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A Study on Ethical Dilemmas and Coping Strategies in Teaching Decisions of Primary and Secondary School Teachers

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Abstract: The ongoing implementation of educational reforms and the advancement of digital education have introduced new ethical dilemmas in teaching decision-making that primary and secondary school teachers must now confront. This study examines the ethical dilemmas encountered by primary and secondary school teachers in their instructional decision-making within the context of digital education development and the ‘Double Reduction’ policy, alongside corresponding coping strategies. Through literature analysis and theoretical construction, three principal core dilemmas have been identified: The appropriate balance for differentiated teaching, the ethical risks associated with digital technology applications, and the tension between teacher guidance and student autonomy. Through literature analysis and data examination, this study identifies key ethical dilemmas faced by educators, evaluates the moral implications of specific practices, and proposes three-tiered countermeasures—individual teacher, school, and societal—to address ethical dilemmas in teaching decision-making for primary and secondary school educators.

Keywords: Primary and secondary school teachers; Teaching decisions; Ethical dilemmas

1. Introduction

The flourishing development of digital education has seen online learning gradually become one of the learning methods for primary and secondary school pupils. The issuance of guidance by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, coupled with the opening of online course platforms organized by the Ministry, has not only spurred various organizations to spontaneously provide free assistance to students but has also successfully ensured the smooth continuation of diverse teaching methods. This enables more students to access high-quality education, thereby promoting educational equity and enhancing the overall literacy of the populace. Furthermore, it has laid a solid foundation for the development of online learning and digital courses. Therefore, online teaching has become an important part of primary and secondary school teaching. However, this disadvantage is that it is easier to make up lessons after school, it causes too much schoolwork burden for primary and secondary school students, which is not conducive to their healthy and balanced development. In addition, the Ministry of education first published the "action plan for deepening the teaching reform of basic education courses" in May 23, and the subsequent continuous improvement. The core of its fundamental idea is to develop quality education, deepen the reform of key links in education, implement different plans for different regions, digitally empower teaching, and professional training for teachers, and training and assessment of students' morality, intelligence, physique, beauty and labor in many dimensions. Therefore, "double reduction" has become the main means to promote the implementation of policies and accelerate teaching reform.

Under various factors, primary and secondary school teachers need to make many complex decisions in their daily work, so the ethical dilemma in their teaching decision-making is gradually revealed. In addition to the common definitions of fairness and difference, collective and individual responsibilities, and responsibilities between home and school, there are also unique to Chinese students, such as whether to sacrifice art and music courses for the sake of cultural courses. The essence of teachers' ethical dilemma is the choice of values, which is nothing but right and wrong, and the ultimate goal is for the long-term development of students. The ethical dilemma of teachers requires that we recognize the existence of the dilemma, establish a normative mechanism that is beneficial to both teachers and students, and make a choice between competing principles in a complex, valuable and uncertain environment, and make a relatively correct decision that can stand the test of practice, which is the inevitable trend conducive to the development of education.

2. Literature Review

Moral and ethical dilemmas will inevitably appear in teaching from the beginning to the subsequent arrangement, so teachers should be given the opportunity to discuss teaching tools and curriculum objectives and communicate and check the moral aspects of their work. However, teachers face multiple structural obstacles, which hinder the in-depth discussion of the ethical dilemma in teaching practice (Ta et al., 2023). For example, the nature of the teacher's role itself requires considerable time constraints and excessive workload. This is especially true in the current educational environment. Emphasizing the all-round development of students puts forward more requirements for educators. At the same time, due to the lack of support from multiple stakeholders, including schools and parents, teachers are often in an environment of professional isolation and minimal collaboration. This, coupled with the lack of clear moral dilemmas and skills to solve these dilemmas, hinders teachers' ability to reflect and overcome moral dilemmas in their teaching decisions. In addition, teachers must have critical awareness to identify and record content, handle observations, and demonstrate a subtle understanding of ethical issues. This often requires educators to go beyond the traditional training framework and seek guidance to identify and guide ethically sensitive situations (Gilliland et al., 2023). Especially for beginning teachers, they encounter the ethical problems inherent in the teaching profession for the first time, which is the key stage for them to begin to analyze the ethical dilemma they face (Lilach, 2020). Teachers' profession shows heterogeneity in the school environment to solve sudden and daily ethical dilemmas. As individuals, educators show different views on certainty and uncertainty in different contexts, their methods of solving moral problems, and their sensitivity to recognize these difficulties. However, teachers can still formulate strategies to deal with ethical challenges and reduce the harm caused by ethical dilemmas; in addition, the way schools or organizations deal with moral dilemmas affects teachers' reactions, and teachers' views on the uncertainty of such dilemmas may also evolve over time. The experiences of teachers

and educators in resolving ethical dilemmas offer new avenues for subsequent research, potentially prompting us to reconsider these longstanding challenges and to recognize the value of professional learning opportunities that enable teachers and other educational practitioners to address such dilemmas (Gurr et al., 2024).

The new era and evolving circumstances demand that teachers transform their core competencies to adapt to the new environment (Yao et al., 2023). This presents new challenges for teacher educators, particularly within the context of China's educational landscape following the implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy and the post-pandemic era. The extended demands of teaching and school-related duties, coupled with contemporary challenges, have created entirely new professional requirements. Consequently, teachers are prone to experiencing stress and burnout (Sun et al., 2025). When the demands of such work continue to increase without a commensurate rise in resources to sustain motivation, the risk of teachers encountering ethical dilemmas in decision-making will significantly heighten (Heikkilä et al., 2023). For instance, under the current trends in digital education, primary and secondary school teachers who utilize artificial intelligence applications during training often become more inclined to employ and rely on AI to alleviate fatigue and burnout (Brandhofer & Tengler, 2025). However, teaching quality may decline due to factors such as inadequate compensation for time resources squeezed by newly added AI training and management duties, or insufficient technical resources provided by schools. This gives rise to an ethical dilemma for teachers concerning how to balance traditional education with digital education.

3. An Analysis of Ethical Dilemmas in Teaching Decisions Among Primary and Secondary School Teachers

3.1. Gauging the Appropriate Level of Differentiated Instruction

Traditional uniform teaching requires all pupils to study identical content and textbooks, while receiving the same teaching methods and assessment criteria. For teachers, this facilitates pupil management and offers lower administrative costs alongside greater efficiency. However, the drawbacks are rather pronounced: teachers lack sufficient flexibility in their teaching approach, tending to cater primarily to students of average ability. This results in pupils at both ends of the spectrum being easily overlooked, failing to meet the diverse learning requirements of some students. Consequently, this approach is at odds with the current emphasis on holistic education.

Differentiated teaching refers to the practice of grouping students into distinct levels based on their existing knowledge and skills across different subject areas, as well as variations in their proficiency levels, learning pace, and learning styles. This approach enables the provision of teaching content, methods, and assessment that are tailored to meet their individual needs (For example, dividing the year group into A, B and C classes based on pupils' academic performance). Teachers need to evaluate and interpret clues about learning, readiness and interests, and create opportunities for pupils to gather information, explore ideas, express themselves and broaden their understanding (Demirci-Ünal & Öztürk, 2024). Whilst this approach may bolster students' confidence and motivation, enhance learning efficiency, and contribute to personal development, it also risks creating subtle inequalities (Continuing from above, pupils placed in Group C are highly likely to develop feelings of inferiority and be labelled as “poor performers”), This results in greater challenges in student management and places higher demands on resources and teaching staff capabilities.

3.2. The development of digital technology and artificial intelligence

Traditional teaching emphasizes the emotional bond between pupils and teachers. It makes limited use of technology, prioritizing the teacher's personal guidance and example. Requiring fewer resources, it remains the predominant approach in impoverished regions. However, its shortcomings are also quite apparent. In an era of such rapid technological advancement, without the support of online education, it is prone to stagnation, failing to keep pace with the times and hindering students' access to diverse learning opportunities.

Digital teaching has significantly disrupted traditional pedagogy. Despite its incompatibility with conventional methods, multimedia instruction has alleviated teachers' workload through features such as AI-powered marking and error analysis. Not only does it enhance the appeal of knowledge to children, thereby facilitating teaching, but it also enables the precise identification of students' weak areas, providing personalized

tutoring to effectively boost learning efficiency (Karakus et al., 2025). However, the improper use of multimedia can easily lead to privacy breaches, and overreliance on it may result in a lack of care for pupils, which is detrimental to the development of primary and secondary school students. Moreover, the quality of online content varies considerably, necessitating teachers to discern and filter it; the heavy reliance on networked devices also constitutes a drawback in the development of digital education, exacerbating the “urban-rural divide” and undermining educational equity.

3.3. *The balance between teacher guidance and student-led learning*

Teacher-led instruction refers specifically to the aspects and elements within the teaching process that are primarily planned, organized, implemented, and controlled by the teacher. The benefit of teacher-guided instruction lies in establishing a logically coherent knowledge structure that avoids fragmentation, whilst ensuring all pupils receive identical content to minimize the impact of resource disparities on their learning. However, the drawbacks are equally apparent: students' low engagement levels in the classroom can easily lead to disengagement, while excessive guidance may significantly undermine their critical and innovative thinking. This is particularly problematic for primary and secondary school pupils, whose attention spans are unable to remain focused for extended periods, thereby impacting both teaching effectiveness and the pace of instruction.

Typical scenarios of student-led teaching approaches, such as interdisciplinary project-based learning and creative writing, foster autonomous learning to stimulate intrinsic motivation. Moreover, knowledge retention rates are higher when students engage in hands-on activities and self-directed learning compared to teacher-guided instruction. However, allowing students excessive autonomy in their learning can lead to disruptions in classroom order and other issues that hinder teaching effectiveness. It also makes it difficult to quantitatively assess students' developmental progress, thereby preventing further enhancement of their capabilities.

Beyond this, ethical dilemmas in teaching decisions faced by primary and secondary school teachers also encompass collaboration and competition among colleagues, new challenges arising from the “Double Reduction” policy, and the delineation of responsibilities between home and school. These are all factors' teachers must consider when making relatively sound decisions.

4. Analysis of Factors Influencing Ethical Dilemmas

The reference study (Liu et al., 2024), based on the aforementioned analysis of ethical dilemmas in teaching decisions among primary and secondary school teachers, conducted a questionnaire survey involving multiple teachers across various dimensions. This yielded the data presented in Table 2, specifically detailing secondary school teachers' perspectives on ethical issues concerning classroom assessment: This table examines seven domains related to educational assessment, including confidentiality, fairness, performance, performance, communication, assessment methods, test administration, and grading. Each category contains two specific assessment items (identified by numbers 1–14, totaling fourteen items). The core data represents the proportion of respondents who consider each practice to be ethically sound.

Teachers' ethical decision-making exhibits significant variation, with imbalances across categories. To illustrate this visually, the following presents the average ethical percentage for each category (calculated based on two items) and the overall inclination:

Table 1. Average Ethical Percentage

Category	Average morality (%)	Average immorality (%)	overall tendency
Confidentiality	83.16	16.84	High moral character
Fairness	25.40	74.60	low moral standards
Results	26.20	73.80	low moral standards

Communication	82.35	17.65	High moral character
Evaluation Methodology	77.54	22.46	Moderate morality
Test Management	48.93	51.07	Significant differences
Grading	23.8	76.2	Extremely low moral standards

Overall, teachers' moral decision-making exhibits a polarized pattern: when involving interpersonal interactions (such as confidentiality and communication), moral standards tend to be higher; Categories involving evaluation and fairness (such as equity, performance, and grading) tend to exhibit lower ethical standards. This contrast highlights how evaluative decisions within educational settings are more prone to generating ethical dilemmas.

Categorizing the aforementioned data to reveal differences between categories has exposed risks associated with certain specific items, which may represent common scenarios of ethical dilemmas faced by teachers.

Table 2. Teacher's Ethical Behavior Risk Assessment

Risk Level	Whether morality is a proportion	Essence	Specific projects and case studies
High-risk projects	Immoral Percentage > 80%	A pronounced tendency towards unethical behavior indicates that teachers face considerable pressure in specific decision-making situations	Fairness Item 14: Unethical 82.89% (Potential issues with unequal resource allocation or differential treatment) Grading Item 3: Unethical 80.75% (Adjustment or manipulation of grades to meet external demands) Test Administration Item 6: Unethical 82.35% (Handling of examination cheating) Grading Criteria Item 2: Unethical 88.77% (Opaque grading standards)
High Moral Standards Program	Morality Percentage > 85%	It reflects the strong moral integrity of teachers and can be used as a model practice	Confidentiality Item 8: Ethics 88.24% (Protecting students' sensitive information) Communication Item 11: Ethics 87.17% (Providing honest feedback on student performance) Assessment Method Item 5: Ethics 86.63% (Whether assessment criteria are transparent and publicly available)
Highly contentious projects	The ratio of moral to immoral behavior is close.	Teachers' understanding and level of commitment to the project vary, with decision-making being highly context-dependent	Test management categories collectively approach 50% (teaching evaluation forms and quantitative indicators) Certain assessment practices within the evaluation methodology (subjective scoring) may be prone to controversy

In short, high-risk projects usually point to the issue of "evaluation fairness", and teachers may compromise ethical standards under institutional pressure. High integrity projects often involve clear procedures and

personal professional behaviors, and decision-making is not vulnerable to external interference. Different results in teaching practice result from different teaching decisions among educators and different management frameworks of regional schools.

5. Strategies for Addressing Ethical Dilemmas

The root of the ethical dilemma faced by teachers lies in the systematic problems within the scope of evaluation. In order to reduce unethical decision-making, it is suggested to focus intervention on education policy and professional development.

5.1. For individuals:

5.1.1. *The Identification and Evaluation of Argumentative Dilemmas*

When such situations arise, one must first determine whether the issue constitutes an ethical dilemma, an operational difficulty, or a matter of personal preference. Secondly, if the issue is an ethical dilemma, it is essential to identify the core principles at conflict (for example: responsibility towards pupils versus responsibility towards the school and parents). When identifying an ethical dilemma, it is essential to gather information relevant to the current facts as comprehensively and objectively as possible, thereby avoiding erroneous decisions based on bias or partiality. Finally, list all possible solutions to the greatest extent feasible, taking into account legal regulations and local policies. Assess each solution's short-term and long-term impacts and determine whether they contravene core ethical principles. Based on this analysis, arrive at the most responsible, feasible, and acceptable teaching decision. At times, relatively correct decisions may conflict with personal interests, requiring teachers to exercise discernment.

5.1.2. *Seeking advice*

When teachers lack sufficient decision-making experience, they may seek external assistance by discussing issues with more experienced colleagues to gain diverse perspectives and advice, thereby enabling more objective judgements. However, care must be taken to protect student privacy; One may also consult school leadership and administrators regarding institutional policies and resources. Some institutions establish dedicated departments or committees to address such matters. For more complex issues involving legal or psychological concerns, one may seek advice from solicitors, counsellors, or similar professionals. Leadership bears responsibility for addressing ethical dilemmas faced by teaching staff and should lead by example in encouraging open discussion of encountered ethical challenges and their resolution processes; Teachers may resolve their own ethical dilemmas by consulting educational ethics literature, journals, ethical guidelines issued by professional organizations, and case studies.

5.1.3. *Self-reflection and learning*

Following the implementation of a decision, it is necessary to reflect upon the entire process in order to accumulate experience for the emergence of future ethical dilemmas. The outcome of the ethical dilemma resolution: whether the intended objectives were achieved, what aspects of the resolution process were handled well and what could be improved, and what insights this experience offers for future ethical decision-making. When addressing issues, one must continue to adhere to professional conduct standards, ensuring decisions best serve the interests and long-term development of all pupils—particularly those affected. Furthermore, one must select the fairest, most equitable approach that respects pupils' dignity, autonomy, and privacy, while aligning with one's own values to navigate ethical dilemmas.

5.2. For school:

5.2.1. *Establish a clear ethical framework and policy structure*

In accordance with national and local regulations and taking into account the specific circumstances of the school, establish clear and practical guidelines for teachers' ethical conduct. These guidelines should outline the principles and procedures for resolving various ethical dilemmas, and ensure that matters such as managing student behavior, awarding honors and praise, and communicating between schools and parents are

handled in accordance with ethical principles. Ethical standards and support policies should be regularly reviewed, updated and improved. When adhering to the ethical standards and policies set by the agency, senior managers should set an example and encourage staff to clarify ethical dilemmas rather than avoid them. They should take the initiative to take responsibility for system improvement to prevent the staff from facing the difficulties caused by system defects alone. In addition, the policy should improve teachers' awareness of the psychological pressure caused by moral dilemmas and encourage them to seek necessary psychological support and pressure relief resources. Only by creating an atmosphere that allows mistakes can teachers be able to face and solve this ethical dilemma.

5.2.2. Establish a reasonable evaluation and litigation mechanism

Establishing a fair and transparent decision-making and appeal mechanism is an important guarantee for safeguarding procedural justice and protecting teachers' legitimate rights and interests. For example, when a teacher's moral decision causes controversy or conflict, the school administrative department must maintain impartiality, investigate and handle it according to the established procedures, so as to protect the legitimate rights and occupational safety of teachers. This can prevent teachers from being unfairly treated or retaliated for adhering to moral principles. In addition, the appeal procedure should be improved to provide clear and effective remedies for educators, ensure that their voices are heard and deal with injustice fairly. This not only protects the legitimate rights and interests of teachers, but also reduces the potential harm caused by unpredictable environment and ambiguous ethical standards. These measures can promote the long-term development of educators and students by reducing the cognitive burden of coping with moral dilemmas, improving the well-being of teachers and maintaining the commitment to fairness and justice.

5.2.3. Ethics Training and Support System

Schools should develop regular moral training programs for teachers and regularly conduct case studies and lectures to improve educators' sensitivity and decision-making ability to moral dilemmas. The focus should be on strengthening the moral training within the assessment category, and conducting targeted training for areas with low moral standards such as fairness, grading and assessment, so as to emphasize the principles of justice and conflict management. (For example, item 14 (86.6% unethical) and item 3 (86.5% unethical) should give priority to intervention). The ethical dilemma in teaching decision-making constitutes the core content of new teacher induction training. In addition, teachers may worry that openly discussing their moral dilemmas may be perceived by colleagues, management or parents as incompetent or poor judgment. Such disclosure may even lead to negative evaluation, adversely affect career development, or cause unnecessary disputes. Therefore, the establishment of an ethical support system is essential to enhance teachers' sense of trust, reduce unnecessary conflicts, and enable them to better deal with ethical dilemmas.

5.3. For society:

5.3.1. Refine laws and policies

Establish a legal environment characterized by clear rights and responsibilities, strong protection and procedural justice. We should improve the legal framework and solve the moral dilemma faced by primary and secondary school teachers, so as to provide them with clear behavior boundaries and protect their rights. At the same time, ensure that the rights of students are protected. Key operational measures include improving the criteria for defining moral dilemmas, recording common moral dilemmas, avoiding ambiguous terms that make teachers unable to determine their obligations. We should also formulate policies to protect teachers' rights, optimize their working environment (reduce administrative and formalist tasks), and improve their economic and social status, so as to alleviate the moral dilemma caused by their low status.

5.3.2. Provide professional guidance and resource support

In order to provide professional guidance to teachers, it is not only necessary to systematically integrate the curriculum of educational ethics into teacher training programs and use case studies and role plays to cultivate the ethical sensitivity and decision-making ability of future educators, but also necessary to regularly

hold ethics focused workshops during in-service training. These courses should analyze real-world dilemmas, promote experience sharing, and teach ethical dilemmas decision-making models. At the same time, more attention should be paid to strengthening the resource support for educators who deal with moral dilemmas. Practical resources such as ethical dilemma response guides and case study databases should be developed for teachers to consult when required. Particular attention should be given to establishing an AI-powered database for teacher ethical dilemmas, enabling faster resolution of such challenges.

5.3.3. Properly harnessing public opinion

The ethical role of teachers in public discourse is often oversimplified and flattened, obscuring the complex ethical decision-making processes and self-concepts inherent in the profession (Gurr et al., 2024). Therefore, efforts should be made to foster public understanding and respect for the teaching profession while cultivating a favorable public discourse environment. This includes advocating for objective and comprehensive media coverage of educational matters, reducing negative reporting to avoid one-sided portrayals of teacher-student or home-school conflicts, and thereby shaping a professional and responsible image of teachers. At the same time, efforts should be made to promote public understanding of the complexity of modern education, the professional nature of teaching and the moral challenges faced by educators through community initiatives and parent education programs. It must be emphasized that education is not only the responsibility of teachers; Society and the public should share this responsibility. This includes creating a supportive environment for students and reducing teachers' stress and loneliness.

6. Conclusions

To sum up, primary and secondary school teachers' teaching decisions are facing increasingly complex ethical challenges, including the "double reduction" policy, the development of artificial intelligence and big data. This study uses empirical data to further demonstrate the serious ethical pressure faced by teachers in teaching decision-making and reveals the deep-seated conflict between institutional constraints and ethical principles. Therefore, this paper proposes three-dimensional strategies to solve these conflicts and problems. We must realize that to solve the ethical dilemma of teachers does not mean to seek an absolute solution, but to find a dynamic balance in the multiple value conflict. Future research should further explore the different challenges faced by teachers in different stages of education, as well as the specific content and direction of teachers' ethical decision-making ability and ultimately promote the high-quality development of education.

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Mengdi Qin: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no competing interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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