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BEHIND THE FOUR WALLS: UNVEILING CLASSROOM TEACHERS' ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN TEACHING

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ABSTRACT
This transcendental phenomenological study investigated the ethical dilemmas experienced by five secondary school teachers in Banga, South Cotabato. In-depth interviews explored how educators navigate moral tensions between institutional policy, personal values, and student needs. Thematic analysis revealed five core themes: Balancing Fairness with Compassion; Upholding Institutional Policy versus Personal Values; Reflective and Value-Based Decision-Making; Collaborative Resolution and Collegial Advice; and Institutional Support and Ethical Frameworks. The findings show that teachers rely on self-reflection, empathetic reasoning, and peer support when formal policies fall short of addressing the complexities of classroom ethics. The study recommends that schools develop context-sensitive ethical guidelines, provide structured ethics training, and foster peer consultation spaces to empower teachers in ethical decision-making.
KEYWORDS: *Ethical Dilemmas; Moral Decision-Making; Educational Ethics; Reflective Practice; Teacher Support*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is inherently an ethical endeavor that demands educators to continuously reconcile competing values such as fairness, compassion, institutional policy, and student well-being (Börü, 2020; Levinson & Fay, 2024). These ethical dilemmas emerge in everyday decisions—from grading and discipline to classroom relationships—often presenting no clear-cut right or wrong solutions. In particular, modern educators must navigate moral complexity intensified by digital contexts, socio-emotional demands, and inequities in access and resources.

While global research has advanced our understanding of these dilemmas, studies capturing their lived dimensions in the Philippine context remain limited. Existing research has addressed challenges such as burnout, resource scarcity, relational conflicts, and inclusive leadership (Bautista & Dela Cruz, 2021; Ramos, 2020; Navarro, 2022). Yet, few of these adopt a phenomenological lens to explore how teachers personally experience and interpret ethical tensions in their classrooms.

This study addresses that gap by using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology (1994) to explore the lived experiences of secondary school teachers in Banga, South Cotabato. Anchored in theoretical models such as Kohlberg's stages of moral development and Noddings' Ethic of Care, the research aims to uncover how educators perceive, reflect upon, and navigate ethical dilemmas in teaching. The analysis offers new insights into how teachers reconcile personal values with institutional expectations, and how systemic supports—or the lack thereof—influence their moral agency in contexts marked by cultural diversity, economic constraints, and evolving pedagogical demands.

Review of Related Literature

Teaching as a profession is deeply embedded in ethical responsibilities, where educators must navigate complex dilemmas involving fairness, compassion, and institutional expectations. Theoretical models such as Kohlberg's stages of moral development, Rest's Four-Component Model, and Noddings' Ethic of Care provide foundational frameworks for understanding how teachers recognize, evaluate, and act upon ethical issues (Börü, 2020; Levinson & Fay, 2024). These theories emphasize that moral reasoning, empathy, and character strength are crucial in resolving classroom dilemmas.

Recent studies reinforce the pervasiveness of ethical challenges in both local and global education settings. Teachers face conflicts in grading, discipline, inclusivity, and policy enforcement—often with no clear solutions

(Pope et al., 2023; Erdogan & Sezgin, 2020). In the Philippine context, dilemmas are further complicated by resource scarcity, parental expectations, and policy constraints, despite the existence of a formal Code of Ethics. Globally, multicultural classrooms and evolving societal norms present additional ethical tensions that test teachers' adaptability and integrity (Navarro, 2022; Ramos, 2020).

To cope, educators employ strategies such as collaborative decision-making, reflective practice, and continuous ethics training. These approaches help teachers reconcile their personal values with institutional mandates while maintaining fairness and empathy in their practice (Levinson, 2023; Brown & Wild, 2023). This study builds on these frameworks to explore how Filipino teachers experience and respond to ethical dilemmas in real-world classroom settings.

Statement of the Problem

This study explored the ethical dilemmas commonly encountered by secondary public and private school teachers in Banga, South Cotabato. It examined the strategies employed by teachers in resolving these ethical conflicts and provided insights for policy enhancement and professional support systems that could assist educators in ethical decision-making. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What were the common ethical dilemmas faced by classroom teachers in their teaching practice?
2. How did teachers navigate and resolve ethical challenges in their professional responsibilities?
3. What support mechanisms or policies could be developed to assist teachers in handling ethical dilemmas?

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in the study, ensuring a systematic approach to exploring the ethical dilemmas experienced by classroom teachers. Using qualitative inquiry, purposive sampling, thematic analysis, and strict adherence to ethical research principles, the study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges teachers faced within the classroom setting.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of classroom teachers in navigating ethical dilemmas. The qualitative nature of the research allowed for a rich and nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives, emotions, and decision-making processes—elements that could not be fully captured through quantitative means.

The phenomenological approach was particularly suitable for this investigation, as it sought to uncover the essence of ethical dilemmas as experienced firsthand by teachers. Rather than relying on predetermined variables or statistical data, this method allowed participants' narratives to shape the direction of the inquiry. In-depth, semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, enabling participants to articulate their experiences, ethical conflicts, and coping strategies in their own words. Through thematic analysis, recurring patterns in their responses were identified, providing insight into the nature and resolution of ethical dilemmas in varying teaching contexts.

By focusing on teachers' lived experiences, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of moral decision-making in education and generated implications for improving teacher training, policy frameworks, and institutional support systems.

Sampling Techniques

The study employed purposive sampling to deliberately select participants based on their direct experience with ethical dilemmas in teaching. Inclusion criteria required that participants be licensed secondary school teachers, with at least three years of teaching experience, and a willingness to share their experiences. Ten teachers from both public and private secondary schools in Banga, South Cotabato were selected. Although ten participants were initially targeted, data saturation was achieved after five interviews, as recurring themes began to emerge. Including teachers from both rural and urban settings ensured a range of perspectives and enriched the findings with context-specific insights.

Research Instrument

The study utilized a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection tool, balancing consistency across participants with the flexibility to explore individual experiences in depth. The guide focused on teachers' real-life encounters with ethical dilemmas, their decision-making processes, and the support systems they relied upon. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, based on participant availability and convenience, ensuring broad accessibility. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

to ensure accuracy. This process facilitated a thorough thematic analysis, enabling the researcher to identify recurring patterns and insights aligned with the study's objectives.

Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis using the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allowed for a systematic exploration of teachers' ethical experiences. The process began with familiarization, where interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to gain a deep understanding of the data. Initial codes were then generated to capture significant features related to ethical dilemmas and teacher responses. These codes were organized into broader patterns during the theme-searching phase, followed by a rigorous review to ensure coherence and consistency. The themes were then clearly defined and named to accurately reflect the specific aspects of ethical challenges encountered by teachers. Finally, the findings were contextualized within the research objectives and existing literature, with participant quotations used to illustrate each theme. This method enabled the study to generate a rich, insightful account of how classroom teachers perceive, navigate, and resolve ethical dilemmas in their professional practice.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in full compliance with established ethical research standards to safeguard participant welfare and maintain the integrity of the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were thoroughly briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, with signed consent forms collected before interviews commenced. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports, and no identifying information was disclosed. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary, with participants made aware of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data, including audio recordings and transcripts, were securely stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher, ensuring that participants' information remained confidential and protected throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed five major themes that captured the lived ethical experiences of secondary school teachers in Banga, South Cotabato. Central to these findings was the moral tension between maintaining fairness and expressing compassion. Participants consistently encountered situations where the enforcement of uniform academic standards conflicted with the personal struggles and socio-emotional realities of students. One teacher expressed the difficulty of catering to both slow and fast learners within the same instructional framework, highlighting the risk of disengagement and inequality. Instances were also shared where disciplinary actions taken under emotional strain later triggered professional remorse, underscoring the internal conflicts educators face when their actions fall short of their ethical ideals.

Another significant dilemma arose from the disconnect between institutional policies and personal moral values. Teachers reported having to comply with rigid school directives that did not always reflect the context or needs of their learners, such as resorting to strict grading systems or disciplinary procedures that conflicted with their instinct for leniency and empathy. In resolving such ethical challenges, teachers employed reflective and value-based decision-making as a primary strategy. They described pausing to consider the long-term developmental consequences of their actions on students, opting for restorative practices rather than punitive responses. Teachers' reflections often involved placing themselves in the students' shoes to ensure empathetic and just resolutions.

Complementing individual reflection was a reliance on collegial consultation. Informants highlighted the value of discussing ethical predicaments with co-teachers and administrators, which provided emotional reassurance, broader perspectives, and informed strategies. Such collaborative environments fostered a professional culture of shared ethical responsibility. However, a notable concern was the inadequacy of institutional support structures. While some schools offered trainings and meetings, these were perceived as generic and insufficiently targeted to the complex ethical realities of teaching. Participants emphasized the need for more context-specific ethics training, clearer policy frameworks, and leadership that models ethical integrity.

These findings align with existing literature suggesting that teachers' moral agency flourishes when institutions promote ethical reflection, peer dialogue, and coherent policies (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011; Sockett, 2006). Overall, the study underscores the multifaceted nature of ethical dilemmas in education, pointing to the urgent need for responsive support systems that not only recognize the moral labor of teaching but actively sustain it through institutional commitment.

Conclusions

This study investigated the lived experiences of five secondary school teachers in Banga, South Cotabato, regarding the ethical dilemmas they encountered in their professional practice. Guided by a transcendental

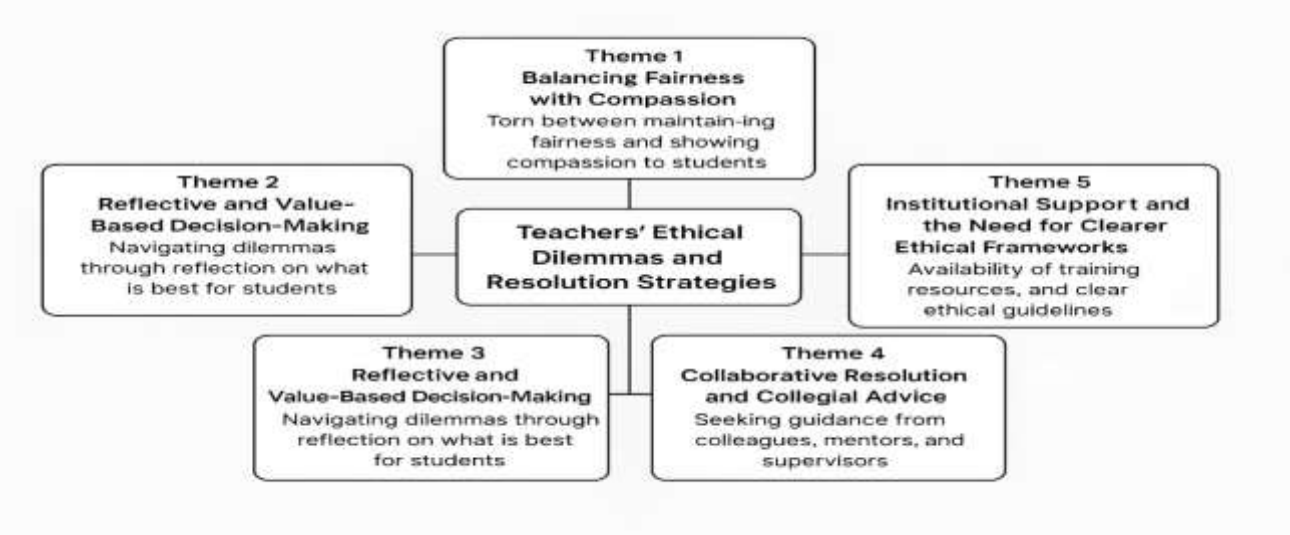
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phenomenological approach, the research sought to uncover the most common moral challenges teachers face, how they navigate such issues, and what forms of institutional support are most needed. The analysis revealed five central themes: balancing fairness with compassion, upholding institutional policy versus personal values, reflective and value-based decision-making, collaborative resolution and collegial advice, and the need for institutional support and clearer ethical frameworks. From these themes, it was concluded that ethical dilemmas are deeply embedded in daily teaching responsibilities and that teachers often rely on personal moral judgment and collegial consultation to make decisions. However, institutional guidance and formal training on ethics were found to be lacking, exposing gaps in school policies and professional development programs.

Recommendations

To address these concerns, it is recommended that schools implement continuous ethics-centered training, establish structured mentoring systems, and revise policies to be contextually sensitive and inclusive. Moreover, ethics modules should be incorporated into both pre-service and in-service teacher education, focusing on real-life scenarios to build moral resilience. Finally, future research should expand to include the perspectives of students, parents, and administrators to construct a more holistic understanding of ethical dilemmas in education, thereby fostering a more responsive and ethically grounded teaching environment.

Figure 1



The diagram illustrates five key themes that emerged from the study on teachers' ethical dilemmas in Banga, South Cotabato. At the center is the core issue—Ethical Dilemmas in Teaching—surrounded by interconnected themes: Balancing Fairness with Compassion, Upholding Institutional Policy vs. Personal Values, Reflective and Value-Based Decision-Making, Collaborative Resolution and Collegial Advice, and Institutional Support and Ethical Frameworks. Each theme represents a critical dimension of how teachers experience, navigate, and resolve ethical challenges in their practice, emphasizing the interplay between personal reflection, peer support, institutional structures, and student-centered values.

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