

Chapter 1. ETHICAL DILEMMAS UNDER UNCERTAINTY: FAIRNESS OF DECISIONS, INCLUSION, AND RESOURCE PRIORITIES IN EDUCATION

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Abstract. *The study addresses ethical dilemmas in education under conditions of uncertainty, with a particular focus on justice, inclusion, and the allocation of limited resources. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining conceptual and comparative normative analysis, case analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, observation, thematic analysis, and statistical processing of quantitative data. It was identified that educational uncertainty is not situational but ontological, manifesting through epistemic, normative, and ontological dimensions that structure the emergence of pedagogical dilemmas. It was established that ethical dilemmas constitute an everyday reality for educators rather than exceptional episodes, and that their specificity is determined primarily by the nature of pedagogical relationships and the forms of responsibility characteristic of different educational sectors. It was found that, in general, secondary education dilemmas of holistic responsibility for child development prevail; in professional pre-higher education, dilemmas arise at the boundary between educational and quasi-professional responsibility; and in higher education, dilemmas of dual loyalty between scholarly and pedagogical roles become more salient. The influence of institutional culture, ethics training, teaching experience, and support resources on the quality of dilemma processing, the level of moral distress, and confidence in decision-making was assessed. Regular patterns of decreasing moral distress and a complex dynamic in which such decreases may reflect both professional adaptation and, in some cases, a risk of reduced moral sensitivity (moral anesthesia) were characterized. It was established that institutional culture is the strongest predictor of morally responsible decision-making and that no individual preparation can compensate for a toxic organizational environment. It was clarified that inclusive education remains a normatively justified ideal, yet its implementation generates dilemmas related to competing rights, cultural diversity, and resource scarcity. The impact of wartime conditions, digitalization, and algorithmic risks on the intensification of ethical tensions in*

education was also evaluated. It was concluded that further research should focus on longitudinal, comparative, and cross-level studies of pedagogical wisdom, moral distress, and institutional conditions of ethical decision-making.

Keywords: *ethical dilemmas in education; pedagogical ethics; uncertainty; inclusive education; resource allocation; moral distress; pedagogical wisdom.*

Introduction

The field of education belongs to those spheres of social life in which fundamental values collide most sharply: equality and freedom, efficiency and justice, individual development and social well-being. These collisions are not accidental; rather, they are rooted in the very nature of pedagogical activity, which unfolds under conditions of fundamental uncertainty. No educational process takes place in a vacuum of stable conditions: teachers make decisions about children whose futures are unpredictable; administrators allocate resources without precise knowledge of their effects; and education policymakers establish standards for societies undergoing constant transformation.

Uncertainty in education is not a temporary condition that can be overcome through the accumulation of knowledge or the refinement of methodology. It is an inherent ontological characteristic of education itself. As Dewey (1916, p. 89) notes, education is “a reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.” Embedded in this definition is a recognition of the openness of the future: neither “added meaning” nor “subsequent experience” can be fully predetermined.

It is precisely in this context that ethical dilemmas acquire particular urgency. If uncertainty is a constant, then the question of how to make morally justified decisions despite incomplete information becomes central to pedagogical ethics. This chapter is devoted to three interrelated dimensions of this issue: the fairness of educational decisions under conditions of uncertainty, inclusion as both a normative ideal and a practical challenge, and the allocation of limited resources among competing educational needs. These dimensions are considered interdependent components of a single moral challenge confronting contemporary

education. In addition, recent studies highlight the growing prevalence of moral distress among educators working in complex, crisis-affected environments (Ballangrud et al., 2025; PMC, 2025). The chapter aims to provide practically applicable frameworks for educators and institutional leaders through theoretical analysis.

The relevance of this study is determined by several interrelated factors shaping the current state of educational theory and practice. Rapid social transformations, technological shifts, and globalization processes have significantly complicated the conditions under which educational systems operate. The accelerating pace of change means that educators and educational leaders are increasingly required to make decisions in situations for which no established experience or unambiguous normative guidance exists. Under such conditions, the study of the mechanisms of moral judgment becomes especially important.

The intensification of social inequality in education in the post-pandemic context has brought renewed attention to the distribution of educational resources, the priorities for supporting vulnerable student groups, and the mechanisms of compensatory educational policy. According to UNICEF (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in learning losses that disproportionately affected children from low-income families and students with special educational needs, making the issue of fairness in resource allocation especially acute.

The implementation of the principles of inclusive education in Ukraine and in most countries worldwide, in accordance with international commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, encounters serious practical dilemmas that require theoretical reflection. The transition from the declarative recognition of inclusion to its actual implementation reveals contradictions that cannot be resolved at the level of administrative regulation without deeper ethical analysis.

Fourth, the digitalization of education and the spread of algorithmic decision-support systems have opened new dimensions of longstanding problems of fairness and bias, requiring reflection within the framework of pedagogical ethics. Algorithmic bias, the digital divide, and risks to student

confidentiality are new manifestations of old problems of inequality and dignity, all of which call for renewed normative analysis. These concerns are increasingly discussed in recent research on AI ethics in education, which highlights risks of algorithmic bias, opacity, and accountability gaps (Education Sciences, 2025; Frontiers in Education, 2025).

Fifth, within Ukrainian academic discourse, the problem of pedagogical ethics under conditions of uncertainty remains insufficiently and unsystematically studied. The vast majority of domestic scholarship in pedagogical ethics focuses either on general principles of pedagogical morality or on particular applied issues, such as academic integrity or rules governing teachers' conduct, while leaving aside a systemic analysis of dilemmatic situations arising under conditions of fundamental uncertainty. Addressing this gap is a central task of this chapter.

Recent international research (2024–2026) has further expanded the understanding of ethical decision-making in education under conditions of uncertainty, particularly in relation to artificial intelligence, institutional ethics, and moral distress among educators (Ballangrud et al., 2025; Biesta, 2025; Fedotova, 2024; Frontiers in Education, 2025; MDPI Education Sciences, 2025; SAGE Journals, 2025). Contemporary studies emphasize the growing complexity of ethical challenges associated with algorithmic governance, data-driven decision-making, and crisis conditions in education systems. These works highlight the importance of integrating ethical reflection into both educational leadership and everyday pedagogical practice, as well as the need for institutional frameworks that support morally responsible decision-making in rapidly changing environments.

Taken together, these studies confirm the growing importance of integrating ethical reflection, institutional responsibility, and technologically informed decision-making in contemporary education.

The **aim** of the study was to develop an integrated theoretical framework for the analysis and morally grounded resolution of ethical dilemmas arising in educational practice and policy under conditions of uncertainty, with particular attention to the fairness of decisions, inclusion, and resource allocation.

The **methodological foundation** of the study is comprehensive and corresponds to the interdisciplinary nature of the issues addressed in pedagogical ethics. A variety of methods were employed in order to capture both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation.

Conceptual analysis was used to clarify the study's key concepts: uncertainty, ethical dilemma, justice, inclusion, and pedagogical wisdom. Clarifying these concepts was a necessary precondition for properly formulating research questions and avoiding the conceptual confusion that often arises in interdisciplinary inquiry.

Comparative normative analysis was used to systematically compare different ethical theories – consequentialism, deontology, theories of justice, the capability approach, and the ethics of care – in terms of their capacity to explain and guide the resolution of educational dilemmas. This method enabled the identification of both the heuristic potential and the limitations of each theoretical tradition.

Argumentative analysis was employed to assess the quality of normative arguments used in debates on educational justice, inclusion, and resource allocation. This method enabled identifying the logical structure of arguments, uncovering hidden premises, and evaluating their persuasiveness.

The *method of thought experiments*, within the tradition developed by Rawls (veil of ignorance) and by other analytic philosophers, was used to test normative principles in hypothetical yet pedagogically productive situations. This method proved particularly effective for revealing implicit value assumptions and demonstrating the practical implications of theoretical positions.

Case analysis enabled concrete application of theoretical arguments through reference to real or realistic educational situations. Cases were selected according to criteria of typicality, by reproducing common classes of dilemmatic situations; diversity, by encompassing the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of education; and heuristic value, by illuminating normatively significant questions.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method for collecting data in the empirical part of the study. The choice of a semi-structured format was determined, on the one hand, by the need to ensure comparability of responses through common thematic blocks and, on the other hand, by the need to give respondents sufficient freedom to articulate individual positions and reveal the specific features of particular situations. The interview guide covered the following thematic blocks: 1) descriptions of concrete dilemmatic situations from personal experience; 2) strategies for addressing uncertainty and making decisions; 3) support resources and institutional conditions; and 4) respondents' assessment of their own preparedness to deal with ethical dilemmas.

Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data on the frequency with which educators encountered different types of dilemmas, their subjective confidence in their own decisions, and their perceptions of institutional support. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of a preliminary qualitative pilot study and included self-assessment scales of moral distress adapted from medical practice (Corley et al., 2001), as well as scales of perceived organizational justice (Colquitt, 2001).

Focus groups were used to investigate educators' collective perceptions of "right" and "wrong" strategies for resolving dilemmas, as well as to identify informal norms and cultural expectations regulating behavior in dilemmatic situations. Focus groups are particularly effective for studying social norms because participants interact with one another and jointly construct meanings.

Observation (in the sample of school practices), was used during the pilot phase of the research to document real situations in which educators encountered dilemmas and the strategies they used to address them in natural settings. Observation made it possible to reduce the gap between declared and actual practices, a phenomenon well known in sociological research as the attitude-behavior gap.

Thematic analysis, following the methodology of Braun and Clarke (2006), was applied to qualitative data, namely interview and focus-group transcripts. Coding was conducted in two stages: first, inductively, through open coding closely grounded in the text; and then, deductively, by testing for correspondence with theoretical categories. The analysis was carried out using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software.

The *statistical analysis* of quantitative questionnaire data included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis to identify relationships between the level of moral distress and institutional factors, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare groups of educators with different lengths of service, types of institution, and experience working with inclusive students. Data were processed in the R environment.

The *triangulation* of methods and data sources was a fundamental methodological decision that ensured the validity of the conclusions. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods (methodological triangulation) and comparing data from teachers, administrators, and students (source triangulation) enabled cross-checking of the findings and reduced the influence of the specific limitations of any single method.

The *scientific novelty* of the research findings lies in the following. For the first time in Ukrainian pedagogical scholarship, a systematic analysis of ethical dilemmas in education has been conducted through the lens of fundamental uncertainty, identifying three qualitatively distinct dimensions of educational uncertainty – epistemic, normative, and ontological – and corresponding strategies for addressing them. This distinction is conceptually productive and opens up new analytical possibilities for pedagogical theory. An original typology of educational dilemmas has been developed based on the levels of the educational system (micro-, meso-, and macro-levels) and the nature of the conflicting values (equality vs. freedom, efficiency vs. justice, and individual good vs. public interest). Unlike existing approaches that consider dilemmas either in a purely abstract manner, at the level of theoretical principles, or in a purely casuistic way, at the level of isolated examples, the proposed typology combines theoretical systematicity with practical orientation. The concept of pedagogical wisdom (*phronesis*) has

also been proposed and substantiated as a practical virtue that enables educators to orient themselves morally in situations of uncertainty. Unlike approaches that reduce pedagogical competence to technical skills, the concept of pedagogical wisdom emphasizes an irreducible practical rationality that develops through experience, reflection, and participation in moral communities. The understanding of inclusive education has been further refined through a distinction between its normative foundations, which remain relatively stable, and the practical dilemmas of implementation, which are contextually variable. This distinction helps avoid two symmetrical errors: reducing support for inclusion to the defense of an abstract principle without accounting for practical difficulties, and rejecting the principle of inclusion on the basis of practical obstacles. The application of the capability approach developed by Nussbaum and Sen to problems of educational justice under conditions of resource scarcity has also been further advanced (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). In particular, criteria for prioritizing educational investment have been developed that synthesize arguments for efficiency associated with the Heckman curve (Heckman & Masterov, 2007) and for justice associated with the Rawlsian difference principle (Rawls, 1971).

Based on an empirical study, the strategies used by practicing educators to address dilemmatic situations under conditions of uncertainty were identified and systematized, and institutional factors that facilitate or hinder morally responsible decision-making were determined. These findings help bridge the existing gap between normative pedagogical theory and educational practice.

The practical significance of the research findings is multi-level and concerns various actors within the educational system

For practicing educators, the study offers conceptual tools for identifying and analyzing dilemmatic situations, including a typology of dilemmas and criteria for distinguishing genuine dilemmas from merely «difficult decisions»; normative guidelines for making morally justified decisions under conditions of

uncertainty; and strategies of self-care and preservation of moral resilience under conditions of sustained moral distress. The chapter's materials may be used to develop workshops for educators on pedagogical ethics and decision-making.

For administrators of educational institutions, the study provides an analysis of the structural conditions that facilitate or hinder morally responsible decision-making; recommendations for fostering a school culture that supports reflective practice and collective engagement with difficult situations; and practical guidance for developing internal procedures for conflict resolution that are normatively transparent and ensure procedural justice.

For education policymakers, the study offers a normative framework for evaluating policy decisions concerning inclusion, resource allocation, and equal access to quality education; an analysis of the mechanisms of systemic responsibility and their possible distortions; and concrete recommendations for designing more equitable systems of educational funding and support for inclusion.

For systems of teacher education and professional development, the chapter's materials may serve as a basis for instructional modules in pedagogical ethics that emphasize not the memorization of ready-made rules, but the development of the capacity for moral judgment under conditions of uncertainty. The cases and analytical methods described here may be used in teacher education as instructional resources.

For the scholarly pedagogical community, the study provides a conceptual framework for further research in pedagogical ethics; a methodological toolkit, including adapted scales of moral distress and organizational justice and interview and focus-group protocols; and an empirical basis for comparative studies of how educators address dilemmatic situations in different institutional contexts.

In addition to the conceptual contributions, the study provides concrete implementation-oriented tools for educational practice. In particular, it proposes: structured decision-making protocols for handling ethical dilemmas under uncertainty (including stakeholder mapping, risk assessment, and justification procedures); institutional guidelines for organizing ethics

reflection groups and collegial consultations within educational institutions; practical frameworks for balancing inclusion and resource allocation in conditions of scarcity; models of integrating ethical reflection into everyday pedagogical routines rather than treating it as an exceptional activity.

These tools may be directly implemented at the institutional level through internal regulations, professional development programs, and leadership practices.

Research Results

The concept of uncertainty has several fundamentally different interpretations in scholarly discourse, and these are conceptualized differently within pedagogical ethics. In his classic work *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, Knight (1921) distinguished between risk as a measurable probability of adverse outcomes and uncertainty proper as a condition in which no objective probabilistic estimate is possible. This distinction is of fundamental importance for educational practice: a substantial part of what occurs in the educational process belongs precisely to Knightian uncertainty rather than to risk.

Simon (1955) introduced the concept of bounded rationality, which describes the cognitive limitations of decision-making: the human mind is unable to process all available information and therefore inevitably simplifies reality through heuristics and simplified models. In the educational context, this means that the ideal of the “rational educator” who makes decisions on the basis of complete information is a theoretical fiction. The real educator always acts on the basis of partial knowledge.

In poststructuralist pedagogical theory, uncertainty is conceptualized in a more radical way. Derrida (1978) and his followers argued that any educational situation is fundamentally unstable and that the meanings of pedagogical actions are never definitively fixed. From this perspective, attempts to fully «overcome» uncertainty through standardization and control are not only practically impossible but also ethically problematic, because they deny the autonomy and uniqueness of each learner.

For the purposes of this analysis, it is useful to distinguish three dimensions of educational uncertainty. First, epistemic uncertainty refers to a lack of knowledge about relevant facts, such as a student's individual abilities, the effectiveness of teaching methods, or future social needs. Second, normative uncertainty denotes the absence of consensus regarding which values and goals should be prioritized in education. Third, ontological uncertainty refers to the fundamental unpredictability of the future in which students will live and act. Each of these dimensions generates specific ethical challenges.

Contemporary pedagogical ethics draws on several competing normative traditions, each of which offers its own approach to resolving dilemmas under conditions of uncertainty. Understanding these traditions is a necessary precondition for the analysis of specific educational problems. Contemporary discussions also stress the limits of purely evidence-based approaches and the need for value-sensitive decision-making under uncertainty (Biesta, 2025).

Consequentialism, especially in its utilitarian form, evaluates decisions by their consequences and requires the maximization of overall welfare. In education, this logic is reflected in approaches oriented toward measurable educational outcomes, the economic efficiency of investment in human capital, and responsiveness to labor market demand. Critics of consequentialism point out that under conditions of uncertainty, the assessment of consequences becomes highly problematic: we do not know what actually produces particular educational outcomes, let alone how to predict the long-term social consequences of educational decisions (Sen, 1999).

The deontological tradition, represented above all by Kantian ethics, insists that some actions are morally obligatory or prohibited regardless of their consequences. The Kantian requirement to treat each person as an end rather than merely as a means has obvious significance for education: a student cannot be reduced to "human capital" or a statistical indicator. This tradition is especially important for protecting the rights of students and teachers in situations where systemic logic may disregard them.

Rawls's theory of justice offers a procedural approach to distributive problems that is particularly important for education. The Rawlsian difference principle requires that inequalities be justified only if they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1971). The veil of ignorance as a methodological device, namely, the idea of choosing an educational system without knowing one's own position within it, is especially productive for the analysis of educational justice (Rawls, 1971). Nussbaum and Sen developed the capability approach, which shifts attention away from the equal distribution of resources toward the real opportunities available to individuals (Nussbaum, 1995; Sen, 1999).

The ethics of care, developed by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984), offers an alternative focus: not abstract principles of justice, but concrete relationships of care between educator and student. From this perspective, the moral task of education lies not in the uniform application of rules, but in responsive attentiveness to each child's unique needs. This tradition is especially important for criticizing bureaucratic systems of educational administration that efface individuality.

None of these traditions is sufficient on its own. A comprehensive analysis of educational dilemmas requires their synthesis, in which they function as complementary perspectives rather than competing doctrines. This synthetic approach underlies the analysis developed in the following sections.

A dilemma in the strict sense is a situation of choice between two or more possible courses of action, each of which is undesirable to some extent or associated with moral costs. It is fundamentally important to distinguish a dilemma from a "difficult decision": in a difficult decision, the correct answer exists but is hard to find or implement; in a genuine dilemma, any choice leads to some form of moral loss.

In educational practice, dilemmas arise at several levels. At the *micro-level*, teachers face dilemmas in concrete pedagogical situations: how to respond to a disruptive student without neglecting the needs of the rest of the class; how to balance the demands of standardized assessment with a particular student's real needs. At the *meso-level*, there are dilemmas of school

administration: how to distribute limited resources among competing needs; how to ensure inclusion without lowering the quality for other students. At the *macro-level*, there are dilemmas in educational policy: which model of equality to implement and how to balance school autonomy with maintaining common standards.

Uncertainty complicates dilemmas in a distinctive way. When the probable consequences of each available course of action are unknown, it becomes impossible even to measure the “moral costs” associated with each option. This gives rise to the phenomenon of double uncertainty: uncertainty about facts is compounded by uncertainty about normative criteria. It is precisely within this space of double uncertainty that most real educational dilemmas arise.

Justice is perhaps the most frequently invoked and, at the same time, the most contested concept in pedagogical ethics. Different theorists attribute markedly different meanings to it, and this diversity is not merely academic; it reflects real value conflicts within society.

Equality as sameness is the most intuitive understanding: every student should receive the same educational resources, the same amount of teacher attention, and the same opportunities. This conception appeals to the basic principle of impartiality and can be easily operationalized through standards and regulations. Yet it conceals a fundamental problem: identical treatment of different individuals is not neutral; it systematically reproduces and deepens inequality when those individuals start from unequal positions.

Equity, by contrast, presupposes that different students should receive different resources according to their needs precisely as much as is required to achieve relevant educational goals. This approach underlies compensatory educational policy: additional funding for schools in deprived areas, support for students with special educational needs, and programs for gifted learners. The difficulty lies in the fact that the very definition of “needs” is normatively charged and often reflects underlying power relations.

The *capability approach*, developed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (1995), reconceptualizes justice as the provision of a real space of opportunities for each individual. Nussbaum identifies ten “central capabilities,” among which education that develops the capacity for critical thinking occupies an important place (Nussbaum, 1995, pp. 33–34). This conception is particularly useful for the analysis of inclusive education: the issue is not merely access to schooling, but whether that schooling genuinely enables the development of each child’s potential.

Critical pedagogy, especially in the legacy of Freire (1970), insists that genuine justice is impossible without transforming the power relations reproduced through education. Freire’s metaphor of “banking education,” in which students are treated as passive “accounts” into which knowledge is deposited, suggests that even well-intentioned efforts at fair resource distribution remain confined within a system that is itself unjust (Freire, 1970).

If substantive justice, that is, a just outcome, is extraordinarily difficult to achieve under conditions of uncertainty, procedural justice – the justice of the decision-making process – assumes particular importance. Research by Tyler (1990) in psychology and the social sciences convincingly shows that people evaluate outcomes far more positively when they perceive the process by which those outcomes were reached as fair, even when they remain dissatisfied with the outcomes themselves.

The principles of procedural justice in education include several *key elements*. The first is *representation*: everyone affected by a decision should have an opportunity to be heard during decision-making. The second is *justification*: decisions should be accompanied by explanations intelligible to those whom they affect. The third is *consistency*: similar situations should be resolved according to similar principles. The fourth is *contestability*: mechanisms should exist for reviewing decisions that may prove unjust.

An important instrument for securing procedural justice is the deliberative approach to educational policy, developed within the tradition of deliberative democratic theory (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). The essence of this approach lies in the idea that educational decisions should be made through open and

reasoned dialogue among all stakeholders: teachers, parents, students, administrators, scholars, and community representatives. Such an approach does not guarantee the “right” decision, but it does ensure that different perspectives and values are taken into account.

Another important procedural instrument is Rawls’s concept of reflective equilibrium, a method of reconciling general principles with particular judgments through their mutual adjustment (Rawls, 1971). In the pedagogical context, this means an ongoing dialogue between general normative principles, such as the claim that every child has a right to quality education, and concrete practical decisions. Such dialogue is never definitively complete; it is an inherent feature of morally responsible educational practice.

Any decision made under conditions of uncertainty entails the risk of error. Pedagogical practice and educational policy generate norms regarding which mistakes are more acceptable than others. This is a deeply ethical issue: the distribution of the risk of error is simultaneously a distribution of power and vulnerability.

In medical bioethics, the principle *primum non nocere* – “first, do no harm” – is well known. An analogous principle may be formulated for pedagogical practice: in situations of uncertainty, preference should be given to those decisions that minimize the risk of harm, especially for students belonging to the most vulnerable groups. This precautionary principle takes different forms in educational practice: careful assessment before assigning a diagnosis of “learning difficulties,” consultation with specialists before excluding a student, and caution in adopting new pedagogical methods.

At the same time, excessive caution has moral costs of its own. When fear of making a mistake paralyzes pedagogical action, students who require timely intervention suffer. A child with dyslexia who does not receive specialized support in time because of concerns about “misdiagnosis” incurs real educational losses as a result of such caution. The precautionary principle must therefore be balanced by a principle of active responsibility: not

only avoiding harm, but actively promoting the well-being of those who require support.

Particularly important is the question of who bears the consequences of erroneous decisions. In actual educational practice, such consequences are often distributed highly unevenly: systemic errors in educational policy, such as inadequate funding for schools in poor areas, fall first and foremost on the most vulnerable students. Meanwhile, those who made those decisions rarely bear corresponding costs. This asymmetry of risk constitutes a significant dimension of educational injustice.

Pedagogical assessment is one of the clearest illustrations of the problem of justice under conditions of uncertainty. It combines all three dimensions of uncertainty: epistemic, because we do not know exactly what is being measured; normative, because there is no consensus on what ought to be measured; and ontological, because we do not know how assessed knowledge will be used in the future.

Standardized testing is one response to a particular aspect of this uncertainty: it seeks to minimize evaluator subjectivity and ensure the comparability of results. Yet it also generates other forms of injustice: a systematic advantage for students familiar with the testing format; the marginalization of important competencies that do not lend themselves to standardized measurement; and curriculum narrowing, as teachers are compelled to focus on “teaching to the test.”

Alternative approaches to assessment – such as portfolios, project-based learning, and authentic assessment – have their own justice-related problems. Their subjectivity makes them more vulnerable to evaluator bias, and their resource intensity means the quality of assessment varies with available resources. No approach to assessment is free from moral compromise.

One of the most thoroughly studied manifestations of injustice in assessment is assessment bias. Meta-analytic research by Gershenson et al. (2016) demonstrates that teachers’ evaluations vary systematically by students’ race, socioeconomic status, and gender, even after controlling for students’ knowledge levels. This phenomenon illustrates how subjective uncertainty –

“How am I evaluating this student?” – is transformed into systemic injustice through the influence of social stereotypes on pedagogical judgment.

The principle of inclusive education – the education of children with diverse needs and abilities within a shared educational environment – has become an international norm through the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Article 24 of the Convention proclaims the right of every person with a disability to “inclusive education at all levels” and obliges states to provide “reasonable accommodation of individual requirements.”

The normative justification of inclusion rests on several arguments. First, there is the human rights argument: every child has an inalienable right to education in a non-exclusionary environment, and segregation constitutes a form of discrimination regardless of its “benevolent” motives. Second, there is the dignity argument: full participation in social institutions is a constitutive element of human dignity, and education is central among such institutions. Third, there is the social cohesion argument: educating students with different abilities and needs together is a condition for the development of a solidaristic society prepared to embrace diversity.

The evidence base summarized by Hehir et al. (2016) indicates that well-implemented inclusion produces positive outcomes both for students with special educational needs and for the rest of the class. Their meta-analysis showed that students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms demonstrate stronger academic and social outcomes than students in segregated settings. For other students, inclusive education fosters empathy, cooperation skills, and readiness to work in diverse environments.

However, the normative appeal of inclusion does not eliminate the real dilemmas that arise in practice. Some of these dilemmas result from insufficient resources, which is a problem of implementation rather than of principle; others are more fundamental and concern the principle itself. Recent studies confirm that many of these dilemmas are intensified under

conditions of limited resources and institutional instability (Oberg, 2025).

One of the most debated dilemmas of inclusive education concerns the distribution of teacher attention and resources among students with different needs. Critics of inclusion, such as Kauffman & Badar (2014), argue that the need to adapt teaching for students with substantial special needs inevitably diverts resources from the rest of the class. Supporters counter that this problem is largely an artifact of insufficient funding and inadequate staff preparation rather than a principled limitation of inclusion.

A deeper dilemma concerns the compatibility of different models of “special needs”. A child with severe behavioral disorders who systematically disrupts the learning process places the educator in a position of having to choose between that child’s right to inclusive education and the rights of other students to learn in a safe and stable environment. There is no principled resolution to this dilemma; rather, it requires the situational balancing of competing rights.

Another dilemma arises from different models of understanding disability and special needs. The medical model treats special needs as characteristics of the individual requiring “correction” or “compensation.” The social model, by contrast, understands disability as the result of social barriers and calls for their removal rather than the “treatment” of the individual. As Oliver (1990) argues, these models have significantly different implications for educational practice: the former leads to specialized support, whereas the latter leads to the transformation of the educational environment. In practice, however, the two often need to be integrated.

Questions of identity and culture constitute another source of normative tensions in inclusive education. Deaf communities frequently criticize the audist view of deafness as a “hearing impairment,” insisting instead, as Lane (1992) argues, that Deafness should be understood as a cultural identity rather than a pathology. This position calls into question the very aim of inclusive education when it is oriented toward “fitting” the child into mainstream culture. Similar tensions arise around education

for children with autism, particularly in debates between “therapeutic” and “neurodiversity” approaches.

The concept of inclusion is gradually expanding to encompass not only children with special educational needs associated with disability, but also students marginalized on other grounds, including ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religious belief. This expansion is normatively justified, yet it also generates additional complexities.

Multicultural education, which seeks to incorporate the experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of different cultural groups into the learning process, encounters the dilemma of cultural relativism. If the equal value of different cultures is recognized, how should one respond to cultural practices that conflict with liberal values such as gender equality, human rights, and scientific knowledge? According to May & Sleeter (2010), the answer varies substantially across approaches to multicultural education, from “critical multiculturalism,” which advocates transforming unjust cultural practices, to more conservative forms that emphasize equal respect for cultural traditions.

Education in minority languages is a specific instance of this broader dilemma. On the one hand, instruction in one’s native language supports more effective learning and contributes to the preservation of linguistic and cultural identity. On the other hand, equal access to the state language, and through it to broader social opportunities, is a condition of social integration and mobility. These aims are not mutually exclusive, but they require careful balancing under conditions of limited resources.

Questions related to gender identity and sexual orientation among students are particularly complex under conditions of uncertainty. Educational systems must protect the dignity and safety of students who identify as LGBTQ+, while at the same time taking into account the religious and cultural convictions of some families and communities. The absence of scientific and social consensus on a number of related issues, such as medical intervention in cases of gender dysphoria in children, complicates the formulation of unambiguous educational recommendations.

Research on effective inclusive education practices identifies a set of institutional conditions without which the proclaimed principle remains empty rhetoric. First, adequate resources are essential: support systems such as teacher assistants, psychologists, speech therapists, and social workers; accessible educational environments; and adaptive learning materials. Second, Forlin (2010) shows that one of the most common reasons for teachers' resistance to inclusion is a sense of unpreparedness and lack of competence, which makes specialized teacher preparation especially important.

Third, a positive school culture is essential, that is, a climate in which diversity is perceived as a resource rather than as a problem. This requires deliberate efforts to build a community of mutual respect and mutual support. Fourth, active partnership with families is crucial: parents of children with special needs possess critically important knowledge about their children, and their genuine involvement, rather than merely formal "information sharing", is a condition of effective inclusive practice.

Fifth, system flexibility is required: standardized curricula and rigid assessment systems often function as structural barriers to inclusion. Universal Design for Learning, developed in the United States, offers principles for designing flexible learning environments that enable different students to achieve common educational goals through different pathways (CAST, 2018). This approach is an important response to the tension between standards and individualization.

The allocation of limited resources is the central practical manifestation of most educational dilemmas. Resources in education include not only financial means, but also teachers' time, administrative attention, physical space, educational materials, and access to specialists. All of these resources are scarce, and no real educational system can satisfy all the needs of all participants at the highest possible level.

Scarcity generates competing demands that are normatively incommensurable: how can one compare the needs of a child with a severe disability requiring extremely costly specialized support with the needs of a class of ordinary students for high-quality general education? How can investment in gifted students be

balanced with support for those who are falling behind? These questions have no purely “technical” answers; they are normative in their very nature. Contemporary analyses of educational systems under crisis conditions demonstrate that such trade-offs have become even more acute in recent years (Constantin et al., 2025).

In public choice theory, education is regarded as a public good characterized by a distinctive combination of properties: it is partly rivalrous, because the time a teacher spends on one student is unavailable to another, and partly non-rivalrous, because knowledge acquired by one student does not reduce the knowledge available to others. This hybrid nature complicates the application of both market logics, which assume full rivalry, and purely public logics, which assume full non-rivalry.

Inequality in educational funding is one of the most thoroughly documented forms of structural injustice. In many countries, school funding depends heavily on the local tax base, leading to systematic inequality between schools in wealthy and poor areas. Research by Condron & Roscigno (2003) convincingly demonstrates that financial inequality reproduces and deepens social inequality. Attempts to overcome this inequality through redistributive mechanisms, such as federal or nationwide funding, often encounter resistance grounded in principles of local self-government and autonomy.

Philosophers and economists of education have proposed several competing criteria for the fair distribution of educational resources. The principle of equal expenditure per pupil is the simplest and most readily operationalized: every student has a right to equal funding. Yet, as already noted, equal expenditure does not guarantee equal opportunities when students begin from unequal starting positions.

The principle of compensatory distribution presupposes that students with greater needs or more adverse circumstances should receive more resources. This principle is implemented through targeted programs: financial subsidies for schools in poor areas, special funding for students with special needs, and early childhood development programs. Barnett’s (1995) research on the Head Start program in the United States shows that early

investment in children from disadvantaged social backgrounds has positive long-term effects.

The principle of equal outcomes is the most demanding: educational resources should be distributed so that all students attain a minimum level of achievement. This approach underlies minimum competency education and the concept of leveling up, that is, raising the lowest-performing students to the average level rather than merely providing an ordinary level of resources. Critics argue that this approach may impose a “ceiling” on more capable students.

The adequacy approach, widely used in American legal thought on educational finance, holds that every student is entitled not to “equal” but to adequate funding – that is, funding sufficient to attain a certain minimum level of education (Minorini & Sugarman, 1999). This conception is more flexible, but also more indeterminate, because it shifts the problem to the question of what counts as “adequate.”

The most acute dilemmas of resource allocation arise under conditions of genuine scarcity, when even the basic needs of all students cannot be met. Such situations are characteristic of educational systems in low-income countries, post-conflict societies, and particular schools experiencing deep deprivation.

Medical bioethics has developed several principles of prioritization under conditions of scarce resources, especially in the context of triage during emergencies. Some of these principles can be adapted for education. The principle of greatest benefit gives priority to those who will benefit most from a given resource. The principle of priority to the most vulnerable gives precedence to those in the worst position. The principle of most urgent needs takes time into account: some educational needs have a “window” beyond which meeting them becomes far less effective, as in the case of early language support.

Especially complex is the problem of prioritization between “ordinary” students and students with extremely costly special needs. When educating one student with a severe disability costs as much as educating an entire class, a dilemma arises: how should one balance the rights of the individual against the interests of the group? Case law in a number of countries has

established that the right to reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities is not unlimited and must take overall systemic resources into account; however, “reasonableness” remains an indeterminate criterion subject to situational evaluation.

Decisions regarding the allocation of educational resources also have an important temporal dimension that often remains overlooked. Investments that appear “costly” in the short term may yield substantial long-term benefits, and vice versa. Heckman & Masterov (2007) demonstrated through the Heckman curve that the highest returns on educational investment are achieved in early childhood rather than at the university level. From the standpoint of long-term efficiency, limited resources should therefore be directed primarily toward early development rather than higher education.

Yet this logic of “efficiency” encounters normative limits, because it risks reducing education to a purely instrumental matter – an investment in “human capital” – while neglecting its intrinsic value. Learning at any age has value in itself, regardless of its “rate of return”; an exclusive concentration on early childhood may therefore lead to neglect of the needs of students in later age groups.

Intergenerational justice introduces another temporal dimension into resource allocation. Decisions made today about the educational system will have consequences for future generations. A decline in the quality of education for the present generation of students will have systemic consequences for society twenty or thirty years from now. Conversely, strengthening educational institutions requires long-term and stable investments that compete with current needs.

The analysis of educational dilemmas at the level of theoretical principles is necessary but insufficient. Real decisions are made by concrete people in concrete situations, where general principles collide with unforeseen details. It is here that Aristotle’s concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) comes to the fore: the capacity to act rightly in particular circumstances, which cannot be reduced to the application of general rules (Aristotle, 1999, 1140a24–b30).

Pedagogical wisdom is a form of practical virtue that enables educators to orient themselves in morally complex situations. It includes the capacity to notice morally relevant aspects of a situation, that is, a form of moral perception; the capacity to weigh competing considerations and determine which are most salient in a given context; and the capacity to act decisively when a decision is required, even in the absence of full certainty.

Unlike technical skills, pedagogical wisdom cannot be fully codified into rules and procedures. It develops through experience, reflection, and participation in moral communities – collectives in which complex situations are jointly interpreted. This means that the institutional conditions under which educators work are of fundamental importance for the formation and exercise of pedagogical wisdom: bureaucratized systems that demand strict adherence to procedure suppress the development of practical wisdom.

As Jameton (1984) argues, the continual encounter with irresolvable dilemmas and the need to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty are a significant source of moral distress, a psychological state that arises when a person knows what ought to be done morally, yet systemic or institutional constraints make it impossible to act accordingly. Moral distress is a well-documented phenomenon in medical practice, but its manifestations in educational work have been studied less extensively. Recent research in education confirms the relevance of this concept, showing that moral distress is widespread among teachers and strongly associated with institutional constraints and lack of support (Ballangrud et al., 2025; Constantin et al., 2025).

Teacher burnout is one of the most serious challenges facing contemporary education. Not all aspects of burnout are consequences of moral distress; however, the constant encounter with irresolvable moral conflicts is a significant contributing factor. An educator who is repeatedly forced to choose between the rights of one student and the needs of the rest of the class, or between the demands of the system and the well-being of a particular child, bears not only cognitive but also moral burdens.

Research in positive psychology points to several factors that support teachers' moral resilience. These include a sense of

autonomy and meaningfulness in work, support from colleagues and administrators, opportunities to participate in collective reflection on difficult situations, and a school culture that acknowledges the complexity of pedagogical work and does not demand “pseudo-certainty” from educators in situations where uncertainty is unavoidable.

Schön (1983) proposed the concept of reflection-in-action, a form of thinking that occurs directly in the course of practice and makes it possible to adjust one’s actions in response to new information and context. Unlike the technical application of ready-made recipes, reflective practice presupposes continual reconsideration of both the situation and one’s own actions.

In the context of educational dilemmas, reflective practice includes, among other things, continual re-examination of one’s own biases and their influence on pedagogical decisions; a willingness to question one’s initial judgments; participation in communities of inquiry in which educators jointly analyze complex situations; and the documentation of decisions and their consequences as a means of accumulating practical wisdom.

An important tool of reflective practice is ethics consultation, a mechanism widespread in medical ethics but much less developed in education. Educational ethics committees or ethics consultants may support teachers and administrators in dealing with especially complex dilemmas, not by imposing ready-made decisions, but by facilitating structured analysis of the situation and examination of available alternatives.

The digitalization of education has generated fundamentally new dimensions of ethical dilemmas that overlay traditional problems of justice and distribution. The use of algorithmic systems in education – from adaptive learning platforms to automated assessment and early identification systems for “at-risk students” – raises new questions of transparency, accountability, and fairness.

Algorithmic bias is one of the most thoroughly studied risks of digitalized education. Algorithms trained on data reflecting existing inequalities can reproduce and even intensify those inequalities. As Barocas&Selbst (2016) note, dropout prediction systems trained on data from schools where racial minorities

disproportionately left school may systematically flag students from such groups as “at risk,” regardless of their individual characteristics. Recent empirical studies confirm that such biases are not merely theoretical risks but observable patterns in data-driven educational systems (Mirea, Palade, & Gaureanu, 2024).

Another specific problem is the digital divide: unequal access to technology that may deepen educational inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated this problem with particular clarity: the shift to distance learning proved profoundly unjust for students who lacked reliable internet access or a quiet place to study. These “new” inequalities are, in fact, both a reflection and an intensification of “old” socioeconomic inequalities.

Questions of confidentiality and data collection constitute another dimension of digital pedagogical ethics. Contemporary learning platforms collect vast amounts of data about students, ranging from test scores to click patterns and attention spans. These data may be used to personalize learning, which has clear educational advantages, but also for surveillance, commercial purposes, and, in extreme cases, manipulation. Legal frameworks such as the GDPR in Europe and FERPA in the United States impose certain restrictions, yet their effectiveness remains contested.

Artificial intelligence systems open up significant possibilities for personalized learning, support for teachers in routine tasks, and the early identification of students who require additional assistance. At the same time, they also generate specific ethical risks that call for a carefully considered normative response. At the same time, contemporary research emphasizes the ethical ambiguity of AI integration, particularly regarding responsibility, transparency, and pedagogical autonomy (AlBlooshi, 2026; Ballangrud et.al., 2026).

One of the key questions concerns the distribution of responsibility between the human actor and the algorithm when the algorithm makes or recommends a decision. If an AI system recommends that a student be referred to a specialized educational institution, and a teacher or administrator follows this recommendation without critical reflection, who bears moral responsibility for that decision? As Pasquale (2015) argues, the

risk of authoritative algorithmic bias – that is, the uncritical acceptance of AI recommendations as though they possessed objective authority is both real and well documented.

The concept of “moral anesthesia” should therefore not be interpreted unambiguously as a negative outcome. In part, it may reflect a necessary professional adaptation that enables educators to function under conditions of sustained moral pressure. At the same time, there is a risk that such adaptation may, in some cases, lead to diminished moral responsiveness. This dual nature calls for more precise conceptual and empirical differentiation.

Pedagogical autonomy is another normatively important dimension. If algorithmic systems excessively constrain pedagogical freedom by imposing standardized methods and content, they undermine the very nature of the pedagogical vocation. Pedagogy is not only a technique, but also an art that presupposes responsive sensitivity to the unique needs of particular students. Systems that reduce pedagogical work to the execution of algorithmic prescriptions risk undermining precisely what makes pedagogy effective.

The preceding analysis has focused primarily on the micro-level, namely, the dilemmas of individual teachers and administrators. Yet most educational injustices are systemic in nature: they are reproduced through institutional structures, norms, and practices that exceed the capacities of individual actors. Individual reflection and moral virtue alone are therefore insufficient; systemic transformation is required.

Structural racism in education is one of the most thoroughly documented manifestations of systemic injustice. As Ladson-Billings (1995) argues, it is manifested not only in overt forms of discrimination but also in apparently neutral institutional practices that continually reproduce inequality, particularly through the allocation of resources on the basis of local taxation, disciplinary gaps in which students from racial minorities are more frequently subjected to severe sanctions, and lower academic expectations held by educators toward certain groups of students.

Another important conceptual tool is the notion of the hidden curriculum, introduced by Jackson (1968). Alongside the explicit content of education—knowledge and skills – schools transmit

implicit messages about power, hierarchy, acceptable behavior, and social roles. These implicit messages often carry class, gender, and cultural dimensions, reinforcing inequality by normalizing dominant cultural codes.

Educational policy confronts a distinctive form of uncertainty: decisions made at the systemic level affect millions of people and have long-term consequences, making exhaustive prediction impossible. This requires specific procedural standards to ensure the legitimacy and accountability of educational policy decisions.

In particular, the principle of epistemic humility in relation to educational reform presupposes that reformers should acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge and build feedback mechanisms that make it possible to identify and correct mistakes. Randomized controlled trials are widely used in evidence-based educational policy to justify reforms with scientific data. At the same time, Biesta (2007) notes that they have important limitations: they measure only short-term outcomes in particular conditions and are difficult to transfer to other contexts.

The inclusion of stakeholders in the development of educational policy is a procedural principle that partly compensates for policymakers' epistemic limitations. Teachers, parents, students, and community representatives all possess forms of practical knowledge absent from the offices of officials and university campuses. Mechanisms of such inclusion – from public consultations to advisory councils – are important elements of a just educational system, although their effectiveness depends on genuine, rather than merely formal, willingness to listen to voices from below.

Accountability systems are among the most controversial features of contemporary educational policy. On the one hand, they respond to an entirely legitimate social demand: if the state invests substantial resources in education, it has the right to require an account of how those resources are used. On the other hand, specific forms of accountability often generate serious distortions.

Standardized testing as an accountability instrument has been widely criticized for encouraging teaching to the test,

narrowing the curriculum, demotivating students and teachers, and inadequately capturing what genuinely matters in education. Research on the *No Child Left Behind* reforms in the United States shows that strong pressure on schools through standardized tests led to the manipulation of reporting and a focus on “borderline” students – those barely reaching the required threshold – while other students were neglected (Jennings & Rentner, 2006).

Alternative approaches to accountability include intelligent accountability, which, according to O’Neill (2002), relies on trust in educators and on demonstrating results through multiple forms of evidence rather than solely through numerical indicators. The Irish model of school inspection, the Finnish support system – in which accountability is built primarily on the development of teacher competence rather than on external control – and several other approaches demonstrate that accountability systems can exist without undermining educators’ autonomy and motivation.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, several principles may be formulated that together constitute an integrated normative framework for pedagogical practice under conditions of uncertainty. These principles are not “recipes” and therefore do not eliminate the need for situational judgment; rather, they serve as guidelines that structure morally responsible thinking.

A central guideline for morally balanced decision-making in education under conditions of uncertainty is the principle of prioritizing the minimization of harm to the vulnerable. When the consequences of a pedagogical or managerial decision cannot be fully foreseen, preference should be given to courses of action that reduce the risk of worsening the situation of students who are already in disadvantaged circumstances. The issue here is not passive avoidance of responsibility, but active protection of those whose capacity for self-protection is constrained by social, psychological, physical, or institutional factors. Such a logic of moral choice corresponds to the idea of supporting the least advantaged and to approaches that link justice not merely to formally equal treatment but to the real expansion of life opportunities.

Another key element is the principle of procedural fairness and reason-giving. In the absence of any guarantee of a perfectly just outcome, the fairness of the process within which a decision is made becomes especially important. A morally justified educational process presupposes taking into account the voices of all stakeholders, providing intelligible explanations of the grounds and motives of decisions, maintaining consistency in the application of norms and criteria, and remaining open to reconsideration in the event of error or well-founded objection. Procedural fairness is particularly important in educational settings, where every decision affects not only the experience of a particular student but also trust in the institution as a whole.

No less significant is the principle of recognition and respect for diversity. Educational reality is constituted by differences in abilities, needs, linguistic experience, cultural affiliation, social status, modes of perception, and developmental pace. Morally responsible education therefore cannot orient itself toward the image of an “average” or “normative” student as a universal model. Respect for diversity presupposes organizing educational space in such a way that plurality is not regarded as a deviation requiring additional “inclusion,” but is built into the very approaches to teaching, assessment, communication, and support. Inclusiveness thus emerges not as a separate area of activity, but as a moral quality of the educational system as a whole.

The principle of reflective humility also requires special attention. In professional pedagogical practice, it is impossible to possess complete knowledge of all the consequences of one’s actions, all the contexts of a student’s life, or all the hidden factors shaping an educational situation. A morally mature stance therefore requires acknowledgment of the limits of one’s own knowledge, readiness to refine earlier conclusions, willingness to revise decisions in light of new information, and sensitivity to indirect and delayed consequences. Such an orientation is not a sign of weakness, but of professional and moral maturity, because it prevents self-confident decision-making without adequate appreciation of complexity. Reflective humility supports responsible pedagogical action that combines decisiveness with readiness for self-correction.

This framework is completed by the principle of systemic responsibility. The moral quality of educational decisions depends not only on the personal virtues of teachers or administrators, but also on the character of the institutional environment in which professional activity unfolds. Inequality in access to resources, procedural formalism, bureaucratic pressure, and hidden mechanisms of exclusion or discrimination cannot be overcome solely through individual integrity. A morally responsible pedagogical stance therefore involves not only supporting individual students in difficult circumstances, but also participating in the transformation of structures that reproduce injustice. A professional community aware of its own systemic responsibility can become an agent of educational change aimed at creating a more just, responsive, and inclusive educational environment.

Pedagogical ethics is not only a normative framework for educators' actions; it must also address the question of how education prepares students for their own ethical dilemmas. In a world characterized by increasing complexity and uncertainty, one of the most important aims of education is the development of moral agency – the capacity to orient oneself in morally complex situations, make responsible decisions, and live with uncertainty.

Critical thinking, media literacy, and the capacity for anticipatory analysis are not merely cognitive achievements, but moral ones as well. They shape individuals capable of resisting manipulation and authoritarianism, critically evaluating their own convictions, and assuming responsibility for their judgments.

Empathy and moral imagination – the ability to understand the perspectives and experiences of people different from oneself – constitute an important dimension of moral education. As Noddings (1984) emphasizes, education should above all cultivate the human capacity to care for others. Nussbaum (1995), for her part, insists on the central role of literary imagination – the ability to identify with other human destinies through literature and other forms of narrative – in the formation of morally responsible citizens.

Moral resilience – the capacity to preserve one's moral orientation and to avoid moral burnout under difficult conditions – is another important aim of education. It is not stoicism or

indifference, but rather the ability to preserve moral sensitivity and the capacity for action even when the “right” answer is not self-evident.

The empirical study was conducted over the period 2022–2025 in three successive phases: 1) a pilot qualitative phase involving observation and pilot interviews ($n = 18$), which made it possible to refine the research instruments; 2) a main qualitative phase involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups; and 3) a quantitative phase involving questionnaire administration for the verification and generalization of qualitative data.

A fundamentally important feature of the study is its coverage of three levels of the educational system: institutions of general secondary education (GSE), including comprehensive schools, lyceums, gymnasiums, and special education institutions; institutions of professional pre-higher education (PPH), including colleges, technical schools, and vocational schools; and institutions of higher education (HEIs), including universities, academies, and institutes. This design was motivated by the need to identify both common and specific patterns in the emergence and handling of dilemmas across different levels of the educational system, where the age of learners, the character of pedagogical relationships, and institutional norms differ substantially.

The sample was constructed with attention to length of teaching experience (up to 5 years, 5–15 years, and more than 15 years) and occupational status (subject teachers, homeroom teachers, administrators, pedagogical staff, and academic staff). The overall sample structure included semi-structured interviews ($n = 84$: GSE = 36, PPH = 22, HEIs = 26), focus groups (9 groups, $n = 68$; three in each type of institution), and questionnaires (514 completed questionnaires: GSE = 218, PPH = 142, HEIs = 154). The geographical scope covered seven regions of Ukraine—Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv, Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, Poltava, and Volyn – with equal representation of urban and regional centers. The structure of the sample by type of institution, respondent status, and length of service is presented in Table 1. The study was conducted in accordance with research ethics standards: all participants provided informed consent, data were anonymized, and transcripts were stored on secure servers. Table 1

Table 1
Structure of the research sample by type of educational institution

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>GSE</i>	<i>PPH</i>	<i>HEIs</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of institutions	24	14	16	54
Questionnaires (n)	218	142	154	514
Interviews (n)	36	22	26	84
Focus groups (n)	3	3	3	9
Experience up to 5 years (%)	28%	31%	19%	26%
Experience 5–15 years (%)	41%	38%	44%	41%
Experience over 15 years (%)	31%	31%	37%	33%
Share with ethics course (%)	28%	33%	41%	33%

Source: Authors' own work.

The analysis of qualitative data revealed both common patterns, characteristic of all types of institutions, and substantial specificity at each level of the educational system. This specificity is determined by differences in learners' ages, the nature of pedagogical relationships, the degree of procedural formalization, and institutional requirements.

In general secondary education, the leading dilemmas concern students' unequal starting conditions, responsibility for the child's "holistic development" rather than merely the transmission of knowledge, interaction with families, and the protection of children from adverse circumstances. Educators in general secondary education describe the most intensive emotional bond with students and, correspondingly, the highest level of moral distress when outcomes are unfavorable. A characteristic quotation is: "You have known this child for many years, you know the family, and when you cannot help because of the system, it really hurts" (primary school teacher, 12 years of experience).

In institutions of professional pre-higher education, dilemmas at the boundary between pedagogical and quasi-professional responsibility clearly predominate: learners are both "students" and "future professionals," which creates specific tensions between educational support and the demands of actual competence. Educators in professional pre-higher education frequently describe dilemmas related to deciding whether to admit a learner to practicum or vocational training when they regard that

learner's competence as insufficient: "If I let this student through, they will end up in a real-life situation where people depend on them. If I do not let them through, I may destroy their career because of one failure" (college instructor, Nursing program).

In higher education institutions, the dominant dilemmas concern academic integrity, the balance between research and teaching functions, student autonomy, and institutional pressure. Especially characteristic is the much greater number of descriptions of dilemmas involving conflict between one's own scholarly convictions and the demands of administration or external stakeholders: «Science says one thing, but the administration wants us to teach students differently, so what am I supposed to do in front of the classroom?» (associate professor, Pedagogy program). Academic integrity is the most pronounced institution-specific issue in higher education: 78% of HEI instructors described dilemmas related to academic plagiarism and the choice of sanctions.

Quantitative analysis of questionnaire data enabled systematic assessment of the prevalence of different types of dilemmatic situations across the three types of institutions (Table 2).

Table 2

**Prevalence of types of dilemmatic situations
by type of institution (% of respondents who encountered
a given type of dilemma "often" or "very often")**

<i>Type of dilemma</i>	<i>GSE %</i>	<i>PPH %</i>	<i>HEIs %</i>	<i>Total %</i>
Distribution of attention and resources	91%	84%	67%	82%
Assessment and actual progress	83%	79%	71%	78%
Confidentiality/protection	74%	62%	45%	62%
Academic integrity	41%	68%	78%	59%
Cultural / value diversity	69%	57%	53%	61%
Systemic mismatch of requirements	62%	71%	74%	68%
Professional competence/admission to practice	18%	76%	49%	44%
Conflict between scholarly and administrative positions	12%	31%	68%	34%

Note. Values $\geq 70\%$ are highlighted in bold as the most prevalent types of dilemmas in each group.

Source: Authors' own work.

As Table 2 shows, dilemmas concerning the distribution of attention and resources are most prevalent in general secondary education (91%) and professional pre-higher education (84%), whereas in higher education their frequency is noticeably lower (67%), which may be explained by the greater autonomy of higher education students. By contrast, dilemmas concerning a systemic mismatch of requirements are more prevalent in HEIs (74%) and PPH institutions (71%), where educators more often describe tensions between educational autonomy and bureaucratic regulation. Academic integrity is the dominant type of dilemma in HEIs (78%) and PPH institutions (68%), but occurs much less frequently in GSE (41%).

The comparative analysis of strategies for handling dilemmas revealed substantial differences among educators working in different types of institutions. These differences reflect not only educators' personal characteristics but also institutional culture and the nature of pedagogical relationships (Table 3, Fig.1).

Table 3

Prevalence of dilemma-processing strategies by type of institution (% of respondents who identified the strategy as «primary» or «frequently used»)

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>GSE %</i>	<i>PPH %</i>	<i>HEIs %</i>	<i>Total %</i>
Priority of relationships (ethics of care)	82%	71%	58%	72%
Procedural protection (rule adherence)	58%	61%	44%	54%
Collegial consultation	53%	49%	57%	53%
Harm minimization	49%	51%	43%	48%
Deferred decision	41%	37%	33%	38%
Systemic appeal / activism	19%	24%	31%	24%
Appeal to an external arbiter (ombudsperson, NPP)	8%	11%	22%	13%

Source: Authors' own work.

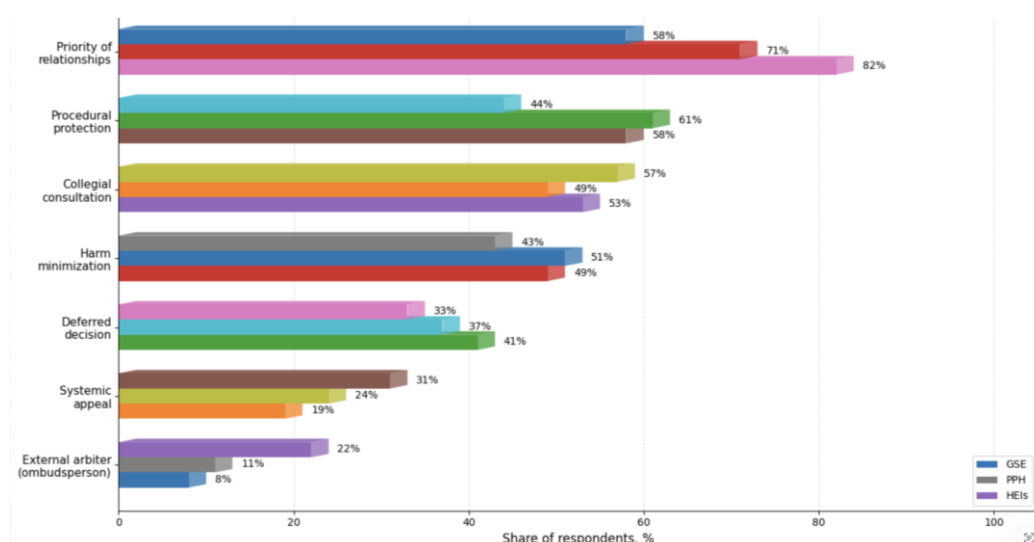


Figure 1
Prevalence of dilemma-processing strategies by type of educational institution

Source: Authors' own work.

The strategy of prioritizing relationships is dominant in general secondary education (82%), which corresponds to educators' emotional closeness to students. In higher education, its prevalence is substantially lower (58%), because relationships between instructors and students are less intensive and more formalized. By contrast, the strategy of systemic appeal is much more common among HEI instructors (31%) than among GSE educators (19%), which may be related to higher levels of self-efficacy and to the presence of institutional channels, such as academic councils and independent committees, for systemic change.

Appeal to an external arbiter, such as an equality commissioner, ombudsperson, or independent pedagogical board, is most common in higher education (22%), where such structures are better institutionalized, and least common in general secondary education (8%), where educators more often describe the absence of effective external mechanisms.

Regression analysis identified the key predictors of two dependent variables: the level of moral distress (measured by the Corley et al. scale) (Corley et al., 2001) and subjective confidence in decisions made (Table 4).

Table 4

Multiple regression results: predictors of moral distress and confidence in decisions (standardized β coefficients)

<i>Predictor</i>	β (<i>distress</i>)	β (<i>confidence</i>)	<i>p</i> - value	<i>Signi- ficance</i>
Supportive institutional culture	−0.48	+0.39	<0.001	***
Teaching experience	−0.31	+0.41	<0.001	***
Training in pedagogical ethics	−0.24	+0.33	<0.001	***
Availability of support resources	−0.22	+0.27	<0.001	***
Institution type (HEIs vs GSE)	+0.11	−0.08	<0.05	*
Institution type (PPH vs GSE)	+0.07	−0.05	0.12	n.s.
R ² model	0.61	0.54	—	—

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; n.s. = not significant. β = standardized regression coefficient.

Source: Authors' own work.

The results of the regression analysis confirm that institutional culture is the strongest predictor of both moral distress ($\beta = -0.48$) and decision confidence ($\beta = +0.39$). Training in pedagogical ethics has a significant independent effect on both variables, even after controlling for teaching experience and type of institution, indicating the educational component's autonomous role. The type of institution has a comparatively smaller effect: HEI instructors show somewhat higher distress ($\beta = +0.11$), which may be explained by the greater autonomy of their role and lower institutional support in comparison with GSE. The model explains 61% of the variance in moral distress and 54% of the variance in decision confidence ($R^2 = 0.61$ and 0.54 , respectively).

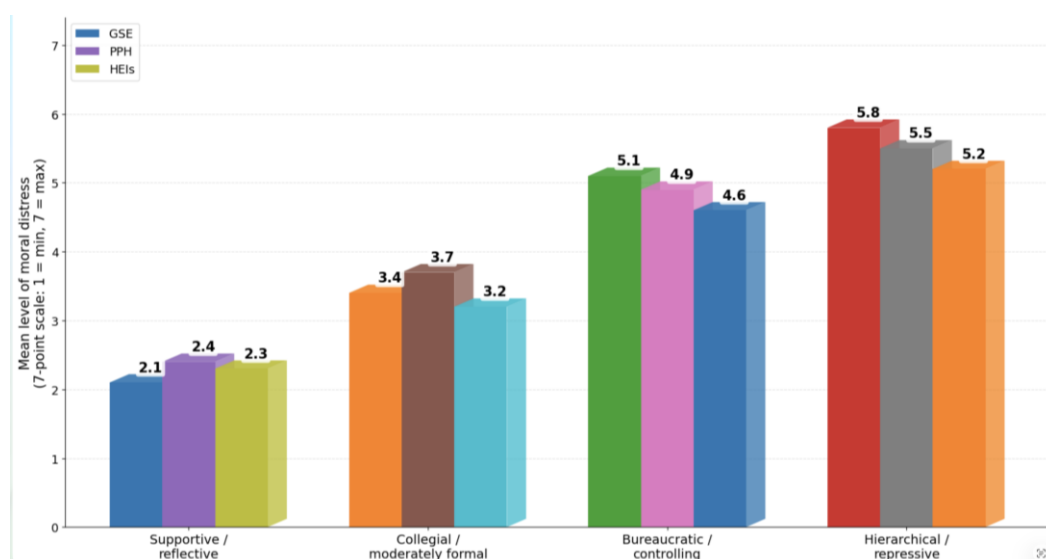


Figure 2
**Level of moral distress (mean on a 7-point scale)
by institutional culture and type of educational institution**

Source: Authors' own work.

Of particular analytical interest is the non-linear relationship between teaching experience and the level of moral distress (Table 5).

Table 5.

Mean level of moral distress (7-point scale) and proportion of educators showing signs of moral anesthesia by years of service and type of institution

Years of service	GSE distress	PPH distress	HEIs distress	Total distress	GSE anaesthesia	HEIs anaesthesia
Up to 5	4.1	3.9	3.7	3.9	4%	3%
5–10	3.6	3.8	3.4	3.6	6%	5%
10–15	3.2	3.4	3.1	3.2	9%	8%
15–20	2.9	3.1	2.9	3.0	14%	11%
20–25	2.7	2.8	2.6	2.7	19%	16%
Over 25	2.4	2.5	2.3	2.4	31%	27%

Note. Moral anesthesia was operationalized as a combination of low distress (≤ 2.0) and low moral sensitivity based on qualitative assessment of interview transcripts.

Source: Authors' own work.

The data in Table 5 demonstrate a pronounced non-linear relationship: the level of moral distress gradually decreases with increasing years of service, from $M = 3.9$ among educators with up to 5 years of experience to $M = 2.4$ among those with more than 25 years. At the same time, the proportion of educators showing signs of moral anesthesia rises – from 4% among novices to 31% among the most experienced educators in general secondary education and 27% in higher education. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in general secondary education, where the emotional intensity of pedagogical relationships is greatest: prolonged immersion in complex situations without adequate support may lead to the exhaustion of moral sensitivity, even when outward functional effectiveness is preserved.

It is important to interpret the observed decrease in moral distress with caution. This tendency may indicate not only the development of professional competence, emotional regulation, and pedagogical maturity, but also, in certain cases, a reduction in sensitivity to morally significant aspects of situations. Distinguishing between adaptive professional resilience and problematic moral disengagement requires further qualitative and longitudinal analysis.

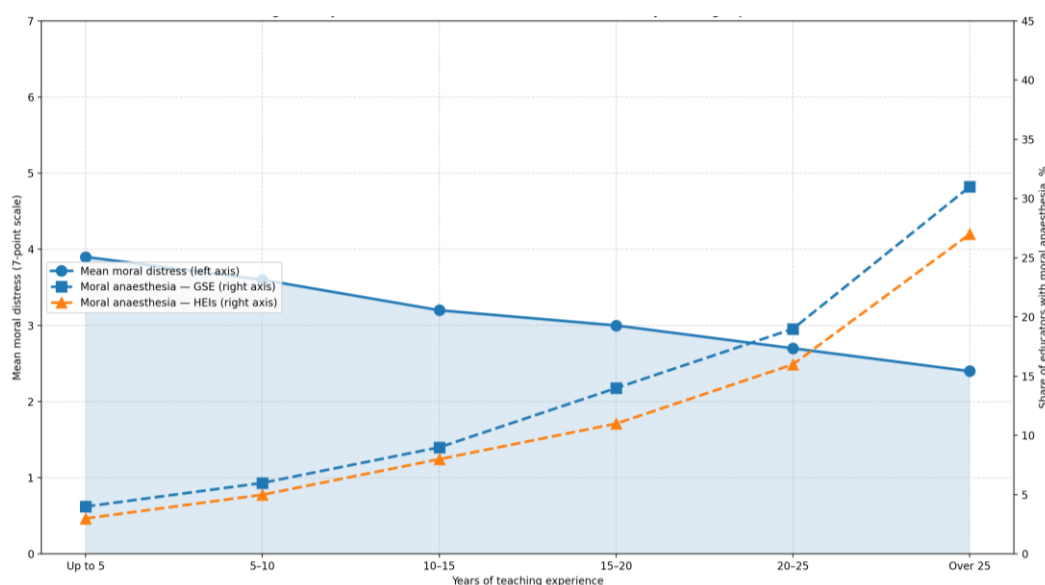


Figure 3
Dynamics of moral distress and moral anesthesia through teaching experience

Source: Authors' own work.

Comparison of data from the three types of educational institutions reveals several fundamentally important patterns that both confirm and refine the theoretical propositions while also bringing to light several unexpected and nuanced findings.

The findings confirm the proposition that dilemmatic situations are fundamentally pervasive in pedagogical practice and constitute not isolated cases, but an everyday reality for the vast majority of educators. More specifically, the nature of dilemmas is determined primarily by the character of pedagogical relationships and the nature of responsibility rather than by the formal level of education. In general secondary education, dilemmas are predominantly dilemmas of “holistic responsibility” for the child’s development; in professional pre-higher education, they arise at the boundary between educational and quasi-professional responsibility; in higher education, they take the form of dilemmas of “dual loyalty” between scholarly and pedagogical roles. This conclusion points to the need to systematically prepare future educators to address dilemmas, rather than merely to master subject content and methodological skills. These differences have important implications for teacher education and suggest the need for substantially different thematic emphases in courses on pedagogical ethics for teachers in general secondary education and instructors in higher education. These findings align with recent international research emphasizing the central role of institutional conditions, ethical leadership, and systemic support in shaping educators’ moral agency (Hill-Berry & Burris-Melville, 2025; Ballangrud et al., 2026).

The identified strategies for handling dilemmas correspond to different normative traditions: “priority of relationships” aligns with the ethics of care; “procedural protection” aligns with deontological approaches; and “harm minimization” aligns with consequentialism. This suggests that practicing educators intuitively draw on normative logics that best align with their personal orientation and institutional context, albeit without systematic theoretical reflection.

The data convincingly show that the quality of handling dilemmas is primarily a function not of educators' individual characteristics but of institutional conditions, specifically the institution's culture, the availability of support, and the presence

of space for collegial reflection. This has important implications for educational policy: strategies aimed solely at individually “upskilling” educators without transforming the institutional environment are insufficient.

Despite differences in the prevalence of particular types of dilemmas, institutional culture remains the strongest predictor of the quality of dilemma processing across all three types of institutions. This is a crucial conclusion: no system of teacher preparation can compensate for a toxic institutional environment. Systemic efforts to transform the organizational culture of educational institutions are a precondition for the effectiveness of any individually oriented intervention.

The phenomenon of “moral burnout” among experienced educators is a troubling signal that requires further investigation. It suggests that prolonged exposure to irresolvable dilemmas without adequate support may lead not only to burnout in the conventional sense of emotional exhaustion, but also to a specific form of “moral anesthesia,” namely, a diminished sensitivity to the morally significant aspects of situations. Its increasing frequency with years of service points to the need not only for initial but also for continuous support for educators, in the form of regular reflection groups, individual counseling, and organizational mechanisms that sustain moral sensitivity throughout the entire career.

The considerably lower proportion of educators across all types of institutions who had undergone systematic training in pedagogical ethics (GSE = 28%, PPH = 33%, HEIs = 41%), combined with the independent positive effect of such training on the quality of handling dilemmas, points to a substantial gap in teacher education. This conclusion is especially important for the system of pedagogical education in Ukraine, where ethics courses often remain optional or are reduced to a mere declaratory presentation of principles, without fostering practical capacities for moral judgment.

The findings are broadly consistent with international studies that regard ethical dilemmas as an everyday rather than exceptional component of pedagogical practice. In particular, Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) has shown that critical incidents in

teachers' work most often arise at points where care, justice, institutional norms, and professional responsibility collide; at the same time, educators frequently experience powerlessness and lack adequate tools for well-grounded moral choice. The high frequency of dilemmas documented in our study across GSE, PPH, and HEIs is therefore not anomalous but confirms an internationally documented feature of the profession.

The finding concerning the decisive role of institutional culture corresponds with the conclusions of Cherkowski, Walker, and Kutsyuruba (2015), who demonstrate that the moral agency of educational leaders and the quality of ethical decision-making depend not only on the personal virtues of the leader but also on whether the institution has created an atmosphere of trust, collegiality, and inclusive decision-making. In this sense, our conclusion that no amount of individual preparation can compensate for a toxic institutional environment is not only empirically confirmed but also theoretically consistent with the broader line of scholarship on moral agency in educational leadership (Ballangrud et al., 2025; Cherkowski et al., 2015).

At the same time, our data deepen the international literature by demonstrating differences among types of educational institutions. Whereas some international studies focus either on the school level or on institutional leadership, our study traces the specificity of dilemmas across three subsystems simultaneously. This helps explain why dilemmas of academic integrity and conflict between scholarly and administrative positions are more salient in higher education, while dilemmas of care, confidentiality, and the distribution of attention predominate in general secondary education. Such differentiation does not contradict international findings, but rather specifies them within a more complex institutional configuration (Roos & Bagger, 2024).

The findings relating to inclusion and resource scarcity also correspond with contemporary Ukrainian scholarship. Diachenko, Voroshchuk, Romanova, Shevtsova, & Tretiakova (2024) emphasize that the development of inclusive education in Ukraine is constrained not only by formal barriers but, above all, by a lack of trained personnel, support resources, and coherent intersectoral coordination. This conclusion helps explain why educators in our sample so often described dilemmas not as

conflicts of principles in themselves, but as conflicts of principles under conditions of insufficient time, lack of specialists, and weak procedural support.

The identified phenomenon of moral distress and its transformation into “moral anesthesia” among more experienced educators requires separate explanation. In Fedotova’s (2022) theoretical work, moral distress is understood as a condition that arises when an internally accepted moral decision cannot be realized because of external constraints. In our study, this mechanism takes on a distinctly educational meaning: educators remain in situations for long periods in which they can clearly see the ethically preferable course of action, yet lack the resources, time, or institutional mandate to implement it. It is precisely the repetition of such situations that may explain the gradual decline in the intensity of distress with years of experience, not as a sign of healthy adaptation, but as a risk of the exhaustion of moral sensitivity.

The wartime context in Ukraine is another important factor in interpreting the findings. Shelestova’s work on learning losses under wartime conditions and Nadyukova & Frenzel’s (2025) study on stress and coping among Ukrainian teachers show that contemporary educators work under conditions of educational disruption, psychological overload, environmental instability, and widening inequality among students. The high levels of dilemmas concerning resource allocation, care for the vulnerable, and tensions between formal requirements and actual possibilities documented in our study should therefore be explained not only by the general complexity of the teaching profession, but also by the intensification of moral burdens under wartime conditions (Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025; Shelestova, 2023).

At the same time, the analysis also indicates what is currently lacking in both domestic and international discourse. First, there is a shortage of comparative studies that simultaneously encompass GSE, PPH, and HEIs within a single analytical framework. Second, there is limited research capable of tracing the long-term dynamics of educators’ moral distress and distinguishing professional maturity from moral exhaustion. Third, within the Ukrainian context, there is still insufficient empirical description of how war, digitalization, and inclusion policy together

reshape the structure of ethical dilemmas. Our study thus partly fills this gap while also opening up perspectives for further longitudinal and cross-level research.

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Although the sample is diverse, it is not representative in the strict statistical sense, since it was constructed through purposive rather than random sampling. The quantitative data should therefore be regarded as indicative rather than as grounds for strict generalization to the entire population of educators. Self-report data, including questionnaires and interview responses, may also be affected by social desirability bias: educators may describe themselves as acting in a more morally reflective manner than they actually do in practice. The observation phase partly mitigates this risk, but it covers only a limited number of participants and situations. The study was conducted under conditions of martial law in Ukraine (since 2022), which generated specific dilemmas for traumatized learners, internally displaced persons, and distance learning under conditions of danger, which may not be fully representative of peacetime conditions. The study captures educators' perceptions and self-assessments, but does not evaluate the actual outcomes of their decisions. It therefore remains an open question whether subjectively "correct" or confident decisions are in fact more just or more effective for students. Further research may include triangulated analysis comparing educators', pupils', parents', and students' judgments of the same situations. Overall, the results support the growing consensus in international scholarship that ethical decision-making in education cannot be reduced to individual competence alone but requires systemic, institutional, and technological awareness (Biesta, 2025; Xu et.al., 2025; AlBlooshi, 2026).

Conclusions

The analysis undertaken here leads to several fundamental conclusions. Uncertainty is an inherent ontological characteristic of educational activity rather than a temporary condition that can be overcome through the accumulation of knowledge. Distinguishing among epistemic, normative, and ontological

uncertainty enables more precise analysis of the nature of specific educational dilemmas and the corresponding strategies for addressing them. Justice in education is a polysemous concept that encompasses fundamentally different understandings – equality, equity, adequacy, and equality of opportunity. None of these is sufficient in isolation; genuine educational justice requires their synthesis, with procedural justice given priority in conditions where substantive justice of outcome is unattainable.

Inclusive education is a normatively justified ideal grounded in arguments from human rights, human dignity, and social cohesion. At the same time, its implementation generates real dilemmas – above all in the distribution of teacher attention, the compatibility of different models of special needs, and cultural diversity – which require situational balancing rather than the mechanical application of principles.

The distribution of educational resources is the clearest manifestation of systemic educational injustice. Systemic mechanisms of unequal funding, which sustain and reproduce social inequality through educational inequality, are a problem that exceeds the capacities of individual actors and requires systemic responses. At the same time, the temporal dimension of distribution remains important: the evidence supporting the prioritization of investment in early development and in the most vulnerable students is both compelling and normatively significant.

The educator's role as a moral subject is central to the entire analysis. Pedagogical wisdom, as a practical virtue that enables orientation in complex situations, cannot be reduced to technical skills and is a necessary condition of morally responsible educational practice. Reflective practice and participation in collective communities of inquiry are important mechanisms for developing and maintaining pedagogical wisdom.

The digitalization of education generates new dimensions of traditional dilemmas: algorithmic bias, the digital divide, and risks to confidentiality and pedagogical autonomy all require specific normative responses that are only beginning to take shape in pedagogical and legal thought.

The study's findings enable the formulation of an integrated normative framework for pedagogical practice under conditions of uncertainty, a framework that combines prioritizing the minimization of harm to the vulnerable, procedural fairness, respect for diversity, reflective humility, and systemic responsibility. No theoretical framework can eliminate dilemmas altogether. It can, however, provide guidelines for morally responsible thought and action in a complex educational world. Promising directions for further research include: 1) longitudinal investigation tracing the development of pedagogical wisdom and moral distress across the career span; 2) comparative international research into the specificity of dilemmas across different educational systems; 3) the development and evaluation of programs designed to prepare educators to deal with dilemmatic situations; and 4) triangulated analysis of the judgments of educators, learners, and parents/employers regarding the same dilemmatic situations.

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