Qualitative Exploration of Perception and Knowledge of Trainee Teachers about Professional Ethics

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Teachers play an influential role in the lives of students from childhood. Teachers, while playing a central role in developing the student, also act as role models or figure heads in classrooms. The present study is focused on exploring the perceptions and knowledge of trainee teachers about professional ethics. To achieve the objective, a qualitative exploration was adapted from trainee teachers enrolled in teacher education programs of the University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan. Interview protocol was designed and validated using expert opinion and literature review. A total of 43 trainee teachers enrolled in undergraduate programs of teacher education took part in the study. The analysis procedure involved thematic analysis. It was found that, in the view of trainee teachers, the main purpose of the professional teacher education program is to develop professionally sound and ethical teachers. The data also reflected the awareness of trainee teachers regarding professional duties and roles. It was found that the majority of trainee teachers know professional ethics and they focus on certain ethical principles more than the others. The study recommends the design and delivery of a professional ethics course module for the teacher training programs.

Keywords: *Profession, Professional ethics, Trainee, Teacher education, Ethics*

Introduction

Teaching is known for transferring the information, knowledge and skills to the students in classrooms. Besides this, teachers are also known to influence the lives of their students by acting as their role models. Teaching is regarded as the noblest professions of all; hence, teachers lay the foundations for their students' lives. In recent years, globalisation and the technology revolution has resulted in diverse changes in our educational system (Shahzadi & Hussain, 2019). The aims and objectives at all levels of education are changing in response to technological change, evolution, and revolution. It is also noted that change may happen according to the need, interests and requirements of the learners, society, and nation as a whole (Lei & Solcum, 2005). Simultaneously, it is noted that like many other fields, the concept of teacher and teaching is changing day by day. A teacher is supposed to perform many tasks and duties in this contemporary era. It is a requirement that apart from professional qualifications, they should also possess knowledge of professional ethics (Warnick & Silverman, 2011).

Professional ethics enables the teacher to provide quality education and inculcate good values among the learners by acting like a guidebook(Soltis, 1986). It is noted that the professional ethics used to enlighten teachers enables them to play a major role in bringing desirable changes in the attitude of learners. It also helps the teachers to develop an understanding of their teaching profession and its requirements. It helps them develop as a supervisor and guide of their students as well as of their peers. Teachers support their students with love, care, affection, and commitment, which is made clear through their knowledge of professional ethics(Karma 2018).

Thus, a principle that aims to support professionals and allows them to conduct work with dedication, commitment, and integrity, is known as a professional code of conduct (Kidesu,2018). It is assumed that a professional will follow the professional principles and perform their responsibilities according to professional needs (Imani,Forman & Amir,2018). Conducive atmosphere in the workplace is sure when professionals will follow the professional code of conduct. For the purpose, it is therefore noted that professional knowledge and skills should be acquired by every professional. It is also noted that to fulfil the aims and objectives of the organisation, the professionals working there should follow the professional code of conduct (Bartlett, 2019).

In an educational institute, the professional code of ethics is purposely planned and designed to protect the rights of the students and of the teachers themselves. Under the influence of globalisation and the technological revolution, the need to understand work ethics and values is becoming more crucial for teachers (Wischer, 2020). It is stated that to meet the present challenges, teachers should be active and encourage their students to self-regulate and be an active learner (Kelly, Greeny, Rosenberg &Schwartz, 2020). It is important to mention that to understand the individual differences of learners is the prime duty of teachers. Therefore, the

professional code of ethics plays a critical role in developing professionally sound teachers(Maxwel,2017).

Review of Related Literature

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) is the highest-level organisation on higher education in Pakistan. It is the regulatory body for higher educational institutes (HEIs). HEC guides and supervises higher education to produce leaders of society and economy in all areas with a commitment to the ideology of the country. The primarily laws of ethics are related to morality, conduct and behaviour in maintaining a congenial environment to ensure productivity in the higher education sector. Administrative, academic, technical, and supporting staff are the main human resources of higher education and manage the achievement of the objectives of higher education(Das & Kaur, 2014).

Though it is noted that institutes vary in practicing the professional ethics across geographical borders of nations and demographical boundaries of the societies. These are the individual and societal norms that framed ethics in general and professional ethics in particular(Naaz,2017). Nonetheless, constant, and absolute are the societal and individual norms and among this a wide disparity is noticed. Literature has also highlighted that individual norms can dominate societal norms and vice versa (Kar,2018; Kafi, Motallebzadeh & Ashraf, 2018).

Since a sub-system of the societal system is education, it is noted that formal and non-formal educational institutions are guided by individual, social and cultural ethics. Professional growth is a cause of professional ethics as reported by authors and is rewarded with non-monetary and financial incentives(Burakgazi & Can, 2018) It is well documented that people reach the zone of proximal development after a certain age of their life, while professional ethics are recognised and acknowledged in higher education institutions on the basis of their value pattern(Decker, Wolf & Belcher, 2021). Academics in higher education institutions are being promoted to higher posts because of commendable ethical considerations, and are often rewarded by higher management. Professional ethics help in creating cohesive and positive interactions to increase individual benefits and collectively participate in the institutional growth by individual employees(Thompson, 2020).

It is evident that value patterns often contribute in understanding professional ethics and this is the reason that higher educational institutes at times inculcate these value patterns (Durkheim, 2013). The value patterns have roots in the theoretical, moral, economic, political, religious, and aesthetic aspects of the society (Durkheim, 2013). Therefore, the personality of an individual or professional can be shaped by professional ethics to a significant extent, ensuring optimal individual and institutional development(Daniel & Sapo, 2020).

For a long time, professional ethics has been one of the major concerns for organisations, academic discussions, and research publications. With every passing year, higher educational institutions are increasingly conscious of developing professional standards, the code of conduct and presenting a positive image. Therefore, it is also an important standard to be considered for ranking higher educational institutions (Cronqvist, 2020; Saat et al., 2010). The Teacher Education department and programs are concerned with developing prospective teachers. Professional training institutes need to consider the perception and knowledge of trainee teachers regarding professional ethics. This may raise awareness regarding whether trainee teachers are prepared to take on ethical challenges in the workplace.

Methods and Materials

The study was qualitative in nature with the aim of exploring the perception and knowledge of undergraduates about professional ethics. For achieving the objectives of the research, a sample of 43 students was selected from three semesters and two undergraduate programs in the teacher education department of the University of Sargodha, Pakistan. To collect the data from undergraduates an interview protocol was developed. Interviews were conducted using WhatsApp. Interviews were recorded; transcribed and coded. The transcription was carried out after listening and re-listening to the audio. Thematic analysis was performed using Nvivo 11 pro.

Results

The findings of the study reflect that the code of conduct identified by each respondent in the study represented their view of professional ethics. It was found during analysis that there are certain professional ethics that are known as universal professional ethics as identified by the literature. The interpretation of the data by reading and re-reading the coded transcripts identified the existence of four potential themes in the transcripts. These include: Respect for people, procedure and products, Responsible Conduct, Integrity and Responsibility. Under these potential themes, themes and subthemes were identified. Table 1 presents the potential themes, themes and subthemes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data.

Table 1: *Potential Themes, Themes and Subthemes*

	Potential Themes	Themes	Subthemes
1	Respect for People, Procedures and Products	• Personal integrity • Be non-judgmental • Be a reference	• Privacy, confidentiality • Race, gender, age, nationality
2	Responsible Conduct	• Developing mastery and expertise • Assess your strength and weakness • Adopt and adapt • Awareness • Seek supervision	• Limiting practice to the field • Acquire proper knowledge and skills • Train and develop yourself • Should know new practices or research • Seek guidance and supervision of some expert
3	Integrity	• Focus on exhibiting and managing integrity	• Work for acceptance and mutual respect • Exercise sound judgment • Be honest, committed and loyalty
4	Responsibility	• Responsible for self-actions • Responsible social actions	• Align your interest with organisational interest • Disperse information • Protecting the trust of the public in your profession • Loyalty to national, organisational, and individual interests

Respect for People, Procedure and Product

The data analysis revealed that respect for people, procedures and products at school is the first potential theme for professional ethics. The coded transcripts revealed that this theme carried three sub themes i.e., personal integrity, be non-judgmental and be a reference. Subthemes were, privacy, ensuring confidentiality when information is shared, managed, and asked, and being non-judgmental in regard to nationality, race, gender, and age, when in classrooms. Similarly, it was also found that referring to some expert and more capable person for guidance and counselling is also a part of professional ethics.

In one of the transcripts, one trainee teacher responded, "*ummmm I think teacher should not take care of the gender and ummmm the age of the student that whether he or she is old or young and S/He should not be fended with students from same geographical location or same ethnicity or race*" (TT, 21).

Similarly, another of the trainee teachers said, "*I always feel teachers make it their ego problem that not to say no to anything that they are not known to. While on the other hand*

there are very few teachers who seek help of their peers in making students understand the complicated concepts and make referrals"(TT,04).

Responsible Conduct

This potential theme identified from the data collected entailed themes including, developing mastery and expertise, assessing your strength and weakness, Adopting, and adapting knowledge, Attitude and skills, Awareness and seeking supervision. Sub themes identified under these themes were limiting practice to the field of knowledge and expertise, acquiring proper knowledge and skills to upgrade and update ones' own knowledge, Attitude and skills, Train and develop yourself, should know new practices or research, and Seeking guidance and supervision of some expert that may be a peer.

For example, one trainee teacher reported that "*being professionally ethical practitioner teacher should act responsible and be a responsible partner in school planning and processes for this teacher must have knowledge about his or her strengths and weaknesses. S/he should not feel shy to ask help when and where professionally required"(TT,34).*

Similarly, one trainee teacher also focused on the development of self, stating that "*if school provide professional development opportunity one should not hesitate to develop self and his or her surroundings. Professional act is the main responsibility of the individual when one [had] has*" (TT-41).

Likewise, another responded that "*it is needed to develop an in-depth and insight in a field and to develop expertise one has to dedicate himself or herself to the field of interest and not beyond that. I must add here that ummmm he/she being ethically professional should be the master of one rather trying to have multi-focusing personality*" (TT 07).

Integrity

The data analysis also showed that integrity is a potential theme when professional ethics in teacher education is explored. The themes and subthemes were: Focus on exhibiting and managing integrity, work for acceptance and mutual respect, exercise sound judgment and be honest, committed and loyal respectively.

One of the trainee teachers stated that "*being ethically bound professional teacher should have skills and attitude to display and manage integrity while involved in teaching and learning practices in classrooms"(TT 01).*

Another trainee teacher similarly maintained that "*professionalism is known for integrity both in attitude and display of knowledge, understanding and skills. This is a must for every*

teacher but teachers whom we know as professional teachers should have more of it and they should judge people with accuracy and no flaw" (TT 17).

Likewise, one more trainee teacher described that "*professionalism is to be professional and ethics in professionalism is to be honest, committed and loyal with the students and school at large*" (TT 11).

Responsible

Data analysis of the present research revealed that professional ethics, one of the potential themes, is being responsible. Data revealed that it entails themes including being Responsible for self-actions and being Responsible for social actions. Subthemes of these themes were Align your interest with organisational interest, Responsibility to disperse information, Protecting the trust of the public in your profession, and loyalty to national, organisational and individual interest.

One trainee teacher responded that "*being responsible does not mean that you are responsible for your actions being responsible means take care of the organisation as well and responsibility is a social action and here social means schools*" (TT, 6).

One respondent reported, "*you cannot be ethical if your interests are at 180 degree to the organisational interests. It is moral obligation to consider the interest of the organisations and be loyal to the institute where you are working*"(TT, 14).

Discussion

The present study aimed at exploring the perception and knowledge of trainee teachers about professional ethics. The study found that the salient theme for professional ethics, as reported by trainee teachers, is responsibility and responsible conduct. The findings are in line with the research conducted by Bowen, Pearl & Akintoye (2007), who found that professionals have responsibilities to their clients, and they must meet them. It was concluded that trainee teachers perceive that teachers are professionally ethical if they possesses the necessary knowledge, attitude and skills, and are able to focus on the training and development of their own knowledge, attitude and skills. Similar findings are reported by Campbell(2000), who found that teachers should work to update their knowledge and skills as part of their professional obligation. The study found that integrity is also responsible for the ethical professional practice of teachers. This finding of the present study is in accordance with a study conducted by Airaksinen in 2012, who quoted that integrity makes teachers true professionals. Based upon the findings, the study concluded that the perception and knowledge of trainee teachers about professional ethics is almost the same as it is in other studies. There is only a difference in perceiving and knowing responsibility as a social action. This may be due to a lack of awareness to the profession's social obligations. The study

recommends that during professional training of the trainee teachers, modules and course materials may be prepared that focus on communicating professional ethics in the context of a professional code of conduct.

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