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Moral Dilemmas across Gender and Teaching Experience: A Case of Iranian High-School English Teachers

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Abstract

Although the criticality of morality in education has been acknowledged recently, the nature of moral dilemmas that English teachers face and the ways they deal with them have been rarely investigated. The present study aimed at filling the gap in the literature by investigating the Iranian high school EFL teachers' narration of moral dilemmas and the decisions they made when they confronted one. The study followed a mixed-methods design. The participants of the qualitative part of the study were 120 male and female high-school English teachers, in their first, second, and third decades of teaching. The results of the qualitative part revealed that while the nature of moral dilemmas differed among both genders, evaluation was the most prevalent theme among the participants followed by work-related, pedagogical issues, and student–teacher interaction. For the quantitative part, a moral dilemma inventory was designed to which 600 participants responded. Reading some hypothetical moral dilemmas, they were supposed to choose which path (self-serving or moral) they would take. The data analysis indicated that gender and experience were both influential factors in teachers' decision-making process. The findings imply that while score-oriented education might be the primary source of moral dilemmas, the ways teachers approach them could be rooted in different socialization of males and females, and socio-cultural context.

Keywords Moral dilemma · Iranian EFL teachers · Gender · Teaching experience · Evaluation

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Introduction

Morality is considered a simple yet one of the most controversial terms within humanities and social sciences. Although the concept defies a consensual explanation, the proposed definitions might convey that morality can function as a set of ultimate principles, prescribing the right course of action in every situation (Blackburn, 2021). Nonetheless, the issues concerning the nature and principle of moral values are not clear-cut. Once one accepts the moral framework, the question arises as to whether this set of standards extends to all situations across various cultures (Mackie, 1990). One outstanding arena in which the complicacy of the matter stands out is the field of education. Various attempts by educational theorist to delve into the essence of morality, has resulted in hot debates revolving around the definition of moral education, its meaning, and the ways to engage in it (Noddings, 2010).

In recent years, various approaches have been taken up to explore the issue of morality in teaching, all of which point out the significance it bears in an educational context (e.g. Hosseini Fatemi et al., 2024; Koc & Buzzelli, 2016; Soleimani & Lovat, 2019). Nowadays, the general consensus is that the classroom environment cannot be kept value-neutral and the type of relationship that teachers and students hold is inherently moral (Johnston, 2003). Put another way, teaching is a field of facing ethical conflicts where teachers' decisions and judgements bear moral weight (Akbari & Tajik, 2019; Colnerud, 1997; Tirri, 1999). According to Campbell (2008), teaching as an "interpersonal journey" (p. 357) is intricately layered and hence prone to conundrums which call for more than the teacher's pedagogical knowledge. In fact, the intricacy of these situations is that although the moral principles are supposed to act as guidelines, the right act is not as clear-cut as it is assumed. Since teaching is a moral enterprise, a teacher is prone to such complexities; nonetheless, they are not prepared to face these imbroglios as its significance has not been acknowledged enough in most teacher education programs (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016). This dovetails with the fact that the moral underpinnings of the language classrooms have also been largely overlooked. It is not discussed how a teacher should face the overwhelming task of making decisions when his/ her values turn out to be in conflict. Part of the complexity of such situations stems from their ambiguities which make it impossible to infer generalized solutions since each individual situation has to be understood in its own terms (Johnston, 2003).

Albeit the body of research covers a wide range of topics, the issue of morality in teaching is far from adequately studied. One of the aspects in need of further investigation is moral dilemmas. Educational research has dealt with teachers' ethics since the mid-1980s (Colnerud, 1997); yet, there exist few empirical studies which have investigated the significance of moral dilemmas from the teachers' point of view (e.g., Akbari & Tajik, 2019; Banli et al., 2015). The ubiquity and preeminence of moral dilemmas in language classroom call attention to more studies which can shed light on this aspect of teaching. The previous studies have focused on the moral dilemmas the teachers encounter in their daily practice (e.g., Gunawan et al., 2017; Hedayati et al., 2019; Magendzo & Toledo, 2009). Nonetheless, how they respond to dilemmatic situations has been largely neglected. Moreover, how their choice changes with respect to gender and level of experience, as well as the intensity of the situation, has also been absent in the body of research. The present study tries to fill the gap by bringing the aforementioned issues under the limelight. The path taken in this study is also of significance to teacher education field who should feel partly responsible for the consequences of teachers' moral actions in the future. Morality is significant enough to be part of the curriculum for prospective teachers who, if are not

to pushed to ponder over the consequences of their act on their students' lives, might come to this awareness at the expense of their own and/or their students' psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Literature Review

Regardless of how one defines it, morality has always been of cardinal significance within humanities and social sciences. Accordingly, its centrality to the field of education could not be overlooked. Nevertheless, despite the fact that teaching is essentially a moral endeavor (Carr, 2011; Sanger, 2008), the research on how morality is construed in education is far from comprehensive. In order to keep up with the dominant research in the educational sphere, the field of language teaching methodology has often followed its main trends. Moving from a prescriptive standpoint to a descriptive one, applied linguists conferred that their job was to conduct the sort of research that could tell language teachers what works best for their learners (Allwright, 2006). The dominant trend was to boost the educational quality of language classrooms via search for the universal commonalities in order to find simplistic ways which could render the best learning results. However, as asserted by Gieve and Miller (2006), "our personal and professional lives are so interwoven and understanding and learning are so intrinsically constitutive of life that they cannot be measured in terms of efficiency" (p. 19). As a result, alternations were made in order to tailor the language classroom research to the newly set purposes.

If it is widely accepted that teaching is a moral enterprise, the same goes for teaching foreign languages. According to Johnston et al. (1998), language teaching of all kinds constitutes the meeting-point of two cultures and since culture and morality are profoundly intertwined, any discussion of the morality of ESL teaching must countenance the possibility of competing cultural as well as individual values. Furthermore, he pointed out that ESL learners are at a disadvantage due to their imperfect command of English; therefore, their voice in educational contexts is compromised. Moreover, although the explicit instruction of morals to adults is out of place, research shows that language classrooms can have implicit impact on learners' development of moral judgments and moral reasoning (e.g., Javadi Mehr et al., 2015). Yet, the moral aspects of teaching were almost completely overshadowed by "the cognitive theories connected to teaching and learning, effective approaches to measurement and assessment, classroom management strategies, and other aspects that, while naturally important, are rarely viewed from a moral or ethical perspective" (Campbell, 2008, p. 358).

This dovetails with the fact that the moral underpinnings of the language classrooms have also been largely overlooked. One aspect, inherent in language classrooms yet significantly overlooked in the literature, is the moral dilemmas in which every teacher finds himself/herself every now and then in his/her career. Leading a moral life might not be possible without facing moral dilemmas (Perry, 2014); the inevitable elements which "take many forms, arise in a wide variety of circumstances, and appear to arise in the context of widely differing moral and ideological system" (Mason, 1996, p.3). Audi (2015) defined moral dilemma as "any problems where morality is relevant" which includes "conflicts between moral reasons, reasons of law, religion or, self-interest" (p. 684). One of the major challenges that the field of ethics confronts is providing principles which could operate as guidelines in dealing with problems that the contemporary world poses (Audi, 2007). But a more grassroots question arises as to whether any moral knowledge exists that could

deliver moral principles when making decisions. While moral epistemology tries to demystify the moral knowledge, whether it is rooted in reason, natural laws, or perception and feeling, it is transparent that one's judgments and henceforth her/his acts do not always match the pre-designated moral behavior. If teaching, in every aspect, is a moral enterprise and teachers are moral agents, the dilemmas that teachers confront can bear moral weight as well. As Colnerud (1997) argued "teachers' ethical conflicts are regarded as phenomena inherent, but not always easily discernible, in teaching" (p. 629). Although there appears to be different interpretations of dilemma in the teaching realm, the fact that they reside in teachers' practice is undeniable.

Johnston (2003) classified the dilemmas in ELT classrooms into three basic groups: "dilemmas of pedagogy; dilemmas of teacher-student relations; and dilemmas of beliefs and values" (p.116). In tandem with this approach, Johnston and Buzzelli (2002) illustrated how the teachers' dilemma as how to attain equity between two students in class can be inherently moral. Following this line of research, Banli et al. (2015) analyzed 30 EFL teachers' moral dilemmas, their solving strategies, and their reasoning process as they make a choice. Their results indicated that issues related to assessment were the most frequently confronted dilemmas among the participants; moreover, the single-handed problem-solving strategy was reported to be the most common strategy applied to solve the conflicts.

The EFL teachers' moral dilemmas were also the focus of Soleimani and Lovat's (2019) study. In this research study, they investigated the moral conflicts English teachers confronted in their classrooms and how they resolved these challenges. The mismatch between the teachers' ideologies and the external codes were found to be the most dominant challenge among the participants. Furthermore, cultural values instilled by religion as well as family backgrounds were referred to as the most influential factors in justifying their moral decisions. Akbari and Tajik (2019) examined the types and frequencies of moral dilemmas among EFL teachers as well. Additionally, they sought to reveal if there are any differences in the pattern of moral dilemmas based on gender and experience. The results of their study illustrated that while experience could affect both the order and frequency of moral dilemmas, gender did not change the patterns of moral dilemmas faced by the participants. 'Rules and Regulations' were also the main underlying factor in teachers' dilemmas. In a qualitative study, Amini et al. (2020) explored the moral dilemmas of English teachers in Iran and their criterial beliefs in responding to these conflicts. They interviewed eight experienced EFL teachers and their analysis of the data indicated two categories of moral dilemmas: disciplinary and educational. Furthermore, knowledge, experience, intuitive sense as well as the teaching context and learners' history were referred to as the main sources of moral judgement.

Method

Participants

This study was comprised of two phases in which 732 (half male and half female) Iranian high-school English teachers, between 24 to 50 years of age, participated. The participants of the preliminary phase were 120 teachers in Iran who were chosen using purposive sampling, while the other 600 ones were conveniently selected from across the country. In addition to the main participants, 12 participants took part in the field-testing of the written

interview. The participants were equally categorized into six groups based on their gender and years of teaching experience. As for the experience, the first, second, and third decade of teaching were accounted to determine their level of teaching experience. To ascertain the homogeneity, the middle years of teaching experience were chosen. Therefore, the participants of the first decade were in the 4th,5th, and 6th, the second decade in 14th, 15th, and 16th, and the third decade in 24th, 25th, and 26th years of teaching. All in all, the 6 groups included male participants in their first, second, and third decade of teaching experience and their counterparts; that is, female participants who taught in their first, second, and third decades.

Procedure

This study, framed in a mixed-methods design, consisted of an initial qualitative data collection and analysis, which could be typified as interpretive study (Ary et al., 2018), followed by a quantitative phase to investigate the participants' experience of moral dilemmas. Interview was the main means to obtain the required data for the qualitative part of the study. One-hundred and twenty participants who were chosen via purposive sampling were interviewed in the preliminary phase. The interviews took about 10 to 15 min, following a semi-structured frame which allowed the participants contemplate on their responses. During the interview, after a brief introduction on moral dilemma, they were then required to narrate one example of moral dilemma they confronted in their career. The main questions included:

(a) What kind of moral dilemma have you confronted in your career as an English teacher?
(b) What decision did you make regarding the incident?
(c) What factors did you take into account while making the decision?

The participants were free to choose if they want to do the interview in English or Persian. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Some of the interviews were conducted asynchronously via e-mails (Ary et al., 2018). For this purpose, the questions were presented to the participants in written form. For further clarification, a preface on the purpose of the study along with explanations on the main concerns of the interview were also included. Since the written interview lacked face to face interaction, to ensure the comprehensibility as well as its validity, it was first sent to a pilot group which comprised of twelve participants who shared the characteristics of the target sample.

No preexisting instrument was utilized in this study; however, a moral dilemma inventory was specifically designed for the purpose of this study. For this purpose, three dilemmas were designed based on the theme of 'evaluation', the main pivot around which most of the participants' dilemmas revolved. The inventory covered the dilemmas both in English and their translation in Persian. The content validity of the instrument was checked by three experienced experts in moral education; furthermore, the reliability was determined using test–retest method. Cronbach alpha declared a substantial reliability of 0.79. The dilemmas gave participants two choices, a moral option and a self-serving one. Finally, the moral dilemma inventory was distributed among 600 participants which was comprised of 100 participants from each group across gender and teaching experience.

The main purpose of the first part of the study was to delve into the participants' experience of moral dilemmas. After gathering the data, the focus was to discover the themes underlying each participant's response. After reading and rereading the raw data, the

themes were identified. The emerged themes were then checked by three experts. Based on the narrated dilemmas, the main themes were identified through content analysis. In this stage, the focus was on categorizing the moral dilemmas based on a common underlying theme. Another major concern of this study was how the teachers treated the moral dilemmas they encounter in their everyday practice. The dilemmas gave participants two choices, a moral option and a self-serving one. Based on the number of times any participant selected the moral or self-serving path, her/his output was assigned as moral or self-serving (at least two out of three). Finally, a series of Crosstabulations and Chi-square tests were conducted to discover any differences between: males and females in general, among males across teaching experience, among females across teaching experience, males and females in the first decade, males and females in the second decade, and males and females in the third decade.

Results

Qualitative Phase

Female Participants

The female teachers in their first decade of teaching mostly confronted dilemmas when they had to grade the students. Annie (all used names are pseudonyms) described her dilemma: "*as a novice teacher, I confronted a conflict while assessing my students. I was told by the principal to change the scores of the students in order to help the high school to be promoted to a higher rank*". To put it in a nutshell, the primary aspect in which the morality of teaching stands out is evaluation and as reported by the participants of this study, testing posed major dilemmas to the teachers.

Likewise, the second-decade female teachers were put in similar dilemmatic situations. However, defining the professional duties can also put one in a dilemma. Sylvia, in the interview, narrated a story in which she noticed one of her students was not feeling well. By further inquiry, the teacher found out that her student had committed suicide and had been hospitalized the night before. The student confides in the teacher, telling her that she is in love with a boy; a romance which has been strongly forbidden by her parents. She desperately asks of the teacher not to tell anyone, especially the other school staff, about her secret, but she asks her teacher to talk to her mother. The teacher explained her dilemma. She knew that she would be punished by the principal if she talked to the student's parents as the school was so strict about such incidents. She also knew that it was the school counselor's job to interfere. But she could not violate the student's trust by revealing her secret:

> *It was really hard to be in that situation. I could not forget her pale face, her begging look. It was also my first years of teaching at that school. I did not want to be punished for breaking the rules. To the student, I was a friend, an older sister. To the principal, I was just a teacher, not a friend, not a counselor.*

The female participants in the third decade shared dilemmas with the participants of the other two groups. Abby complained about the incidents which, as she believed, occurred so frequently that made teaching and testing so complicated. Like others, she was tired of facing dilemmas just because of knowing students' parents: "*it is a disaster. I have always been in such dilemmatic situations. However, now I know, no matter what I decide, the*

result is to their liking not mine. But at first, it was hard to solve these problems". Students' evaluation, being forced or informally asked to giver higher grades, and establishing their affective relationship with the students were all observed in this category as well. However, they had other occupational concerns which were not expressed in the other two groups. One participant in this category talked about her dilemma of how to make adjustments so that her own expectations do not collide with the job's demands. Celine explained,

> *I have always worked hard in my years of teaching. I have tried to transfer what I know to my students. But recently, I've been wondering in this country, in this organization, where teachers are not respected, what they do is not respected, they are not evaluated by the right criteria, and they are not even paid enough for what they do, is it worth going through so much? Should I do my best or do my job negligently as many of my colleagues do. It has turned into a dilemma for me.*

In a similar line, the mental conflicts with the nature of the job was pervasive among the participants of the third group. Another teacher asserted that with all the experience of teaching, she still wonders if she could apply what she had been taught at teacher-training centers to her classes. Regulating the relationship between the participants and their colleagues was also observed in the dilemmas of the third group of participants.

Male Participants

The male teachers described dilemmas akin to those of their female counterparts; evaluation was the most frequent theme among male participants as well. In regards to pedagogical issues, a participant experienced a moral dilemma while deciding what to teach during the semester. Phil had complication in deciding whether to cover the whole material within a semester: "*the dilemma is whether to be strict or easy with respect to the curriculum. I wouldn't push myself to stick to the curriculum*". Establishing an appropriate relationship with the students was also another point of concern for the male participants of the first decade.

The examples mentioned so far have clearly put the moral side of teaching in the spotlight. However, the morality is so tightly attached to the decision-making that sometimes it is hard to see the moral aspect unless it is brought to the conscious attention. As Johnston and Buzzelli (2002) pointed out "moral meanings are co-constructed through language, gesture, proxemics, gaze, the sharing of resources, opportunities to take the floor, and in numerous other ways" (p.46). The construction of moral meaning can be well observed in this narration of Tito's moral dilemmas:

> *While I was teaching in a village in the first years of my employment, I had a co-ed class. I had a crush on one of my students in the third grade of high school. I developed strong feelings toward her little by little. And I knew whatever I did in the class was closely examined by the other students. I tended to treat her differently, but I noticed even the looks I gave her could have influences on the other girls in the class. They noticed something, maybe they had some sort of competition or something but I felt my attention toward her could be discouraging for the others. But the heart wants what it wants. It was difficult and I could not ignore my feelings in the class or in the exams.*

The dilemmas prevalent in the second decade male teachers shared a similar pattern to the previous ones. Developing tests was a major concern which could pose moral dilemmas

to the teachers. The grading problem also occurred frequently in the dilemmas. What makes such situations overwhelming is that being under external factors, such as a relative's demand, the teacher is forced to break her/his moral principles and this could be taxing for a moral agent (Milgram & Sabini, 1978). The emotions that are developed within a teacher can influence her/his practice in different ways. As affections can be influential in the process of decision-making, at times, the negative emotions can also affect the teacher's moral judgement. Joey had such an issue when a student from blue blooded family was disobeying in his class. After the student failed the final exam, Joey could help him by increasing his class score: "*I had done the same for others. I didn't like the student and I didn't want him to pass. But this created a problem for me. It was against my conscience to fail him like that*".

With respect to the third-decade male teachers, the same themes ran through the dilemmas however it seemed the situations were more complex and intense. In one case, a teacher's dilemma included a situation in which he knew something about the student and he had to choose to reveal it to the school or not. As Richard narrated, he had noticed one of his students was sleepy during the class and then he accidentally caught him smoking marijuana. He was not a bad student but Richard had heard word of mouth that addiction ran in his family. What was difficult to decide was if had had to interfere or not, "*I feared if I told the principal, the student would be punished which at the time could make him quit school. If I kept quiet, with his background, his situation could get worse*".

Underlying Themes of the Dilemmas

The participants of this study shared their experiences of dilemmatic situations in which it was hard for them to choose the right act. The types of dilemmas experienced by both male and female teachers mostly swirled around common themes; however, there were differences in the frequency of the dilemmas. In the one hundred and thirteen shared dilemmas (7 participants, 2 female and 5 males, believed they had not experienced moral dilemma) the identified themes, as presented in Table 1, were concerned with evaluation, pedagogical issues, regulating teacher-student relation, and the work-related dilemmas. Dilemmas that dealt mostly with pedagogy were categorized under the first theme. The examples included the situation where teachers found it difficult to decide on such issues such as the syllabus, how to adapt theory and practice in the classroom, or wondering about the appropriateness of the currently used methodology in the class.

The most frequent theme among the teachers with different level of experience was evaluation. Evaluation can pertain to dilemmas of pedagogy; however, in the present study,

Table 1 Frequency of Underlying Themes of Dilemmas

Themes	Teaching Decade	Female			Male			Total
		1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	
Pedagogical issues		3	4	3	6	4	3	23
Evaluation		8	7	6	6	7	5	39
Student–teacher interaction		4	4	3	4	3	4	22
Work-related		4	5	7	3	4	6	29

due to its prevalence, dilemmas of pedagogy and evaluation were allotted to two distinct categories. In addition to the process of test development and the concern over the fairness or the validity of the test, the practitioners mostly experienced dilemmas related to the grading procedure which can be disrupted by external impositions. As implied by the name, student–teacher interaction comprised situations where the teacher had to decide on how to keep her/his relation with the students balanced. For instance, dilemmas related to teachers' confidentiality, defining professional duties in relation to the students, how to punish or appreciate a student so that the power is held in balance were included in this category. Finally, work-related dilemmas were mostly identified in the third decade of teaching as the experience increased. The instances included the dilemmas pertaining to payment, the relation between colleagues and questioning the nature of their profession. It seems teachers who had this issue were grappling with the fact that whether they must do their best for the students or put minimum effort to match their salaries.

Quantitative Phase

Using moral dilemmas that the participants shared in the previous part, an inventory was designed to check the decisions the participants with different genders and levels of experience are more likely to make. Since Evaluation was the most frequent theme in the dilemmas of the participants, the inventory was based on this theme. The dilemmas were extracted from the real ones narrated by the participants. The inventory consisted of 3 hypothetical dilemmas in which the participants had to choose whether they will take the moral or self-serving path.

Comparing Males and Females in General

The tests of this section aimed at exploring any statistical difference between Iranian male and female English language teachers regarding the pursuit of moral and self-serving path. The tests were conducted regardless of teaching experience and format of moral dilemmas, and the results are presented in the following two tables and figure.

As presented in Table 2, although both groups tended more to choose moral path rather than self-serving one, females (58.8%) were far more likely to take the moral path compared to male participants (41.2%). Furthermore, the results presented in

Table 2 The Gender-Path Crosstabulation for Males vs. Females

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Path	Self-serving	Count	133	62	195
		% Within Path	68.2%	31.8%	100.0%
		% Within Gender	44.3%	20.7%	32.5%
		% of Total	22.2%	10.3%	32.5%
	Moral	Count	167	238	405
		% Within Path	41.2%	58.8%	100.0%
		% Within Gender	55.7%	79.3%	67.5%
		% of Total	27.8%	39.7%	67.5%

Table 3 Chi-square Test for Male and Female Teachers in General

		Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square		38.298	1	.000
Continuity Correction		37.227	1	.000
Symmetric Measures	Phi	.253		.000
	Cramer's V	.253		.000
N of Valid Cases		600		

Table 3 reveals that this difference across gender is statistically significant ($\chi2 = 38.298$; p = .000; $\varphi_c = .253$).

Males across Teaching Experience

This section was an investigation of the difference between male teachers of different decades of teaching with respect to taking the moral or self-serving path in moral dilemmas. As presented in Table 4, as teaching experience of the participants increased, the tendency to take the moral path in the hypothetical scenarios decreased so that male participants in their first decade of teaching (42.5%) were more likely to take the moral path followed by those in the second (32.3%) and third decade (25.1%). Subsequently, Table 5 presents the results of Chi-square test which point to the fact that the observed difference through Crosstabulation is statistically significant ($\chi2 = 17.208$; p = .000; $\varphi_c = .239$).

Table 4 The Path and Teaching Experience Crosstabulation for Male Teachers

			Teaching Decade			Total
			First	Second	Third	
Path	Self-serving	Count	29	46	58	133
		% within Path	21.8%	34.6%	43.6%	100.0%
		% within Teaching Decade	29.0%	46.0%	58.0%	44.3%
		% of Total	9.7%	15.3%	19.3%	44.3%
	Moral	Count	71	54	42	167
		% within Path	42.5%	32.3%	25.1%	100.0%
		% within Teaching Decade	71.0%	54.0%	42.0%	55.7%
		% of Total	23.7%	18.0%	14.0%	55.7%

Table 5 Chi-square Test for all Male Teachers

		Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square		17.208	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio		17.549	2	.000
Symmetric Measures	Phi	.239		.000
	Cramer's V	.239		.000
N of Valid Cases		300		

Table 6 The Path and Teaching Experience Crosstabulation for Female Teachers

			Teaching Decade			Total
			First	Second	Third	
Path	Self-serving	Count	15	19	28	62
		% Within Path	24.2%	30.6%	45.2%	100.0%
		% Within Teaching Decade	15.0%	19.0%	28.0%	20.7%
		% of Total	5.0%	6.3%	9.3%	20.7%
	Moral	Count	85	81	72	238
		% Within Path	35.7%	34.0%	30.3%	100.0%
		% Within Teaching Decade	85.0%	81.0%	72.0%	79.3%
		% of Total	28.3%	27.0%	24.0%	79.3%

Table 7 Chi-square Test for all Female Teachers

		Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square		5.408	2	.067
Likelihood Ratio		5.327	2	.070
Symmetric Measures	Phi	.134		.067
	Cramer's V	.134		.067
N of Valid Cases		300		

Females Across Teaching Experience

This section focused on the difference between female teachers of different decades of teaching with regards to taking the moral or self-serving path. The results of Cross-tabulation and Chi-square test are presented in the following tables and figure. Once again, as revealed in Table 6, the tendency to take the moral path decreased with teaching experience so that participants in the first decade (35.7%) took the moral path more often followed by second (34.0%) and third decade (30.3%) of teaching experience. However, Table 7 shows that this difference across teaching experience is not statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 5.408$; p $= 0.067$; $\varphi_c = .134$).

First Decade Teachers

This section aimed at investigating whether a meaningful difference exists between Iranian male and female English teachers in their first decade of teaching experience with regards to the selection of moral and self-serving paths. Table 8 reveals that female teachers in their first decade (54.5%) took the moral path more often than male teachers (45.5%) with the same amount of teaching experience. This observed difference, Table 9 reveals that, is statistically significant ($\chi 2 = 5.711$; p $= .017$; $\varphi_c = .169$). However, the results point to a small effect size.

Table 8 First Decade Gender-Path Crosstabulation

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Path	Self-serving	Count	29	15	44
		% Within Path	65.9%	34.1%	100.0%
		% Within Gender	29.0%	15.0%	22.0%
		% of Total	14.5%	7.5%	22.0%
	Moral	Count	71	85	156
		% Within Path	45.5%	54.5%	100.0%
		% Within Gender	71.0%	85.0%	78.0%
		% of Total	35.5%	42.5%	78.0%

Table 9 Chi-square Test for First Decade Male and Female Teachers

		Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square		5.711	1	.017
Continuity Correction		4.924	1	.026
Symmetric Measures	Phi	.169		.017
	Cramer's V	.169		.017
N of Valid Cases		200		

Table 10 Second Decade Gender-Path Crosstabulation

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Path	Self-serving	Count	46	19	65
		% Within Path	70.8%	29.2%	100.0%
		% Within Gender	46.0%	19.0%	32.5%
		% of Total	23.0%	9.5%	32.5%
	Moral	Count	54	81	135
		% Within Path	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
		% Within Gender	54.0%	81.0%	67.5%
		% of Total	27.0%	40.5%	67.5%

Second Decade Teachers

In this part, the existence of any statistically meaningful difference between Iranian male and female English language teachers in their second decade of teaching experience was probed. The investigated likely difference was in regard to the selection of moral and self-serving path. As presented in Table 10, female teachers (60.0%), once again, were more likely to adopt the moral path compared to their male counterparts (40.0%). Furthermore, Table 11 reveals that the observed difference in frequency is statistically significant across gender in the second decade of teaching experience ($\chi2 = 16.615$; $p = 0.000$; $\varphi_c = 0.288$).

Table 11 Chi-square Test for Second Decade Male and Female Teachers

		Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square		16.615	1	.000
Continuity Correction		15.407	1	.000
Symmetric Measures	Phi	.288		.000
	Cramer's V	.288		.000
N of Valid Cases		200		

Third Decade Teachers

Finally, the existence of any statistically meaningful difference between Iranian male and female English language teachers in their third decade of teaching experience was under scrutiny in this section. The numbers in Table 12 reveals that, like the previous two Cross-tabulations, female teachers (63.2%) were far more likely to take the moral path compared to male participants (36.8%). Moreover, Table 13 points to the fact that the observed difference with regards to frequency is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 18.360$, p = .000, $\varphi = 0.303$).

Discussion

Qualitative Phase

The conducted thematic analysis on moral dilemmas the participants had faced during their teaching experience led into emergence of four master themes: evaluation, work-related,

Table 12 Third Decade Gender-Path Crosstabulation

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Path	Self-serving	Count	58	28	86
		% Within Path	67.4%	32.6%	100.0%
		% Within Gender	58.0%	28.0%	43.0%
		% of Total	29.0%	14.0%	43.0%
	Moral	Count	42	72	114
		% Within Path	36.8%	63.2%	100.0%
		% Within Gender	42.0%	72.0%	57.0%
		% of Total	21.0%	36.0%	57.0%

Table 13 Chi-square Test for Third Decade Male and Female Teachers

		Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square		18.360	1	.000
Continuity Correction		17.156	1	.000
Symmetric Measures	Phi	.303		.000
	Cramer's V	.303		.000
N of Valid Cases		200		

pedagogical issues, and student–teacher interaction. Akbari and Tajik (2019), in line with Johnston (2003) related the evaluation dilemmas to pedagogy. With regard to evaluation, they further pointed out that ELT practitioners face dilemmas that are quite different from testing in other fields due to problems such as the difference between competence and performance, the ambiguity of test development process, subjectively measuring learners' proficiency and such. Furthermore, the type of observed dilemmas in the present study extended those identified in the Akbari and Tajik's. Johnston (2003) closely classified the dilemmas related to teacher-student relations into three types: responsibility, authority vs. solidarity, and institutionally, the examples of which were all observed in the present study as well. Tirri (1999) classified such dilemmas into the subcategory of 'dilemmas related to teacher's work'. Akbari and Tajik (2019) also identified dilemmas related to the student–teacher relation in their study. As mentioned before, since the students lie at the heart of teachers' interactions at school, it is expected they affect the type of dilemmas teachers confront in their everyday practice.

Plato is known to believe that the main job of ethics it to say what ought to be done in different situations. Allegedly, the moral principles, self-developed or externally inculcated, are the determinants of the right act. Nonetheless, the moral decision is not always clear-cut, specifically in perplexing situations where the available choices fall in the moral gray area, being equally right or wrong, good or bad, favorable or unfavorable. Many dilemmas experienced by the teachers have students as the core that lie within them (e.g., Akbari & tajik, 2019; Joseph & Efron, 1993; Lyons, 1990). Most of the dilemmas that the participants of this study had faced were related to grading students. In most cases they were pressured by an authority or an acquaintance to change the score of some students. It should come as no surprise since the educational system and as a result, students have become score-oriented. The societies consider the scores of students as the sign of their capabilities and categorize them accordingly. Therefore, the students and their parents have become obsessed with grades and use them as a sign of their accomplishments. In such a context, asking for better scores through different means becomes a trend and that is why this theme is by far the most frequent one emerged from what participants had to say. Such an issue has been discussed by scholars who are promoting the case against education and propose that people mostly engage in education because of its signaling effects. According to Caplan (2018), "even if what a student learns in school is truly useless, employers will happily pay extra if their scholastic achievement provides information about their productivity" (p.3).

Another important issue for the teachers was the dilemmas they faced while establishing a relationship with their students. There are a great number of studies within social psychology that address the interpersonal relationships among individuals. Any relationship among human beings might be affected by a variety of factors such as proximity (Gilovich et al., 2016), mere exposure (Reis et al., 2011), similarity (Rushton & Bons, 2005), physical attractiveness (Hamermesh, 2011), etc. All these factors come into play when a certain teacher develops a relationship with his/her students. They could easily lead to differential treatment on teacher's part that could end up problematic for everyone involved. The teachers were aware of this issue and mentioned some cases in which factors of this nature had pushed them into a moral dilemma.

Apart from the teacher-student relationship, creating the appropriate teacher-colleague interaction was also a source of conflict among the participants. Furthermore, at times, the inconsistency between teachers' will and what the school decreed was the source of dilemma. As the teachers got more experienced, they started to mention dilemmas which were more critical in the long run. The experience had made them capable of seeing the

bigger picture that might lead to dire consequences in their students' lives. It is axiomatic that experience plays a role in bringing wisdom and making human beings see things more clearly. The experience actually had two noticeable changes in orientation for the teachers: firstly, they were able to speculate about how their decisions might affect the whole future in front of their pupils; and secondly, they were more easily capable of justifying their self-serving decisions.

Quantitative Phase

The results of data analysis in the quantitative phase of this study revealed that both males and females tended to take the moral path rather than self-serving one. However, there existed a meaningful difference across gender as females were far more likely to take the moral path compared to male participants. Subsequently, the results indicated that as teaching experience of the participants increased, the tendency to take the moral path in the hypothetical scenarios decreased. This decline in tendency to take the moral path, however, was only statistically significant among males. Finally, female participants were more likely to take the moral path across teaching experience compared to their male counterparts even though the results revealed a small effect size for the first-decade teachers.

Generally, the results revealed that gender is an influential factor regarding the pursuit of moral or self-serving path. This finding is not surprising since gender has always been a determining factor in humanities and social sciences (Moezzipour & Fathabadi, 2024). The interesting and thought-provoking finding was the fact that Iranian female teachers were far more likely to take the moral path compared to male teachers. The difference could be attributed to a great number of factors each of which would need further investigation. Since the emergence of the statement 'gender is socially constructed' (Aronson et al., 2019), it is believed that men and female live in dissimilar worlds, and it is even more influential as a factor in the third world countries which follow different cultural values, culminating in a different construction of gender roles.

The inclination of female teachers to take the moral path more frequently could have internal and external reasons all of which are worthy of research. Gilovich et al., (2016) assert that men and women exert different behavior as a result of a culturally different socialization. For instance, whereas men are raised to value independence and autonomy, women strive for interdependence and social relationships; this might lead to different patterns of social behavior in that women are more subject to social influence than men do (Gilovich et al., 2016). This explains why women in this study were more likely to follow the moral principles as embedded in the social context; as well as, their compliance to the authorities' demand in justifying a decision which diverges from the moral path. As significant as gender seems to be, there is evidence which contradicts the existing evidence. Akbari and Tajik (2019) in their investigation of moral dilemma patterns among Iranian EFL teachers, found out that gender would not affect the patterns of moral dilemmas. On the other hand, experience turned out to be an influential factor in the order as well as frequency of the dilemmas teachers faced.

In the same line, experience was found out to affect the results in the present study. Rarely would anyone dismiss the impact of experience on human beings' acts. However, this point was once challenged and once proven in this study. Experience proved effective in the pursuit of moral and self-serving paths among male participants, but ineffective among female teachers. As male teachers got more experienced, they turned out to be more likely to take the self-serving path, while experience was not a meaningful factor

regarding the pursuit of different paths for female participants. Since there existed no difference between male and female participants in the first decade of their teaching experience, it can be implied that the divergence has appeared along the experience. The simple implication is that male teachers start off the same as female teachers but diverge along the way. It seems that male participants move along a different path compared to females who more or less stay the same as they get more experienced. There is a good reason to believe that inexperienced teachers are similar regarding the pursuit of moral path since they are fresh out of the teacher training centers where they receive similar education. As for the divergence, various factors might be at play which merit close scrutiny. This reawakens the issue of differences between males and females in the process of constructing social identities and how they interact with the surrounding context. It seems as far as gender is a viable factor, arguments fall on fertile ground.

Conclusion

Investigating the morality of teaching is a burgeoning area of study. Not until recently has the field witnessed a resurgence of interest in the moral aspects of education. Moral education, in its totality, was considered as the explicit teaching of moral rules or at best, importing some pre-defined principles to the students' minds. Now that the role of teachers as moral agents and the moral nature of classroom interaction have been acknowledged, there is a need to fill in the existing gap. Most dilemmas Iranian teachers provided were related to the students' grades. It actually highlights an important issue: students and their parents have become too score-oriented. The orientation people in a society gain toward education is majorly influenced by educational planning and the stance of those responsible for it. Perhaps if the score was not the primary purpose of education, the dilemmas teachers face during their careers could decrease to a large degree.

The fact that the female teachers took moral path more frequently than male teachers is an interesting finding that needs further investigation. Whatever the reasons might be, it exists and the consequences of it are real. In Iran educational system, male and female students attend segregated schools and experience co-ed education for the first time at the university level. Perhaps, such segregation leads to a number of university students with different expectations and conceptualizations regarding many critical concepts such as morality. However, there is a need for further investigation in different socio-cultural contexts to draw more educated and justified conclusions.

This issue needs to be addressed more thoroughly as the problem lies within a larger picture. Not only do the teacher education programs lack a comprehensive blueprint to make the would-be teachers aware of the morality of teaching, there is also a lack of ethical codes as pedagogical resources for the teachers in future (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016). In these programs, what is under focus is the acquisition of the required knowledge and skills at the cost of putting aside the whole concept of morality of education. This point has been captured in several studies in the literature (Akbari & Tajik, 2019; Benninga, 2013; Koc & Buzzelli, 2016) which unanimously call for the need to make teachers more aware of the perplexities of their profession, the challenges they might face, and how to be ready to respond to these situations. To gain an operating force, more studies of such nature are needed which would contribute to accumulating more evidence. Hopefully, this would result in teacher education programs which could at least prepare the teachers for what they might confront in their career.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The participants consented to take part in this study and be published under pseudonyms.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Financial Interests The authors declare they have no financial interests.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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