



## Seeking the elusive ethical base of teacher professionalism in Canadian codes of ethics



Bruce Maxwell <sup>a, \*</sup>, Marina Schwimmer <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Quebec at Trois-Rivières, Canada

<sup>b</sup> McGill University, Room 244, Education Building, 3700 McTavish Street, Montreal, Quebec H3A 1Y2, Canada

### H I G H L I G H T S

- Analysis did not reveal an overlapping consensus on teachers' ethical obligations.
- Six core professional values of teaching were dominant in the codes of ethics.
- Codes of ethics provide an incomplete depiction of teacher deontology.
- Extensive corporatist content in the codes is negative and confusing.
- For teacher education, codes of ethics have important limitations.

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### A B S T R A C T

Two studies were conducted to explore codes of ethics as a source of insight into the ethical base of teacher professionalism. Using the 13 codes of ethics overseeing teachers' work in Canada as a sample, Study 1 applied content analysis to assess whether an overlapping consensus on teachers' professional obligations could be observed. Study 2 deployed interpretive analysis techniques to determine whether a set of dominant core values of teacher professionalism would emerge. The results point to specific limitations in using codes of ethics as a pedagogical resource in ethics education for future teachers.

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A perennial and generally uncontroversial view in the scholarly writings on professional ethics in teaching is that the role of ethics education, whether it takes the form of integrated curriculum or a dedicated course, is to ensure that teachers know and understand the collective norms of the teaching profession. This view draws on the idea that teaching, like other professions, has its own unique set of ethical concepts and professional values which define and frame ethically responsible conduct—fairness, due process, respect for privacy and dignity, intellectual honesty, integrity, personal

achievement, caring, etc.—and that these notions are often expressed through a range of widely accepted norms of professional conduct. Initial teacher education should, then, include the explicit teaching of ethics content because knowledge of the profession's ethical norms is a basic requirement of teacher professionalism and, therefore, quality teaching (for statements of this view see [Boon, 2011](#); [Campbell, 2008a](#); [Strike, 1989](#); [Terhart, 1998](#)).

This simple but compelling picture of the objectives and rationale of professional ethics education in teaching, however, glosses over the fact that there is apparently little agreement on the ethical base of teacher professionalism ([Martin, 2013](#)). One of the key conclusions of [Campbell's \(2008b\)](#) major review of the literature on the ethics of teaching since 1991, for example, was that, despite extensive research on the ethical dimensions of teaching, scholars in the field do not appear to be any closer to agreement on “the

\* Corresponding author. Department of Educational Sciences, University of Quebec at Trois-Rivières, R-2036, 3351 Des Forges, Trois-Rivières, Quebec G9A 5H7, Canada.

E-mail addresses: [bruce.maxwell@uqtr.ca](mailto:bruce.maxwell@uqtr.ca) (B. Maxwell), [meschwi2002@yahoo.fr](mailto:meschwi2002@yahoo.fr) (M. Schwimmer).

moral essence of teacher professionalism” (p. 358). Expressing similar reservations, [Wilkinson \(2007\)](#) argues that the teaching profession has failed “to unite around any agreed set of transcendental values which it might serve” (p. 382) and calls on teacher educators to work towards a clearer articulation of the ethical values that sustain teachers’ professional identity. The ideal of an ethical base of professionalism that Wilkinson has in mind here is explicitly inspired by the example of medical ethics and its “four basic principles.” Since their initial elaboration in the Belmont Report ([National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979](#)), and subsequent refinement in Beauchamp and Childress’s classic course book *Principles of biomedical ethics* (2001), the principles of medical ethics (i.e., respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficance and justice) have, on an international scale, been instrumental in structuring the content of teaching and learning about ethics for future medical practitioners ([Pellegrino, 1993](#)).

Survey work and qualitative research on ethics curriculum in initial teacher education provide confirming evidence for [Campbell’s \(2008b\)](#) and [Wilkinson’s \(2007\)](#) observations about the limitations of the conceptual infrastructure surrounding ethics education for teachers. An international survey has found that the variability in the content of mandatory ethics-related courses for future teachers is enormous and that this holds as much within as between the five OECD countries examined ([Maxwell et al., 2016](#)). Indeed, the variety of themes and topics treated in courses focusing on ethics, morality and values in teaching was so extensive, the survey’s authors advanced, that it may be difficult for teacher educators to know where the content parameters around an ethics course for future teachers lie—and hence whether their very own teacher education programs provide opportunities to learn about ethical issues in teaching through a dedicated course ([Maxwell et al., 2016](#)). In the same vein, parallel but independent qualitative studies on students’ perceptions of ethics content in preservice teacher education found that students felt a need for clear and explicit guidelines on the professional conduct expected of them as teachers but that this need that was not being met by their programs and that when ethics was being taught as integrated curriculum, its delivery was patchy and unequal across programs ([Boon, 2011](#); [Campbell, 2008a](#)).

This lack of common ground on the ethical base of teacher professionalism is a problem for teacher education and the teaching profession more broadly. At best, it is an obstacle to identifying the knowledge, skills and personal dispositions that should be prioritized in teaching and learning about of professional ethics for future teachers. At worst, it is an embarrassment. How can teacher educators engage effectively in the essential task of socializing future teachers into the ethical norms of the teaching profession (cf. [Biesta, 2015](#)) if they only have an intuitive or highly personal sense of what the norms of teacher professionalism are?

In the face of this problem, the aim of the present study was to explore codes of professional ethics as an alternative source of insights into what teachers, teacher educators and other stakeholders in the teaching profession consider as the core values and ethical obligations of teaching. In light of the limitations of the scholarly literature in this regard, the hypothesis we wished to investigate was whether codes of teacher ethic were a promising place to look for the seemingly elusive ethical base of teacher professionalism. The reason why we singled out codes of ethics for analysis is because a code of ethics can be seen, to use [Van Nuland’s \(2009\)](#) compelling formulation, as the “collective conscience of a profession” (p. 32). That is, a code of ethics is the fruit of a collaborative process aimed at articulating the ethical base of professional practice, as conceived by the trustee institution mandated to produce the code. Taking the 13 codes of ethics overseeing teachers’

work at the provincial and territorial levels in Canada as a sample, the purpose of this research was twofold. First, we applied techniques of content analysis to the codes to assess whether an overlapping consensus on teachers’ professional obligations could be observed. Second, we conducted an interpretive analysis of the codes to see whether a set of dominant “core values of teacher professionalism” would emerge.

## 1. Connections to previous research

Codes of teacher ethics have occasionally been the subject of interpretive and content analysis in previous research.

One strand of the past research is decidedly critical. [Terhart’s \(1998\)](#) analysis of a selection of codes of teacher ethics from the U.S.A., Germany and Switzerland focusses on the implicit messages contained in codes of ethics about conceptions of teaching, the meaning of teacher professionalism, and the social status and purpose of teachers’ work. In light of his analysis, [Terhart \(1998\)](#) expresses reservations about the formalism of codes of ethics, arguing that this renders them unavoidably superficial, static and thus easy for teachers to ignore. Adopting a similarly critical approach, [Shortt, Hallett, Spendlove, Hardy, and Barton \(2012\)](#) conducted a structural analysis that aimed to reveal the “professional mythology” embedded in the code of conduct governing teachers’ work in England. Their investigation revealed that the code requires teachers to assume two mutually incompatible social roles. In their work with young people, teachers were expected to be avid promoters of individual autonomy and critical reflection. Yet as public service professionals, they were expected to be passive subjects who unquestioningly obey the rules imposed by the state.

Other studies view codes of ethics for teachers in a more positive light. Taking an international perspective, [van Nuland’s work \(Van Nuland, 2009; Van Nuland & Khandelwal, 2006\)](#), for example, positions the code of ethics as a tool for countering corruption in educational systems and advancing teacher professionalism, especially in developing countries. [Van Nuland’s \(2009\)](#) content analyses of some 20 codes of teacher ethics, and a series of comparative case studies on the process of designing, implementing and enforcing formalized ethical standards in several countries around the world, offer detailed recommendations on how to promote the ownership of a code of ethics by a community of educators. For her part, [Forster \(2012\)](#) has undertaken an analysis of eight Australian codes of ethics for teachers. Backgrounded by the trend towards the federalization of the education system in that country, [Forster’s study](#) found that the codes generally adopted an “inspirational” tone (as opposed to a disciplinary or punitive one) and were broadly structured around two core values: respect and integrity.

Like [Forster’s \(2012\)](#) study, this research employs qualitative, interpretive and some basic quantitative analysis to draw supported inferences about the professional values and ethical norms of the teaching profession as they are conveyed in a set of codes of ethics specific to one country. The main difference between the present research and [Forster’s](#) relates to the conceptualization of the research problem and our approach to the analysis. First, and unlike [Forster \(2012\)](#), our aim is to assess the level of convergence (and divergence) that can be found in our data set on the specific ethical obligations that are taken to define teacher professionalism in the set of codes analyzed. Also, whereas [Forster’s \(2012\)](#) search for the professional values of teaching focused on explicit values statements occurring in her sample, this project takes a more open view and assumes that statements of professional principles, obligations, and rules provide evidence of particular values commitments as well.

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