



Research Article

Professional Ethics in Teacher Education: Strengthening Ethical Competence for Quality Teaching and Sustainable Educational Development

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Abstract

Professional ethics has emerged as a fundamental component of teacher education in the twenty-first century, as teachers are expected not only to possess pedagogical competence but also to demonstrate integrity, responsibility, fairness, and commitment to learners and society. In an era characterized by rapid technological advancements, increasing educational accountability, and diverse classroom environments, the ethical preparation of prospective teachers has become a critical concern for educational institutions and policymakers. The present paper examines the concept, significance, and contemporary relevance of professional ethics in teacher education and explores its role in fostering ethical competence among future teachers.

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research design based on an extensive review of scholarly literature, policy documents, teacher education frameworks, and recent studies related to ethics and professionalism in education. The analysis focuses on major ethical principles, theoretical foundations, emerging challenges, and institutional responsibilities associated with ethical teacher preparation.

The review indicates that professional ethics serves as a guiding framework for teachers' professional conduct, decision-making, and relationships with learners, colleagues, institutions, and society. The findings further reveal that ethical competence contributes significantly to educational quality, academic integrity, inclusive practices, and responsible use of digital technologies. However, challenges such as academic dishonesty, commercialization of education, ethical dilemmas in digital environments, and declining value orientation continue to affect teacher education systems.

The paper concludes that integrating ethics into teacher education curricula, strengthening reflective practice, promoting ethical leadership, and providing continuous professional development opportunities are essential for preparing socially responsible and professionally committed teachers. The study offers valuable implications for teacher educators, educational institutions, and policymakers seeking to strengthen ethical standards in contemporary education.

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INTRODUCTION

Professional ethics constitutes the foundation of responsible and effective teaching practice. In the contemporary educational landscape, teachers are expected to perform multiple roles as educators, mentors, facilitators, counselors, and role models. Their professional conduct significantly influences students' academic achievement, character formation, and social development. Consequently, ethical behavior is no longer considered an optional attribute of teaching; rather, it is an essential professional requirement that guides teachers in making fair, responsible, and informed decisions in diverse educational contexts.

Professional ethics refers to a set of moral principles, values, standards, and codes of conduct that regulate the behavior of individuals within a particular profession. In the context of education, professional ethics encompasses honesty, integrity, accountability, respect for diversity, confidentiality, fairness, commitment to learners, and dedication to professional growth. These ethical principles provide a framework through which teachers can fulfill their professional responsibilities while maintaining trust and credibility among students, parents, colleagues, and society. Professional ethics therefore serves as a moral compass that helps educators navigate complex situations and ethical dilemmas encountered in educational settings (Campbell, 2008).

The teaching profession occupies a unique position in society because teachers directly contribute to the intellectual, emotional, moral, and social development of future generations. Unlike many other professions, teaching involves continuous interaction with learners whose attitudes, values, and behaviors are shaped through observation and experience. Ethical conduct among teachers fosters a positive learning environment characterized by mutual respect, inclusivity, and trust. It also promotes educational equity by ensuring that all learners receive fair treatment regardless of their socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, or religious backgrounds. Research suggests that ethically responsible teachers are more likely to establish productive classroom relationships, enhance student engagement, and uphold academic integrity (Sokkett, 2012).

The significance of professional ethics has become even more pronounced in the twenty-first century due to rapid technological advancement, globalization, multicultural classrooms, increased accountability, and the growing integration of artificial intelligence in education. These developments have created new ethical challenges related to digital privacy, academic honesty, responsible technology use, professional boundaries, and inclusive educational practices. As a result, teacher education institutions are increasingly expected to prepare prospective teachers not only with pedagogical knowledge and teaching skills but also with ethical competence and professional responsibility.

Therefore, ethical teacher education has emerged as a critical dimension of quality education. It equips future teachers with the ability to make principled decisions, respond effectively to ethical dilemmas, and uphold the values necessary for fostering democratic, equitable, and sustainable educational environments. Developing professional ethics among teacher

trainees is thus essential for strengthening both teacher professionalism and educational excellence.

Conceptual Understanding of Professional Ethics in Teacher Education

Professional ethics is a vital component of teacher education that guides teachers in performing their professional responsibilities with integrity, fairness, and accountability. As teaching is a value-oriented profession that directly influences the intellectual and moral development of learners, ethical conduct forms the foundation of effective educational practice. Professional ethics provides a framework of principles and standards that help educators make appropriate decisions while interacting with students, colleagues, parents, and society.

Professional ethics may be defined as a set of moral values, professional standards, and codes of conduct that regulate the behavior of individuals within a profession. In teacher education, professional ethics refers to the ethical knowledge, attitudes, and practices that prospective teachers develop during their preparation programs. It enables them to act responsibly, respect human dignity, maintain professional integrity, and fulfill their duties in a manner consistent with the objectives of education. Unlike personal morality, which is largely based on individual beliefs and experiences, professional ethics is linked to the responsibilities, expectations, and standards associated with the teaching profession (Strike & Soltis, 2009).

The nature of professional ethics in teaching is both normative and practical. It not only prescribes what teachers ought to do but also guides their actions in real-life situations. Ethical teaching requires continuous reflection, professional judgment, and sensitivity toward the needs and rights of learners. Therefore, professional ethics is not limited to compliance with institutional rules; rather, it involves a commitment to educational values and the welfare of students.

Several ethical values constitute the core of teaching practice. These include honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, empathy, responsibility, confidentiality, inclusiveness, and commitment to lifelong learning. Honesty promotes trust and academic integrity, while fairness ensures equal opportunities for all learners. Respect and empathy enable teachers to appreciate diversity and respond to students' individual needs. Responsibility and accountability encourage teachers to maintain high professional standards and contribute positively to society. Together, these values create a supportive and ethical learning environment that promotes both academic and personal growth (Campbell, 2003).

Professionalism and ethics are closely interconnected concepts within teacher education. Professionalism emphasizes competence, expertise, commitment, and adherence to professional standards, whereas ethics provides the moral foundation that directs professional behavior. A teacher may possess strong pedagogical skills, but without ethical commitment, professional competence alone cannot ensure responsible educational practice. Similarly, ethical values become meaningful when they are translated into professional actions. Thus, professionalism and ethics function as complementary dimensions of effective teaching, jointly

contributing to the development of trustworthy, competent, and socially responsible educators.

Theoretical Foundations of Professional Ethics

The understanding and practice of professional ethics in teacher education are deeply influenced by various ethical theories that provide a philosophical basis for moral decision-making and professional conduct. These theoretical perspectives help educators understand their responsibilities, guide ethical behavior, and address complex dilemmas encountered in educational settings. Among the most influential frameworks are Virtue Ethics, Deontological Ethics, Ethics of Care, and the Social Responsibility Perspective.

Virtue Ethics, originating from the work of Aristotle, emphasizes the development of moral character rather than mere adherence to rules or consequences. According to Aristotle, ethical behavior arises from cultivating virtues such as honesty, courage, justice, wisdom, and compassion. In the context of teacher education, virtue ethics encourages prospective teachers to develop qualities that enable them to act as moral exemplars for learners. Ethical teaching, therefore, is not simply about performing professional duties but about becoming a person of good character who consistently demonstrates integrity and responsibility (Aristotle, trans. 2009).

Deontological Ethics, primarily associated with Immanuel Kant, focuses on duty, moral obligations, and adherence to universal ethical principles. Kant argued that actions are morally right when they are performed out of a sense of duty and guided by rational moral laws. Within teacher education, this perspective emphasizes fairness, respect for human dignity, honesty, and adherence to professional codes of conduct. Teachers are expected to treat all students impartially and uphold ethical standards regardless of personal interests or external pressures (Kant, 1785/1993).

The **Ethics of Care**, developed by Nel Noddings, highlights the importance of relationships, empathy, and responsiveness to others' needs. This perspective views caring as a fundamental ethical principle in education. Teachers are encouraged to establish supportive and trusting relationships with learners, recognize individual differences, and foster an environment of emotional and academic well-being. The ethics of care underscores that effective teaching extends beyond instruction to include genuine concern for students' holistic development (Noddings, 2013).

The **Social Responsibility Perspective** emphasizes the broader societal role of teachers as agents of social transformation and democratic development. From this viewpoint, educators are responsible not only for individual student growth but also for promoting social justice, equity, inclusion, and civic values. Teacher education programs guided by this perspective prepare future teachers to address social inequalities and contribute positively to community development and nation-building.

Collectively, these theoretical foundations provide a comprehensive ethical framework that supports the development of professionally competent, morally responsible, and socially committed teachers.

Core Dimensions of Professional Ethics in Teacher Education

Professional ethics in teacher education is reflected through a set of commitments that guide teachers' professional conduct and decision-making. These commitments shape the quality of educational practices and influence the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. Ethical teachers are expected to demonstrate responsibility not only toward students but also toward knowledge, colleagues, institutions, society, and emerging technological environments. Understanding these core dimensions is essential for preparing prospective teachers who can uphold professional standards and contribute positively to educational development.

Commitment to Learners

Commitment to learners represents the most fundamental dimension of professional ethics in teaching. Teachers are ethically obligated to respect the dignity, rights, and individuality of every learner. This commitment requires providing equal learning opportunities, maintaining fairness in assessment, ensuring confidentiality, and creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment. Ethical teachers recognize the diverse backgrounds, abilities, and needs of students and strive to support their academic, emotional, and social development. They avoid discrimination, favoritism, and any form of bias that may negatively affect student growth. By fostering trust, respect, and empathy, teachers contribute to meaningful learning experiences and holistic student development.

Commitment to Knowledge and Learning

Teachers have a professional responsibility to uphold the integrity of knowledge and promote lifelong learning. This commitment involves maintaining subject expertise, engaging in continuous professional development, and adopting evidence-based teaching practices. Ethical educators demonstrate intellectual honesty by presenting accurate information, encouraging critical thinking, and respecting academic integrity. They cultivate curiosity and independent learning among students while remaining open to new ideas and innovations. In teacher education, prospective teachers must develop habits of reflective practice and continuous learning to respond effectively to evolving educational demands and societal changes.

Commitment to Colleagues and Institutions

Professional ethics also requires teachers to maintain respectful and collaborative relationships with colleagues and educational institutions. Effective educational environments depend on cooperation, mutual respect, and shared responsibility among staff members. Ethical teachers communicate honestly, respect professional boundaries, support collaborative decision-making, and contribute positively to institutional goals. They avoid actions that may harm professional relationships or undermine institutional credibility. Furthermore, they comply with professional standards, institutional policies, and ethical codes while participating actively in school improvement initiatives and professional communities.

Commitment to Society and Nation

Teaching is a socially significant profession that contributes to nation-building and democratic development. Therefore, teachers have an ethical obligation to promote social justice, equality, citizenship, and respect for cultural diversity. They play a crucial role in nurturing responsible citizens who can contribute to social harmony and sustainable development. Ethical teachers encourage democratic values, environmental awareness, national integration, and community engagement. Through their professional actions, they help address social inequalities and foster a culture of tolerance, inclusion, and civic responsibility.

Digital and Technological Ethics

The increasing integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in education has introduced new ethical responsibilities for teachers. Digital and technological ethics involves the responsible use of technology while safeguarding privacy, confidentiality, intellectual property, and academic integrity. Teachers must ensure that digital tools are used ethically and inclusively to support learning rather than facilitate misconduct. They should educate learners about responsible online behavior, cyber safety, information literacy, and the ethical use of AI-assisted technologies. Ethical engagement with technology enables teachers to balance innovation with accountability and maintain professional standards in increasingly digital learning environments.

Collectively, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for professional ethics in teacher education, ensuring that teachers remain committed to excellence, integrity, and social responsibility throughout their professional careers.

Role of Teacher Education Institutions in Promoting Professional Ethics

Teacher education institutions play a crucial role in cultivating professional ethics among prospective teachers. As the primary centers for teacher preparation, these institutions are responsible not only for developing pedagogical competence but also for fostering ethical awareness, moral reasoning, and professional responsibility. Ethical values acquired during teacher preparation significantly influence future professional conduct and contribute to the creation of responsible and trustworthy educators. Therefore, teacher education institutions must establish systematic mechanisms to integrate ethics into all aspects of teacher preparation.

Curriculum Integration

One of the most effective ways to promote professional ethics is through curriculum integration. Ethical principles should not be confined to a single course but embedded across various components of teacher education programs. Courses related to educational philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, assessment, and educational technology should include discussions on ethical issues and professional responsibilities. Through case studies, ethical dilemmas, classroom scenarios, and value-based learning activities, prospective teachers can develop ethical sensitivity and decision-making skills. Integrating ethics

throughout the curriculum helps students understand the practical relevance of ethical principles in everyday teaching situations and strengthens their commitment to professional standards.

Ethical Leadership and Institutional Culture

The ethical climate of a teacher education institution significantly influences the attitudes and behaviors of future teachers. Institutional leaders, teacher educators, and administrators serve as role models whose actions communicate the ethical values upheld by the institution. Ethical leadership promotes transparency, fairness, accountability, respect, and inclusiveness within the academic community. When institutions consistently demonstrate these values, prospective teachers are more likely to internalize similar standards in their professional lives. A positive institutional culture characterized by mutual trust, academic honesty, and professional respect creates opportunities for students to experience ethics in practice rather than merely learning about it theoretically.

Reflective Practice and Mentoring

Reflective practice is a powerful strategy for developing ethical competence among teacher trainees. Through reflection, prospective teachers critically examine their beliefs, actions, and professional responsibilities in relation to ethical principles. Reflective journals, group discussions, and self-assessment activities encourage deeper understanding of ethical issues and professional values. Equally important is the role of mentoring. Experienced teacher educators and mentors can guide student teachers in recognizing ethical challenges, evaluating alternative courses of action, and making responsible decisions. Effective mentoring supports the development of professional identity while reinforcing ethical commitment and accountability.

Field Experiences and Ethical Decision-Making

Field experiences provide authentic opportunities for prospective teachers to apply ethical principles in real educational settings. During teaching practice, student teachers encounter diverse learners, classroom management challenges, assessment issues, and professional interactions that require ethical judgment. These experiences help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Guided supervision and structured reflection enable teacher trainees to analyze ethical dilemmas, consider multiple perspectives, and develop sound decision-making skills. Such experiential learning strengthens their ability to respond ethically and professionally in complex educational environments.

In conclusion, teacher education institutions serve as critical agents in promoting professional ethics through curriculum design, ethical leadership, reflective learning, mentoring, and field-based experiences. Their efforts are essential for preparing teachers who can uphold ethical standards and contribute meaningfully to educational quality and social development.

Contemporary Ethical Challenges in Teacher Education

The rapidly changing educational landscape has created new opportunities for teaching and learning while simultaneously generating complex ethical challenges for teacher education. Globalization, technological advancement, market-oriented educational policies, and increasing accountability have transformed the professional responsibilities of teachers. Consequently, teacher education institutions must prepare future educators to address these emerging ethical concerns effectively and responsibly.

Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism

One of the most significant ethical challenges in contemporary teacher education is academic dishonesty, particularly plagiarism. The widespread availability of digital resources has made copying and reproducing academic content easier than ever before. Some teacher trainees engage in unethical practices such as submitting copied assignments, falsifying research data, or presenting others' work as their own. Such practices undermine academic integrity and weaken the credibility of teacher preparation programs. Since teachers are expected to model honesty and ethical behavior for students, academic misconduct during teacher education can have long-term implications for professional practice. Therefore, institutions must promote a culture of originality, ethical scholarship, and responsible research practices.

Commercialization of Education

The growing commercialization of education presents another ethical concern. Increasing competition among educational institutions, emphasis on rankings, and market-driven approaches have sometimes shifted attention away from educational values toward financial and reputational gains. In certain contexts, issues such as unfair admission practices, excessive fee structures, and the prioritization of profit over educational quality have raised ethical questions. Such trends may compromise the fundamental purpose of education as a public good and weaken the commitment to equity and social justice. Teacher education programs must therefore reinforce the idea that teaching is a service-oriented profession grounded in ethical responsibility rather than purely economic interests.

Digital Misconduct and AI-Related Ethical Concerns

The integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) in education has introduced new ethical dilemmas. While technological tools enhance learning opportunities, they also raise concerns related to privacy, data security, misinformation, intellectual property, and academic integrity. The misuse of AI-generated content in assignments, assessments, and research can blur the boundaries between assistance and misconduct. Additionally, excessive reliance on technology may reduce critical thinking and independent learning among students. Teacher education institutions must prepare future teachers to use digital technologies responsibly, promote ethical AI practices, and ensure that technological innovations support rather than compromise educational values.

Bias, Discrimination, and Inclusivity Issues

Educational environments continue to face challenges related to bias, discrimination, and exclusion. Teachers may consciously or unconsciously exhibit preferences based on gender, socio-economic status, language, culture, religion, disability, or ethnicity. Such biases can negatively affect student participation, achievement, and well-being. Ethical teaching requires educators to recognize and challenge discriminatory practices while promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Teacher education programs must equip prospective teachers with intercultural competence and inclusive pedagogical skills to ensure fair treatment of all learners.

Professional Accountability

Professional accountability remains a critical ethical challenge in contemporary education. Teachers are increasingly expected to demonstrate transparency, responsibility, and adherence to professional standards. However, balancing institutional expectations, societal demands, and individual professional judgment can sometimes create ethical tensions. Issues such as unfair assessment practices, misuse of authority, breaches of confidentiality, and neglect of professional duties can undermine public trust in the teaching profession. Strengthening accountability requires continuous professional development, ethical awareness, and adherence to established codes of conduct.

In summary, contemporary teacher education faces numerous ethical challenges that demand proactive responses from institutions and educators. Addressing academic dishonesty, commercialization, digital ethics, inclusivity concerns, and professional accountability is essential for preparing ethically competent teachers capable of navigating the complexities of modern educational environments.

Strategies for Strengthening Professional Ethics among Prospective Teachers

The development of professional ethics among prospective teachers is essential for ensuring quality education and maintaining public trust in the teaching profession. Ethical competence does not emerge automatically; rather, it requires systematic preparation, continuous reflection, and sustained professional support. Teacher education institutions play a crucial role in fostering ethical awareness and professional responsibility through various pedagogical and institutional strategies.

Ethics-Based Training Modules

One effective strategy is the incorporation of ethics-based training modules within teacher education programs. Such modules should focus on professional values, ethical principles, codes of conduct, and ethical decision-making processes relevant to educational settings. Through structured learning experiences, prospective teachers can develop a deeper understanding of their professional responsibilities toward learners, colleagues, institutions, and society. Ethics-oriented coursework also enables teacher trainees to identify ethical dilemmas and evaluate appropriate responses in complex situations. Integrating ethics across the curriculum rather than

treating it as an isolated topic can further strengthen ethical consciousness and professional commitment.

Case Study Approach

The case study approach provides practical opportunities for understanding ethical issues encountered in real educational contexts. By analyzing authentic classroom situations, professional conflicts, and ethical dilemmas, prospective teachers learn to apply ethical principles to decision-making processes. Case-based discussions encourage critical thinking, reflective judgment, and perspective-taking, allowing teacher trainees to consider multiple viewpoints before reaching conclusions. This approach bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and professional practice and prepares future teachers to respond responsibly to challenging situations in their careers.

Value-Based Education

Value-based education serves as an important foundation for ethical teacher preparation. Core values such as honesty, integrity, empathy, respect, fairness, responsibility, and social justice should be integrated into teaching and learning experiences. Teacher education institutions can promote these values through classroom interactions, co-curricular activities, community engagement programs, and institutional culture. When prospective teachers internalize these values, they are more likely to demonstrate ethical behavior in their professional lives and serve as positive role models for students. Value-based education thus contributes to both personal character development and professional excellence.

Continuous Professional Development

Professional ethics should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a one-time learning outcome. Continuous professional development programs help teachers remain informed about emerging ethical issues, educational policies, technological changes, and professional standards. Workshops, seminars, mentoring programs, and reflective learning activities provide opportunities for ethical growth and professional renewal. Such initiatives encourage lifelong learning and help educators adapt their ethical practices to evolving educational contexts.

Ethical Assessment Practices

Assessment practices significantly influence students' perceptions of fairness and integrity within educational institutions. Therefore, teacher education programs should train prospective teachers to design and implement ethical assessment procedures. Ethical assessment involves transparency, objectivity, confidentiality, fairness, and respect for learner diversity. Teachers should avoid bias, favoritism, and discriminatory practices while ensuring that evaluation methods accurately reflect student learning. Ethical assessment practices not only enhance educational credibility but also reinforce the principles of justice and accountability in professional practice.

Collectively, these strategies contribute to the development of ethically responsible, reflective, and professionally competent

teachers who are capable of meeting the ethical demands of contemporary education.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study highlight that professional ethics is a fundamental component of teacher quality and educational effectiveness. Ethical competence extends beyond adherence to professional codes and encompasses the ability to make responsible decisions, demonstrate integrity, respect diversity, and act in the best interests of learners and society. In contemporary educational environments characterized by technological advancement, increasing accountability, and cultural diversity, ethical competence has become as important as pedagogical knowledge and instructional skills. Teachers who possess strong ethical values are more likely to create inclusive learning environments, maintain academic integrity, foster positive relationships, and contribute to students' holistic development. Consequently, ethical professionalism should be regarded as a core indicator of teacher quality rather than an optional attribute of professional practice.

The study also has significant implications for educational policy and institutional practice. Policymakers should ensure that professional ethics is explicitly incorporated into teacher education standards, accreditation frameworks, and professional development policies. National and institutional guidelines should emphasize ethical competencies alongside pedagogical and subject-specific competencies. Furthermore, teacher education institutions need to establish ethical cultures that promote transparency, accountability, fairness, and respect. Curriculum reforms should integrate ethics across courses, while mentoring and field experiences should provide opportunities for ethical reflection and decision-making. Institutions must also address emerging challenges related to digital technologies, artificial intelligence, academic integrity, and inclusive education through targeted training initiatives. Strengthening ethical preparation at both policy and institutional levels can contribute to the development of competent, responsible, and socially committed teachers capable of meeting the evolving demands of the teaching profession.

CONCLUSION

Professional ethics constitutes the moral foundation of effective teaching and plays a critical role in shaping the professional identity of educators. As teaching is inherently a value-oriented profession, ethical principles guide teachers in fulfilling their responsibilities toward learners, colleagues, institutions, and society. This paper examined the conceptual foundations, theoretical perspectives, core dimensions, institutional responsibilities, contemporary challenges, and strategies related to professional ethics in teacher education. The analysis demonstrated that ethical competence is essential for maintaining educational quality, promoting academic integrity, ensuring inclusivity, and fostering responsible professional behavior.

The study further revealed that teacher education institutions have a pivotal role in nurturing ethical awareness through curriculum integration, ethical leadership, reflective practice,

mentoring, and field-based learning experiences. At the same time, emerging challenges such as plagiarism, commercialization of education, digital misconduct, artificial intelligence-related concerns, and issues of equity require continuous attention and proactive intervention. Addressing these challenges demands collaborative efforts from policymakers, educational institutions, teacher educators, and prospective teachers.

In an era of rapid educational transformation, ethical competence must be viewed as an indispensable dimension of teacher professionalism. Preparing teachers who possess both pedagogical expertise and strong ethical values is essential for building equitable, democratic, and sustainable educational systems. Therefore, strengthening professional ethics within teacher education should remain a priority for ensuring the development of responsible educators capable of positively influencing future generations and contributing meaningfully to social progress.

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