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Professional Ethics in teaching: a critical determinant of Educational Excellence

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Abstract

Professional ethics are principles that govern the behaviour of a person or group in a business environment. Like values, professional ethics provide rules on how a person should act towards other people and institutions in such an environment. Apart from disseminating knowledge or imparting information to students, a teacher can raise the morality of a student by encouraging ethical practices. Presently, ethics is the most concerning issue because the youth generation indulges in unethical activities randomly. For providing good quality education it is necessary that a teacher should be professionally competent and up to date in its profession and must follow certain codes of conduct such as professional ethics. There are three pillars of teaching which interact with each other i.e. teacher, student and society. The present paper examines the concept, dimensions, and significance of professional ethics among teachers and explores their relationship with educational excellence. Drawing upon major ethical theories, educational philosophy, and contemporary research, the paper critically analyses the influence of ethical behaviour on teaching effectiveness, school climate, student outcomes, and institutional performance. It also discusses the emerging ethical challenges faced by teachers in the era of digital education, inclusive classrooms, technological advancement, and increasing professional accountability. It argues that professional ethics should be viewed not merely as a code of conduct but as a dynamic framework that guides teachers' professional decisions, classroom practices, interpersonal relationships, and commitment to continuous professional development. The study further suggests that integrating ethical education into teacher preparation programmes, strengthening institutional ethical policies, and promoting reflective professional practice can substantially enhance educational excellence.

Keywords: *Professional Ethics; Teachers; Educational Excellence; Teacher Professionalism; Ethical Leadership; Teacher Accountability.*

Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as one of the most powerful instruments for individual development, social transformation, and national progress. At the heart of every successful education system lies the teacher, whose professional competence, ethical commitment, and personal integrity significantly influence the quality of teaching and learning. While pedagogical knowledge and subject expertise remain indispensable components of effective teaching, these attributes alone cannot ensure educational excellence unless they are complemented by strong professional ethics. In the twenty-first century, teachers are increasingly expected to function not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as ethical professionals, mentors, facilitators, role models, and agents of positive social change [1]. Professional ethics in teaching encompass the moral principles, values, standards, and responsibilities that guide teachers' professional conduct in their interactions with students, colleagues, parents, educational institutions, and society. Ethical teaching extends beyond compliance with institutional regulations; it reflects a commitment to honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, confidentiality, accountability, and professional responsibility. Teachers who consistently demonstrate ethical behaviour create learning environments characterised by trust, inclusivity, mutual respect, and academic integrity, thereby fostering students' intellectual, emotional, social, and moral development.

The significance of professional ethics has become increasingly prominent in recent decades due to rapid educational reforms, technological advancement, digital learning environments, inclusive education policies, multicultural classrooms, and growing public expectations regarding teacher accountability. These developments have expanded the ethical responsibilities of teachers, requiring them to address complex professional dilemmas while balancing institutional expectations, student welfare, legal obligations, and societal values [2-3]. Consequently, professional ethics have emerged as a critical dimension of teacher professionalism and educational leadership. Educational excellence is a multidimensional concept encompassing academic achievement, effective teaching-learning processes, institutional quality, learner satisfaction, innovation, equity, and continuous improvement.

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Numerous studies indicate that ethically committed teachers contribute substantially to improved student learning outcomes, positive classroom management, stronger teacher–student relationships, enhanced organisational culture, and sustainable institutional development. Ethical teachers inspire confidence among stakeholders, promote democratic values, encourage critical thinking, and nurture responsible citizenship. Conversely, unethical practices—including discrimination, favouritism, professional negligence, academic dishonesty, abuse of authority, and breaches of confidentiality—can adversely affect student development and undermine the credibility of educational institutions. Despite the growing recognition of teacher professionalism, discussions on professional ethics often remain confined to institutional codes of conduct, overlooking their broader influence on educational quality and organisational effectiveness. There is therefore a need for a comprehensive examination of professional ethics as a strategic determinant of educational excellence rather than merely a regulatory requirement. Understanding the ethical foundations of teaching can assist policymakers, educational administrators, teacher educators, and practitioners in developing frameworks that strengthen professional accountability and improve educational outcomes. Against this background, the present paper critically examines the concept, dimensions, theoretical foundations, and significance of professional ethics among teachers [4]. It further analyses how ethical professional practices contribute to educational excellence through enhanced teaching effectiveness, positive school climate, student development, and institutional performance. By synthesising contemporary scholarly literature and theoretical perspectives, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the indispensable role of professional ethics in achieving quality education and sustainable educational development.

Concept of Professional Ethics

Professional ethics refer to the moral principles, standards of conduct, values, and responsibilities that govern the behaviour of individuals within a particular profession. These ethical principles serve as a framework for guiding professional decisions, maintaining accountability, ensuring integrity, and promoting public trust. Unlike personal ethics, which are shaped by individual beliefs and cultural values, professional ethics are derived from the expectations, norms, and standards established by a profession to ensure responsible and competent practice. They define what constitutes acceptable professional behaviour and establish boundaries that protect the interests of clients, organisations, colleagues, and society.

The concept of professional ethics is founded on the premise that every profession carries a social responsibility beyond the mere performance of technical duties. Professionals are entrusted with specialised knowledge, authority, and decision-making power, which must be exercised with honesty, fairness, competence, and accountability. Consequently, professional ethics act as a moral compass that assists professionals in resolving ethical dilemmas, balancing competing interests, and making decisions that uphold justice, equity, and public welfare. They promote responsible professional conduct by encouraging transparency, confidentiality, respect for human dignity, impartiality, and commitment to continuous professional improvement. Professional ethics are particularly significant in service-oriented professions such as education, medicine, law, social work, and public administration, where professional decisions directly influence human lives and societal development. In these professions, ethical behaviour extends beyond compliance with legal regulations and organisational policies; it requires professionals to demonstrate moral judgement, empathy, compassion, responsibility, and dedication to the welfare of those they serve. Ethical professionals not only fulfil their contractual obligations but also uphold the values and ideals that define the integrity and credibility of their profession. From a philosophical perspective, professional ethics are rooted in the broader discipline of ethics, which examines moral values, principles, rights, duties, and standards governing human conduct. Major ethical traditions—including virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and consequentialism—provide different perspectives for understanding professional responsibility. Virtue ethics emphasises the development of moral character and professional virtues such as honesty, integrity, courage, and compassion. Deontological ethics stresses adherence to moral duties, obligations, and universal ethical principles regardless of outcomes. Consequentialist approaches evaluate professional decisions based on their outcomes and their contribution to the welfare of individuals and society. Together, these perspectives enrich the understanding of ethical decision-making within professional contexts.

Professional ethics are dynamic rather than static. As societies evolve, technological advancements emerge, and professional responsibilities expand, ethical standards must also adapt to address new challenges. The rapid growth of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, online communication, data privacy concerns, multicultural workplaces, and global professional interactions has significantly broadened the scope of ethical responsibility across professions. Consequently, professional ethics today encompass not only traditional principles of honesty and accountability but also digital responsibility, equity, inclusiveness, environmental sustainability, respect for diversity, and responsible use of technology. Scholars have consistently recognised professional ethics as a fundamental component of professionalism. According to many researchers, professionalism cannot be achieved solely through technical competence or academic qualifications; rather, it requires the integration of specialised knowledge with ethical values and socially responsible behaviour. Professional ethics strengthen organisational credibility, enhance stakeholder confidence, improve decision-making, reduce professional misconduct, and contribute to long-term institutional effectiveness.

Organisations that foster strong ethical cultures are more likely to experience higher levels of trust, collaboration, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment among their members. In contemporary education systems, professional ethics have emerged as one of the principal determinants of educational quality and institutional excellence. Educational reforms worldwide increasingly emphasise ethical professionalism as an essential component of teacher effectiveness, educational leadership, and school improvement. Teachers who exhibit high ethical standards are more likely to foster positive classroom climates, strengthen student trust, encourage academic integrity, support inclusive learning environments, and enhance overall educational outcomes. Conversely, ethical lapses such as professional negligence, discrimination, bias, academic dishonesty, breaches of confidentiality, and abuse of authority can significantly undermine educational quality and public confidence in educational institutions.

Definitions of Professional Ethics by Leading Scholars

Professional ethics have been defined by numerous scholars, philosophers, and professional organisations from different perspectives, reflecting the multidimensional nature of ethical conduct within professional practice. Although the wording of these definitions varies, they consistently emphasise moral responsibility, professional competence, integrity, accountability, respect for human dignity, and commitment to public welfare. An examination of these perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding of the ethical foundations that govern professional behaviour, particularly within the teaching profession. One of the earliest and most influential perspectives on ethics originates from Aristotle, who viewed ethics as the cultivation of moral virtues that enable individuals to achieve excellence in both personal and professional life. According to Aristotle's virtue ethics, ethical behaviour is not simply adherence to rules but the development of virtues such as honesty, justice, courage, prudence, and integrity through continuous practice.

[5] the founder of deontological ethics, conceptualised ethical behaviour as the fulfilment of moral duties and obligations irrespective of personal interests or anticipated consequences. Kant argued that professionals should act according to universal moral principles that can be applied consistently to all individuals. Within professional settings, this perspective implies that honesty, fairness, respect, confidentiality, and accountability are not optional values but fundamental duties that professionals must uphold under all circumstances. Kant's emphasis on duty has significantly influenced contemporary professional codes of ethics across various disciplines, including education. According to [6] ethics is the systematic study of morality, moral judgement, and standards governing human conduct. He argued that professional ethics involve applying moral principles to professional activities in order to determine what professionals ought to do in situations involving ethical choices.

Frankena's definition highlights that professional ethics extend beyond technical competence and require professionals to evaluate their actions against established moral standards and societal expectations. [7] define professional ethics as the application of ethical principles to professional practice, focusing on respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Although their work primarily addresses biomedical ethics, these four principles have become widely recognised across many professions because they provide a practical framework for ethical decision-making. In educational settings, these principles encourage teachers to respect learners' dignity, promote student welfare, avoid actions that may cause harm, and ensure fairness and equity in all professional interactions.

The National Education Association Code of Ethics defines professional ethics in teaching as the principles that inspire educators to uphold the dignity of the profession by demonstrating honesty, fairness, respect, professional competence, and commitment to students' welfare. The code further emphasises teachers' responsibility to protect students from discrimination, exploitation, harassment, and any practices that may interfere with their educational development. This organisational perspective clearly illustrates how ethical principles translate into professional responsibilities within educational institutions. The National Council for Teacher Education views professional ethics as a set of professional values, responsibilities, and standards that guide teachers in performing their educational duties with integrity, impartiality, respect, accountability, and commitment to learners' holistic development. The council stresses that ethical teachers should promote inclusive education, protect learners' rights, maintain professional relationships, and continually update their professional knowledge and skills. Similarly, the UNESCO and International Labour Organization Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers recognises professional ethics as an essential element of teacher professionalism. The recommendation emphasises that teachers should demonstrate intellectual honesty, professional independence, social responsibility, respect for learners' rights, commitment to lifelong learning, and dedication to educational improvement. It further acknowledges that professional ethics strengthen public confidence in teachers and contribute to national educational development.

Dimensions of Teacher Professional Ethics

Teacher professional ethics comprise a comprehensive set of moral values, professional responsibilities, behavioural standards, and ethical commitments that guide teachers in performing their educational duties. These dimensions collectively shape teachers' professional identity and influence their interactions with students, colleagues, parents, educational institutions, and society. Contemporary educational literature recognises professional ethics as a multidimensional construct because ethical teaching extends beyond classroom instruction to encompass fairness, accountability, leadership,

collaboration, continuous learning, and social responsibility. Each dimension contributes significantly to improving teaching effectiveness, strengthening institutional credibility, and achieving educational excellence.

Commitment to Students: Commitment to students represents the foremost dimension of teacher professional ethics because students constitute the central focus of the educational process. Ethical teachers prioritise the academic, emotional, psychological, and social well-being of every learner without discrimination based on gender, religion, caste, socioeconomic background, language, ethnicity, or disability. They demonstrate genuine concern for students' holistic development by creating safe, inclusive, supportive, and learner-centred classrooms.

Professional Competence and Continuous Professional Development: Professional competence refers to the teacher's ability to perform instructional responsibilities effectively through sound subject knowledge, pedagogical expertise, classroom management, assessment skills, and educational innovation. Ethical teachers recognise that competence is not static but requires continuous improvement throughout their professional careers. Commitment to lifelong learning enables teachers to remain updated with curriculum reforms, educational policies, technological advancements, innovative pedagogical practices, and emerging research findings.

Honesty and Integrity: Honesty and integrity constitute the moral foundation of professional ethics in teaching. Ethical teachers maintain truthfulness, transparency, and consistency in all professional activities, including classroom instruction, student assessment, research, record maintenance, and administrative responsibilities. They avoid plagiarism, academic dishonesty, manipulation of examination results, falsification of records, and misuse of institutional resources. Integrity also requires teachers to align their actions with their professional values. Teachers who consistently demonstrate honesty earn the trust of students, colleagues, parents, and society, thereby enhancing the credibility and reputation of educational institutions. Integrity strengthens ethical leadership and contributes to a culture of accountability and academic excellence.

Fairness, Justice, and Equity: Fairness is a fundamental ethical principle requiring teachers to treat all learners impartially and equitably. Ethical teachers evaluate students objectively, provide equal opportunities for participation, and avoid personal bias in classroom interactions, grading, disciplinary measures, and academic guidance. Justice in education involves recognising learners' diverse backgrounds and ensuring that every student receives appropriate educational support according to individual needs.

Accountability and Professional Responsibility: Professional accountability refers to teachers' willingness to accept responsibility for their professional decisions, actions, and educational outcomes. Ethical teachers fulfil their instructional responsibilities conscientiously, maintain punctuality, prepare lessons effectively, assess students fairly, complete administrative duties honestly, and comply with institutional policies and professional standards. Accountability also extends to reflective practice, where teachers critically evaluate their own performance, identify areas for improvement, and accept constructive feedback. By demonstrating responsibility and transparency, teachers strengthen institutional trust and improve organisational effectiveness.

Respect for Human Dignity and Diversity: Respect for human dignity is a universal ethical principle that recognises the inherent worth of every learner and educational stakeholder. Ethical teachers create classroom environments characterised by mutual respect, empathy, tolerance, compassion, and acceptance of diversity.

Commitment to Society and Nation Building: Teaching is widely recognised as a profession dedicated to public service. Ethical teachers contribute not only to students' academic success but also to the social, cultural, moral, and economic development of society. Through value education, civic education, environmental awareness, constitutional values, and democratic citizenship, teachers prepare responsible and socially conscious citizens. The dimensions discussed above demonstrate that teacher professional ethics are multidimensional, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing. Commitment to students, professional competence, honesty, fairness, accountability, respect, confidentiality, collaboration, ethical decision-making, social responsibility, and digital ethics together establish the ethical foundation of effective teaching. These dimensions not only regulate teachers' professional conduct but also strengthen educational quality, institutional effectiveness, student learning outcomes, and public confidence in education. Consequently, professional ethics should be regarded as a strategic pillar of teacher professionalism and a critical determinant of educational excellence.

Review of Literature

Professional ethics has increasingly become a significant area of educational research because of its influence on teacher professionalism, instructional quality, and educational excellence. Numerous scholars have examined teacher ethics from philosophical, professional, and organisational perspectives, highlighting its role in promoting effective teaching and responsible educational practice. [7-8] examined the importance of professional ethics in the teaching profession and argued that ethical values serve as guiding principles for teachers in fulfilling their academic and social responsibilities.

The study highlighted that professional ethics enable teachers to maintain discipline, develop positive relationships with students, and promote value-based education. It concluded that ethical teachers contribute significantly to the overall development of learners and the improvement of educational quality. [9] synthesised Western research on teacher ethics and concluded that teacher ethics is grounded in multiple theoretical perspectives, including virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and consequentialism. The review highlighted ethical judgement, moral agency, professional responsibility, and ethical conflict resolution as central dimensions of teacher professionalism while identifying the need for further empirical research in diverse educational contexts. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) has consistently emphasised that teacher education programmes should develop professional values, ethical behaviour, reflective practice, and lifelong learning among prospective teachers. Through its teacher education regulations and professional standards, the Council recognises professional ethics as a fundamental competency required for effective teaching and educational leadership. The Ministry of Education's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 identifies teachers as the cornerstone of educational transformation and stresses the importance of professional integrity, accountability, inclusiveness, and continuous professional development. The policy advocates strengthening professional standards, ethical responsibility, and teacher autonomy to enhance the quality of school education and achieve equitable educational outcomes. [10-15] critically analysed teacher professional ethics within the framework of NEP 2020. The authors argued that ethical professionalism is central to educational excellence and that teachers must demonstrate integrity, inclusiveness, transparency, and professional accountability while responding to contemporary educational challenges. The study further recommended strengthening ethics education in teacher preparation programmes to improve institutional effectiveness and public trust in the teaching profession. [16-18] investigated school teachers' perspectives on professional ethics and found that teachers regularly encounter ethical dilemmas while performing their professional responsibilities. Their study revealed that although teachers recognised the importance of professional ethics, there was a need for greater awareness of ethical standards and structured ethics education in both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes. The authors recommended developing comprehensive professional codes of conduct to guide ethical decision-making and strengthen teacher professionalism. Similarly, the National Education Association Code of Ethics highlights teachers' responsibility to protect students' rights, maintain professional integrity, promote fairness, avoid discrimination, and preserve public confidence in the teaching profession. These ethical principles provide a framework for responsible professional conduct.

Research Gap

Existing studies have examined various aspects of teacher ethics, including moral values, professional conduct, accountability, integrity, commitment, ethical leadership, and codes of professional practice. Both international and Indian scholars have consistently emphasised that ethical teachers contribute significantly to effective teaching, positive classroom environments, student development, and institutional credibility. Overall, the reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that professional ethics is a critical determinant of teacher effectiveness, educational quality, student development, and institutional excellence. However, most existing studies focus on specific ethical issues or individual dimensions of professionalism. Comparatively fewer studies present an integrated conceptual framework that explains how the various dimensions of teacher professional ethics collectively contribute to educational excellence. This gap provides a strong rationale for the present study. Despite these valuable contributions, several important research gaps remain, the majority of previous studies have focused on specific dimensions of professional ethics, such as integrity, accountability, commitment, or ethical leadership, rather than examining teacher professional ethics as a comprehensive and multidimensional construct, much of the existing literature is either descriptive or policy-oriented, primarily discussing the importance of ethical values or professional codes of conduct, international research has extensively explored ethical professionalism in developed educational systems; however, comparatively fewer studies have examined teacher professional ethics within the Indian educational context, particularly in relation to recent educational reforms such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, contemporary educational challenges—including digital learning, artificial intelligence, online teaching, multicultural classrooms, inclusive education, and increased professional accountability—have introduced new ethical responsibilities for teachers, while previous studies have acknowledged that professional ethics positively influences educational quality, relatively little attention has been given to explaining how ethical professional practices strengthen educational excellence through improved teaching effectiveness, learner development, institutional effectiveness, professional relationships, and a positive school climate. A comprehensive synthesis of these interrelated dimensions is largely absent. Therefore, the present study seeks to bridge these gaps by examining teacher professional ethics as a multidimensional construct and by analysing its role as a critical determinant of educational excellence.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the present study is developed on the premise that teacher professional ethics constitute a multidimensional construct that significantly influences educational excellence. Professional ethics encompass a set of moral values, professional standards, ethical responsibilities, and behavioural principles that guide teachers in carrying out their professional duties with integrity,

competence, fairness, and accountability. These ethical dimensions collectively shape teachers' professional behaviour, decision-making processes, instructional practices, and interpersonal relationships within educational institutions. It emphasises that ethical professionalism enhances both individual teacher performance and organisational effectiveness by integrating moral responsibility with pedagogical competence. The framework therefore provides a theoretical basis for understanding how ethical values and professional conduct influence the overall quality of education and supports the central proposition of the present study that professional ethics is a critical determinant of educational excellence.

Conclusion

Professional ethics constitute the moral and professional foundation of the teaching profession and are indispensable for achieving educational excellence. As demonstrated throughout this paper, ethical teaching extends beyond adherence to institutional rules or professional codes of conduct; it encompasses a comprehensive framework of values, responsibilities, and professional behaviours that guide teachers in fulfilling their educational, social, and moral obligations, professional ethics should not be viewed merely as a regulatory requirement but as a strategic pillar of teacher professionalism and educational excellence. Strengthening ethical values and professional responsibility among teachers is essential for improving teaching quality, fostering inclusive learning environments, enhancing institutional effectiveness, and preparing responsible citizens. An education system that prioritises ethical professionalism is better equipped to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century and to contribute meaningfully to sustainable national and global development.

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