

Perceived Changes in Teachers' Professional Ethics and Students' Moral Values: An Empirical Study Informed by Virtue Ethics and Moral Agency”

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Abstract

Purpose: This empirical study investigates the correlation between teachers' professional ethics and students' moral values in secondary schools, framed within virtue ethics and moral agency theoretical perspectives.

Design/methodology/approach: Employing a quantitative descriptive-correlational design, data were collected from 300 secondary school teachers and 450 students using standardized scales. Statistical analyses included reliability testing, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and linear regression.

Findings: Results indicate moderate-to-low levels of professional ethics among teachers ($M=3.12$, $SD=0.54$) and moral values among students ($M=2.95$, $SD=0.61$). A significant positive correlation was found ($r=.48$, $p<.01$), with teacher ethics explaining 23% of variance in student moral values.

Practical implications: Findings underscore the need for ethics-focused teacher development programs, integration of moral reflection in school culture, and policies supporting teacher autonomy.

Originality/value: This study provides quantitative evidence linking teacher ethics to student moral development, integrating virtue ethics and moral agency in educational research.

Keywords—Professional Ethics, Moral Values, Virtue Ethics, Moral Agency, Secondary Education, Character Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Education has historically been recognized as a fundamentally moral enterprise that extends beyond academic instruction to encompass character formation and ethical development (Hansen, 1995; Noddings, 2002). Within this paradigm, teachers serve not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as moral exemplars whose professional conduct significantly influences the ethical development of students (Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993; Campbell, 2013).

Contemporary educational discourse has raised concerns regarding perceived declines in both teacher professional ethics and student moral values (Sockett, 2009; Kristjánsson, 2015). Manifestations include reduced professional commitment among educators, increased academic dishonesty among students, and weakening of traditional ethical frameworks within school environments (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006; Biesta, 2012). Despite theoretical recognition of the teacher-student moral relationship, empirical investigations quantifying this association remain limited, particularly within specific cultural contexts such as Kashmir.

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This study addresses this research gap by examining the relationship between teachers' professional ethics and students' moral values through integrated theoretical frameworks of virtue ethics and moral agency. By providing empirical evidence of this relationship, the research contributes to informed interventions in teacher education and school policy aimed at strengthening the moral dimensions of educational practice.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Virtue Ethics in Educational Contexts

Virtue ethics, with Aristotelian origins, emphasizes the cultivation of moral character through habitual practice of virtues such as wisdom, justice, courage, and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) (MacIntyre, 1981; Carr, 2003). Applied to education, this framework posits that teaching is intrinsically ethical, requiring continuous moral judgment within relationships of asymmetrical power (Fenstermacher, 1990).

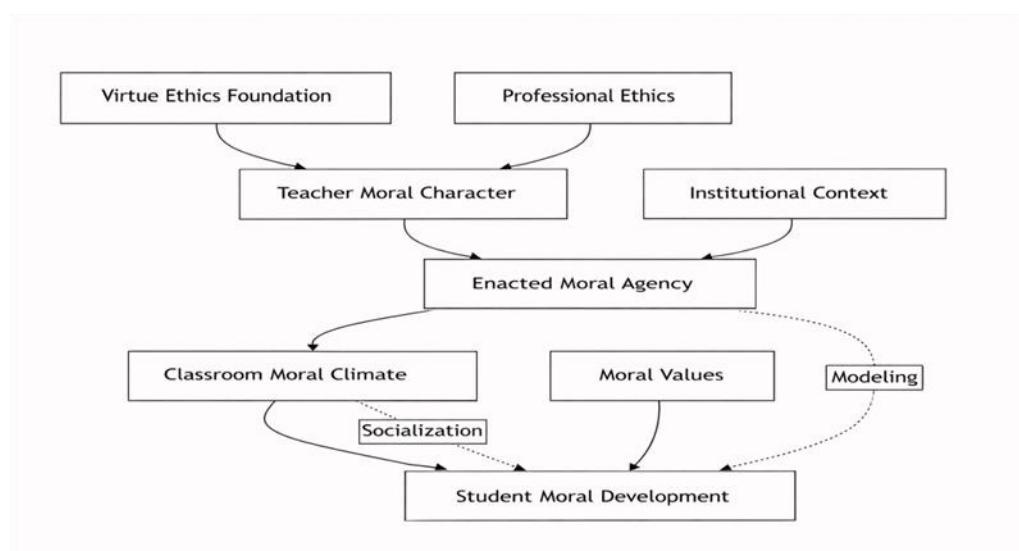
The virtue ethics perspective suggests that teachers' character traits—their integrity, fairness, care, and professional diligence—constitute the foundation of their moral influence (Sockett, 2006). Students learn ethical conduct not primarily through explicit instruction but through observation and emulation of teachers who embody virtuous professional practice (Sanderse, 2012).

2.2 Teacher Moral Agency

Moral agency theory complements virtue ethics by focusing on the capacity to enact ethical principles in complex practical situations (Bandura, 2002; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011). Teacher moral agency involves the exercise of ethical judgment, decision-making, and action that promotes student welfare and educational values (Biesta, 2015).

This framework recognizes that teachers operate within institutional constraints but maintain agency in shaping the moral climate of their classrooms. Through reflective practice and principled action, teachers construct ethical learning environments that either facilitate or hinder student moral development (Oser, 1994).

Figure 1: Theoretical Integration of Virtue Ethics and Moral Agency



3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Dimensions of Teacher Professional Ethics

Professional ethics in teaching encompasses multiple dimensions that collectively define ethical educational practice. Campbell (2013) identifies four core components: integrity and honesty in professional conduct; care and respect for students; fairness and justice in treatment and assessment; and professional diligence in fulfilling responsibilities. Research indicates that ethical teaching practices foster trust, enhance learning environments, and contribute to positive school climates (Colnerud, 2015). However, contemporary educational systems increasingly subject teachers to performative pressures that may erode ethical practice through standardization, accountability regimes, and reduced professional autonomy (Sockett, 2009; Biesta, 2012).

3.2 Student Moral Development in School Contexts

Moral values—including respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, and empathy—develop through complex interactions between individual dispositions and social environments (Lickona, 1991; Nucci, 2001). Schools function as crucial moral ecologies where students' ethical sensibilities are shaped through formal curriculum, informal interactions, and institutional culture (Narvaez, 2006).

Emerging evidence suggests concerning trends in youth moral development, including increased academic dishonesty, diminished empathy, and weakened civic engagement (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006; Twenge, 2013). These trends underscore the importance of understanding school-based factors that influence moral development.

3.3 The Teacher-Student Moral Relationship

Theoretical and empirical literature consistently highlights teachers' role as moral models whose professional conduct significantly influences student ethical development (Oser & Althof, 1993; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013). The modeling hypothesis, rooted in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), suggests that students internalize values through observation of significant adults' behavior.

Research demonstrates that teachers who exemplify ethical conduct, engage in moral dialogue, and create caring classroom communities foster higher levels of prosocial behavior and moral reasoning in students (Watson, 2003). Conversely, teacher hypocrisy or unethical behavior can undermine student trust and moral commitment.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study was guided by four specific objectives:

- To assess the perceived level of professional ethics among secondary school teachers.
- To assess the perceived level of moral values among secondary school students.
- To examine the nature and strength of the relationship between teachers' professional ethics and students' moral values.
- To determine the predictive influence of teachers' professional ethics on the level of students' moral values.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

A quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive-correlational design was employed. This design facilitates examination of relationships between naturally occurring variables without experimental manipulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

5.2 Population and Sampling

The study population comprised all secondary school teachers and students (Grades 9-10) in public schools across the Kashmir division. Stratified random sampling ensured representation from urban, semi-urban, and rural educational zones.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Teachers (n=300)	Students (n=450)
Gender		
Male	165 (55%)	240 (53.3%)
Female	135 (45%)	210 (46.7%)
Teaching Experience		
1-5 years	90 (30%)	-
6-10 years	105 (35%)	-
11-15 years	75 (25%)	-
16+ years	30 (10%)	-
School Location		
Urban	120 (40%)	180 (40%)
Semi-urban	105 (35%)	157 (34.9%)
Rural	75 (25%)	113 (25.1%)
Grade Level		
Grade 9	-	225 (50%)
Grade 10	-	225 (50%)

5.3 Instruments

Two standardized self-report questionnaires were administered:

1. Teacher Professional Ethics Scale (TPES): A 30-item instrument adapted from Campbell (2013) and Tirri and Husu (2002) measuring four dimensions:

Integrity & Honesty (8 items)

Care & Respect (7 items)

Fairness & Justice (8 items)

Professional Diligence (7 items)

2. Student Moral Values Scale (SMVS): A 25-item instrument developed from Lickona (1991) and Berkowitz (1997) frameworks assessing five core values:

Respect (5 items)

Responsibility (5 items)

Honesty (5 items)

Fairness (5 items)

Empathy & Compassion (5 items)

Both instruments used a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree).

Table 2: Instrument Reliability Analysis

Instrument/Subscale	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
TPES Total	.89	30
Integrity & Honesty	.83	8
Care & Respect	.81	7
Fairness & Justice	.79	8
Professional Diligence	.76	7
SMVS Total	.86	25
Respect	.78	5
Responsibility	.75	5
Honesty	.80	5
Fairness	.74	5
Empathy & Compassion	.77	5

5.4 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Data collection occurred during regular school hours with prior administrative permission and informed consent from all participants. Questionnaires were administered anonymously in group settings, with researchers available to clarify instructions. Ethical guidelines regarding confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data protection were strictly followed.

5.5 Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26. Analytical procedures included:

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations)

Reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha)

Pearson correlation analysis

Simple linear regression analysis

6. RESULTS

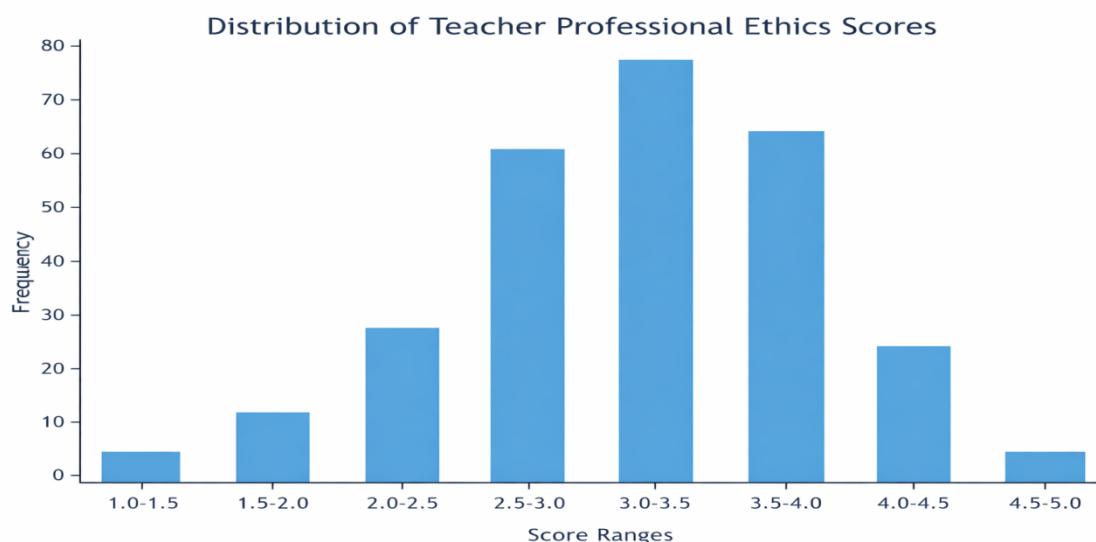
6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Major Variables

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Teacher Professional Ethics	300	1.80	4.60	3.12	0.54	-0.32	0.45
Student Moral Values	450	1.64	4.52	2.95	0.61	-0.41	0.38

The mean scores for both Teacher Professional Ethics ($M=3.12$) and Student Moral Values ($M=2.95$) fall below the scale midpoint (3.5), indicating moderate-to-low levels of these constructs in the sampled population.

Figure 2: Distribution of Teacher Professional Ethics Scores



6.2 CORRELATION ANALYSIS

Table 4: Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. TPE-Total	1					
2. TPE-Integrity	.84**	1				
3. TPE-Care	.76**	.62**	1			
4. TPE-Fairness	.81**	.58**	.54**	1		
5. TPE-Diligence	.72**	.51**	.49**	.48**	1	
6. SMV-Total	.48**	.42**	.44**	.39**	.36**	1
7. SMV-Respect	.41**	.38**	.45**	.32**	.31**	.82**
8. SMV-Responsibility	.39**	.35**	.40**	.34**	.29**	.79**
9. SMV-Honesty	.43**	.44**	.38**	.36**	.33**	.81**
10. SMV-Fairness	.40**	.36**	.39**	.45**	.30**	.78**
11. SMV-Empathy	.45**	.40**	.48**	.35**	.34**	.83**

*Note: TPE = Teacher Professional Ethics; SMV = Student Moral Values; *p < .01

As shown in Table 4, all dimensions of teacher professional ethics correlate significantly with overall student moral values and its components. The strongest correlation exists between overall teacher ethics and student moral values (r=.48, p<.01).

6.3 Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression was conducted to evaluate the prediction of Student Moral Values from Teacher Professional Ethics.

Table 5: Simple Linear Regression Analysis Summary

Mode	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F	df1	df2	p
1	.48	.23	.23	0.54	92.55	1	448	<.001

Table 6: Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI for B
Constant	1.45	0.20		7.12	<.001	[1.05, 1.85]
Teacher Professional Ethics	0.48	0.05	.48	9.62	<.001	[0.38, 0.58]

Dependent Variable: Student Moral Values

The regression model was statistically significant ($F(1, 448)=92.55, p<.001$), explaining 23% of the variance in student moral values. Teacher Professional Ethics was a significant positive predictor ($\beta=.48, p<.001$).

Figure 3: Scatterplot of Teacher Ethics and Student Moral Values with Regression Line



6.4 SUBSCALE ANALYSIS

Table 7: Regression Analysis of TPE Subscales Predicting SMV

Predictor (TPE Subscale)	R ²	β	t	p
Integrity & Honesty	.18	.42	8.23	<.001
Care & Respect	.19	.44	8.65	<.001
Fairness & Justice	.15	.39	7.52	<.001
Professional Diligence	.13	.36	6.89	<.001

Among the teacher ethics subscales, Care & Respect demonstrated the strongest predictive relationship with student moral values ($\beta=.44$), explaining 19% of variance.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide compelling empirical evidence supporting the theoretical connection between teacher professional ethics and student moral development. The moderate-to-low mean scores for both constructs (TPE: $M=3.12$; SMV: $M=2.95$) align with concerns regarding ethical decline in educational contexts (Sockett, 2009; Kristjánsson, 2015). These scores suggest that both teachers and students in the sampled population perceive deficiencies in ethical professional practice and moral value orientation.

The significant positive correlation between teacher ethics and student moral values ($r=.48$) confirms the central hypothesis derived from virtue ethics and moral agency frameworks. This finding substantiates the modeling hypothesis (Bandura, 1977) and validates the proposition that teachers serve as crucial moral exemplars whose professional conduct directly influences student ethical development (Jackson et al., 1993; Oser & Althof, 1993). The strength of this correlation is particularly noteworthy given the multiple factors influencing moral development beyond school environments.

The regression analysis revealing that teacher professional ethics explains 23% of variance in student moral values represents a substantial predictive relationship in educational research contexts. This finding quantitatively demonstrates the significant leverage point that teacher ethics represents in moral education initiatives. It suggests that improvements in teacher professional ethics could potentially yield meaningful enhancements in student moral development.

The subscale analysis provides nuanced insights into specific dimensions of teacher ethics most influential for student moral development. The finding that Care & Respect demonstrates the strongest predictive relationship ($\beta=.44$) aligns with relational approaches to moral education emphasizing the importance of caring teacher-student relationships (Noddings, 2002). However, all dimensions—integrity, fairness, and diligence—contribute significantly, supporting a holistic approach to teacher ethics development.

7.1 Theoretical Implications

These findings offer empirical validation for integrated virtue ethics and moral agency frameworks in educational contexts. The results demonstrate that teacher character (virtue ethics) and ethical action (moral agency) jointly create moral learning environments that shape student values. This supports Biesta's (2015) assertion that education involves risk and responsibility in moral dimensions, and confirms Carr's (2006) argument that teaching excellence inherently requires ethical excellence.

7.2 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences; longitudinal studies are needed to establish temporal precedence and causal relationships. Second, reliance on self-report measures introduces potential response biases; future research should incorporate observational methods and multi-informant approaches. Third, the study was conducted in a specific regional context; replication in diverse cultural settings would enhance generalizability.

Future research should examine mediating and moderating variables in the teacher ethics-student values relationship, including school leadership, parental involvement, peer influences, and specific pedagogical approaches to moral education. Investigation of intervention strategies to enhance teacher moral agency and professional ethics would also contribute to practical applications of these findings.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study establishes a significant and substantial relationship between teachers' professional ethics and students' moral values in secondary school contexts. Guided by integrated virtue ethics and moral agency frameworks, the research demonstrates that teacher ethical conduct explains approximately one-quarter of the variance in student moral development.

The findings underscore that concerns regarding declining professional ethics among teachers and degrading moral values among students are interrelated rather than separate phenomena. Teachers function not merely as academic instructors but as moral agents whose professional character and ethical practice significantly shape the moral development of their students.

Strengthening teacher professional ethics through comprehensive approaches to teacher education, professional development, and supportive institutional contexts represents a crucial strategy for enhancing student moral development. By investing in the ethical dimensions of teaching, educational systems can more effectively fulfill their dual responsibility for academic learning and moral formation.

This study contributes to moral education scholarship by providing quantitative evidence linking teacher ethics to student moral values, validating theoretical frameworks through empirical investigation, and offering practical guidance for educational improvement. Future research should build upon these findings to develop and evaluate interventions that strengthen the moral dimensions of educational practice for the benefit of both teachers and students.

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