Article

# A Multinational Study of Teachers' Codes of Ethics: Attitudes of Educational Leaders

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#### **Abstract**

The study aimed to elicit a universally accepted meaning of "ethical practice in school" from teachers' codes of ethics formulated by educational leaders including school principals, the nation's government, and teachers' union representatives. Analysis was based on a random sample of 30 codes of ethics in various countries using a qualitative methodology. The findings generated a multidimensional model. School principals' access to this model may advance making decisions that foster an ethical school environment worldwide.

## **Keywords**

code of ethics, educational leaders, ethics, school practice, school principals

Ethics plays an intrinsic role in educational practice around the world (Crawford, 2017). Therefore, studies have investigated the topic of ethics in school practice (e.g., McGlothlin & Miller, 2008; Yu & Durrington, 2006), including ethical practices that are typical of a particular country (Melé & Sánchez-Runde, 2013; Rausch et al., 2014) and those that are common across countries (Donnelly, 2013). Examining shared ethical attitudes in different countries is important since awareness of these attitudes may clarify the ethical role that is expected around the world from school principals and their teachers. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore different countries' codes of ethics for teachers and to ascertain their shared ethical aspects.

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# **Ethics From the Cultural Perspective**

Ethics evoke decisions and actions compatible with what we believe is right (Ryan, 2016). Previous studies focused on two prevalent attitudes: one sheds light on ethical principles that are drawn from a country's culture (e.g., Melé & Sánchez-Runde, 2013), while the other focuses on ethical principles that are common across countries (Donnelly, 2013). The approach that focuses on ethical attitudes that are *unique to a country* maintains that national culture has an influence on ethical attitudes and behaviors (Minkov & Hofstede, 2011). House et al. (2004) define national culture as shared experiences that form common values and policies in a society and lead to a unique way of perceiving the world. The attitude that focuses *on communal ethical perceptions* and behaviors in different countries derives from the claim of universal culture. For example, Donnelly (2013) claimed that universal values, such as social justice, are essential for collective survival.

In education, both attitudes are represented. There are, for example, studies that explore ethical practices in the context of cultural diversity (Banks, 2015) and others that investigate the similarity between countries regarding, for example, human rights in education (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014).

# **Teachers' Codes of Ethics**

A code of ethics is a written document drafted by a professional body with the goal of guiding practitioners, protecting clients, and preserving the reputation of the profession (Bullough, 2011). Codes of ethics comprise the ethical standards related to organizations (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) and are generally created on the basis of a collaboration between practitioners and scholars (Poisson, 2009).

In schools, the aim of a teachers' code of ethics is to set guidelines for ethical standards of professional conduct (Schwimmer & Maxwell, 2017). Thus, the codes may protect teachers from misconduct and, as a result, may enhance public trust in the teaching profession (Poisson, 2009).

In most countries, teachers' codes of ethics were developed collaboratively by educational leaders such as school principals, superintendents, government representatives, and teachers' union representatives (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016; Poisson, 2009). Therefore, we presume that these codes reflect the ethical values of the educational leaders who drafted them and can reflect common ethical aspects of school practice across different countries.

# **Method**

# Data Collecting

The sample size was based on prior samplings done within similar qualitative comparative studies in education (e.g., Mertens, 2014; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). It included codes from 30 countries representing all five continents. We look for their respective codes of ethics on teachers' union websites, Ministry of Education

websites, in the UNESCO collections, and by directly contacting scholars who have written about ethics in education. For non-English-speaking countries, we had their codes of ethics translated to English by professional translators. Each translation was then validated by experts in the field of education from the respective countries.

# Data Analysis

The data analysis, which was managed by four readers (the author and three research assistants), was based on qualitative thematic analysis (Brooks et al., 2015). First, each reader perused the documents to obtain a general idea as to whether the concept "ethical practice in school" could be extracted from the codes. Second, we analyzed the codes of ethics by means of a three-step process (Coward et al., 2015; Lomas, 2016; Ruppel & Mey, 2015) as outlined below and illustrated in Figure 1.

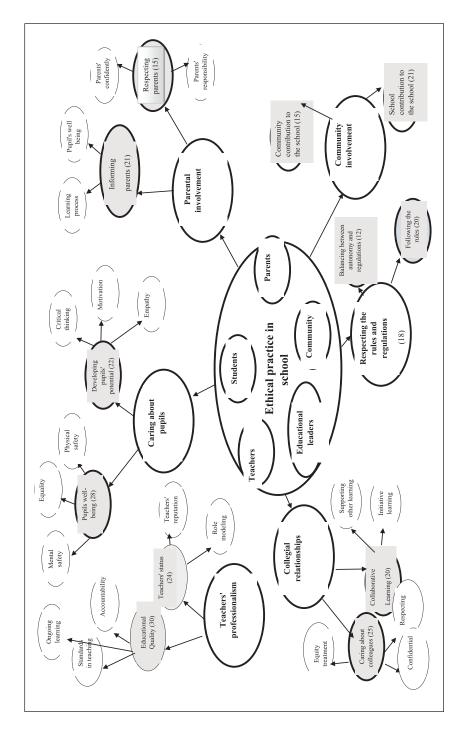
*Open Coding.* A process of breaking down the data into separate units of meaning by the readers. For example, the subcategory "commitment to ongoing professional learning" was based on several phrases in different codes of ethics such as, "We acknowledge teaching as a professional vocation that requires continuous education" (Korea) or, "Ongoing professional learning is integral to effective practice and to pupil learning" (Canada).

Axial Coding. Each section of each country's code of ethics was considered as a subcategory, which was then placed along the axis of a category. For example, the subcategory of "pupil's mental safety" was placed on the axis of the "pupil well-being" category, while the subcategory of "respecting colleagues' opinions" was placed on the axis of the "caring about colleagues" category.

Selective Coding. We reduced the number of categories and grouped them together into larger, more inclusive categories, called primary categories. As a result, we ended up with six primary categories which we named as follows: "caring about pupils," "teachers' professionalism," "collegial relationships," "parental involvement," "community involvement," and "respecting the rules and regulations." These six categories elicited a core category which we called "ethical practice in school," which represents a variety of interactions among educational leaders, teachers, pupils, parents, and the community.

We found 20 subcategories that were linked to 12 main categories by corresponding meaning. These main categories were then matched to the six primary categories in the same manner (Figure 1). For example, the "collaborative learning" and "caring about colleagues" categories were found to be linked to the primary category "collegial relationships," while the "community contribution to the school" and "school contribution to the community" categories were found to be linked to the primary category "community involvement." From all of the primary categories together we elicited the concept "ethical practice in school."

The data were examined using the ATLAS.ti 5.0 software package that organizes themes (Paulus et al., 2017). We conducted a cross-checking procedure of independently coded data (Elo et al., 2014) and held meetings to discuss the findings.



**Figure 1.** The multidimensional model of "ethical practice in school." Note. Ellipse = subcategory; grey ellipse = main category; bold ellipse = primary category.

# **Findings**

We found six primary categories: "caring about pupils," "teachers' professionalism," "collegial relationships," "parental involvement," "community involvement," and "respecting the rules and regulations." These are detailed below.

# Caring About Pupils

The primary category "caring about pupils" elicited two main categories: the dominant category was "pupils' well-being" (28 cases), while the secondary category was "developing pupils" potential' (22 cases).

Dominant Category: Pupils' Well-Being. This category signified aspects of equality, diversity, and discrimination and also represented aspects of trust and physical safety (e.g., creating a safe learning environment). Below are three examples:

#### Ireland

[Teachers should] be caring, fair and committed to the best interests of the pupils entrusted to their care, and seek to motivate, inspire and celebrate effort and success. (The Teaching Council, 2016)

#### Israel

Teachers should maintain confidentiality and privacy in order to ensure the welfare and safety of all pupils. (The Council for Promoting Teaching and Education, 1995)

#### Australia

Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments. (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011)

Secondary Category: Developing Pupils' Potential. The sections in this category represented findings relating to commitment to lifelong learning and learning processes. Below are three examples:

#### Canada

Members express their commitment to pupils' well-being and learning by exerting positive influence, exercising professional judgment and showing empathy in practice. (Ontario College of Teachers, 1996)

#### New Zealand

We strive to meet the needs of every learner by providing them with the support they need to reach their full potential. (Education Council New Zealand, 2017)

#### Malta

We create learning experiences that motivate and challenge pupils in an inclusive environment with a commitment for lifelong learning. (The Council for the Teaching Profession in Malta, 2012)

# Teachers' Professionalism

This second primary category generated two main categories: the dominant category was "educational quality" (30 cases), while the secondary category was "promoting and maintaining teachers" status' (24 cases).

Dominant Category: Educational Quality. The category "educational quality" signified the aspects of meeting standards and qualifications and being accountable and committed to ongoing professional development. Below are three examples:

#### USA

The teacher shall not apply for a professional position while deliberately making a false statement or failing to disclose pertinent information relating to competency and qualifications. (National Education Association, 1975)

#### Russia

Teachers should be dedicated, have a sense of accountability, do high quality work, be a role model. (The Council of the OS, 2002)

## Singapore

Member institutions agree to ensure that employed teachers have the appropriate qualifications and experience that at worst meet the minimum standard. (Singapore Association for Private Education, 2013)

Secondary Category: Advancing and Maintaining Teachers' Status. This category of "advancing and maintaining teachers' status" represented the categories of upgrading the reputation of the teaching profession, which included teachers' professional work at school and their responsibility to act as role models beyond the confines of the school. Below are two examples.

#### Slovenia

The teacher strives to maintain the reputation of his profession by ensuring that his work meets professional standards and responsibilities. (The Association of Catholic Pedagogues of Slovenia, 1997)

#### China

I agree to be a positive role model for pupils by: Abstaining completely from alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs; Avoiding vulgar, profane and any other form of unclean language; Following the China Horizons dress and grooming standards. (China Horizons, 2016)

# Collegial Relationships

This primary category elicited two central categories: the dominant category was "caring about colleagues" (25 cases), while the secondary one was "collaborative learning" (20 cases).

Dominant Category: Caring for Colleagues. "Caring for colleagues" demonstrated that schools not only encourage caring about pupils but also encourage teachers to care about other teachers. Teachers are expected to treat their colleagues fairly and equitably, respect their privacy, and avoid any form of humiliation. Below are two examples:

#### USA

The professional teacher, in exemplifying ethical relations with colleagues, gives just and equitable treatment to all members of the profession; The professional teacher does not reveal confidential information about colleagues unless required by law. (Association of American Teachers, 1994)

#### South Africa

A teacher must avoid any form of humiliation and refrain from any form of abuse (physical, sexual, or otherwise) towards colleagues. (South Africa Council for Education, 2000)

Secondary Category: Colleagues' Collaborative Learning. This category focuses on teachers supporting one another in dealing with pupils' diversity, be it socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, or religious. Collaborative learning may take place in different forums while each participant benefits from the process. Below are two examples:

#### Australia

"[Teachers are expected] to support colleagues to develop effective teaching strategies that address the learning strengths and needs of pupils from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds"; "Initiate and engage in professional discussions with colleagues in a range of forums to evaluate and improve professional knowledge and practice, and pupil achievements." (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011)

#### England

Registered teachers reflect on their practice and use feedback from colleagues to help them recognize their own development needs. (General Teaching Council for England, 2009)

## Parental Involvement

This primary category elicited two main categories: the dominant category was "informing parents about pupils' learning and well-being" (21 cases) and the secondary category was "respecting parents" (15 cases).

Dominant Category: Informing Parents. The number of statements related to informing parents about their child's well-being as opposed to those statements related to their child's formal learning and knowledge demonstrates that, according to the codes of ethics, the teachers' most important role is to inform parents about their child's well-being. Below are two examples:

#### Malaysia

Teachers should establish cordial relationships and cooperation between the school and pupils' parents, to inform parents about matters that concern the pupils' welfare. (Ministry of Education in Malaysia, 2014)

#### Italy

A fundamental duty of the teachers' work is to promote formal and informal communication as part of a cooperative atmosphere and trust with families. The teacher must explicitly articulate the teaching goals, be attentive to problems posed by parents. (CCNL, 1999)

Secondary Category: Respecting Parents. This category encourages teachers to respect the wishes and culture of the pupils' parents. Below are two examples:

## Malaysia

"Teachers should treat all information supplied by parents as confidential"; "Teachers should avoid using parents' social and economic status for personal gain"; "Teachers should avoid using inappropriate remarks that may affect pupils' confidence in their parents or guardians." (Ministry of Education in Malaysia, 2014)

## Hungary

The teacher's relationship with parents is based on mutual respect, trust and appreciation. (National Education Committee, 2015)

# Community Involvement

This primary category elicited two main categories: the dominant category was "school contribution to the community" (21 cases) and the secondary category was "community contribution to the school" (15 cases). This primary "community involvement" category was bidirectional and outlined how a school can contribute to the community and how the community can contribute to the school. Below are two examples for each direction:

## School Contribution to the Community

#### Hungary

Teachers should work with a more effective and efficient service to public education, with children, pupils, colleagues, parents, advocacy and professional organizations. (National Education Committee, 2015)

## Japan

It is a task given to teachers to advocate peace, promote independence of ethnic groups, and create a democratic society that adheres to the constitution. (Japan Teachers Union, 1972)

# Community Contribution to the School

## England

[The community is] responsible for maintaining its reputation and building trust and confidence in it. (General Teaching Council for England, 2009)

## Hungary

The obligation of the Hungarian community is to encourage our professional knowledge regarding decisions, declarations and actions. (National Education Committee, 2015)

# Respecting Rules and Regulations

This primary category yielded two main categories: the dominant category was "following the rules" (20 cases) and the secondary category was "balancing between autonomy and Regulations" (12 cases).

Dominant Category: Following the Rules. The "Following the Rules" category elicited that while most countries explain the rationale behind the importance of obeying the law (e.g., Ireland: to promote pupils' education, welfare, and protection), some countries do not do so (e.g., United Arab Emirates). Below are these examples:

#### Ireland

Teachers should comply with agreed national and school policies, procedures and guidelines that aim to promote pupil education and welfare and child protection. (The Teaching Council, 2016)

#### United Arab Emirates

Teachers will abide by government laws and regulations at all times and will be obligated to report violations of these laws to appropriate authorities. (The Abu Dhabi Education Council, 2009)

Secondary Category: Balancing Between Autonomy and Regulations. The category of "balancing between autonomy and administrative regulations" shows that teachers are expected to exercise ethical judgments within the framework of school regulations. Below are two examples:

## Norway

All teachers and leaders of pedagogical institutions should be loyal to the goals and regulations as long as they are not in conflict with our professional ethics. (Union of Education, 2002)

**USA** 

The professional teacher complies with the written local school policies and applicable laws and regulations that are not in conflict with this code of ethics. (Association of American Teachers, 1994)

# **Discussion**

The main goal of this study was to examine the meaning of "ethical practice in school" based on cross-national attitudes reflected in codes of ethics that were developed by educational leaders such as school principals, district superintendents, government, and teachers' union representatives. We assume that these codes express ethical aspects of school practice because they were developed by educational leaders who were generated from the educational field. The challenge arose when we attempted to define a universal multinational definition of "ethical practice in school," because we were aware that codes of ethics are based on the country's culture, its policies, and the people involved (Sapira-Lishchinsky, 2013). However, we were also aware that by discovering common characteristics of ethics in school practice anchored in universal values, we may be able to offer school principals and teachers rules of ethical conduct by which they can inform and advance their professional decisions and actions (Terry, 2011; Tullberg, 2015).

The findings of the present study have generated a multidimensional model which provides deeper insights into ethical practice in school from the perspective of educational leaders. The multidimensional model for ethical practice in school yielded six dimensions (primary categories) that appear in almost every code of ethics that we reviewed: "caring about pupils," "teachers' professionalism," "collegial relationships," "parental involvement," "community involvement," and "respecting the rules and regulations."

The first primary category, "caring about pupils," focuses mainly on caring about pupils' well-being before caring about their learning and achievements. The focus on fairness, respecting others, and confidentiality, exemplify the real ethical challenges in today's educational system and reflect the expectation that the school principal's role extends beyond the demand that teachers simply impart academic knowledge.

The second primary category, "teachers' professionalism," demonstrates that school principals should expect teachers to maintain high standards by participating in ongoing professional development and serving as role models both inside and outside the school.

The third primary category, "teachers' collegial relationships," focuses on promoting colleagues' collaborative learning. This dimension also includes ethical aspects of "caring about colleagues" such as school principals' fair and just treatment of their teachers and respecting the discretion and privacy of colleagues. The existence of this dimension in the codes of ethics of many countries may indicate a shared belief that an effective learning environment is dependent not only on healthy relationships between teachers and pupils but among teachers as well.

The fourth primary category, "parental involvement," stresses the importance of informing parents about their children's academic status and their well-being as well as maintaining confidentiality and recognizing parental authority and responsibility toward their children. It is important that the codes of ethics yielded in this dimension, as in previous studies (Epstein et al., 2011; Lawson, 2003) illustrate that although school principals perceive parents as important participants in developing and empowering their children, in practice, teachers are reluctant to solicit parental involvement since they fear parental intervention and perhaps, the extreme parental interference.

The fifth primary category, "community involvement," which was found to be bidirectional, includes both the school's contribution to the community and the community's contribution to the school. The school's contribution to the community is characterized by school principals who promote activities toward creating a democratic community and preparing pupils to work in that community. The community's contribution to the school is expressed by promoting an equal opportunity through school programs that are supported by the community, offering professional help in school principals' decision making and actions, and helping school principals foster their community's confidence in the educational system.

This primary category demonstrates that schools that promote ethical practices are "open educational systems," whereby information flows from the school to the community and from the community to the school.

The sixth primary category, "respecting the rules and regulations," shows that while school regulations may protect the rights of pupils and teachers, a balance should be struck between teachers' conscience and their obligation to obey the rules.

In all six primary dimensions that were found in the codes of ethics, insofar as they relate to ethics in school practice, teachers were expected to be actively involved. This includes promoting pupils' well-being, encouraging ongoing professional development programs to maintain high pedagogical standards, collaborative learning with colleagues, encouraging parental involvement, and using judgment to strike a balance between autonomy and compliance to the rules.

In summary, the study offers a broad perspective of a shared ethical practice in school across 30 countries by means of exploring the codes of ethics of those countries, a novel approach that has not been used before. The findings support the existence of universal ethics, as the codes of ethics that we examined reflect shared ethical beliefs of educational leaders in the participating countries. The findings of this study, which elicited shared ethical meanings regarding teachers' relationship with colleagues, pupils, parents, community, and rules and regulations, may help in formulating universal standards with respect to ethical school practice.

# Conclusions, Implications, Future Studies, and Limitations

This study proposes a multidimensional model for understanding the meaning of ethical practice in school, based on educational leaders' perspectives. The findings suggest that six primary dimensions are relevant in describing ethical practice in school.

Understanding this concept deeply may reduce, and eventually eradicate, school principals' and teachers' unethical behavior. School principals' awareness of these ethical aspects may advance their strategic planning and decision making toward promoting an ethical environment in schools which, in turn, may increase teachers' ethical behavior and pupils' scholastic achievements.

Moreover, the study's findings, which generated shared categories that characterize ethics in school practices across a variety of countries with diverse national cultures, justified our universal approach. Future studies could further investigate our proposed multidimensional model of ethical practice in school by comparing the cultures and contexts of additional countries. In addition, by planning educational policies and training programs that focus on the dimensions explored in this study, school principals will be able to promote an ethical environment in their schools. As a result, teachers will be more aware of their school's expectations regarding ethical behavior, and the feedback school principals provide after implementing the educational policies will enable a further refinement of the existing codes of ethics.

This study has several limitations. First, the range of dates of the codes of ethics is broad. Based on the great variety of factors that may motivate policy makers to develop or update their codes of ethic, which may, in turn, affect the statements in the codes, future studies might focus on interviews of diverse educational leaders who were involved in developing codes of ethics for teachers, to find out what caused them to use their country's existing code of ethics or what caused them to update it, and in addition, to explain and broaden the findings elicited in this study.

Second, this study focused on a variety of codes of ethics (e.g., national, provincial, governmental, of religious bodies and others), which provide a broad perspective for this study. Future studies might investigate the similarities and differences between codes of ethics from different sectors.

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# **Author Biography**

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