

# Research on the transformation path of knowledge and practice in teacher ethics education based on the theory of "meaningful learning"

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**Abstract:** In the implementation process of teacher ethics education in China and the West, a common problem arises, namely, the failure to fully respect the learning psychology of teachers, resulting in the loss of the learning significance of teacher ethics education and a lack of substantive connection and transformation between it and individual teacher ethics behaviors. Ausubel's "meaningful learning" theory emphasizes that learners actively establish connections between new knowledge and existing knowledge, relying on cognitive mechanisms such as "assimilation", "accommodation", and "balancing", to promote the transformation from ethical cognition to teacher ethics practice through action and knowledge. Therefore, in teacher ethics education, it is necessary to design and classify teacher ethics learning scenarios, create dilemmas in teacher ethics to trigger cognitive conflicts, achieve social significance negotiation in the practical community, and embed the educational scene to facilitate the transformation from knowledge to action.

**Keywords:** meaningful learning; teacher ethics education; transformation of knowledge and action; cognitive conflict

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## 1 The problem: the lack of significance in teacher ethic education learning

As the implementers of education, the professional ethics of teachers directly affect the growth of students, the improvement of educational quality, and the long-term development of society. Teacher ethics education is not only a key component of the teacher's professional development system, but also a core approach to shaping noble educational personalities and promoting the spirit of education. Of course, teacher ethics learning has distinct characteristics. These characteristics determine that teacher ethics must establish a close internal connection with teacher's own professional life and be truly integrated into the daily behaviors and professional practices of teachers.

There are certain differences in the teacher ethics education between Chinese and Western education systems. In terms of requirements for teacher ethics, norms establishment, and educational methods, they exhibit different ways of thinking and priorities. For instance, Chinese teacher ethics education requires teachers to possess noble qualities, emphasizing the moral cultivation and personality charm of teachers as "a teacher with high knowledge and a role model with upright conduct", and becoming a social role model. It also values direct and positive persuasion education and enhances teacher ethics levels by offering specialized courses and exemplary demonstrations. Western teacher ethics, on the other hand, places more emphasis on professional ethics, requiring a focus on individual-centered aspects. Western teacher ethics is a typical representative of "bottom-line thinking", that is, by setting minimum behavioral standards to safeguard the rights of

of the teacher group, this external moral restraint centers on regulating behavior, clearly defining what teachers "should do", forming the minimum moral standards for professional behavior [1]. For example, in European and American countries, teachers' requirements are classified under the category of social morality, without the requirement of being a social role model. They emphasize specific behavioral rules and are more operable. They adopt indirect methods, integrating teacher ethics content into education courses. Many countries do not have separate teacher ethics courses and emphasize the specific conduct of teachers in educational and teaching situations. For instance, in countries like Finland and Norway, teachers discuss moral dilemmas in educational life through group (community) discussions, using methods such as empathy and value clarification to handle conflicts [2].

The contemporary teacher ethics education in China is, on the one hand, deeply rooted in the long and rich traditional culture of the country, carrying forward traditional concepts such as respecting teachers and valuing education; on the other hand, it actively draws on and absorbs the characteristics of foreign teacher ethics education in terms of logical system construction and emphasis on daily practice, through continuous integration and innovation, gradually enriching and improving the connotation of teacher ethics education. In terms of teacher ethics learning, a systematic content framework has been constructed. It covers multiple important dimensions. Firstly, it explores the spirit of teacher ethics, traces the cultural origin of teacher ethics, discusses teacher ethics, and clarifies the moral principles and behavioral norms that teachers should follow in educational and teaching activities [3]. Secondly, it comprises teacher ethics norms and guidelines, which include the national-level teacher professional ethics norms and guidelines for primary and secondary school teachers, providing guidance for teachers' professional behaviors; the basic requirements for teachers' professional qualities and moral qualities formed by the teacher industry itself; the integration of international best practices with local standards of teacher ethics. Finally, it includes the transformation and application of teacher ethics practice, emphasizing the conversion of the learned teacher ethics theoretical knowledge into actual educational and teaching behaviors, constantly testing and improving the teacher ethics concept in educational practice, and enhancing the effectiveness of teacher ethics education. The last part is teacher ethics cultivation and self-improvement. This part focuses on guiding teachers to conduct self-reflection and improvement, through regular self-examination, discovering problems in teacher ethics and correcting them in time; at the same time, conducting teacher ethics warning education, using typical cases as negative examples, to sound the alarm for teachers and enhance their self-discipline awareness and sense of responsibility.

However, in the implementation of teacher ethics education in both China and Western contexts, there is a common problem that the learning psychology of teachers is often overlooked, resulting in the loss of the learning significance of teacher ethics education and a lack of an intrinsic and substantive connection and transformation between it and individual teacher ethical behaviors. When conducting teacher ethics education, educators often tend to design course systems, compile knowledge content, define behavioral standards, and list punishment mechanisms, attempting to achieve educational goals through external constraints and knowledge indoctrination. For example, teacher ethics education is often carried out in the form of emergency, thematic lectures, or policy document learning, and is usually conducted only after incidents of teacher ethics violations occur, which neglects the complexity of teachers as moral learning subjects, separates the connotations of love education, professional ethics, and teacher ethics wisdom into isolated knowledge points, and uses external pressure or input-style teaching, unable to form teachers' internal moral cognitive structure, value system, and behavioral tendencies. Teachers remember norms, regulations, and stories, but fail to internalize them, unable to integrate them into the existing cognitive system to form a complete structure, resulting in information being easily forgotten and difficult to flexibly apply. This leads to the "two-layered nature" of teacher ethics education: on the one hand, it repeatedly emphasizes certain points; on the other hand, it merely stays at the superficial level, failing to evoke emotional resonance

or thought-provoking impact. Teacher ethics education overly relies on theoretical indoctrination and normative preaching, simplifying the content into abstract knowledge items or requiring teachers to mechanically abide by external norms. This makes it difficult for teachers to transform the learned teacher ethics-related learning content into internal behavioral norms. How to fully focus on the teacher's learning subject and promote the transformation of knowledge and action in teacher ethics learning is an important topic worth exploring.

## **2 Solving the issue of the learning significance of teacher ethics education from the cognitive perspective**

During the process of teacher ethics learning, teachers often tend to adopt a passive attitude. Learners lack patience and struggle to concentrate, adopting an attitude of mere compliance. This passive state leads to poor learning outcomes. American educational psychologist David Ausubel proposed the "meaningful learning theory", which holds that the essence of the meaningful learning process is to establish an artificial and substantive connection between the new knowledge represented by symbols and the appropriate concepts already existing in the learner's cognitive structure [4]. The realization of good learning outcomes depends on the synergy of internal and external conditions. In terms of internal conditions, learners themselves need to possess a specific cognitive foundation and a willingness to learn. Learners should have a positive intention to actively establish connections between new knowledge and existing knowledge, rather than being in a passive state of accepting knowledge. This internal learning motivation is the key force driving the meaningful learning process.

### (1) The learning motivation requirements of the learner as the main body

The content of teacher ethics learning essentially encompasses two closely related yet distinct dimensions. The first is the systematic study of knowledge and norms, where teachers need to study educational laws and regulations, professional ethics norms, etc., to clarify behavioral guidelines and professional requirements, providing a reference for teaching behaviors. The second is the in-depth perception and self-internalization of the spiritual connotations, where teachers internalize the spirit of loving education and caring for students during the process of understanding teacher ethics, and internalize it as a value pursuit and action consciousness. In practice, they will implement and elevate it, achieving a transformation from external norms to internal spiritual drive.

The pursuit of lofty spiritual and value goals is the most core internal requirement in the study of teacher ethics, and it is also the driving force for teachers to engage in such learning. Teachers with a lofty educational belief regard teacher ethics as an important guarantee for achieving educational ideals. Even when encountering various difficulties during the learning process, they will persist in studying, knowing that only with noble teacher ethics can they fulfill the sacred mission of cultivating well-rounded talents. The construction of teacher educational beliefs is the core issue in the professional growth of teachers and the improvement of educational quality. It concerns how teachers understand the essence of education, adhere to the values of education, and transform them into lasting educational motivation in practice. It represents teachers' profound recognition of education's essence, purpose, and value, serving as the spiritual core that transcends utilitarian calculations.

The deep recognition by teachers of the essence, purpose and value of education forms the spiritual core and driving force of teacher ethics learning. The internal motivation of teacher ethics learning should be enhanced, converted into specific guidelines, and continuously elevated in practice. Educational belief elevates teacher ethics from "compliance with professional norms" to "fulfillment of educational ideals", clarifying its ultimate goal, making teachers actively concern disadvantaged groups, fairly distribute resources, resist utilitarianism erosion, and insist on not assigning mechanical repetitive tasks. At the same time, it stimulates teachers' professional happiness, transforms teacher ethics behavior into

self-actualization, alleviates professional burnout, and makes teachers more willing to actively participate in teacher ethics training. Educational belief also serves as an operational practical framework for teacher ethics, constructs a behavior checklist, functions as a decision-making basis in moral dilemmas, and helps teachers refuse unreasonable demands. Through action research and educational narratives during the deepening of practice, educational belief enables teachers to verify convictions in practice, refine them through reflection, and elevate their ethics from a state of "compliance with norms" to "expression of beliefs". Educational belief and teacher ethics learning form a "belief-driven practice, practice feeding back to belief" relationship, thereby achieving the transformation of teacher ethics from "compliance with norms" to "expression of beliefs". As Wang Shouren pointed out in *Record of Transmission and Practice*: "The genuine and solid place of knowing lies in action, and the clear, perceptive and discerning place of action lies in knowledge [5].

The passion for education serves as the emotional foundation for the study of teacher ethics. Loving education means that teachers regard the growth of students and the development of education as their responsibility, and deeply understand the crucial role of good teacher ethics in shaping students' character and guiding their growth. This passion drives teachers to actively study teacher ethics norms and internalize them as their own behavioral guidelines, holding themselves to higher moral standards. Driven by professional conviction and passion, educators will have a strong interest in the relevant content of teacher ethics, actively exploring the essence of teacher ethics. This interest will become the motivation for teachers to continuously explore the treasures in the repository of teacher ethics knowledge and continuously enhance their moral cognitive level. For example, through the exemplary power of outstanding teachers, the learners' inner recognition and love can be enhanced. Teachers may be presented with exemplary cases such as Zhang Guimei's dedication to establishing a free girls' high school in a poverty-stricken area and helping countless girls change their destinies. Detailed learning materials should be compiled encompassing her educational journey, pedagogical philosophy and stories of teacher-student interactions, along with pictures and video materials, allowing the learners to have an intuitive understanding of the spirit of dedication, stimulating a sense of mission and responsibility, and strengthening their educational beliefs and emotional identification.

## (2) Meaningful learning provides a relevant "anchor point" for teacher ethics education

In the learner's original cognitive structure, there should be concepts or propositions closely related to the new knowledge, and these existing knowledge must be clear, stable, and distinguishable. Only in this way can they provide a solid "anchor" for the acceptance and integration of new knowledge. When new knowledge establishes a substantive connection with the appropriate concepts already in the cognitive structure, the new knowledge can be incorporated into the original cognitive network, thereby enriching and expanding the cognitive structure. The core mechanism for achieving deep teacher ethics construction lies in activating the experiential connection between individual teachers and exemplary narratives. When teachers establish a substantive, non-arbitrary connection between the moral logic embedded in the story and their own detailed observation, profound perception, and specific practical experience of teacher ethics behavior, the new knowledge can be deeply integrated and restructured with the original cognitive structure. This process prompts learning to shift from an external, passive acceptance of knowledge to an internal, active construction of meaning, enabling teachers to understand the norms of teacher ethics beyond superficial imitation and delve into the essence of moral principles. Only when new knowledge establishes such a real, profound, and logically coherent connection with the original cognitive structure can meaningful learning truly take place, and the cognitive structure of learners can achieve substantive expansion and deepening. From an external perspective, learning materials and teaching support play an indispensable role. The learning materials themselves should have rigorous internal logic, which can naturally and effectively guide learners to perceive the intrinsic connection between old and new knowledge and build a bridge for

knowledge communication. At the same time, the teaching support is also crucial. Diverse teaching methods should be utilized such as ingenious questioning or organizing guided discussions to help learners deeply reveal the potential connections between knowledge, promoting learners to transform external learning materials into organic components of their own knowledge system, thereby achieving the organic synergy of internal and external conditions and promoting the actual occurrence of meaningful learning.

(3) Teacher ethics education should align with the mechanisms of "assimilation", "adaptation" and "balancing".

During the process of teacher ethics learning, the psychological mechanisms of meaningful learning - assimilation, adaptation, and balance - play a crucial and unique role [6]. They interweave and work together, driving the continuous development and improvement of teachers' ethical cognitive framework, and helping teachers become more professionally competent and morally committed educators. Assimilation, as the initial psychological process of meaningful learning, is the way for learners to incorporate new knowledge into their existing cognitive structure and make it part of the existing knowledge. In the field of teacher ethics learning, teachers often rely on the broad and fundamental cognitive foundation of "caring for students" to assimilate specific requirements such as "paying attention to students' mental health" and "respecting students' individual differences", allowing new teacher ethics requirements to be integrated into the existing conceptual system, making the original concepts more rich and specific, and helping teachers better practice the norms. However, with the continuous development and transformation of education, new educational concepts, social values, and changes in students' needs bring new knowledge that does not match the teachers' original cognitive structure. At this point, the adaptation mechanism comes into play. For example, from emphasizing the authority of teachers to advocating equal communication and common growth between teachers and students, teachers need to adjust their original cognitive structure and achieve the transformation of teacher ethics cognition from traditional to modern, making the teacher ethics cognition keep pace with the times and adapt to new requirements. Balanceization, through the dynamic interaction of assimilation and adaptation, enables learners to gradually achieve the balance and expansion of cognitive structure. In teacher ethics learning, teachers constantly come into contact with new concepts and requirements. Through assimilation, they consolidate and strengthen existing concepts, and through adaptation, they break through traditional thinking and accept new standards. Through repeated interaction, they optimize the teacher ethics cognitive structure. When facing diverse student groups or complex educational situations, they can not only adhere to core values such as dedication and caring for students, but also flexibly apply new methods and techniques to adapt to students' needs, making the teacher ethics cognition more scientific and comprehensive, and guiding practice with a more mature and wise attitude. In conclusion, the series of psychological mechanisms of assimilation, adaptation, and balanceization are closely linked and indispensable in teacher ethics learning, jointly promoting the continuous development and improvement of teachers' ethics cognition, providing a solid psychological foundation and cognitive guarantee for teachers to become guides for students' growth, and promoting the education cause to develop in a more humanized and scientific direction.

### **3 The path of moral character transformation based on meaning construction in educational contexts**

The constructivist learning theory holds that learning is not a simple and passive mirror-like reflection of the objective reality by the subject, but an active construction process. During this construction process, the subject's existing cognitive structure plays an especially important role; moreover, his cognitive structure is constantly evolving [7]. In other words, knowledge is not acquired through the teacher's transmission, but is obtained by the learner in a certain context (i.e., within a social and cultural framework), with the help of others (including teachers and learning partners), by utilizing necessary learning materials, and through the process of meaning construction. Only when the knowledge concept of teacher ethics

has a substantive connection with the individual's existing experience and value cognition can learning truly transform into an internal driving force for professional growth.

(1) Designing hierarchical and classified learning scenarios for teacher ethics

Starting from the concept of "individual experience adaptation", we design hierarchical and categorized scenarios for teacher ethics learning based on the cognitive differences and individual uniqueness among different teacher groups. For instance, when telling stories about exemplary teachers to the teachers, the understanding levels and experiences of different groups of teachers will vary. For example, young teachers might understand it as teaching skills and ideals, while subject leaders might focus on leadership and influence. Similarly, young teachers also have differences in their understanding of ethics due to individual variations. If we connect it with their prior observations and perceptions of teacher ethics behaviors, and understand the internal logical relationship, it will help achieve meaningful teacher ethics construction and learning. Meaningful teacher ethics learning enables teachers to reflect on their own moral behaviors, thereby enabling its reflection and enhancement within specific educational contexts. This allows teachers to effectively transform and apply the learned moral knowledge to reality when facing complex and changing educational situations, truly realizing the internalization and application of the knowledge of teacher ethics learning.

(2) Creating a dilemma situation related to teacher ethics to trigger cognitive conflicts

During the process of learning about teacher ethics, teachers' understanding of norms and values is often influenced by their existing cognitive framework. When new requirements for teacher ethics are inconsistent with an individual's existing experiences or beliefs, cognitive conflicts may arise. Such conflicts are an important opportunity for deepening teacher ethics cognition and promoting the restructuring of cognitive structures. By creating realistic scenarios with dilemmas, it is possible to stimulate teachers to reflect on the commonly held value concepts in their daily teaching, thereby achieving the elevation and internalization of teacher ethics cognition during the process of resolving conflicts [8].

For instance, when organizing a discussion on teacher ethics, one can design educational event cases with moral dilemmas, such as "Should we sacrifice the individual student's legitimate needs in order to preserve the collective honor?" In such conflicting situations, the teacher's existing value judgments may face challenges. Driven by cognitive conflicts, teachers, through collective discussion, role-playing and debate exchanges, not only need to understand the surface requirements of teacher ethics norms, but also need to explore the underlying ethical logic and educational significance: Healthy collective honor should be for promoting the growth, cohesion and sense of belonging of every member in the collective. If it is achieved at the expense of the basic rights of a certain member, then this "honor" has already been alienated. The teacher ethics requires teachers to treat every student fairly and impartially. Ignoring the reasonable needs of individual students in the name of the collective is a manifestation of teacher ethics deviation. In this discussion, teachers correct their own understanding of teacher ethics in the process of viewpoint collisions and gradually form a more stable and reasonable concept of teacher ethics.

(3) Achieving social significance negotiation within the practical community

Meaningful learning theories suggest that the construction of meaning is not only an individual psychological process, but also deepens through negotiation in social interactions [9]. Creating a "practical community" is precisely to provide teachers with a platform for social meaning negotiation, enabling new ideas that emerge in cognitive conflicts to be tested, refined, and confirmed through conversations, observations, and collaboration with others, thereby achieving the elevation from individual understanding to collective wisdom, and realizing the stabilization and transferability of teacher ethics cognition. For example, in the aforementioned dilemma case of collective honor and individual legitimate demands, teachers must clearly articulate the value logic behind their behavioral choices (connecting with their original cognition),

and listen to and respond to the completely different perspectives of their peers (accepting new social information). This social interaction forces teachers to constantly reflect and adjust their viewpoints, and ultimately, under the collision of collective wisdom, construct a more practical and instructive model of teacher ethics experience. Similarly, in community discussions, allowing the "silent knowledge" of senior teachers' teacher ethics and the "frontier theories" of young teachers to collide and integrate is precisely the way to facilitate the substantive connection between old and new experiences in the process of meaningful construction [10].

#### (4) Embed in educational settings to facilitate behavioral transformation

The ultimate significance of teacher ethics learning lies in the fact that teachers, in the real and complex educational scenarios, can consciously and consistently exhibit professional behaviors that conform to the norms of teacher ethics. Therefore, the most meaningful teacher ethics learning is when it is seamlessly integrated into teachers' daily teaching routines and educational workflows, through immediate feedback and behavioral calibration, to facilitate the practical transformation of teacher ethics cognition into teacher ethics practice.

Exploring the moral value of the educational field, conducting theoretical analysis of moral values, and integrating them into the long-term and consistent process of moral education for teachers is a long-term and persistent measure for transforming the requirements of teacher ethics into educational behaviors. For example, in the observation and evaluation of teaching sessions, observers not only assess teaching techniques but also consciously pay attention to the details of the interaction between teachers and students, and provide feedback on moral behaviors accordingly: regarding the micro-level fairness in education, does the teacher unconsciously only ask questions to certain students? When a student answers incorrectly, is the teacher's words and demeanor encouraging or discouraging? Wait a moment. This kind of feedback based on real teaching segments and focusing on specific behaviors can most directly help teachers establish a substantive connection between their professional ethics and educational behaviors. Through continuous analysis and reflection, it can deepen the understanding of the significance of professional ethics and promote a profound transformation of professional ethics in terms of both knowledge and action.

## 4 Conclusion

Although teacher ethics education has certain educational particularities, it still follows the transformation rule of internalizing knowledge into externalizing behavior. Only when the teacher ethics norms establish a non-arbitrary and substantive connection with the individual cognitive experience of teachers, does teacher ethics learning have real significance. By combining the cognitive psychological mechanism revealed by the meaningful learning theory, a systematic loop of knowledge and action transformation for teacher ethics education is constructed, providing a reference for solving the dilemma of "disconnection between knowledge and action" in teacher ethics education. It also reminds us that the fundamental aspect of teacher ethics education lies in the profound understanding of the connotation and significance of teacher ethics, so that it can achieve professional ethical action consciousness in the real educational field.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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