also highlights the importance of self-reflection and thereby ‘being very aware of yourself to be able to criticize or think that you may have made a mistake’. The self-reflection contributes to seeing one’s own values and in conversations with colleagues also being able to reconsider them. For Diana, collaboration is about more than discussing and reflecting together. She believes that the community between the teachers rubs off on the children. She says: ‘I think the children sense this, that the pedagogues have a nice attitude toward each other. They like each other and that reflects on the children.’ The idea is that the teachers can act as a kind of collective role model for the children.

Interaction with guardians is also part of the phenomenon of ethical responsibility in the meeting with the children. In addition to the need for collaboration and the fact that there are sometimes tensions between home and school about values that must be managed, other aspects also emerge in communication. Åsa emphasizes the importance of always giving guardians ‘value-free information’. This means that she tries to describe what happened in situations where the child was involved without interpreting or adding any understanding of her own because she tries to find out how the guardians have understood the incident through the child’s own story. In doing so, she shows self-awareness that she does not always see the big picture. She says: ‘There may be parts I have missed.’ To understand the child’s perspective, the teachers need the help of guardians. The contact with the guardians, based on the stories in the empirical work, requires a great deal of openness on the part of the teachers because the family situation can look very different. One of the experiences that Magda talks about is when she asks a single father to support his child in a task: ‘He was so honest and sincere about his own inadequacy, and he was very sad about it.’ Magda remembers his answer, although it was a long time ago because she realized how easy it is to generalize about people’s living conditions.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Through this descriptive phenomenological study, the essential meaning of teachers’ ethical responsibility in meeting with the children in teaching is formulated. The ethical responsibility to guide the children about right and wrong takes place through discussions, conflict management, reprimands, and through the teacher being a role model. Building relationships with and between the children as well as a safe learning environment is both the basis for and consequence of the guidance. Values expressed in the context of teaching by, for example, colleagues, guardians, and through governing documents influence the guidance.

4.1 Complexity and consensus demand concepts

The dominant concept within the ethical dimension of teaching in Sweden is “fundamental values”. This is the translation used by the National Agency of Education when referring to the curriculum.² Among teachers both in preschool and school, a common expression is that “we work with the fundamental values” without clarification of what they mean. When the phenomenon in the study is formulated based on ethical responsibility, participants become uncertain about what is being asked for. A few ethical concepts and models are mentioned in the participants’ stories, while no one mentions ethical codes. The diffuse expression of the ethical dimension together with almost no other ethical concepts or references to the Swedish ethical code leads to difficulties in expressing and understanding the ethical dimension (Britzman, 2010; Sawyer, 2020). Ethical concepts, models, and codes should not be used by the teacher to abdicate their own ethical responsibility (Steinnes, 2011) but could stimulate conversations about the ethical dimension and provide guidance in

²Curriculum for the Preschool, Lpfö 18 – Skolverket

ethical dilemmas (French-Lee & Dooley, 2015). Nevertheless, this study shows a clear consensus about ethical responsibility based on the teachers' lived experiences.

The teachers' main ethical responsibility is to guide the children about right and wrong, but in this guidance their starting points are ambiguous. While there are important democratic values to assert and common rules that need to be respected, these approaches are constantly balanced against the children's opportunities to speak and think for themselves and the teachers' endeavor to be neutral. The teachers want to support children to explore their own ethical positions (Cliffe and Solvason 2022) but the aspiration must, just as the study shows, be balanced against the democratic mission (Castner et al., 2017; Larsen & Hesby Mathé, 2023) and common rules at the school. In the data, colleagues who deviate from common agreements or who express positions that the participants believe deviate from how they understand the governing documents are problematized. The participants' own values seem to be part of their natural attitude (Husserl, 1995/1907) and they ignore that the curriculum is formulated at a very general level without guidance in specific teaching situations. They emphasize the importance of a certain consensus between colleagues while at the same time expressing that they want to strengthen the children's critical approach. Teachers can encourage children to discuss (Mascadri et al., 2021) and think critically (Rombout et al., 2021) about the content of democratic values and shared rules, but they still must apply them. Democratic education is recognized both as cognition but also as the ability to act (Chen et al., 2017) and the teachers in the study express their importance as role models (Tirri, 2022), not only to show their positive sides, but also an acceptance for mistakes. At the same time, the focus of their stories is on discussions and the children's opportunities to participate in them.

The teachers in this study have different attitudes to the tension between responsibility for knowledge content and guiding the children ethically (Jepson Wigg, 2021; Walls, 2022). Ethical guiding conversations can be about anything or knowledge content, be planned, or arise spontaneously. They can be conducted during class time but also during breaks, in the whole class, in small groups, or individually. Some teachers believe that the conversations are teaching, while others regard them as a basis for being able to teach later. However, the teachers agree that the conversations are needed and are keen even if the design varies. Another tension emerges between an ethical responsibility to adapt the environment to the children's needs and an ethical responsibility to challenge them and reprimand them a way that helps them. To manage this complexity, teachers need to continually build relationships with children, strive for contact with guardians, and use their judgment to determine where the line between adaptation and challenge lies.

The teachers' striving toward being neutral is problematic both because of their mission to advocate democracy and human rights but also because the teachers' life worlds, their way of interacting with the world, is part of their natural attitude (Husserl, 1995/1907) and affects their way of being. The teachers express that they in different ways signal values. When values are signaled but not expressed, they risk remaining implicit (Puroila & Haho, 2017; Rissanen et al., 2018), part of the natural attitude and thus difficult to express. Values that are signaled in one way and verbalized in another way give double messages, which also complicates the discussion. Discussions on various topics are sought but at the same time, the private spheres of both the children and the teachers need to be respected. Many topics are sensitive and sometimes teachers use their judgment to postpone or control discussions so that the children are not exposed. The building of relationships and safe learning environments is experienced by the teachers as necessary to be able to conduct the conversations in a responsible manner. In the teachers' stories, it appears that they use their judgment in many contexts, not least in their choices regarding discussions that are held. However, it varies a lot between teachers' stories about situations whether they exercise their judgment, rely on common rules, or refer to interpretations of the curriculum. The judgment is based on what is best for the child, how the child should be able to participate and think critically, but also on how much courage, energy, and engagement the teachers have in

the situation. In teaching, children's and teachers' life worlds are constantly shaped and reshaped through the dialogues and discussions. The teachers occasionally have hidden intentions, but discussions cannot be completely controlled. Instead of the teachers fully asserting their responsibility and their own judgment in teaching, an ambiguity is expressed in relation to what they perceive as demands based on maintaining a neutral attitude, following agreements, models, and curriculum.

4.2 Professionalism

Teachers' professionalism is dependent on an ability to define a common knowledge base and professional ethics (Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Lindström, 2020). The study clearly shows that there is a coherent picture of the ethical responsibility that professional ethics requires, even if the way this responsibility is exercised is very varied. According to this study, teachers' professional ethics could be described based on the four meanings (guidance of the children, relationship building, safe and respectful learning environment, influence and interaction) as a common basis for ethical knowledge (Akbari & Tajik, 2012). In accordance with Campbell's (2003) requirement that professional ethics must be based on knowledge, the overall meanings supplemented with variations and concrete examples from teaching can form a starting point for further discussions about professionalism. The limitations of this study are the few participants, and that data consists of their stories alone. Observations could have added useful data about how ethical responsibility was expressed in teaching. To conclude, collegial conversations can preferably be based on the essential meanings related to concrete teaching situations. In this matter, the study shows an area that needs to be expanded and strengthened using ethical concepts and models and relating to codes. Another area that needs to be developed is to strengthen teachers in their autonomy to exercise their judgment. Rules, models, and methods can be a support but can never replace the teacher's judgment and ethical responsibility in the situation (Steinnes, 2011). Judgment is not explicit or the focus of the teachers' stories, maybe because they are experienced and have a natural attitude to how they handle different situations. However, their own desires for increased opportunities for collegial conversation could contribute to developing their judgments.

Acknowledgments

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Marita Cronqvist  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6639-8803>

References

- Akbari, R., & Tajik, L. (2012). Second-language teachers' moral knowledge base: A comparison between experienced and less experienced, male and female practitioners. *Journal of Moral Education*, 41(1), 39–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2011.630384>
- Baker-Doyle, K., Hunt, M., & Whitfield, L. C. (2018). Learning to fall forward: A study of teacher courage, equity, and freedom in the connected learning classroom. *The International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*, 35(5), 310–328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJILT-05-2018-0053>
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2010). Why 'what works' still won't work: From evidence-based education to value-based education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29(5), 491–503. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-010-9191-x>

- Britzman, D. (2010). *The very thought of education: Psychoanalysis and the impossible professions*. State University of New York Press.
- Campbell, E. (2003). *The ethical teacher*. Open University Press.
- Castner, D. J., Schneider, J. L., & Henderson, J. G. (2017). An ethic of democratic, curriculum-based teacher leadership. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(2), 328–356.
- Chen, X., Wei, G., & Jiang, S. (2017). The ethical dimension of teacher practical knowledge: A narrative inquiry into Chinese teachers' thinking and actions in dilemmatic spaces. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 49(4), 518–541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2016.1263895>
- Cliffe, J., & Solvason, C. (2022). The messiness of ethics in education. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 20(1), 101–117. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-021-09402-8>
- Cronqvist, M. (2017). Didethics – a didactic model including professional ethics. *Nordisk Tidskrift för Allmän Didaktik*, 3(1), 68–85. <https://doi.org/10.57126/noad.v3i1.12286>
- Cronqvist, M. (2019a). Lärarstudentens livsvärld – i forskning om etiskt ansvar. In S. Ingår i Rosberg, H. Dahlberg, S. Ellingsen, & B. Martinsen (Eds.), *Fenomenologi i praktiken: Fenomenologisk forskning i ett skandinaviskt perspektiv* (Första upplagan, pp. 284–300). Liber.
- Cronqvist, M. (2019b). Reflecting and verbalizing teaching – supported by didactic and digital tools. *Beijing International Review of Education*, 1(2–3), 507–527. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25902539-00102020>
- Cronqvist, M. (2020). Yrkesetik i lärarutbildning – essensens betydelse. *Educare – Vetenskapliga Skrifter*, 2, 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.24834/educare.2021.2.2>
- Dahl, K. K. B. (2017). Too much parental cooperation? Parent-teacher cooperation and how it influences professional responsibility among Danish schoolteachers. *Power and Education*, 9(3), 177–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743817737562>
- Dahlberg, K. (2006). The essence of essences – the search for meaning structures in phenomenological analysis of lifeworld phenomena. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 1(1), 11–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482620500478405>
- Dahlberg, K., Dahlberg, H., & Nyström, M. (2008). *Reflective lifeworld research* (2nd ed.). Studentlitteratur.
- Fenech, M., & Lotz, M. (2018). Systems advocacy in the professional practice of early childhood teachers: From the antithetical to the ethical. *Early Years: An International Journal of Research and Development*, 38(1), 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2016.1209739>
- French-Lee, S., & Dooley, C. M. (2015). An exploratory qualitative study of ethical beliefs among early childhood teachers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 43(5), 377–384. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-014-0659-0>
- Giorgi, A. (1989). One type of analysis of descriptive data: Procedures involved in following a scientific phenomenological method. *Methods*, 1(2), 39–61.
- Husserl, E. (1970/1936). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: An introduction to phenomenological philosophy*. [Die Krisis der europäischen wissenschaften und die transzendente phänomenologie: Eine einleitung in die phänomenologische philosophie] (Övers. D. Carr). Northwestern U.P.
- Husserl, E. (1995/1907). *Fenomenologins idé. 2. Uppl. [Die idee der phänomenologie]* (Övers. J. Bengtsson). Daidalos.
- Jepson Wigg, U. (2021). 'I see it as a privilege to get to know them'. Moral dimensions in teachers' work with unaccompanied refugee students in Swedish upper secondary school. *Ethics and Education*, 16(3), 307–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2021.1927345>
- Kuusisto, E., & Tirri, K. (2021). The challenge of educating purposeful teachers in Finland. *Education Sciences*, 11(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11010029>
- Larsen, E., & Hesby Mathé, N. E. (2023). Teachers' perceptions of their schools' democratic character. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 67(2), 327–343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2021.2021437>
- Lindström, M. N. (2020). Swedish school reforms and teacher professionalism. *Professions and Professionalism*, 10(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.7577/pp.3878>
- Mascadri, J., Lunn Brownlee, J., Johansson, E., Scholes, L., Walker, S., & Berthelsen, D. (2021). Children's perspectives on why and when teachers listen to their ideas: Exploring opportunities for participation in the early years of school. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 107, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2021.101747>
- McKnight, L., & Morgan, A. (2023). "Good" choices vs "what really works": a comparison of evidence-based practice in medicine and education. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 50(3), 643–659. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00509-4>
- Puroila, A.-M., & Haho, A. (2017). Moral functioning: Navigating the messy landscape of values in Finnish pre-schools. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 61(5), 540–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2016.1172499>
- Ribers, B. (2018). The plight to dissent: Professional integrity and ethical perception in the institutional care work of early childhood educators. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26(6), 893–908. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1533707>
- Rissanen, I., Kuusisto, E., Hanhimäki, E., & Tirri, K. (2018). The implications of teachers' implicit theories for moral education: A case study from Finland. *Journal of Moral Education*, 47(1), 63–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2017.1374244>

- Rombout, F., Schuitema, J. A., & Volman, M. L. L. (2021). Teachers' implementation and evaluation of design principles for value-loaded critical thinking. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 106, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2021.101731>
- Sawyer, R. D. (2020). Developing a common language of ethical engagement in teaching: Lessons for and from a time of crisis. *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*, 15(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2020.15.2.1>
- Solbrekke, T. D., & Englund, T. (2011). Bringing professional responsibility back in. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(7), 847–861, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.482205>
- Steinnes, J. (2011). The knight of faith: Ethics in special needs education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 40(4), 457–469, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2011.618777>
- Tielman, K., Wesselink, R., & den Brok, P. (2022). Tensions experienced by teachers of Dutch culturally diverse senior secondary vocational education and training: An exploratory study. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 26(1), 102–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijtd.12238>
- Tirri, K. (2022). The moral teacher in global transition: The 2022 Kohlberg memorial lecture. *Journal of Moral Education*, 52(3), 261–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2142540>
- van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Left Coast Press.
- Walls, J. (2022). Performativity and caring in education: Toward an ethic of reimagination. *Journal of School Leadership*, 32(3), 289–314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684620972065>
- Warnick, B. R., & Silverman, S. K. (2011). A framework for professional ethics courses in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 62(3), 273–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487110398002>