

# ETHICAL TEACHERS' LEADERSHIP COMPETENCE IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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## Abstract

This paper explores the essential role of ethical competence in enhancing teachers' effectiveness in inclusive education settings. It emphasizes that teachers must develop a multifaceted set of competencies that not only encompass knowledge and skills but also the ability to navigate complex emotional and behavioral dynamics of diverse learners. The study highlights the significance of ethical leadership, which empowers teachers to reflect on their professional practices and foster collaborative, inclusive school cultures. It identifies key competencies necessary for teachers to successfully implement inclusive education, such as individualized instruction, classroom management, and effective communication with students, parents, and colleagues. Furthermore, the paper underscores the need for continuous professional development in ethical decision-making and the cultivation of a supportive learning environment. Ultimately, it posits that ethical competence is foundational for teachers to fulfill their responsibilities in promoting equitable educational opportunities for all students, thereby contributing to their social and emotional development. The findings advocate for a systemic approach to teacher training that integrates ethical considerations into pedagogical practices, ensuring that teachers serve as moral models and leaders within their educational communities.

**Keywords:** Teacher competence, inclusive education, ethical leadership.

## Introduction

Teachers develop skills that enhance personal satisfaction and effectiveness, but also knowledge and skills that encourage student self-esteem. Complexity of teacher work demands competences for every day dealing with student learning, emotional and behavioral characteristics (Bukvić, 2014). Ethical competence enables teachers to reflect on professional practices and pedagogical relationships. It renders professional autonomy possible, as well as a genuine approach to freedom (Ghiațău, 2019).

Inclusion assumes that all children are a part of the regular school system from the very beginning of school (Kusuma & Remadevi, 2013). The collaborative nature of inclusive school cultures has clear implications for the nature of leadership and decision making. Furthermore, it leads us to conclude that strong school leaders, committed to inclusive values, are crucial to promoting and supporting collaboration (National College for School Leadership, 2003). However, teachers are not adequately trained and lack competencies to practice inclusive education across the globe. There are relevant competencies required by teachers to practice inclusive education (Rajendran et al., 2020).

Based on all of the above, it is particularly interesting to make an effort to connect the ethical leadership skills of teachers to inclusive education, so that modern teachers, through appropriate training, can be able to provide the best possible educational work for the benefit of all students.

## Ethical Teacher Competence

A competency is more than just knowledge and skills; it involves the ability to meet complex demands by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. Competency is essential to an educator's pursuit of

excellence. Teachers need a wide range of competencies in order to face the complex challenges of today's world. Teaching competency is an inherent element of an effective training process, one that aspires to contribute to the welfare of a particular country or the world itself (Nessipbayeva, 2012). The concept of teachers' competencies is mostly discussed in very narrow dimensions such as teachers' planning, implementation, assessment of the curriculum, standards for the curriculum or the school. These are related to teachers' teaching duties in the school. In this respect, teachers' competencies need to be discussed in many dimensions such as field competencies, research competencies, curriculum competencies, lifelong learning competencies, social-cultural competencies, emotional competencies, communication competencies, information and communication technologies competencies and environmental competencies in order to develop teachers (Selvi, 2010).

Ethical competence can be understood as the psychological skill that supports teachers to find morally adequate solutions to daily professional problems. Given the major impact of the teaching profession on children's lives, the research on the educators' ethical competence is necessary and undoubtedly connected to the professional component. Ethical competence is not just a simple professional skill, but rather a fundamental and constitutive element for the teaching role (Ghiațău, 2019). Ethical competence is defined as that shown by morally mature people when they manifest a combination of knowledge, procedures and attitudes in a range of situations, taking ethical factors into account and thereby giving their professional practice a social and moral meaning that goes beyond the merely instrumental. Thus, ethical competence aspires to a constructive, dialogical approach in which subjects, as actors, are the protagonists of their own ethical learning in the cognitive, affective, volitional and behavioral

spheres, at the same time being nourished by experiences and relationships making up the foundations of their learning (Tey-Teijón, Llanes-Ordóñez & Martínez-Rodríguez, 2023).

The quality of teaching competence plays an important role in the creation and establishment of the quality of the learning process for students, and also shows the level of professionalism of teachers according to their field and can contribute in improving learning performance (Hakim, 2015). There is a close connection between ethical competence and professional freedom. Ethical competence enables teachers to freely and autonomously relate to their tasks. It does not mean obedience to institutional rules, superficial adaptation or circumventing the rules, but freely reflecting on the space of professional freedom (Ghiațau, 2019).

Building and exercising moral competence requires experience accumulated over time as well as the formation of the teacher's character. The teacher's response to critical events depends on the relationship with parents, students, and colleagues (Nayak, Padhi & Lonkar, 2024). Ethical competence is not limited to the relational aspects of the teacher's work, but also relates to the whole set of a teacher's professional responsibilities: curricular design, lesson achievement, selection of teaching, and evaluation methods. Building and exercising moral competence also demands experience accumulated over time, as well as construction of the teacher's character. The teacher's response to critical incidents depends on the relationships with parents, students, and colleagues. It implies courage, communication, empathy, honesty, and balance (Ghiațau, 2019).

Ethical - Moral competence includes knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that support the teacher as a reflexive actor and moral model for students. Therefore, the teaching profession does not mean just the successful transmission of information from a sender to a group of recipients, but a constant intellectual and moral effort, a decision-making process and a struggle. The appropriate approach to moral competence for teachers should resort to both theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge; ethical skills for teachers include reference to the four main components of ethical behaviour which are receptivity, reasoning, motivation and implementation; although the essence of ethical values remains the same, regardless of the profession, their context in education adds some specific features, thus, enhancing knowledge in the field of professional judgement (Nayak, Padhi & Lonkar, 2024).

When we talk about the teachers' competency standards, we must take into account the feelings, reflections, interactions and ethical attitudes in education (Gulevska & Atanasoska, 2015). It is also clear that the teacher, through her/his practice, is a model in the students' eyes, shaping their path towards becoming good professionals; this means that tutors and mentors who take advantage of opportunities for building and reflecting on professional practice are the figures who contribute most inductively to the development of ethical competence. It is important to introduce the elements of this competence consciously and explicitly in order to promote the gradual,

in-depth development of a form of professional practice that encompasses ethics as a key element (Tey-Teijón, Llanes-Ordóñez & Martínez-Rodríguez, 2023). A teacher lacking ethical competence commits certain mistakes in relating to students, and the pedagogical relationship is the background of teaching. In this activity, the priority is not the technical, but the human aspect, that is, to show equal treatment, empathy (Ghiațau, 2019).

In fact, teachers are ethical professionals. As such, professional ethics should be reflected in the beliefs, values, and attitudes toward different learners in inclusive settings, as teachers engage in their practice. The misconceptions and beliefs related to gifted students and gifted education, provide useful starting points for reflection and discussion related to teaching practice and teacher responsibilities in order to support educators working in inclusive settings. The goal of inclusive education is to afford nondiscriminatory quality education for all, with the aim of providing equitable learning opportunities and experiences for students (Tirri & Laine, 2017).

Taking into consideration all the above, it is clearly understood that ethical competence is of much help for teachers to express professional practices and pedagogical relationships, embracing professional autonomy, as well as a genuine approach to freedom. The quality of teaching competence plays an important role in the creation and establishment of the quality of the learning process for students, so it is really important to examine the competences that teachers need for inclusive education in order to provide quality education for all students, providing at the same time equitable learning opportunities and experiences for them.

### **Teacher competence in Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education promotes that the right of every child to be educated in the regular school including the child with special needs. A child with special needs does not have to be segregated and enroll in special schools. Its needs can be served in a natural setting in the regular school. Consequently, the goal of every teacher in an inclusive classroom is to make learning meaningful for every learner in his/her class (Kusuma & Remadevi, 2013). Inclusive education could be a benefit for all participants, that is teachers, students and parents. When we talk about inclusive education, there is an important question about teacher competences as basic carrier of educational process (Bukvić, 2014).

Inclusive education can be achieved in the true sense by understanding the diversity of individual human being, recognizing that all students have strengths and potential, the significance of individualized instruction, ways of creatively addressing challenges, problem-solving skills and skills related to teamwork (Mehta & Panju, 2018). In the search to find an adequate answer to questions about the knowledge and skills that teachers should possess in order to answer the system tasks that already exist, the need for high competence and readiness for dealing with modern social requirements is emphasized, which on the one hand are reflected in the development of the school, and on the other, set requirements for ensuring social development

and progress. The analysis of teachers' competences is therefore essentially related to improving the quality of work in the direction of providing education tailored to each student (Popović, Đurđević Nikolić & Divac, 2020). According to Forlin & Sin (2010), collaboration is a key competency for teachers in inclusive education (Majoko, 2019: 4).

Given that the mentioned difficulties are of a systemic nature, under current conditions, teachers receive the greatest support in their work at the internal level – through working together with colleagues. As a significant resource for empowering competencies for inclusive education, teachers highlighted lessons on the specifics of work with children, but when faced with difficulties they do not expect this type of support from colleagues from special schools; they obtain help from colleagues who have had similar experiences in the regular educational system. The above statement can be interpreted as teachers' assumption that regular and special schools are two contexts with different working conditions, so pupils in special schools cannot be approached in the same way as children who require additional support in regular schools. In that sense, the ability to have a mentor to help them with their work with students is also recognized as a possible contribution to better achieving the goals of inclusive education. In addition, a significant resource for empowering teachers' competencies for inclusive education could be the formation of networks of teachers that would share positive experiences and be a significant support to each other (Popović, Đurđević Nikolić & Divac, 2020).

Competencies for inclusive teaching, such as instructional skills for individualized lessons, planning individualized assignments, managing classroom behaviors, cooperating with other staff and parents, which are part of the general organization and cooperation skills in the profession, are also part of the competencies that the teacher develops during professional development. In addition to the inclusive education policy, a systematic analysis of the teachers' own inclusive practice (experience) plays a key role in continuing teacher education, which can lead to the awareness of the teachers' subjective understanding and a gradual change in educational activities in the classroom, as well as in other fields of professional teacher activities (such as mentoring, exploring their own teaching, partnerships with external institutions, etc.). Teachers' readiness to participate in professional development is a statistically significant predictor that explains one-fifth of the competencies for inclusive teaching. Teachers who are willing to reflect on their practice will appropriately monitor requests for specific changes and will be more willing to respond to challenges in inclusive classrooms (Mihić, Tatalović Vorkapić & Čepić, 2022). It is a necessity on the teachers' part to improve the didactic style, to develop the pedagogical competencies and the teacher's managerial didactics. Continuous training programs come with a curricular offer able to contribute to these goals. The integration of the children with deficiencies into a class with normally development children is one of the greatest challenges a teacher has to face. His/Her preoccupation to personalize the teaching activity, to adapt it to the level and

possibilities of each student is emphasized in the case of the children with deficiencies. A teacher working in an inclusive class has to prove additional competencies compared to those who teach in an ordinary class (Mogonea & Popescu, 2018).

It is evident that inclusive education could be a benefit for all participants (teachers, students and parents). There are certain competencies for inclusive teaching which ought to part of the general organization and cooperation skills in the profession. They can be acquired by all teachers so as to be capable of attaining their personal professional development. Teachers should feel responsible to express their leadership qualities in classroom, a fact that it is highly essential for them to succeed in the whole effort made on their part.

### Teachers' ethical leadership

In order to meet the educational needs of every child, regardless of developmental specifics, the concept of inclusive education was introduced to the world about two decades ago. The competencies of teachers that are very important for the implementation of inclusive education are embedded in a group of competencies related to their professional roles, and are mostly described through a group of competencies for the development of a student's personality, communication and cooperation. The competencies of teachers for inclusive education are based on their belief that all student teachers can: learn, respect the students as individuals, respect the dignity of each student, and persist in helping each child achieve success in accordance with his/her potential. In addition, it is important to have knowledge in the field of specific characteristics of students, as well as developed methodological competencies for equality in approach to all students, irrespective of socio-emotional status, race, intellectual, or some other specificity. Additionally, student teachers need to know the importance of inclusion, especially for children with disabilities, in regular education, which promotes the reduction of discrimination and prejudice (Popović, Đurđević Nikolić & Divac, 2020).

Teachers are capable of leading in the classroom by evaluating student progress using a variety of assessment-data measuring goals, drawing on appropriate data to develop classroom and instructional plans, maintaining a safe and orderly classroom that facilitates student learning, and positive management of student behavior, effective communication to defuse and deescalate disruptive or dangerous behavior, and safe and appropriate seclusion and restraint techniques. Teachers demonstrate leadership in the school by: engaging in collaborative and collegial professional learning activities, identifying the characteristics or critical elements of a school improvement plan, and displaying an ability to use appropriate data to identify areas of need that should be addressed in a school improvement plan. Furthermore, teachers are able to lead the teaching profession by participating in professional development and growth activities, and developing professional relationships and networks. In addition, teachers advocate for schools and students by implementing and adhering to policies and practices positively affecting

students' learning. Finally, teachers demonstrate high ethical standards (Nessipbayeva, 2012).

Teachers must be guided by their own personal code of ethics not only to cover their professional behaviors but also their personal behaviors required for working institutions in creating a positive impact on students' attitude, perception and overall behavior towards the different socially formed units including family, friends and other associations. In academic context, a strong personal code of ethics must be practiced and emphasis should be given to the development and practice of core values resulting in responsible and authentic behavior of student's fraternity. Among the various values of teachers, some of the essential values may include wisdom, vision, moral fiber, communication, work ethics, service, knowledge and obligation. According to few research studies in academic context, teachers as academic leaders need to think about how their decisions will affect other people (colleagues and students) apart from looking for their own benefits. They should also have a great moral responsibility in keeping the ethical upbringings of educational institutions (Sharma, Khandelwal & Agrawal, 2018), expressing traits such as honesty, fairness, respect and responsibility (Velea & Farca, 2013).

Teachers play a vital role in cultivating ethical leadership behaviour among their students and for building an ethical culture at working institutions. Teachers are expected to be a good role-model for students by demonstrating ethical behaviours at and out of institution, because the students will act upon what they accumulate from their teachers. Hence, in conformity with the basic ethical principles, teachers should be full of patience and impartial towards every student. The reputation of an educational institution is not only the responsibility of its administrators and management people but also the onus lies on its teachers. Therefore, teachers should accept the principles of ethics and replicate them in their behaviours to recommend their students follow their lead by building collaboration with their fellow students, bringing credibility and developing respect for the institution they belong to (Sharma, Khandelwal & Agrawal, 2018).

Communication is essential in ethical leadership in the classroom, acting as a foundation for trust, honesty, and developing a healthy learning environment. Ethical classroom leaders prioritize transparency by openly sharing their expectations and decision-making processes with students. Effective communication enables ethical leaders to demonstrate ethical behaviour through their words and deeds. By regularly exhibiting honesty, fairness, and respect in their interactions with students and coworkers, leaders provide a positive example that supports ethical behaviour. Ethical leaders promote open dialogue and collaboration by allowing students to express their thoughts, concerns, and participate in meaningful discussions concerning ethical quandaries. By emphasizing clear, honest, and respectful communication, ethical leaders foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment in which integrity, trust, and ethical behaviour thrive (Gunalan, 2024).

Outstanding teachers are consistent in their display of ethical leadership qualities, not only in the classroom but

around their institution on a day-to-day basis, and in their planning preparation and assessment of/for learning. Ethical leadership will enable a teacher to be genuinely kind when appropriate. It also carries with it all the values and principles that will support, nurture and guide those we work with and lead, in an honest way which does not leave those we lead guessing our intentions or struggling to interpret our actions. Being recognized as an 'outstanding' teacher or an 'outstanding' school is not the end of the journey. Constantly evaluating and reflecting upon our practice and refining our skills and professional behaviours, ensures excellence not only in teaching but in the quality of learning taking place. Seeking to always develop the ethical leadership qualities in our practice, will ensure we sustain excellence (An Imposter's Guide to Effective Schools, 2022).

To sum up, teachers play a vital role in cultivating ethical leadership behaviour among their students and for building an ethical culture. Teachers are expected to be a good role-model for students and be guided by their own personal code of ethics, placing emphasis on communication which is an essential element in ethical leadership in every classroom. Outstanding teachers are consistent in their display of ethical leadership qualities enabling them to be genuinely kind.

## Conclusion

Considering the teacher as the most important factor of the inclusive education process, he/she is responsible for creating appropriate and stimulating environment for learning. In dealing with professional demands on creating opportunities to facilitate student learning, teachers have to possess specific professional and personal competences. Personal competences could be observed through the attitudes and motivation (Bukvić, 2014). The implementation of inclusive education by teachers could serve as an effective pedagogical action to develop the students' social and emotional competencies, thereby yielding various benefits, including the protection of undesirable behaviors and the overall improvement of the development of individuals and societies (Llorent, Núñez-Flores & Kaakinen, 2024).

Inclusion of education for students does not only mean to simply enroll them into regular schools or classrooms. It is necessary that teachers take the responsibility for improving the learning and involvement of all children in their classes. To accomplish this, teachers need to develop competencies that comprise knowledge and skills to teach equitably and to encourage the learning of all pupils. Moreover, teachers need to be able to pursue and practice the support of other people who can serve as valuable resources in inclusive education, such as support staff, parents, communities, school authorities and not to miss the relevant others. Teachers can be benefited by the approach of inclusive education in various ways (Mehta & Panju, 2018).

Ethical competence deserves special attention in the field of pedagogical research, since it is a fundamental feature teachers require in order to fully fulfill their roles. Neglecting the moral dimension of the relationship between teachers and students may lead to dysfunctions, such as

anxiety, lack of self-confidence, persistent fear towards school, opposition to school requirements etc. Ethical competence includes knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that support the teacher as a reflexive actor and moral model for the students. The teaching profession means, therefore, not just the successful transmission of information from a sender to a group of receivers, but a constant intellectual and moral effort, a decision-making process, and a struggle to follow an axiological path. The appropriate approach to ethical competence for teachers should resort both in theoretical and practical knowledge. Ethical skills for teachers include references to four main components of the ethical behaviour which are receptiveness, reasoning, motivation, and implementation. Finally, although the essence of ethical values remains the same, regardless of the profession, their contextualization in education adds certain specific features, enhancing, thus, the knowledge in the field of professional judgment (Ghiațău, 2019).

The need for ethical study is evident and necessary. Pre service teachers should have the opportunity to explore the components of the ethic of the profession prior to entering the profession. In addition, the need for ethical education and study for practicing teachers is evident. The development of a raining session could provide explicit teaching on the ethic of the professions a tool for effective decision-making. Following the session, a study of ethical decision making of participants would indicate the value of this session (Renehan, 2009). Teachers should engage in ongoing professional development to enhance their understanding of ethical leadership and improve their skills in promoting ethical behavior in the classroom. Teachers can create a positive and ethical learning environment that nurtures students' moral development and prepares them to be responsible members of society (Gunalan, 2024).

It can be claimed that encouraging ethical conduct in the classroom is critical to successful teaching. A teacher should dedicate adequate time to establish and reinforce his/her beliefs in any classroom. If they are clear and accepted, they will navigate you throughout the entire school year. Successful teachers begin with the intention of benefiting their students. They may come to the classroom enthused about each school year, but too soon these good intentions fade away. Some students seem unprepared to learn while others are chronically absent. The frustrations of trying to teach students who lack motivation can become a burden.

As a result, no matter how much a teacher has the capacity for motivating others, he/she is bound to experience frustration in the school environment. Everyone should bear in mind that even society as a whole is responsible for the lack of acceptable norms. This is why it is vital to teach ethical behavior in contemporary classrooms. Effective teaching requires considerable knowledge and skillful teachers. It takes consistent attention, effort and refinement to be a competent ethical teacher over time. Teachers' competence in this demanding role ought to be checked regularly without hesitation to seek assistance when there is need to work competently.

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