
Between Empathy and Privacy: Redefining The Ethical Boundaries of Teachers in The Age of Unlimited Connectivity

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Abstract

The development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the teacher-student relationship, giving rise to an ethical tension between the demands of professional empathy and the protection of teachers' personal privacy. This study aims to analyze the shifting roles and expectations of teachers in an era of unlimited connectivity, examine the ethical dilemmas arising from the blurring of professional boundaries, and redefine ethical boundaries based on digital literacy and contextual policies. Using a descriptive qualitative method with a literature review approach, this study synthesizes theoretical and empirical findings on teacher professionalism, digital ethics, and psychological well-being. The results indicate that unlimited connectivity has transformed the teacher's role from that of an authoritative knowledge transmitter to a facilitator and mentor, leading to more horizontal relational dynamics. However, this shift has also exacerbated ethical dilemmas, including the criminalization of disciplinary actions, the blurring of personal and professional digital identities, and increased psychological pressures such as digital fatigue and burnout. Further findings reveal that existing regulations and codes of ethics are insufficient to address the complexities of digital communication. This study concludes that redefining ethical boundaries requires a balanced framework that integrates the enhancement of teachers' digital literacy as well as the development of participatory and contextual school policies. This is crucial for protecting teachers' privacy rights while maintaining empathetic and professional educational interactions, thereby ensuring teachers' well-being and the quality of learning in the digital age.

Keywords– *Teacher Ethics; Digital Connectivity; Privacy Rights.*



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1. Introduction

Advances in digital technology have brought about significant changes in various aspects of life, including the world of education. The advent of the internet, social media, and various online communication platforms has made interactions between teachers, students, and parents faster and unrestricted by time or place (Triyunita et al., 2025). Whereas in the past, the relationship between teachers and students largely took place within the school environment and during specific class hours, in today's era of digital connectivity, communication can occur at any time via WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, Google Classroom, or other social media platforms. This situation indicates that digital transformation is not only changing teaching methods but also reshaping social and professional relationships within the educational environment.

These changes indirectly drive a redefinition of the teacher's role. Teachers are no longer viewed merely as conveyors of instructional content but also as mentors, facilitators, motivators, and even figures expected to be consistently present and responsive to students' needs (Saefina et al., 2025). This demand has grown stronger since the rise of online learning following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has made digital communication an integral part of the educational process. On one hand, this situation can strengthen emotional bonds and facilitate the learning process. On the other hand, the ongoing intensity of communication also raises new issues regarding the boundaries of teachers' professionalism and privacy.research.

The phenomenon of unlimited connectivity presents a rather complex ethical dilemma for teachers. Teachers are expected to be empathetic, responsive, and easily reachable by students and parents alike. However, teachers, as individuals, also have a right to privacy, time off, and a personal life outside their profession. In practice, many teachers find themselves replying to students' messages outside of working hours, handling academic communications late into the night, or facing situations where their personal lives on social media become public fodder for students (P. T. Hastuti et al., 2024). These situations

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demonstrate that the boundary between a teacher's professional and personal spheres is becoming increasingly blurred in the digital age.

This blurring of ethical boundaries not only impacts social aspects but also affects teachers' psychological and professional well-being. The pressure to always be available and responsive can trigger digital fatigue, burnout, work-related stress, and a decline in teaching motivation. Furthermore, the use of digital media that is not clearly regulated also has the potential to cause ethical conflicts, privacy violations, and misunderstandings in educational communication (Wijaya et al., 2026). Therefore, a new understanding of the ethical boundaries of the teaching profession in the digital age is needed so that the relationship between teachers and students remains healthy, professional, and humane.

Furthermore, the discussion regarding the ethical boundaries of teachers in the digital age has become increasingly relevant because, to this day, many schools and madrasahs still lack clear and context-specific guidelines for digital communication (Hasnida et al., 2024). Most educational regulations still focus on face-to-face interactions, while the dynamics of virtual communication are evolving much faster than existing regulations. As a result, teachers often have to determine for themselves the boundaries of professionalism in the use of digital media, both in responding to students and managing their personal identities on social media. Therefore, a study on redefining the boundaries of teacher ethics in the era of unlimited connectivity is important as an effort to foster a more adaptive understanding of changes in modern educational communication culture.

Previous research in the journal "Strengthening Teachers' Competencies in Facing the Digital Era" has primarily discussed the importance of technological proficiency, the integration of digital media, and the enhancement of teachers' competencies in the learning process during the digital era (Wati & Nurhasannah, 2024). However, studies on the ethical boundaries of teacher communication particularly regarding the conflict between demands for professional empathy and teachers' personal privacy rights in the context of unlimited digital

connectivity have not yet been extensively addressed. Therefore, this article aims to offer a new perspective on redefining the ethical boundaries of teachers in the digital age by placing the relationship between empathy.

Given these circumstances, it is important to revisit how the ethical boundaries of teachers need to be redefined in the context of unlimited connectivity. This redefinition is not intended to diminish the value of empathy and the teacher's closeness to students, but rather to strike a balance between professionalism, empathy, and teachers' right to privacy. In this context, strengthening digital literacy, digital communication ethics, and the development of contextual school policies are crucial steps toward creating a safe and healthy educational interaction space (D. P. Sari & Multisuandi, 2025). Thus, education in the digital age remains capable of upholding the values of ethics, professionalism, and the well-being of both teachers and students.

2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method using a literature review approach. The literature sources were obtained through the Google Scholar academic database, which was the sole academic search engine used. The keywords used in the search include: "teacher ethics in the digital age," "teacher privacy and connectivity," "ethical dilemmas of teachers on social media," and "professional boundaries of digital teachers" within the publication period of 2020–2026.

Inclusion criteria include: (a) articles from accredited national journals (SINTA), (b) relevant research reports from the past six years, and (c) opinion pieces from credible mass media discussing current issues in teacher ethics. Exclusion criteria include publications not available in full text, non-academic articles without peer review, and sources published prior to 2020. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic synthesis framework, specifically by identifying, coding, and grouping findings from various articles into three main themes: (1) the shifting role of teachers in the era of unlimited connectivity, (2) ethical dilemmas between demands for empathy and teachers' right to privacy, and (3)

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the redefinition of ethical boundaries based on digital literacy and contextual policies. All data were analyzed interpretatively to draw comprehensive and academically sound conclusions.

3. Result and Discussion

The Shifting Roles and Expectations of Teachers in the Age of Unlimited Connectivity

In today's era of boundless connectivity, where internet access is widespread and various digital learning apps are widely used, the relationship between teachers and students has undergone a fundamental shift. The concept of borderless learning allows students to independently acquire knowledge from various sources around the world, whenever and wherever they are. Consequently, students' reliance on the teacher's physical presence in the classroom has diminished (Saadah & Anggraeni, 2025). This change not only impacts how teachers teach but also challenges the fundamental beliefs regarding what the teaching profession entails. Teachers can no longer view themselves as the sole and most authoritative source of knowledge, as the ease of digital access allows students to seek comparisons, verify facts, and even challenge the information presented by teachers through an unlimited number of online sources.

This shift in access to knowledge has necessitated a transformation in the teacher's role from a central position as a conveyor of information to that of a facilitator, content curator, and designer of learning experiences. (Sari 2024)emphasizes in her writing that in the millennial era, characterized by unlimited access to digital technology, teachers face the demand to be digitally literate that is, to possess the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to use various digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops. Teachers no longer function as the sole source of knowledge in the classroom; instead, they are required to continuously enhance their knowledge and teaching techniques to ensure they do not fall behind their students, who are growing up as a digital generation. This shift, in turn, requires teachers to deliver engaging and meaningful learning experiences by employing diverse methods such as

question-and-answer sessions, experiments, and lectures integrated with educational media, while also applying the 4R approach: research, relevance, connection, and rationale. Furthermore, teachers must also be able to serve as role models for students, as the millennial generation is heavily influenced by what they see, hear, and feel from their teachers on a daily basis (Sari, 2024).

More than just a technical-pedagogical change, this transformation also deeply permeates the relational realm between teachers and students. In digital interaction spaces mediated by screens and applications, relationship patterns that were once vertical, hierarchical, and steeped in institutional authority have shifted toward a more horizontal and egalitarian dynamic (Fawaz, 2024). When communication occurs via WhatsApp, Google Classroom, or other social media platforms, the social distance previously maintained by the school's physical walls and formal protocols becomes blurred. Students feel freer to express opinions, offer criticism, or even disregard a teacher's instructions due to the absence of an intimidating physical presence. On the other hand, teachers also lose some of the "aura" of authority associated with physical attributes such as the teachers' lounge, uniforms, or their position at the front of the classroom. This shift in relational dynamics carries dual consequences that are not easily anticipated.

A positive consequence of this shift is the opening of opportunities for more intensive, personal, and sustained interactions between teachers and students, unrestricted by time and space. A teacher can provide feedback on a student's assignment late at night, comfort a student experiencing psychological distress through a private message, or monitor a student's learning progress periodically outside of school hours. Research by (Kasman, 2026) indicates that a teacher's professional responsibility, manifested through ethical consistency and genuine relational engagement has a stronger correlation with students' respect than if such responsibility were understood solely in terms of instructional competence. This means that amidst the onslaught of cold and impersonal digital information, it is precisely the quality of human connection and deep empathy that become the most valuable social

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capital a teacher possesses. Students tend to respect teachers who are caring, present, and ethically consistent, not merely those who master the subject matter.

However, the negative consequences of this shift cannot be ignored. The intensification of digital interactions that transcend the boundaries of work hours and the workplace risks blurring the professional boundaries that have long served as a safeguard for teachers' mental health. Determining when a teacher is considered to be working and when they are engaging in their personal life becomes a difficult question to answer when messages from students or parents can arrive at ten o'clock at night or on weekends (Fawaz, 2024). Furthermore, the demand to always be "digitally present" is often not balanced by awareness of the potential for emotional exhaustion or burnout. Public expectations of teachers in this era are becoming increasingly complex and, in many ways, contradictory: on one hand, teachers are expected to be responsive, accessible, and empathetic, yet on the other hand, they must also maintain professional authority, healthy boundaries, and personal integrity. Without collective awareness and adequate policy protections, this shift in roles can trap teachers in a vortex of unrealistic demands and potentially undermine the very dignity of the teaching profession itself.

An Ethical Dilemma: Between the Demand for Empathy and Teachers' Right to Privacy

The complexity of teachers' new roles, as outlined earlier, has direct consequences in the form of ethical dilemmas that are both structural and personal in nature. The primary dilemma faced by Indonesian teachers in this era of unlimited connectivity is the sharp tension between, on the one hand, societal demands for boundless empathy, and, on the other, the protection of teachers' right to privacy as individual citizens. The public, including parents and policymakers, often places disproportionate expectations on teachers. Teachers are not only expected to impart knowledge but also to serve as counselors, surrogate parents, emergency health responders, and monitors of

students' digital behavior. All these demands must be met amidst limited time, resources, and minimal legal protection. As a result, the line between professional concern and intrusion into a teacher's private life becomes increasingly blurred, creating an ethical gray zone that endangers both parties.

The most dramatic manifestation of this ethical dilemma can be seen in the phenomenon of the criminalization of teachers, namely when basic acts of care or educational discipline actually lead to legal consequences. (Bayu et al., 2025) explain in their research that the criminalization of teachers carrying out their duties to discipline students is on the rise in Indonesia, where disciplinary actions once considered reasonable are now often perceived as legal violations due to shifts in public perception and the literal application of the Child Protection Act. From a pedagogical instinct, actions such as reprimanding, imposing educational sanctions, or even simply checking on the physical condition of a sick student are expressions of pastoral care that form the foundation of a healthy and humane learning environment. However, in a public context that is hyper-sensitive to legal risks and demands, empathy not protected by standard procedures can easily be misinterpreted as a violation or negligence. The chilling effect caused by this phenomenon is very real; research by (MAULANA, 2025) shows that teachers face extraordinary dilemmas and become less firm toward students who violate school rules, due to the fear of being reported to the police or having the incident go viral on social media. As a result, teachers' authority in the eyes of students is diminishing, and their role as character builders and guardians of moral boundaries is gradually eroded by this systemic fear.

The pressure to appear approachable, warm, and informative in the digital space often blurs the lines of healthy professionalism. Research by (Nisa et al., 2025) in their qualitative study on digital ethics challenges reveals that low ethical digital literacy is a major factor influencing teachers' behavior in digital spaces, including in terms of managing personal content and interacting with students via social media. Teachers who share personal grievances about

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workload, salary, or school policies on their social media accounts even if intended as a private venting space can easily be accessed and shared by students or parents, potentially damaging the public image of the teaching profession (Raja & Naibaho, 2025). Consequently, such teachers may lose their authority and face ethical sanctions from their institutions, as the code of ethics for teachers in the digital age must include clear guidelines on how teachers should use technology wisely and protect privacy both students' privacy and their own as educators. Similarly, teachers who interact too closely with students in private digital spaces for example, through informal or even overly personal private messages, risk triggering misunderstandings, slander, or baseless allegations of harassment. In his research on the transformation of teacher-student relationship patterns in digital spaces, (Fawaz, 2024) found that the shift in relationships from an authoritative model toward a more horizontal one is accompanied by a blurring of professional boundaries in digital interactions, thereby creating ethical dilemmas regarding privacy and communication ethics. Therefore, the ability to clearly distinguish between professional and personal accounts, as well as the wisdom in selecting content, timing, and tone in digital interactions, is no longer merely an ethical recommendation but an absolute necessity to protect both teachers and students from potential harm.

Ultimately, this conflict between the demand for empathy and teachers' right to privacy compels us to fundamentally redefine the ethical boundaries of the teaching profession. The solution offered must not simply rely on the individual discretion of each teacher, but must take the form of a comprehensive and well-planned policy framework. There is a need for national-level standard operating procedures (SOPs) to address simple medical interventions that teachers may perform within the school environment, so that teachers' acts of care no longer risk criminal prosecution. Additionally, a specialized unit must be established to conduct contextual investigations into the teaching profession one that understands the intricacies of teacher-student

interactions in the digital age, rather than merely applying rigid criminal law logic. Efforts to enhance public understanding through campaigns and public education regarding the complexities and dilemmas faced by teachers are also urgently needed. The public needs to understand that teachers are ordinary human beings, not robots or angels capable of working without limits and never making mistakes. Without systematic and collective efforts, the teaching profession will remain in a state of ethical and legal uncertainty, where every act of humanity can turn into a disaster, and every teacher's effort to protect their personal privacy is instead accused of being a form of indifference toward students' well-being.

The Psychological and Professional Impact of Blurred Boundaries in the Post-COVID-19 Era

Advances in digital technology and changes to the education system following the COVID-19 pandemic have brought about significant changes in teachers' lives. One of the most noticeable changes is the increasingly blurred line between personal and professional life, a phenomenon known as the "blurred boundary." This situation arises when teachers no longer have clear boundaries regarding their work hours, as job demands can arise at any time through digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Google Classroom, Zoom, or social media. Teachers not only work while at school but also remain connected with students, parents, and school administrators outside of regular working hours. The phenomenon of blurred boundaries has intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift to online learning has forced teachers to adapt to the use of technology at a rapid pace. Teachers are required to prepare digital materials, conduct online lessons, and continuously address the various needs of students and parents. As a result, many teachers experience psychological stress because their rest time and personal lives are disrupted.

One of the most common psychological effects of blurred boundaries is burnout. Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged work-related stress. Teachers experiencing burnout

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typically exhibit symptoms such as feeling easily fatigued, a loss of motivation to teach, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and a sense of disengagement from their work. Veren Wendy Warella and Ratnawati explain that burnout among teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased due to high work pressure and ongoing emotional demands in the online learning process (Warella & Ratnawati, 2021).

In addition to burnout, constant use of technology also leads to digital fatigue. Teachers must spend a significant amount of time in front of screens to teach, create materials, grade assignments, and handle administrative tasks. These conditions can cause headaches, sleep disturbances, stress, and a decline in focus and concentration. Research on technostress indicates that excessive technology use is linked to increased psychological stress and work-related fatigue among teachers (Amelia & Sari, 2024).

These psychological effects subsequently impact teachers' professionalism in their work. Teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion tend to see a decline in their motivation to teach. They become less creative in delivering instructional material and find it more difficult to build positive relationships with students. In fact, prolonged burnout can lower the quality of classroom instruction as teachers experience a decline in productivity and work effectiveness. (E. S. Hastuti, 2021) research indicates that burnout has a negative correlation with teacher performance. The higher the level of burnout a teacher experiences, the lower the quality of their performance in delivering instruction.

The post-pandemic situation in Indonesia also reveals that many teachers are still struggling to adapt to the changing learning system. These challenges range from the pressures of digital administration and low student motivation to the ongoing burden of online communication. Research by Setiadi et al. shows that teachers in the post-pandemic era face various pressures that impact

the quality of learning and their psychological well-being (Setiadi & Kusuma, 2024).

Furthermore, research by (Nadyastuti et al., 2021) indicates that the stress experienced by teachers during the pandemic contributes to increased burnout, particularly when teachers feel they lack the necessary skills to adapt to changes in the learning system. This suggests that high work pressure without adequate psychological support can negatively impact teachers' mental health.

To mitigate the negative effects of blurred boundaries, efforts are needed to maintain a balance between work and personal life (work-life balance). Teachers need clear boundaries regarding working hours to avoid being constantly connected to work around the clock. Additionally, schools must provide support in the form of reduced administrative burdens, training in technology use, and attention to teachers' mental health. (Di Apriyanti et al., 2021) state that work-life balance has a positive effect on teacher performance, whereas burnout has a negative impact on work performance.

As a result, blurred boundaries have become one of the major challenges facing the teaching profession in the digital age. If not managed properly, this situation can lead to burnout, digital fatigue, mental health issues, and a decline in the quality of learning. Therefore, it is important for both teachers and educational institutions to establish healthy boundaries between personal and professional life to ensure teachers' psychological well-being is maintained.

Toward Redefining Ethical Boundaries: Digital Literacy and Contextual Policies

The development of digital technology has significantly transformed communication patterns in the world of education. Interactions between teachers and students are no longer limited to the classroom but have expanded to various digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Google Classroom, Instagram, and other social media. This situation has shifted the boundaries of communication ethics which were previously formal and structured, toward a

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more fluid and flexible approach. Therefore, redefining the boundaries of ethics in digital educational communication is essential to ensure that the relationship between teachers and students remains professional, healthy, and aligned with educational values (Pratiwi et al., 2026). These changes also indicate that the education sector must adapt to the communication culture of the digital generation, which is faster, more open, and more interactive. If not balanced with proper ethical understanding, digital communication has the potential to cause misunderstandings, media misuse, and even a decline in teachers' professional authority.

One crucial step in addressing these changes is enhancing teachers' digital literacy. Digital literacy is not merely defined as the ability to use technology but also encompasses an understanding of ethics, responsibility, digital security, and awareness of the social impacts of digital media use (Feriyantri et al., 2025). Teachers must possess the ability to distinguish between personal and professional spaces in online communication to prevent ethical violations that could lead to misunderstandings or social conflicts. In this context, teachers are not only expected to be able to operate educational technology but must also understand how to build digital communication that is respectful, appropriate, and educational. Teachers' digital literacy is crucial because they serve as role models whose behavior in the digital space is observed and emulated by students. With strong digital literacy skills, teachers can utilize technology more wisely while creating a safe and positive digital learning environment.

Furthermore, the increasingly intense phenomenon of digital communication indicates that the code of ethics for teachers in the digital age needs to be updated to reflect the current context. The code of ethics, which has traditionally focused on face-to-face interactions, is considered insufficient to fully address the challenges of virtual communication. For example, issues such as the timing of communication with students, language use in online conversations, the sharing of content on social media, and privacy boundaries between teachers and students often lack clear guidelines. As a result, many

teachers find themselves in a dilemma between maintaining closeness with students and upholding their professionalism as educators. On the other hand, students also require more flexible communication channels to support learning processes outside the classroom (Rambe, Simbolon, Hasibuan, Safika, & Simamora, 2024). Therefore, an update to the digital code of ethics is necessary to provide clarity on behavioral boundaries while protecting both teachers and students from the risks of digital communication misuse.

In this context, schools or madrasahs need to develop realistic digital communication guidelines that align with contemporary needs. These guidelines should not merely consist of prohibitions but also provide practical guidance on healthy and safe communication patterns in digital spaces. For example, rules regarding academic communication hours, the use of official school groups, social media etiquette, and the protection of teachers' and students' personal data (Salsabila et al., 2025). An overly rigid approach focused solely on restrictions may prove difficult to implement, as the current reality of education demands flexibility in communication to support the learning process. Furthermore, overly restrictive guidelines can make educational interactions less effective and limit teachers' creativity in utilizing digital media. Therefore, policies must strike a balance between discipline, safety, and the needs of modern educational communication.

In addition, the development of digital communication guidelines must be a participatory process involving teachers, students, parents, and school administrators (Achmad & Mulyati, 2023). This is important because ethical boundaries in the digital age can no longer be fully determined unilaterally from above; rather, they must be negotiated based on the evolving social and cultural context and educational needs. Through collaborative dialogue, the resulting rules will be more relevant, easier to understand, and possess stronger social legitimacy within the school environment. The involvement of various stakeholders can also help schools understand the real challenges faced in daily digital communication practices. Thus, the resulting policies will not only be normative but also practical and aligned with on-the-ground conditions.

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Ultimately, redefining the boundaries of digital communication ethics in education is not intended to eliminate teachers' moral values and professionalism, but rather to adapt them to the changing times. Teachers must continue to uphold their integrity, authority, and ethical responsibilities, yet adopt a more adaptive approach toward students' digital culture. Through the enhancement of teachers' digital literacy and the development of context-specific communication policies, the education sector can create a safe, educational digital interaction space that continues to uphold the values of educational ethics. These efforts are also a crucial component in fostering a healthy digital culture within school and madrasah environments (El Hidayah & Saribudi, 2023). With shared awareness regarding digital communication ethics, the relationship between teachers and students can unfold in a more professional, humanistic manner, while remaining focused on educational objectives

4. Conclusion

Unlimited digital connectivity has blurred the professional boundaries between teachers and students, creating a real tension between society's demands for empathy and teachers' right to personal privacy. This study confirms that current codes of ethics and regulations are insufficient to protect teachers from various risks, including psychological risks such as burnout and digital fatigue, as well as professional risks such as criminalization for disciplinary actions that are actually educational in nature. Therefore, redefining ethical boundaries has become an urgent necessity that must be realized through two strategic pillars: strengthening teachers' digital literacy, which encompasses communication ethics and privacy awareness, and developing participatory and context-specific school policies to regulate the timing, platforms, and boundaries of digital communication between teachers and students.

The limitations of this study lie in its complete reliance on secondary sources (literature review), meaning the findings have not been validated through direct empirical data from the field. This study also does not capture the subjective experiences of teachers and students in depth. Future research is

strongly recommended to conduct qualitative case studies or large-scale quantitative surveys of teachers and students to directly explore digital communication practices, perceptions of professional boundaries, and the psychological impacts of blurred digital boundaries across diverse local contexts, educational levels, and school types.

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