

# Exploring Difficult Ethical Situations: The Case of Novice Primary School Teachers in Quebec

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*This article presents results from a study of problematic ethical situations faced by novice primary school teachers in Quebec. Around 30 teachers were interviewed in order to understand what are the situations in which their values are challenged and action is rendered difficult because of this ethical dimension. First, we define what we mean by “problematic ethical situation” through the theoretical framework of professional teaching ethics. Second, we describe the different aspects of 73 situations brought to light by our interviews of novice teachers, before analyzing which ethical obligations are faced, using the “Code of Ethics for All Members of the Personnel of the Educational Organization and for Any Person Required to Work With Minor Students or Students With Handicaps, or Be Regularly in Contact With Them,” published by the Ministry of Education of the Government of Quebec in April 2025.*

## Introduction

Nearly 30% of new teachers in Quebec leave this profession within the first five years after graduation (Carpentier et al., 2019; Mukamurera et al., 2020)—the period during which they are considered “novices.”<sup>1</sup> In the current context of a shortage of teachers (Harnois et al., 2021; Homsy et al., 2019), this professional desertion has serious consequences for the education system in Quebec.<sup>2</sup> The impact is all the more important because the impression of not being sufficiently well trained to resolve problematic ethical situations (PES) figures among the primary reasons for this professional desertion. Indeed, studies reveal that several of those who obtain a baccalaureate in education, once they have become teachers, feel unequipped in the area of professional ethics (Boon, 2011; Cloutier & St-Vincent, 2017; Davies &

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<sup>1</sup> This research was effected through the Research Support for New Academics program titled “Les besoins en éthique professionnelle des enseignants novices au primaire au Québec” (n° 327827) (<https://doi.org/10.69777/327827>), financed by the *Fonds de recherche Société et culture du Québec*.

<sup>2</sup> Including a negative impact on pupils’ success (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019) and the organizational instability of schools (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018).

Heyward, 2019).<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, the students who have just finished their initial training express a deep “sense of personal capability” (Gagnon & Fournier Dubé, 2021) and strong motivation (Sautelet, 2018). But these both tend to wear out during the first five years of practice (Belzile, 2016; Jeffrey, 2015).

This discrepancy between the confidence expressed by students and the reality of work for new teachers testifies to the importance of identifying with precision the difficulties they face with regard to professional ethics. However, while the difficulties of teachers facing PESs are well documented at the secondary level, at college, and at university (Fillion, 2020; Gohier et al., 2017), there is little empirical research centered on professional ethics for primary teaching in Quebec (Auclair Tourigny, 2017; Mukamurera, Lakhal, & Tardif, 2019).<sup>4</sup> This lack of data in the scientific literature means that the current state of the needs of teachers in this area is not understood, creating a deficiency in the development of research in professional ethics. This deficiency in the research means that, little by little, there is a danger that the initial and ongoing training become less relevant for these “new” novice teachers (Gayraud et al., 2011).

Indeed, ethics seems to be an area that is very unclear for students of education (Point, 2023). At what moment and in which situations does one start talking about ethics as a teacher? The majority currents in contemporary moral philosophy tend to gloss over this question, preferring to concentrate on the conceptual content, its rational argumentation and its theoretical and practical implications. For our part, this “launch” into ethics by teachers, in their daily work, is thought-provoking, which is why we decided to question them directly about it. What transpires is that the real work of ethics in their profession takes place in actual situations. In other words, it is the situations themselves that are considered as morally challenging and that form the “field” where ethics is deployed.

Given this fact, in our work we seek to reflect on and identify what we will call problematic ethical situations (Point, 2023). In its most simple form, our research question is the following: How can we identify the problematic ethical situations that novice teachers face in their daily professional lives? The point of this research question is twofold for us: first, it orients us toward obvious training issues. If we understand in more detail the situations that will cause problems for teachers’ ethics and for their professional integration, it becomes possible to anticipate these difficulties during initial training by working on these situations with the students during the classes on professional ethics. Second, this research question allows us to consolidate our theoretical framework in professional ethics (Gohier et al., 2017; Point, 2025a; Point et al., 2024; Maxwell et al., 2025) by adjusting those conceptual tools that enable us to identify with precision a problematic ethical situation.

In order to attain these goals, we will firstly present our theoretical framework, that is, a taxonomy that may not be fully complete, as in reality almost infinite aspects of daily educational decision-making. It is the attempt to provide an analytical definition of the notion of a problematical ethical situation, in view of the current literature on professional ethics. Secondly, we will look at the methodological framework, and we will present our data and the way in which we have analyzed them. Thirdly, after the presentation of the results that enable us to describe the PESs that have been encountered, we will concentrate on the official ethical obligations in order to understand which are the most solicited in these situations.

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<sup>3</sup> This feeling results in an increase in stress and a decrease in self-confidence and in the impression of capability (Frank et al., 2019; Mukamurera, Desbiens, et al., 2019). Thus, the difficulties that teachers encounter with regard to professional ethics pose a considerable danger to their professional integration (Point et al., 2025).

<sup>4</sup> In addition, the research on the other levels of teaching has little bearing on the reality of the professional situations of primary teaching since the latter is so specific (closer relationships with the parents, supervision of break times, etc.). Lastly, the pupils, working conditions, and demands of the teacher are evolving in Quebec (Beaucher, 2020; Beaudry et al., 2021), which is why, on a theoretical level, what teachers need in order to react to PESs is not the same as before.

## What is a Problematic Ethical Situation?

In order to define more precisely what we call “problematic ethical situations” (PES) (Point, 2025b, p. 48, 2025c; Point et al., 2025, p. 4; Point & Legault, 2025), we must first recall that behaving ethically<sup>5</sup> is considered here, in a perspective of applied ethics (Bégin, 2011; Lacroix et al., 2017), as “an aptitude to react in an ethical manner in the different professional situations that one encounters” (Prairat, 2017, p. 88). This way of behaving enables one to make ethical decisions, to make choices according to one’s knowledge of the options envisaged at a particular moment. But in some “moral situations,”<sup>6</sup> which are often uncomfortable, we no longer know how to behave. We hesitate before the choices because we do not know what is the “right” decision. The consistency between our values and our behavior is weakened, and we are troubled by this confusion.<sup>7</sup> These PESs are therefore a “complex ethical dilemmas that arise within practice or policy contexts, in which protagonists must decide among courses of action, none of which is self-evident as the right to take” (Levinson & Fay, 2016, p. 5-6). In these cases, we will say that we are faced with a *problematic ethical situation* (since we are faced with a *problem*, which we do not yet know how to resolve according to our values, our professional role, our beliefs, etc., and since it is our *values* that are solicited). These situations are complex, contain many tensions,<sup>8</sup> and it is for this reason that we will provide an analytical definition of them, in order to better understand them (and then to consider those that teachers experience in their daily work). In doing so, our goal is not to provide ready-made ethical solutions or to say how teachers should behave, but rather to formulate a theoretical framework, a taxonomy of the elements of a PES, that will allow us to understand how a situation can become a problematic ethical situation, and what forms it can take.

Our work has led us to conceive of PESs as dynamic ensembles that are made up of certain elements, some of which are structural, others are particular to the actors<sup>9</sup> of the PES, and still others are shared between the actors. We will begin with the structural aspects.

### *Time, Space, Actors, and Resources*

Even before we consider a situation’s ethical or problematic dimensions, we can see its four structural elements: *time*, *space*, the *actors*, and the physical and epistemic *resources* that are present. This means, first, that a situation is defined by a particular spatial-temporal “enclosure.” For example, a playground in a

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<sup>5</sup> Like other French philosophers (Ogien, 2007; Prairat, 2013), we use the term “ethics” without distinguishing it from the term “morality.” By the term ethics, we refer to the field of research that studies normative ethics, applied ethics, descriptive ethics, and meta-ethics (Fieser, 2000). More specifically, our focus here is on applied ethics, namely the branch of ethics that examines the practical application of our ethical knowledge and values in real-world, specific situations. In short, applied ethics asks how we apply our values to specific actions, relations, or discourses.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of PES has its theoretical roots in the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey. Like Santoro (2014), we use the theoretical resources of this philosophy to think about the “moral situations” (Dewey & Tufts, 1909) in which teachers find themselves.

<sup>7</sup> Tirri’s work (1999; Tirri & Kuusisto, 2022) also shows that the analysis of moral dilemmas through case studies is common practice among teachers attempting to resolve these PESs, and that the strategies they adopt to resolve them are often highly dependent on the situation itself. This situational perspective is, moreover, the majority approach, whether the resolution of the ethical problem is undertaken individually or collectively. In our view, this point contributes to legitimizing a theoretical framework that allows for a nuanced analysis of these PESs.

<sup>8</sup> Shapira-Lishchinsky’s work (2011), drawing on the literature on teachers’ ethical dilemmas (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001; Colnerud, 2006; Husu & Tirri, 2003; Klaassen, 2002), identifies these tensions and classifies them into five categories, but this work considers only professional values and does not take into account other aspects of teachers’ ethical dilemmas.

<sup>9</sup> We use the term *actors* to designate all the people involved in the interactions of a situation, independently of their sex, in order not to weigh down the text.

primary school during morning break constitutes a certain space and time, both of which are identifiable and can be measured. It is true that the boundaries of time are not always easy to establish because a PES can have ramifications for other previous and subsequent situations. This difficulty is part of the point of a discussion by the actors of a PES: they need to agree on the beginning, the duration, the end, and the place of the situation they are facing. In the case of a quarrel between two pupils, the conflict could well have started at the entrance to the school and continued in the corridor before breaking out into violence in front of the teachers once these pupils arrived in the classroom. In this case, it is by exploring the PES with these two pupils that the teacher can extend the situation to these different times and places.

The third structural element is less obvious than it appears and concerns the *actors of the situation* (teachers, pupils, parents, etc.). These are the human beings who interact within the situation. We consider that the presence of several actors (at least two) is necessary to designate a PES, since we share a pragmatic anthropological postulate that relationality is an essential condition for self-development (Mead, 1934), and by extension for one's ethical behavior (Dewey, 1932). An individual by themselves can feel uncomfortable in a particular situation, but while they have not interacted or communicated their discomfort to other actors, the PES will remain in the realm of virtual reality for the latter.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, a situation is a reality constructed by the intersubjectivity of individuals and not a purely subjective projection (determinable by a single individual) nor an objective one (determinable independently of the actors).

The fourth structural element of situations is the physical and epistemic *resources* present in the spatial-temporal framework where the actions and interactions between the actors take place. In terms of physical resources, they could be tools and instruments present (scissors, chairs, computers, etc.) but also the organization and configuration of the spaces themselves. These resources include, for instance, the placement of the furniture in the classroom or the architecture of the school which makes a particular corridor or room more or less accessible or dangerous. By epistemic resources, we mean the resources that enable us to act, to use, and to acquire information (a book, the internet, languages, etc.). These resources make it possible to interpret, to exchange, and to build knowledge and usually come from institutions that structure the society where the situation takes place. For example, a school textbook on a pupil's desk contains information on a subject that has been selected and judged legitimate by the school. The presence or absence of these physical and epistemic resources are the decoration for these particular "stages" that the actors of a PES occupy.

### ***Values, Emotions, Expectations, and Words***

As well as its structural aspects, a PES has at least four other elements, which we will call internal, in the sense that these aspects influence the realities experienced by the actors (or "what happens") at the time of the situation. We will describe them briefly.

The first of these elements is the presence of the *values* of the actor. Each individual arbitrates between these choices of action and interaction depending on their preferences between several values (independence, pleasure, security, solidarity, kindness, etc.) (Dewey, 1939). These values, which may or may not be universal, are more or less conscious and well-defined for the actor, and are acquired through the social environment, the education, and the culture in which the actor lives (Schwartz, 2006). The PESs have this particularity when compared to other problematic situations: the values of the actors are necessarily challenged by the behavior that must be adopted by at least one of the actors of the PES. For example, when faced with a pupil who lies about some homework they didn't hand in because they hadn't

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<sup>10</sup> By that, we mean that we limit the conceptual scope of ethical situations to those in which a person's behavior involves and impacts others. We therefore exclude from our analysis ethical situations where a single person would question practices or behaviors affecting only themselves (such as dietary habits or spiritual practices). In these cases, ethical thinking risks constructing a situation with such strong subjectivity that sharing it would prove too perilous for analysis.

done it, the teacher may hesitate about which attitude to adopt: will they punish the pupil in the name of the value of fairness (universalism), which obliges them to treat all pupils equally when it comes to handing in their homework, or will they give the pupil an extension for finishing their work, thus preferring the value of kindness over fairness? These hesitations, deliberations, prioritizations, and comparisons between the values of the actors are therefore indispensable aspects of the study of PES.

Second, *emotions* are important components of PES. Indeed, being uncomfortable in one's values in a certain situation is always manifested by a specific emotional reaction, which can then influence the interactions with the other actors who are present (Cowen & Keltner, 2017). Like values, these emotions can be more or less clear and well-defined in the actors' consciousness, and their interpretation by the other actors adds another layer to what is at stake. Understanding as well as possible the emotions that the actors of a PES are experiencing demands efforts in empathy and sensitivity, which are indispensable for grasping the complexity of the situation. Without this, the behavior of the actors can only seem irrational and unreasonable. For instance, if a teacher understands that behind the hectoring reaction of a mother on the subject of her child's eating at school is the emotion of fear for the latter and an impression of not having the right to speak out in a school setting, the teacher can nuance their own reaction to her and to pursue other ways of interacting with her.

A third "internal" element of PESs is the *expectations* of the actors. These are the projections and the horizons of expectation that the actors desire and anticipate for the closure of the PES. These translate hopes and issues that are personal to the actors, but they can be shared or not with the other actors who are present. These expectations are deeply rooted in the values of the actor, but they are also linked to other "external" aspects of the PES such as (political, spiritual, etc.) ideals or social and professional roles, elements that we will look at below. These expectations are important components of PESs because they create stress for the actor and tensions between the actors, depending on how important and how clear they are. For instance, if parents want their child to "succeed" at school because they have very high academic expectations of them, that will strongly influence all the situations where the teacher communicates with them.

The fourth and final internal element of PESs is the *words* that are exchanged during the interaction. In this, we include everything that is transmitted verbally or in writing. What are the words, the phrases and the conversations that the actors pronounce? Are the words spoken by these people comprehensible to the others? Are they public or confidential? What can be understood from the tone, the level of speech and its inflections (irony, sub-text, threats, etc.)? Do these words reflect and enable us to identify the specific emotions, values, or expectations? And if so, with what degree of interpretation? These are the questions that this element enables us to ask in order to work on understanding PES. Thus, for example, one can study rumours, insults, the use of high-level or technical language, traces of irony, the use of different languages, etc., which all appear in PES.

### ***Law, Working Habits, Professional Roles, and Idealised Narratives***

The final elements that define a PES are "external" to the PES because, while they are constituent elements of a specific PES, they can also be relevant to other situations. It is the continuity of these elements between the situations that form the institutional and social structure of situations and that give them these "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein, 1953/1958, § 67). In addition to the structural framework of the first elements (time, space, etc.), these elements determine in this way the "social" framework of PES. We will explore each of these aspects in turn.

The first element is the impact of *professional roles* that are taken on by the actors present in the PES. These professional roles (teacher, head teacher, psychologist, etc.) are legal statuses, instituted by schools, and are the sign of belonging to a particular profession. They will define the actors of PESs as users of a service, members of a profession, or civil servants, but will also situate them within a hierarchy (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit), fixing responsibilities and power between them. For example, in France, the actors who have the role of teacher will not interact in the same way with a teaching intern,

another teacher, or a school inspector. Studying these professional roles and taking them into account in a PES enables us to clarify the balance of power between the actors, the sharing of responsibilities, and the pursuit of recognition for this role by the actors, all on a large scale from the most official level (role defined by legal status for example) to the most informal (being recognized as a “positive leader” by one’s colleagues, for example).

Another aspect of PESs is the presence of *the law* and the legislative and juridical frameworks that apply to the interactions of the actors and that determine professional ethical obligations. Through certain official texts, of varying status (charts, school rules, the civil code, etc.), the legislative frameworks are more or less well known and clear in the actors’ minds, but they determine in part what is authorized or forbidden between them. This prescriptiveness in the juridical frameworks can be perceived as distant by the actors of the situation, but it can also be strongly integrated and become a significant deontological reality for them. Studying them is therefore an important point in the analysis of PESs in order to understand at what point a situation becomes ethically problematic for the actors. When exploring the results of our study, we will return to this point.

The third “external” aspect of the situation is the working *habits* of the actors of the PES (timetables, activity routines, the actions that are part of the job, etc.). Are these known and shared by everyone? Are they regular and inflexible or evolutive and adaptable? Faced with these questions, the sociology of education, using the notions of habitus (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1976) or of the conventional foundations of the action (Dodier, 1995), explores this dimension of the interactions of the actors, which strongly influences their way of reacting to a PES. In the analysis of PES, one can ask if these habits are disrupted by the problem of the situation, if the reasons for these habits are expressed by the actors, if these habits are used to justify particular behavior, etc. For instance, in the case of a teacher who hugs her pupils before they go home for the weekend, if problematic reactions arise, it is interesting to ask what the habits of other actors in the school on this point are. Is this physical contact considered usual by them, is it justified on an educational level, or does it belong to a routine that has never been questioned?

The fourth “external” element of the PES to be considered is perhaps the one that is the most difficult for the actors to grasp. It is the ontological beliefs of the actors, means the **stories, ideals**, and other narratives that the actors manifest or express about the objectives and motivations that justify their actions. These narratives can be the vehicle for strong normative content and appear in symbols, notions, or various cultural, religious, or political imaginaries. A narrative, in this sense, can be explicit or understood, shared by all the actors or be a source of conflict and clashes. For example, a teacher might think that the school’s mission is to see to the salvation of the souls of its pupils, and this belief, supported by this religious narrative, can have a great influence on the way he justifies his interactions with his colleagues or his pupils.

Lastly, in addition to these 12 elements that are characteristic of PES, we envisage adding a 13th thanks to the theoretical contributions of intersectional analyses of action (Crenshaw, 1991; Lafortune et al., 2018; Mozziconacci, 2017). This involves considering, when analyzing a PES, the *balance of power* in the relationships between the actors, which could lead to discrimination in terms of the social class, race, or sex of the actors. For example, in schools many PESs can occur through sexist or racist comments that can label and hurt the actors to different degrees depending on their place within this intersectional power balance. Thus, the words of a young female teacher from a racial minority risk being less well heard and considered than those of her colleague if he is an older white man. So it seems important to us to take into account this element in order to increase our understanding of the complexity of a PES in a school setting.

Once these elements have been identified as analytical aspects of PES, the PES can be analyzed according to their complexity and can bring their actors to describe and interpret them qualitatively. With

this theoretical framework, our taxonomy of the elements of an PES,<sup>11</sup> we formulate the working hypothesis that in analyzing these PESs in this way, we will be better equipped to understand the ethical difficulties that novice primary school teachers experience, and, by extension, their needs in these situations.

## The Methodological Framework

In order to observe these problematic ethical situations and report on them in the field, we used a qualitative design that was achieved through individual semi-structured interviews, using the standard interview methodology in the field of education (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012; Savoie-Zajc, 2021; Van der Maren, 2010) of novice primary school teachers in Quebec.

### *Who Were the Study Participants?*

Our study focuses on novice teachers working in public primary schools in Quebec. The principal criteria for inclusion in our study population were: being in the first five years of teaching, having recently finished initial training, and the latter having taken place exclusively in Quebec. We wanted, first of all, to concentrate on novice teachers because we assumed that their experiences of PESs were still new and recent, which decreases the biases of routine or normalization that one could assume with more experienced teachers. Therefore, we interviewed thirty teachers in school service centers (CSS) in the province of Quebec, taking into account as much as possible the sociocultural diversity of the CSS. Among these people, we recruited five men and 25 women ( $N = 30$ ),<sup>12</sup> whose average age was 28. On average, they had around three years' experience in teaching. Their level of teaching in primary was as follows: four people taught in preschool, seven people in Grades 1–2, five people in Grades 3–4, four people in Grades 5–6, and 10 people in mixed-level classes. Lastly, the average socio-economic index of the schools where these people taught was 5.9 out of 10,<sup>13</sup> and these schools were located in four administrative regions, all characterized by a strongly urban context: the Island of Montreal, the South Shore of Montreal, the town of Sherbrooke, and the Centre-du-Québec.

### *The Methodology for Collecting Data*

In order to better understand the PESs experienced by the participants, this study adopted a relatively simple method of collecting data. After being contacted by email via their CSS and having filled in a sociodemographic questionnaire, each person who volunteered participated in an individual semi-structured interview, which aimed to draw out subjective elements such as feelings, judgments, impressions, opinions, and perceptions (Fortin & Gagnon, 2015). Considering the complexity of the school system in Quebec and the diversity of actors who interact there, this approach is based on the idea that each point of view, in a social reality that is constantly changing (Karsenti & Savoie-Zajc, 2018), has a value of its own.

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<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, another taxonomy of these ERPs was developed by Geron (2023), based on the characteristics of overcrowded classrooms, classifying them into three different types of challenges for teachers. Our work can certainly be complementary in this regard.

<sup>12</sup> In Canada, there is an average of 24% men to 76% women among teachers in public primary and secondary schools according to their sex (Statistics Canada, n.d.). This ratio is fairly close to the ratio of the population of our study, with 17% men and 83% women, and the difference can be explained by the fact that primary teaching is generally less equal and more female than secondary teaching.

<sup>13</sup> According to the Ministry of Education of Quebec (MEQ) (2024), the schools are classed on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is the least underprivileged and 10 is the most underprivileged.

In order to obtain data produced in the same year and to limit the biases due to current affairs (for example a major social or political phenomenon leading to a change in education policies with regard to the syllabus for primary education), the collection of data took place during a single year (2024). In addition, the semi-structured interviews were effected in person, at the place of work, by three different research assistants, for an estimated average time of between 45 minutes and one hour for each interview. This duration corresponds to the time allotted by the interview guidelines and meant that the teachers' timetables could be taken into account.

Lastly, the interview guidelines had been prepared and pre-tested by the researcher on novice teachers ( $n = 3$ ). It was elaborated from the theoretical framework described above and consisted of three sections (three collections of directive questions with some follow-up questions), whose aim was to note: (a) the sociometric and professional data of the participants and their informed consent to the research; (b) the elements of PES they had experienced, whether resolved or not, in their work, and the difficulties expressed by the interviewee in resolving these PES;<sup>14</sup> and (c) other elements about the resources acquired during initial training, their identification of resources necessary for responding to their needs in the case of a PES, or other relevant elements that had not yet been mentioned during the interview.

### ***The Methodology for Analyzing the Data***

Among the different methods of qualitative analysis, the approach by interpretative repertoires (Wetherell & Potter, 1998) from a discourse analysis perspective was found to be particularly useful for bringing out units of meaning from the material gathered during the interviews. This approach seeks to identify and analyze the discursive repertoires used by the participants, in order to better define the social context to which their words belong. In practice, this means that out of 30 interviews recorded then transcribed, we were able to identify 73 PESs relevant for our study. Each of these PESs was then analyzed separately but using a common method. A first cycle of iterative codification was effected, which enabled us to progressively construct a tree diagram of flexible codes (which, among other things, was ready to integrate the themes that were emerging from the discourse analysis) on the basis of our theoretical framework.

The analysis of the data was thus effected according to an inductive-deductive methodology (Miles et al., 2018), and through a process of analysis (repeated twice) which the researcher and a research assistant conducted independently of each other. Through this double approach (deductive and inductive), we sought to characterize the data as widely as possible in order to interpret them as best we could with our theoretical framework. By the process of deduction by this taxonomy of the elements of a PES, we identified the different characteristics of the PES: time, place, actors, values, etc. Then, by the process of induction, we drew out the categories within each characteristic that enabled us to classify the data. For example, in order to identify the actors' values that were challenged during the 73 PES, we first pinpointed 246 extracts where the interviewees mentioned values more or less explicitly. Then using the categorization of Schwartz (2006), we classed these different extracts according to the different values of benevolence, security, self-direction (autonomy), etc. In addition, during our work of analysis, an emerging category, that of the value of professionalism, came to light and was able to be integrated into our analysis. For example, this value appears in this interview quote, through the tension between respecting the audience and the sense of camaraderie among teachers:

*[PES18] Interviewee:* I heard teachers who clearly needed to let off some steam and vent. Their comments went beyond professional matters in the sense that they were practically insulting the student. [...] You're belittling a student. At that point, it's no longer professional.

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that, in this regard, our data collection methodology for conducting interviews is similar to Shapira-Lishchinsky's (2011). Like hers, our questions focused on describing the lived experiences of critical incidents.

This value is also found in this other quote where the importance of professionalism is associated with the autonomy of the teacher and on which the legitimacy of the person to practice their profession depends.

[SEP5] *Interviewee*: Yes, professionalism. [...] To me, that's important. We did two years of college and four years at the university, after all. I think we're professionals in our field. Clearly, to me, yelling at students like that isn't a sign of professionalism.

In this way, we were able to identify, for each of the 73 PES, which values were present in a significant way. Thus, by this inductive-deductive approach and our theoretical taxonomy for the PES, we were able to compare on various levels our data gathered in the field and the current scientific literature in human and social sciences that helped us to analyze them. The limits of this article do not permit us to mention each of these scientific articles. It is possible that by choosing other scientific works, one could shed light differently on the content of the PESs and come to a richer understanding of them. However, our aim is not to enter into these discussions but to experience the notion of PESs in order to make them a tool for analyzing the experience of teachers.

## Presentation of Results

Armed with this double theoretical and methodological framework, we can now clearly ask the question: what are the problematic ethical situations that novice teachers experience in their day-to-day work? In this section, we will first of all present the most significant results for identifying these PES, then we will look at the place of the law in the testimonies of novice teachers, that is, the ethical obligations that they come up against in these situations.

### *Space, Time, Actors, and Values*

First of all, one of the elements that was the simplest to identify in the PESs was that of spatial location. In our interviews, out of the 73 PES, the situations that were uncomfortable for the novice teachers took place principally in the classroom (53%), then in other areas of the school (31%), and lastly, a minority took place in areas outside the school grounds (16%). In contrast, identifying the time frame of these PESs proved to be more difficult, since their duration was less clear for the novice teacher interviewees. Sometimes, the ethical problem that was identified was repeated in class (both in the morning and in the afternoon, for example); sometimes the situation was not resolved and reoccurred several times during the year; in any case, the only clear data on this aspect was the moment these situations began during the school year. Thus, according to the interviewees, 68% of PESs arise at the beginning of the school year, then it seems to decrease to only 32% in the middle of the year and 0% at the end of the year. However, this surprising result should be interpreted with caution. Since the interviews were conducted in the middle of the school year, it is possible that teachers may not have had in mind the ethical issues from the end of the school year in previous years.

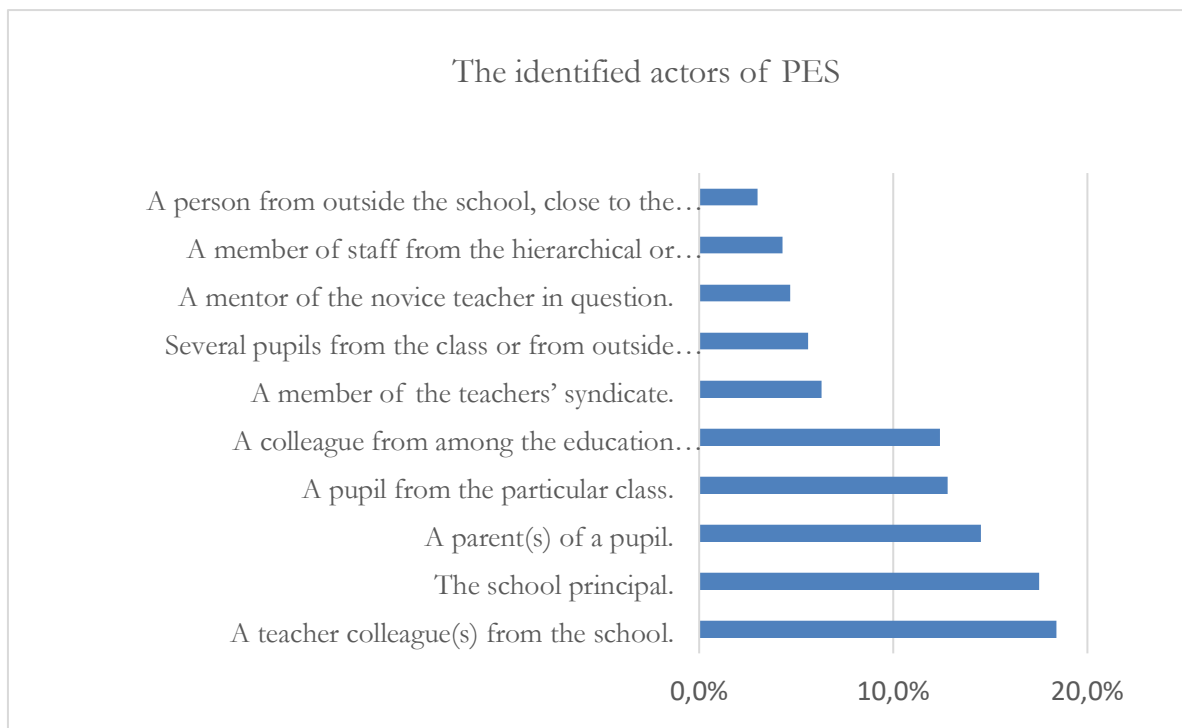
With regard to the people concerned, in the 73 PESs, nearly 284 references concerned the actors and their implication, more or less direct, in the ethical problem.<sup>15</sup> Thus, a first result concerns the *number* of actors implicated in the PESs according to the novice teachers: in 24% of PESs, only one actor is present in addition to the novice teacher. In 40% of PESs, two or three actors are identified, which is

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<sup>15</sup> To clarify, these actors are cited in our interviews and indicated here independently of their participation, positive or not, in the resolution of the PES. In addition, none of these actors participate in the same way or at the same time in the PES, but these results enable us to understand who are, for novice teachers, the people who occupy the daily “stage” of their PES.

thus the most frequent occurrence. With four or five actors, the number decreases to 22% of PESs, and lastly, with six or more actors, the result falls to 14%. Next, for the identification of the actors, we obtain the following results (presented from highest to lowest):

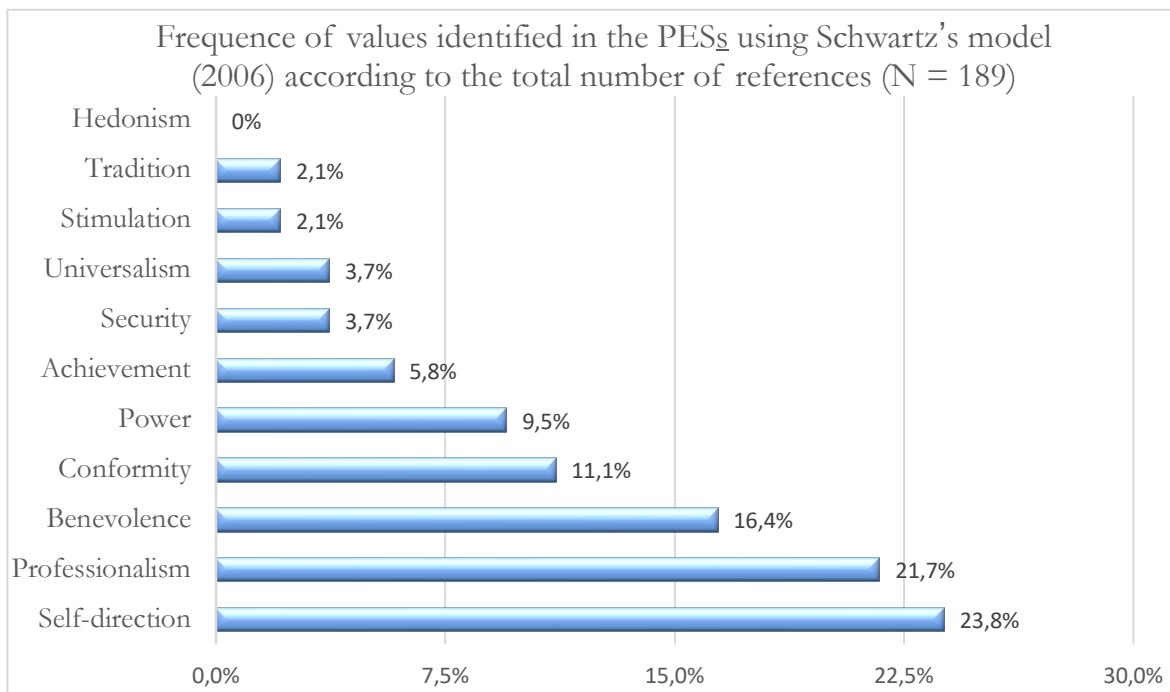
**Figure 1**  
*The identified actors of PES*



On the question of values, we first grouped together the 189 occurrences identified in the 73 PESs from the classification in Schwartz's model (2006). However, among the first 10 values in this model, no occurrence was found that would correspond to the value of hedonism which is linked to satisfaction, pleasure, or personal sensory gratification. But another value, absent from Schwartz's model, emerged from the interviews. This was the value of professionalism,<sup>16</sup> which we added to the analysis after the first classification. Figure 2 shows how the data are distributed:

**Figure 2**  
*Frequency of values identified in the PESs using Schwartz's model (2006) according to the total number of references (N = 189)*

<sup>16</sup> This value can be defined as the importance of being recognized as a professional person by one's peers. At the beginning of a career, just when professionalism is the most fragile, this value proves to be very sensitive for novice teachers.



This figure shows us that self-direction and professionalism are values that are very important to and/or much mentioned by the actors who face the PESs that were studied (more than 20%). For example, many PESs challenge their freedom in the way that they teach; that is, in the choice of activities to do in class and the professional justification of these choices to colleagues or parents. For example, this tension with a parent:

[SEP18] Interviewee: Respect for the educational decisions I have to make. I told myself that I'm trained for this, but [the parent] doesn't respect the fact that I've been trained to do this. [...] With 26 students, [...] the reality of a real classroom [and] your child all alone at home are not the same thing.

Another example of this tension during a PES involving challenging collaborative between teaching colleagues, where autonomy is compromised:

[SEP21] Interviewee: The student comes back, I go over to give him a hug so we can talk later. [...] She, from the other side of the room, shouts at me in front of the students: "X, no, no coddling!" In front of everyone, in front of the students. [...] The students stop, look at her, then look at me. Again, I'm shocked, I stop. [...] Is it malicious or not? It's not malicious, but it was as if there's a clash of values. For her, there's a right way to raise children, a right way and a wrong way. She senses that my way isn't the right way, and then she's unable to get past that enough to respect me as an equal colleague. She treats me more like a student she needs to educate so I do things properly.

In contrast, the values of tradition, conformity, and security are not very present, which leads us to think that the question of continuity is not seen as central for novice teachers. Trained to be independent and innovative, they do not see themselves as guardians of a school tradition or of a method of teaching, and that can contribute to tensions in their relationships with more experienced teacher colleagues.

### ***The Law: What Professional Ethical Obligations Do Teachers Face?***

In order to analyze the results obtained on the subject of the place of the law in PES, we refer to the official document of the Ministry of Education in Quebec entitled *Code of Ethics for All Members of the Personnel of the Educational Organization and for Any Person Required to Work With Minor Students or Students With Handicaps, or Be Regularly in Contact With Them* (2025), published online on April 4, 2025. This ethics code is based on the current legal and regulatory framework in Quebec and lists a certain number of practices and conduct that are expected of educational actors, and that express the entirety of the professional ethical obligations that are expected of them. We therefore identified and categorized for each PES the required practices and conduct that were challenged by this situation.

It is fairly obvious that that first result of this work is the weak interrater agreement of the analysis ( $\kappa = 0.57$ ), since determining which ethical obligations are faced in a PES is a complex task where interpretation is essential. Indeed, some of the ethical obligations of this ethics code are relatively vague. For example, obligation 2.1: “All staff members and all persons required to work with minor or handicapped students or be in contact with them must behave in a just and equitable manner, taking each person’s needs and differences into account” (Ministry of Education in Quebec, 2025, p. 10) can be interpreted in different ways depending on the actions, needs, and differences in question.

In addition, this complexity is strengthened by the fact that in each PES that was analyzed, several ethical obligations were faced, never just one. Very often, the interviews of the teachers revealed a tension between several ethical obligations. For example, the obligation to contribute to pupils’ educational success (obligation 7.3) and that of showing empathy and kindness to pupils (obligation 1.2) could be interpreted as being at the heart of the ethical problem that prevents the teacher from acting confidently in a situation.

According to the titles for each section, the obligations that are faced in the PES are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of ethical obligations that were faced in the problematic ethical situations as a whole*

| <b>Title of the ethical obligation (“Expected practices and conduct”)</b>             | <b>Presence in the PES as a whole (N = 73)</b> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Principle 7 “Professionalism, expertise, and commitment”                              | 85%                                            |
| Principle 1 “Respect, civility, and kindness”                                         | 33%                                            |
| Principle 6 “Integrity, probity, and transparency”                                    | 29%                                            |
| Principle 2 “Justice, equity, and neutrality”                                         | 28%                                            |
| Principle 4 “Health, safety, and well-being”                                          | 28%                                            |
| Principle 3 “Professionalism”                                                         | 16%                                            |
| Principle 5 “Discretion, confidentiality, and the protection of personal information” | 11%                                            |
| Principle 8 “Loyalty and duty of confidentiality”                                     | 9%                                             |

Thus, we see that what causes most ethical problems for novice teachers is less a question of loyalty toward their employer or the confidentiality of personal information, but much more the situations where their professionalism, their competency, or their commitment (or that of the other educational actors) is questioned. Clearly the fact that they are beginning in this profession makes these particular ethical obligations more sensitive than the others and renders more uncomfortable the situations where the responsibilities and the competency of the educational actors do not have clear parameters and content.

In a more detailed way, these principles are divided into sections that specify the different ethical dimensions of these principles. Our results on these sections specify the distribution of ethical obligations faced in all the different PESs (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Distribution of ethical obligations faced, by section, in the identified problematic ethical situations as a whole*

| Ethical obligations by section | Presence (in %) in the PES as a whole (N=73) |  | Ethical obligations by section | Presence (in %) in the PES as a whole (N=73) |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 1.1                            | 9                                            |  | 5.1                            | 5                                            |
| 1.2                            | 23                                           |  | 5.2                            | 7                                            |
| 1.3                            | 11                                           |  | 5.3                            | 0                                            |
| 2.1                            | 27                                           |  | 6.1                            | 23                                           |
| 2.2                            | 4                                            |  | 6.2                            | 0                                            |
| 2.3                            | 0                                            |  | 6.3                            | 3                                            |
| 2.4                            | 1                                            |  | 6.4                            | 0                                            |
| 3.1                            | 12                                           |  | 6.5                            | 1                                            |
| 3.2                            | 0                                            |  | 6.6                            | 3                                            |
| 3.3                            | 4                                            |  | 6.7                            | 0                                            |
| 3.4                            | 0                                            |  | 7.1                            | 17                                           |
| 3.5                            | 0                                            |  | 7.2                            | 24                                           |
| 3.6                            | 0                                            |  | 7.3                            | 25                                           |
| 3.7                            | 0                                            |  | 7.4                            | 56                                           |
| 3.8                            | 0                                            |  | 7.5                            | 16                                           |
| 3.9                            | 0                                            |  | 7.6                            | 5                                            |
| 4.1                            | 8                                            |  | 8.1                            | 5                                            |

|     |   |  |     |   |
|-----|---|--|-----|---|
| 4.2 | 8 |  | 8.2 | 0 |
| 4.3 | 7 |  | 8.3 | 0 |
| 4.4 | 5 |  | 8.4 | 4 |
| 4.5 | 9 |  | 8.5 | 0 |
| 4.6 | 0 |  | 8.6 | 0 |

It can be observed that section 7.4, which concerns the duty of practising one's profession with commitment and collaboration, is identified in 56% of PESs, which makes it the most frequently faced ethical obligation for novice teachers. Next is Section 2.1, the obligation to "behave in a just and equitable manner, taking each person's needs and differences into account" (Ministry of Education in Quebec, 2025; 27% of the PESs); followed by Section 7.3 (obligation to contribute "actively to students' educational success and development") (25%); Section 7.2 ("act in a professional and responsible manner, with attention to detail, objectivity, diligence and vigilance") (24%); Section 6.1 (obligation to "act with integrity, good faith and transparency in order to maintain parents' and the public's trust") (23%); and Section 1.2 ("show consideration, empathy and kindness" to the pupils) (23%).

These are thus the ethical obligations that novice teachers are most concerned about. Depending on the PES, it is often the ethical obligations themselves that are in tension with each another. Maintaining the trust of parents whose child clearly has learning or behavioral difficulties, showing kindness to a pupil while staying professional, or interacting with rigor and objectivity with colleagues who behave unjustly towards each other, etc.; all these tensions are present in the daily work of novice teachers and cause problems for them, since several values (self-direction, professionalism, and benevolence [kindness], for example) can be conflicting and they do not know which is the most important for guiding their behavior.

However, it is also worth noting that 17 of the 44 sections in the ethics code (Ministry of Education of Quebec, 2025) are never identified as playing a role in the 73 PESs that were analyzed. Whether it is promoting the French language (Sections 3.4 and 3.5), showing caution in publicly sharing their opinion in traditional or social media (Sections 8.2, 8.3, and 8.5), or making careful and non-fraudulent use of public funds (Sections 6.2 and 6.4), these are all clear to them and do not create any ethical problems. Although this does not mean that ethical lapses and mistakes are not possible for them, it is not these issues that challenge novice teachers in their daily work, either because such behavior is clearly forbidden (consumption of drugs or alcohol for example—Sections 3.8 and 3.9), or because these are issues that concern responsibilities or tasks that are not yet part of their jobs (such as communication in the media or the management of public funds).

Lastly, the details in the different sections reveal significant variations in the perceived relevance of the ethical obligations as they are presented in the ethics code. For example, under Principle 7, while Section 7.4 on the duty of collaboration is very much present (56%), the interest in Section 7.6 (on the duty to know, understand, respect, and promote ethical norms) is minor (5% of the PES). In the same way, for Principles 2 and 6, only two sections are considered very relevant and the other sections have very weak scores (between 0% and 4%). These two are Section 2.1 (obligation to "behave in a just and equitable manner") with 27%; and Section 6.1 (duty to "act with integrity, good faith and transparency in order to maintain parents' and the public's trust" in the employer) with 23%. The analysis of Section 3 also shows the considerable importance of Section 3.1 (on the duty to "show professionalism, restraint, and judgment"), which is present in 12% of the PES, while almost all the other sections on professionalism are absent from the concerns of novice teachers.

## Discussion and Conclusion

During this study, we have looked at the following research question: What are the PESs that future novice teachers will face? It was with the prospect of improving initial training for teachers<sup>17</sup> that we interviewed novice primary teachers about the situations they faced the most frequently in their daily work. When analyzing the interviews, some results seemed particularly noteworthy, with the central issue in the PES being collaboration between peers.

The fact that most PESs arose at the beginning of the year, in the classrooms, with several actors present, often including colleagues (18.4% of the PES) or the principal (17.5%) leads us to think that what causes problems for novice teachers, on an ethical level, is the question of collaboration with their peers. What limits should one establish for managing one's class? What expectations should one have of one's colleagues? How much should one be obliged to interact and participate in the life of the school when one is starting one's career? All these questions can often be found implicitly in the PES. Torn between the desire to be a colleague who is independent and dynamic, professional and recognized as such, and also to be as kind as possible toward everyone, novice teachers are lacking in clear guidelines and have doubts about how to act in many situations.

Faced with these ethical tensions with regard to collaboration, we can hypothesize that when novice teachers start this career, they imagine that they will be alone with their pupils in their classrooms, as the figure of the teacher alone with his or her class is still a strongly-rooted idyll, despite the profound changes that have taken place in this profession in the last 30 years. But according to this perspective, any interaction with another educational actor, whether a colleague, a parent, or a principal, seems to be seen as an intrusion and an outside interference in the heart of the profession. These PESs at the beginning of a career can lead to disillusionment in teachers, or, at any rate, to a change of paradigm leading to a more collaborative approach to the job. Our inquiry has brought to light the importance of these tensions in collaboration in the professional ethics of novice teachers.

However, there are some limits inherent in our research due to the number of participants and the methodological modalities of the collection and analysis of the data. For example, for data collection, it would be interesting to gather information on PESs experienced by principals, parents, or even pupils themselves, to find similarities and differences with those identified by the teachers. For the analysis of the data, it would be useful to compare the different elements of the PESs that were identified, to see if correlations appear between them; for example, a particular actor of these situations, certain emotions experienced by the teachers, or specific ethical obligations faced. Identifying these correlations or these variables could also be an objective for future research.

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<sup>17</sup> On this point, we share Shapira-Lishchinsky's ambition (2011) to participate in the development or improvement of programs designed to enhance teachers' ethical knowledge.

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