

## Inquiring into the Ethical Dimensions of Professional Practice



Ontario  
College of  
Teachers  
Ordre des  
enseignantes et  
des enseignants  
de l'Ontario



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# Exploring Ethical Professional Relationships: A Self-Reflective Resource

## Introduction

*Inquiring into the Ethical Dimensions of Professional Practice* is intended to support educators in the inquiry and exploration of their own ethical stance, the ethical principles that are the foundation of their actions and the ethical decisions that are required to be made within practice.

The *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* are fundamental to ethical professional practice. Each ethical standard conveys the multi-dimensional nature and complexity associated with effective teaching and educational leadership. A key hallmark of ethically guided educators is a deep commitment to engaging in ongoing critical inquiry into practice. This ethical stance supports the embodiment of the four ethical standards: *Care*, *Respect*, *Trust* and *Integrity* (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006).

The *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* are:

## Care

The ethical standard of *Care* includes compassion, acceptance, interest and insight for developing students' potential. Members express their commitment to students' well-being and learning through positive influence, professional judgment and empathy in practice.

## Respect

Intrinsic to the ethical standard of *Respect* are trust and fair-mindedness. Members honour human dignity, emotional wellness and cognitive development. In their professional practice, they model respect for spiritual and cultural values, social justice, confidentiality, freedom, democracy and the environment.

## Trust

The ethical standard of *Trust* embodies fairness, openness and honesty. Members' professional relationships with students, colleagues, parents, guardians and the public are based on trust.

## Integrity

Honesty, reliability and moral action are embodied in the ethical standard of *Integrity*. Continual reflection assists members in exercising integrity in their professional commitments and responsibilities.

(Ontario College of Teachers, 2006)



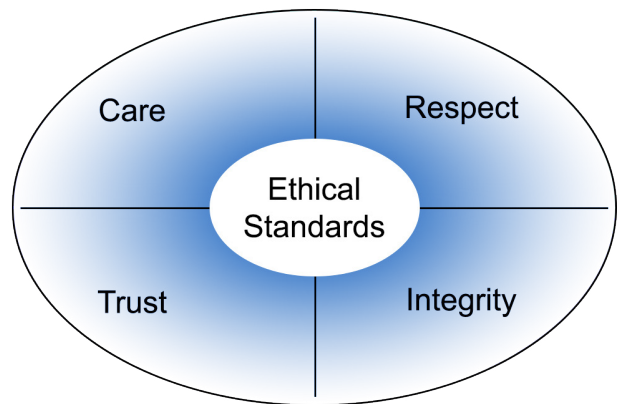
## Professional Inquiry

The *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* can be used as an inquiry framework to reflect upon and explore the ethical dimensions inherent within teaching and educational leadership.

Professional inquiry assists educators to critically explore practices that are laden and interwoven with multifaceted complex ethical dimensions. Understanding and gaining deeper insight into these ethical dimensions can help guide the ethical thinking, decisions and actions of educators.

The ethical challenges and issues included in this resource reflect the experiences of members of the teaching profession who participated in ethical institutes facilitated by the Ontario College of Teachers. These institutes were designed to help illuminate the types of experiences that result in educators critically reflecting on the dimensions associated with ethical teaching and leadership.

Educators can consider the ethical challenges and issues encountered in professional practice through the lens of each of the ethical standards. For instance, an educator might contemplate an ethical dilemma by asking oneself self-reflective questions based on the standards such as:



- How can I communicate *Care* to all individuals involved in the most compassionate manner?
- In what ways have I expressed *Care* for the well-being of students through my professional judgments in this situation?
- What can I do to ensure that I *Respect* and *Trust* the professional autonomy and judgment of the teacher in this incident?
- How did my actions and decisions *Respect* the principles of social justice, freedom and democracy in this situation?
- How do I foster *Trust* with others through consistently embodying fairness, openness and honesty within this complex dilemma.
- In what ways are my relationships with my colleagues based on *Trust*?
- What do I need to do to communicate *Trust* and empower the judgments and decisions of others?
- What do I need to do in this situation to ensure the *Integrity* of my professional practice remains intact and is not compromised?
- How congruent were my words and actions throughout this experience?

(Smith, 2013)

# Teacher Education and Professional Practice

*Inquiring into the Ethical Dimensions of Professional Practice* can be used as a resource within initial teacher education, continuing teacher education and professional practice. This booklet presents experiences from practice and sources for ethical inquiry. Educators may choose to reflect on the written vignettes included in this booklet individually or explore them in collaboration with colleagues. Critical exploration and dialogue of these vignettes can help to enhance the ethical knowledge and actions of educators.

Members of the teaching profession were invited to contribute vignettes from their teaching and leadership experiences that resulted in them reflecting on the ethical nature of professional practice. These vignettes reveal the multiple and complex dimensions associated with ethically guided teaching and educational leadership.

## Vignettes from Practice

Vignettes are brief snapshots of experience (Smith, 2013). The lived experiences of educators are captured within this resource in the form of short educative vignettes. These vignettes illuminate the ethical challenges, issues and dilemmas encountered by educators within the context of their daily professional practice.

Reflecting on these vignettes of experience through dialogue with colleagues enables educators to critically explore the many dimensions that influence and impact professional practice. These vignettes are intended to help awaken educators to the ethical dimensions that are inherent in the decisions and actions that take place within the context of teaching and educational leadership. Ethically guided educators are conscious of these dimensions and are committed to thoughtfully considering these within the reflection and decision making processes they employ (Smith, 2013).

The vignettes included in this resource reveal many ethical issues and challenges related to various aspects of professional practice. Some of the issues that can be explored from an ethical perspective within these vignettes include:

- ethical responsibilities and obligations
- professional boundaries
- actions that undermine the integrity of processes associated with the assignment of teachers
- well-being of educators
- complicit actions that support unethical practices
- ethical responsibilities associated with mental health issues
- developing and sustaining ethical school cultures
- the influence of personal beliefs and biases on hiring processes
- lack of transparency in hiring practices
- compromising professional integrity
- ethical principles that guide actions.

Educators are invited to critically explore these issues with colleagues using an ethical inquiry cycle (Smith, 2013) which follows each vignette.

# Ethical Inquiry Cycle

Ethical professional practice is enhanced through ongoing engagement in ethical inquiry processes. Ethical inquiry embraces and integrates the *Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession* within the many diverse and complex contexts associated with professional practice. The ethical efficacy of educators is strengthened through participation in critical reflection and ethical inquiry based on the ethics of *Care, Respect, Trust* and *Integrity*. The ethical confidence of educators is reinforced when they collectively reflect upon, explore and critique ethical experiences.

An ethical inquiry cycle (Smith, 2013) is presented in this resource to help support the ethical understanding, thinking and action of educators. This ethical inquiry cycle (Image 1) is comprised of several interrelated processes: *lived experience, reflection, critical analysis, new insights* and *perspectives*. Dialogue is a key and necessary element within each of these experiential processes. Dialogue is central to ethical professional practice. Ethical school and organizational cultures are created and sustained through engaging in ethical dialogue. The ethical knowledge, insight and sensitivity (Smith & Goldbaltt, 2009) can be enhanced as educators critically explore the vignettes included in this resource with colleagues using the ethical inquiry cycle.

Image 1.



(Smith, 2013)

# Vignettes from Practice:

## Vignette 1: Rocking the Boat

*As an administrator at the school I became aware of a situation where another administrator made an unjust decision impacting one of the teachers on staff. The administrative team was already on shaky ground as it had been a tough year filled with many serious issues and events. I feared that bringing up this situation would only further “rock the boat”. I wondered if I should remain loyal to the administrative team and not mention the situation or risk more conflict with the administrative team for the greater good of the teacher who had been unjustly treated in the situation.*



### Ethical Inquiry Dialogic Process

After reading the vignette, educators are invited to engage in critical reflection and dialogue related to the following ethical inquiry process:

1. **Experience:** Identify the ethical challenge(s), issue(s) or dimensions inherent within this vignette.
2. **Reflection:** Critically reflect on the underlying values or assumptions that are influencing the professional practices in this vignette.
3. **Critical Analysis:** Critically analyze this vignette through the ethics of *Care, Respect, Trust* and *Integrity*.
4. **New Perspectives and Insights:** Identify new insights or understandings have been gained from reading this vignette?

### Ethical Knowledge and Action

Generate suggestions for enhancing the ethical awareness, sensitivity and ethical efficacy of the educators in this vignette?



## Vignette 2: Negative and Contagious Attitudes

*I worked with an administrator for several years that many staff found difficult to work with: My colleagues perceived this administrator as being disorganized, arbitrary, unfair and extremely biased. For the first time in my professional life, I found myself also beginning to speak of a colleague behind her back in the most unprofessional manner. I knew that back-biting and negative attitudes were contagious and unproductive - worst of all, these actions only worsened an already bad situation within our school. Something had to give as I could not continue to behave and think the way I was. I knew I was negatively impacting the culture of our school. I also reflected on how my own actions and thinking had changed so negatively over the course of time at this school. I wondered how I could move forward and once again act from a more positive and ethical place? How could I once again positively contribute to developing and helping to sustain an ethical culture within our school?*



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## Vignette 3: The Call of Duty

*In teaching a lesson on Nutritional Healthy Choices to students with diverse needs, it came to my attention that one of the boys who was living on his own had not eaten for two weeks. This information invited me to think more deeply about my role as an educator. What were my responsibilities as a teacher given that I had this information about the needs of the student? How far do my responsibilities and commitment as an educator take me in order to support the student? What actions would be perceived to be beyond the call of duty? Why was I even thinking of these questions of duty instead of immediately acting to help this student?*

### Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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## Vignette 4: Burden of Silence

*I was phoned by a colleague who disclosed to me that (s)he had been engaged in a sexual relationship with a very recent graduate from our school. My dilemma was whether or not to go to the administration with the details. As it turned out, it all came to light the next day. As the school began investigating, this colleague emailed and phoned me asking for information on what was being asked and said at the school regarding the case. I refused comment. This burden of silence was overwhelming for me. I called in sick for several days and found it extremely difficult to engage with colleagues at the school throughout the investigation process. I continually reflected on the same question: What support could help me to more effectively and professionally respond to this situation and the burden of silence associated with it?*

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## Vignette 5: Respecting Competing Rights

*A teacher in a special education program was experiencing some significant medical challenges. Over time it became evident to colleagues and administrators that this staff member's medical challenges were preventing him from performing his duties as a teacher and were having an impact on his ability to make sound professional judgments. He appeared to lack pedagogical knowledge, communication skills and the ability to know when he should ask for help. Many accommodations had been made for him in the workplace.*

*Other staff members wrote his formal Individual Education Plans (IEP) and completed other important paperwork. Report cards were never completed. He frequently would not perform scheduled supervision duties. The principals of Applied Behaviour Analysis were abused in order to get students to do what he needed. He often failed to teach the curriculum content required for his students to acquire basic skills. Year after year, his students' behaviour deteriorated into violence. He had inappropriate relationships with students and their families which involved spending weekends away together. Teaching assistants were assigned to him who spent most of their time accommodating for the teacher rather than enhancing service to the students. When confronted by colleagues regarding various incidents or issues he would always bring up his disability and human rights issues. As a vice principal, I questioned my role, responsibilities and actions related to the situation and found myself caught in the middle between competing rights: a teacher's need for accommodation and students right to a quality educational experience.*

### Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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## Vignette 6: Stuck in the Middle

*Individual Education Plans (IEP's) were commonly developed and updated through collaboration between the classroom teacher and the Learning Resource teacher (LRT) in the school board that I work for. Being the only member of the staff trained in the IEP software, the LRT has typically been the one to electronically input the teacher's handwritten changes and updates. Over the past two years however, the roles and responsibilities of the LRT in my school have changed and he is no longer able to offer small group or individual support to struggling students in the Junior Division. As such, he has no time to participate in the development of IEP's for junior students, and this responsibility has fallen solely upon classroom teachers. Now responsible for the entire IEP, junior classroom teachers have requested release time during the instructional day to complete this work. Our principal has decline these requests, and advised us to complete the IEP's during our regularly scheduled prep time.*

*Feeling somewhat "stuck in the middle", the LRT told the junior teachers not to worry about IEP's – he knew that we hadn't had any training on the software, and he said he would shuffle his schedule around and complete our IEP's for us. We would just have to sign them. The ethical dilemma here centres around the LRT offering to write an IEP for a student that he doesn't work with, and results in the possibility of classroom teachers accepting his offer, and having their names attached to a legal document that they were not party to developing.*

### Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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## Vignette 7: When Worlds Collide

*As a beginning teacher, a parent of one of my students was also a senior colleague at our small school. My assessment and evaluation of this student's achievement was questioned by this parent. This parent/colleague frequently mentioned that his child's previous teacher's evaluation always indicated a high level of achievement. The dialogue throughout the year was often tense and focused on the past practices of the previous teacher. I often felt that throughout the school day my colleague was transferring her perspectives as a parent to me as her colleague. It was obvious that the two worlds of being a parent and colleague had collided. I felt intimidated and uncomfortable with the tone and content of our discussions. I frequently questioned my own actions and the actions of my colleague in this situation.*

### Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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## Vignette 8: The Influence of Personal Beliefs and Biases

*Our principal bypassed the transfer list during the hiring process and opted instead to only review the resumes of beginning teachers with five years or less of experience. The principal believed that these beginning teachers, who were on the Long Term Occasional (LTO) list, were more suitable candidates. She was privileging these individuals over those on the transfer list. The principal's assumption was that the teachers on the transfer list were ineffective teachers as she believed they were on the transfer list for a reason. This action goes against policy and procedure which dictates that the transfer list should always take precedence. The principal then selected resumes on the LTO list and provided interviews to only those teachers. As a teacher, I was deeply troubled and disturbed by the lack of transparency and manipulation of the hiring process. What are my ethical responsibilities in a case like this? What are the implications of my decision to either act or remain silent when hiring practices were influenced by the personal beliefs or biases of those in power?*

### Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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## Vignette 9: The Ethical Responsibilities Associated with Mental Health Issues

*Ezhil was a pre-service teacher in a B.Ed. program. I was one of her cohort professors. In the first two months of her coursework, she proved herself to be a conscientious teacher candidate who showed a lot of promise; bright, attentive and doing excellent work in my classes, as well as the other classes within our cohort model.*

*Once the first school-based practicum ended and she returned to the faculty, Ezhil's demeanor and work habits changed subtly in my class. She went to the Dean of the faculty and explained that several classmates, a professor and several prominent celebrities were conspiring against her, and that it was not safe for her to be in the school.*

*Ezhil also told me of her situation in confidence. I was then asked by the Dean's staff to take detailed notes on Ezhil's performance. As the days and weeks progressed, Ezhil experienced increasingly wild perceptions of the world around her, and her work submitted to me was strange and not of the quality that she'd initially produced. I was instructed by the Dean's staff to keep giving Ezhil chances to re-do her work.*

*The time came for the second round of practicum placements in the Spring. I spoke confidentially to the director of practicum and explained my concerns about putting Ezhil into a school with children, given her increasingly peculiar behavior. However, I was told I had to find her a placement. Was I going to stand by and allow the safety of children to be put at risk, or was I going to risk my own position by taking my concerns to a higher level?*

*What were my ethical responsibilities and the institution's ethical responsibilities associated with the mental health of teacher candidates?*

### Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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# Vignette 10: Comprising Professional Integrity

*In my new role as an itinerant teacher, I was asked by a principal to let her know the names of the teachers who were not coming to see me on a regular basis. The same principal asked me to spend some time with a beginning teacher experiencing pedagogical challenges. Near the end of the year, I received an e-mail from the principal requesting that I send her my notes and opinions regarding my visits with the new teacher. I felt my role and my professional integrity were being compromised by this principal's requests.*

## Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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Generate suggestions for enhancing the ethical awareness, sensitivity and ethical efficacy of the educators in this vignette?

# Vignette 1 1: The When Worlds Collide

*Sometimes I would go into other teachers' classrooms and be horrified! I observed students with special needs being given completely different work or sitting in one spot all day doing paperwork. As well, educational assistants were often working alone with the students in one corner of the class while the other students interacted with one another. I also witnessed occasions where educational assistants provided work to these students that was far too hard for them, and administered difficult tests that were impossible to be completed successfully. These types of learning assignments were not on the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and the teachers knew that they were too hard for these students. I questioned my own professional responsibilities as I continued to remain a silent witness to these disturbing unethical practices.*

## Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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## Vignette 12: Pretend This Never Happened

*As per board and union policy, I handed in a Course Preference Sheet in March to my Principal. On that sheet, I listed my three teaching and assignment preferences in the following order:*

- 1. Co-operative Education*
- 2. English*
- 3. Guidance*

*After the March submission deadline had passed for teaching assignments, my principal called me into his office and told me that he could not give me Co-op. The principal said that there were many people competing for the Guidance position. However, he told me that if I took the form back, destroyed it and filled in a new form with Guidance as my first choice, he would put me in that department. I was surprised by this request to adjust my form after the identified date for submission of choices had passed. I was also very troubled by the request to have me alter my choice when no other staff member was being offered the same opportunity. I struggled with complying with this request as I believed I would then be complicit in undermining the integrity of the entire process. I wondered if I should pretend this request never happened and do nothing?*

### Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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## Vignette 13: Struggling with Professional Obligations

*For the last couple of years I have worked with a colleague and fellow Department Head. In my 15 years of teaching with Clarence I have found him challenging to say the least. Clarence likes to teach a grade nine course in the department at least once a year. He does not seem to be very effective, always doing just the minimum and focusing only on the aspects of the course he likes to teach. In my department we collect a course fee from all of the students. I have a strict department policy that all members of my department are to deposit all fees collected over \$100.00 at the end of each day and provide me with a copy of the deposit slip. Clarence does not follow this policy. Since he is a department head, I have given him some leeway but I do remind him several times both orally and by e-mail to deposit his course fees. Lately my patience has worn thin and I have had to involve the budget secretary. Eventually he does make the deposit sometime after the end of the semester, but it leaves me frustrated and I am sure that his reputation does not go unscathed. I also wonder that if he does this in my department with me watching, what does he do in his? Another area of concern is Clarence's lack of planning as he often avoids teaching the theory/ history part of the course and is often forced to provide students with a crash course one week before the exam period.*

*This last semester one of my department members, who was teaching the same course and needed to collaborate with him on the common exam, came to me to report something that was told to her openly by a former student that was in Clarence's class. It seems that this teacher provided both some questions and the answers for a number of the questions in the final exam. I was aware of what needed to be done, yet this is a colleague who is also a department head and someone whom I have to work with in the future. I struggled with my own professional obligations related to this situation. What are my professional obligations and what are the professional obligations of our staff as a collective?*

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## Vignette 14: Principles of Principals

*As principals many initiatives are told to us as “must do’s”. As school leaders we are to facilitate implementation with the teachers with whom we serve. In the course of our monthly principal meeting, we were told by the superintendent how we were to implement changes to a particular board initiative. A colleague stated that he/she would simply mandate the changes (computer application) and staff could learn the software using the power point directions which was included in an attachment. This approach did not feel right to me. How could I just mandate the changes when I knew this would cause stress? The teachers had already entered the data in excel and now would need to re-enter the same information into the data tool. I knew that not all staff would be comfortable doing this on their own?*

*I began to question myself: Was I being too ‘soft’? Many other questions and dilemmas surfaced for me related to this board direction.*

*Do I address or enter into a discussion regarding the ‘use of power over’ (my perception) to complete the task assigned with my principal colleagues? Do I let the suggested approval by my colleague go without engaging in a conversation about possible implications (it is not my school/staff etc.)? Is something greater at play here? For example, do principals have so much coming at them that they have difficulty filtering the initiatives that come into a school and therefore, simply mandate change? Is the self-interest of the principal being privileged above the interests and needs of the teachers? Why was I putting the well-being of teachers above a senior leadership mandate?*

### Ethical Inquiry Cycle



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### Ethical Knowledge and Action

Generate suggestions for enhancing the ethical awareness, sensitivity and ethical efficacy of the educators in this vignette?

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# Ethical Resources

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