
**INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL ETHICS ON STUDENTS'
ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

Ukata E. Emmanuel Ph.D

St. Augustine's Institute of Philosophy, Makurdi, Benue State

&

Oliagba Cynthia Nneka, D.M.M.M

University of Abuja

Abstract

Teachers' professional ethics constitute a fundamental pillar of educational quality and play a significant role in shaping students' academic outcomes, particularly in public secondary schools where teachers serve as the primary facilitators of learning and character formation. Despite continuous investments in educational reforms, concerns over declining students' academic performance have persisted, with growing attention directed toward the ethical conduct of teachers as a critical determinant of instructional effectiveness. This article examines the influence of teachers' professional ethics on students' academic performance in public secondary schools through a comprehensive review of theoretical perspectives and empirical literature. It explores key dimensions of professional ethics, including integrity, accountability, commitment to duty, professional competence, fairness, respect for learners, confidentiality, punctuality, and adherence to established codes of professional conduct. Drawing on ethical theories, professionalism theory, and social learning theory, the article argues that ethical behaviour among teachers enhances classroom management, promotes positive teacher–student relationships, strengthens students' motivation and engagement, and ultimately improves academic achievement. Conversely, unethical practices such as absenteeism, examination malpractice, favouritism, and professional misconduct undermine learning outcomes and weaken public confidence in the education system. The review further identifies institutional, administrative, and socio-economic factors that influence teachers' ethical practices and discusses policy measures necessary for strengthening professionalism within public secondary schools. The article concludes that fostering teachers' professional ethics through continuous professional development, effective supervision, enforcement of ethical standards, and supportive educational policies is indispensable for improving students' academic performance and achieving sustainable educational development. It recommends stronger collaboration among governments, school administrators, teacher education institutions, regulatory bodies, and other stakeholders to cultivate an ethical culture capable of enhancing teaching effectiveness and promoting quality education.

Keywords: teachers' professional ethics; academic performance; public secondary schools; teacher professionalism; educational quality; ethical conduct; instructional effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Education is universally recognized as one of the most powerful instruments for promoting national development, social transformation, economic growth, technological innovation, and sustainable human development. It serves as the foundation upon which societies build knowledgeable, skilled, and morally responsible citizens capable of contributing meaningfully to national progress. Through education, nations develop the intellectual capacity necessary for scientific advancement, political stability, economic competitiveness, and social cohesion. The quality of any educational system is therefore largely dependent on the quality of its human resources, particularly teachers, who constitute the most important factor in the teaching-learning process. As the saying goes, no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers, a position reinforced by educational scholars and international organizations that regard teachers as the cornerstone of educational excellence (UNESCO, 2023).

Teachers occupy a strategic position in every educational system because they are entrusted with the responsibility of transmitting knowledge, developing learners' intellectual abilities, nurturing moral values, and preparing future generations for productive citizenship. Beyond classroom instruction, teachers serve as mentors, counselors, facilitators, evaluators, motivators, and role models whose personal and professional conduct significantly shapes students' attitudes, behaviour, aspirations, and academic achievement. Their effectiveness extends beyond mastery of subject matter to include the demonstration of ethical values that inspire trust, respect, fairness, accountability, and commitment within the school environment (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Consequently, the quality of education received by students is inseparable from the ethical standards upheld by teachers in the discharge of their professional responsibilities.

Professional ethics has become one of the defining characteristics of modern professions. Every recognized profession establishes ethical standards that regulate the conduct of its members, promote public confidence, and ensure accountability in professional practice. Medicine, law, engineering, nursing, accounting, and education all maintain codes of professional ethics designed to safeguard the interests of clients and uphold the integrity of the profession. In education, professional ethics refers to the moral principles, values, standards, and codes of conduct that guide teachers in performing their duties responsibly, honestly, fairly, competently, and professionally. These ethical standards regulate relationships between teachers and students, colleagues, school administrators, parents, and the wider society while ensuring that educational practices promote learners' welfare and educational excellence (Campbell, 2013).

Professional ethics in teaching has attracted increasing scholarly attention because ethical behaviour directly influences the effectiveness of instructional delivery, classroom management, students' motivation, and overall school performance. Ethical teachers inspire confidence among learners, establish positive teacher-student relationships, ensure fairness in assessment, and

provide equal learning opportunities irrespective of students' social, economic, religious, ethnic, or gender backgrounds. Conversely, unethical practices such as absenteeism, lateness to school, examination malpractice, favoritism, sexual harassment, bribery, discrimination, corporal punishment, professional negligence, and poor commitment to duty undermine educational quality and negatively affect students' academic performance (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2016).

One important dimension of teachers' professional ethics is integrity. Integrity involves consistency between professional values and professional behaviour, emphasizing honesty, transparency, moral courage, and accountability. Teachers with high integrity resist corrupt practices, refuse to manipulate examination scores, avoid exploitation of students, and adhere strictly to institutional regulations. Integrity promotes credibility and reinforces public confidence in the education system. Students who perceive their teachers as honest and trustworthy are more likely to respect school rules, value academic honesty, and develop positive attitudes toward learning. Punctuality is another significant ethical attribute that contributes to effective teaching and learning. Teachers who arrive punctually for classes maximize instructional time, complete curriculum coverage, establish classroom discipline, and model responsible behaviour for students. Chronic lateness and absenteeism, on the other hand, reduce contact hours, disrupt learning continuity, contribute to poor curriculum implementation, and ultimately lower students' academic achievement. Studies across various educational contexts have consistently associated teacher absenteeism with reduced student performance and diminished school effectiveness (OECD, 2020).

The importance of professional ethics has become even more pronounced in public secondary schools within developing countries. These schools often operate under challenging conditions characterized by inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional materials, insufficient funding, teacher shortages, and increasing societal expectations. Such constraints place enormous pressure on teachers and sometimes contribute to unethical practices arising from frustration, poor motivation, or inadequate institutional support. Nevertheless, ethical professionalism remains indispensable because it helps maintain educational standards despite environmental challenges (UNICEF, 2022). In Nigeria, public secondary education occupies a strategic position within the national educational system because it serves as the bridge between basic education and higher education while preparing young people for employment, entrepreneurship, and national development. Successive governments have implemented numerous educational reforms aimed at improving access, quality, teacher development, curriculum implementation, and educational management. Despite these efforts, concerns continue to be expressed regarding declining students' academic performance in national examinations, increasing examination malpractice, teacher absenteeism, poor instructional delivery, inadequate supervision, and other indicators of declining educational quality (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022).

Several reports have highlighted persistent challenges affecting Nigerian public secondary schools, including inadequate funding, insufficient teacher motivation, overcrowded classrooms, limited professional development opportunities, weak monitoring mechanisms, and inconsistent enforcement of professional ethical standards. Increasing cases of examination malpractice, extortion of students, favoritism, sexual misconduct, negligence of duty, falsification of records, and poor teacher commitment have further raised questions regarding ethical professionalism within the teaching profession. These concerns threaten public confidence in education and undermine efforts toward achieving the national goals of quality, equitable, and inclusive education. Against this background, the present study examines how teachers' professional ethics contribute to students' academic performance in public secondary schools. Specifically, it investigates the influence of teachers' integrity, punctuality, professional competence, commitment to duty, fairness in assessment, and interpersonal relationships on students' academic achievement. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence, the study seeks to provide deeper insights into the role of ethical professionalism in enhancing educational quality and improving learning outcomes. The findings are expected to contribute to educational policy, strengthen teacher professional development programmes, inform school leadership practices, and support ongoing efforts aimed at improving the quality of secondary education in Nigeria and other developing countries.

2. Conceptual Review

The conceptual review provides the theoretical and definitional foundation upon which a research study is anchored. It clarifies the meanings of the key concepts, examines their dimensions, and explores the relationships among them as established in the literature. In the context of this study, the major concepts are teacher professional ethics, the teaching profession, students' academic performance, and public secondary schools.

Teacher Professional Ethics

Professional ethics refers to the moral principles, values, standards, and rules that regulate the conduct of members of a particular profession. Every recognized profession establishes ethical guidelines designed to ensure accountability, competence, integrity, confidentiality, fairness, and responsibility in professional practice. These ethical codes distinguish professionals from non-professionals by emphasizing not only technical competence but also moral responsibility toward clients and society (Banks, 2012). Professional ethics therefore represents a commitment to performing professional duties honestly, diligently, and in accordance with established standards of practice. Teachers' professional ethics may be defined as the collection of moral values, professional standards, codes of conduct, and behavioural expectations that guide teachers in the

discharge of their professional responsibilities. It requires teachers to demonstrate honesty, integrity, fairness, accountability, respect for learners, confidentiality, competence, punctuality, diligence, impartiality, and commitment to continuous professional development.

Teaching Profession

Teaching is widely recognized as one of the oldest and most influential professions in human society. It is fundamentally concerned with facilitating learning, developing human potential, transmitting cultural values, and preparing individuals for productive participation in society. Unlike many occupations that focus primarily on technical tasks, teaching combines intellectual, moral, emotional, and social responsibilities. Teachers shape future leaders, professionals, entrepreneurs, scientists, and responsible citizens through systematic instruction and character formation (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Students' Academic Performance

Students' academic performance refers to the extent to which learners achieve intended educational objectives following participation in teaching and learning activities. It reflects learners' acquisition of knowledge, development of cognitive skills, mastery of competencies, and demonstration of expected learning outcomes. Academic performance is commonly measured through examination scores, continuous assessment results, standardized achievement tests, classroom participation, assignments, practical work, projects, and graduation rates (Hattie, 2023).

Public Secondary Schools

Public secondary schools are educational institutions established, funded, and supervised primarily by government authorities to provide secondary education for learners following completion of basic education. They constitute a vital component of national educational systems because they prepare students for higher education, vocational training, employment, entrepreneurship, and responsible citizenship. Public secondary schools also contribute to national development by promoting literacy, social integration, democratic values, and human capital formation.

The above concepts reviewed demonstrate that teachers' professional ethics, the teaching profession, students' academic performance, and public secondary schools are conceptually interconnected. Ethical professionalism provides the moral foundation upon which effective teaching is built, while public secondary schools constitute the institutional setting where these ethical principles are translated into classroom practice. Through integrity, competence, accountability, fairness, punctuality, and commitment to duty, teachers create learning

environments that foster students' academic success and promote the broader goals of quality education and national development.

3. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation upon which a study is built. It offers a systematic explanation of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables and guides the interpretation of research findings. In educational research, theories provide lenses through which researchers understand teachers' behaviour, professional responsibilities, ethical obligations, and their influence on students' learning outcomes. Since the present study investigates the influence of teachers' professional ethics on students' academic performance in public secondary schools, it draws upon ethical and educational theories that explain why teachers' moral conduct significantly affects instructional effectiveness, students' behaviour, and learning outcomes. Specifically, the study reviews Virtue Ethics, Deontological Ethics, Ethics of Care, Social Learning Theory, Role Theory, and Professionalism Theory. These theories collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' ethical responsibilities and professional conduct. However, Virtue Ethics and Professionalism Theory are adopted as the principal theoretical foundations because they most directly explain the ethical dispositions and professional standards expected of teachers.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethics is one of the oldest ethical theories in philosophy, originating from the works of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle in his seminal work, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Unlike ethical theories that focus primarily on rules or consequences, Virtue Ethics emphasizes the moral character of the individual. According to Aristotle, ethical behaviour results from the cultivation of virtues stable character traits such as honesty, justice, courage, temperance, prudence, generosity, integrity, and wisdom which enable individuals to act morally in different situations (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Aristotle argued that the ultimate goal of human life is *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as human flourishing or well-being, which can only be achieved through the habitual practice of virtues. Virtues are developed through continuous practice rather than inherited naturally. Thus, ethical behaviour becomes part of an individual's character through repeated moral actions.

Within the teaching profession, Virtue Ethics emphasizes that teachers should cultivate moral excellence rather than merely comply with institutional regulations. Ethical teachers are expected to exhibit integrity, honesty, fairness, compassion, responsibility, patience, and self-discipline in all professional interactions. These virtues foster trust between teachers and students, strengthen classroom relationships, encourage fairness in assessment, and promote students' academic success. Teachers therefore serve not only as instructors but also as moral exemplars whose

conduct shapes learners' character development. Virtue Ethics is particularly relevant because teaching involves constant moral judgment. Teachers regularly make decisions regarding discipline, assessment, confidentiality, learner welfare, equity, and classroom management. These decisions require practical wisdom (*phronesis*), another central Aristotelian virtue, enabling teachers to balance competing interests while promoting students' overall development.

Deontological Ethics

Deontological Ethics was developed primarily by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant during the eighteenth century. The theory argues that the morality of an action depends on whether it fulfills moral duties and obligations rather than on its consequences. Kant maintained that ethical behaviour should be guided by universal moral principles, commonly referred to as the categorical imperative, which requires individuals to act only according to principles that they would wish everyone else to follow (Kant, trans. 1998). Applied to education, Deontological Ethics requires teachers to perform their professional responsibilities because they are morally obligated to do so. Teachers should therefore demonstrate honesty, punctuality, fairness, confidentiality, impartiality, and commitment regardless of personal convenience or expected rewards. Ethical teaching becomes a matter of duty rather than personal preference.

The theory reinforces adherence to professional codes of conduct established by teacher regulatory bodies. Teachers are expected to respect students' rights, maintain confidentiality, avoid discrimination, assess learners fairly, and uphold academic integrity because these actions represent professional obligations essential for maintaining public trust in education.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory was developed by Albert Bandura in 1977. The theory argues that human behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and modelling. Individuals acquire attitudes, values, and behaviours by observing significant others whom they perceive as role models (Bandura, 1977). Teachers occupy highly influential positions within schools, making them powerful behavioural models for students. Learners frequently imitate teachers' honesty, punctuality, fairness, communication styles, discipline, and interpersonal relationships. Ethical teachers therefore contribute to students' moral development by modelling desirable behaviours, while unethical conduct may inadvertently normalize dishonesty, discrimination, or irresponsibility among learners. The theory underscores the importance of teachers maintaining exemplary professional behaviour because students often internalize observed ethical values and reproduce them both inside and outside the classroom.

Role Theory

Role Theory explains human behaviour in relation to the social positions individuals occupy within society. Scholars such as Bruce Biddle argue that every social role carries expectations regarding appropriate behaviour (Biddle, 1986). Individuals occupying particular positions are expected to perform responsibilities consistent with societal expectations attached to those roles. Teachers occupy professional roles associated with knowledge transmission, character formation, learner protection, counselling, leadership, and moral guidance. Society expects teachers to demonstrate professionalism, honesty, competence, impartiality, and responsibility. Failure to fulfill these expectations creates role conflict and diminishes public confidence in the teaching profession. Role Theory therefore emphasizes that ethical conduct is inseparable from teachers' professional identity because society evaluates teachers according to the responsibilities attached to their occupational role.

Professionalism Theory

Professionalism Theory explains the characteristics that distinguish recognized professions from ordinary occupations. Scholars such as Eliot Freidson argue that professions possess specialized knowledge, formal education, ethical codes, professional autonomy, accountability, and commitment to public service (Freidson, 2001). Teaching qualifies as a profession because it requires specialized training, certification, adherence to ethical standards, continuous professional development, and public accountability. Professionalism Theory emphasizes that teachers should consistently maintain competence, integrity, fairness, confidentiality, responsibility, and lifelong learning. Professional ethics therefore becomes an essential component of teacher professionalism. Teachers who uphold professional standards contribute to instructional effectiveness, institutional credibility, and improved students' academic performance. Conversely, unethical practices weaken public confidence in education and diminish the professional status of teaching.

4. Teachers' Professional Ethics and Academic Performance

Teachers' professional ethics constitute a critical determinant of students' academic performance because they shape the quality of instructional delivery, classroom interactions, school climate, and learners' educational experiences. Ethical conduct provides the moral foundation upon which effective teaching and learning are built, influencing not only students' cognitive development but also their emotional, social, and moral growth. Contemporary educational research consistently recognizes that academic performance is influenced not merely by teachers' subject knowledge or pedagogical competence but also by their ethical disposition, professional commitment, and interpersonal conduct (Hattie, 2023). Consequently, ethical professionalism

has become an indispensable component of educational quality, particularly in public secondary schools where teachers serve as the primary facilitators of learning and character development.

An ethical classroom environment is one characterized by trust, mutual respect, fairness, inclusiveness, honesty, and psychological safety. Ethical teachers create classrooms in which students feel valued, respected, and encouraged to express their ideas without fear of intimidation or discrimination. Such environments promote collaborative learning, critical thinking, creativity, and active participation, thereby enhancing students' academic achievement. Conversely, classrooms characterized by favoritism, harassment, intimidation, or injustice discourage learner participation and negatively affect academic performance (Strike & Soltis, 2020).

Closely related to classroom climate is teacher commitment to student learning. Commitment reflects teachers' willingness to invest time, effort, and professional expertise in supporting learners' academic development. Committed teachers prepare comprehensive lesson plans, employ appropriate instructional strategies, provide timely feedback, supervise students' academic progress, and offer additional support to struggling learners. Their dedication enhances curriculum implementation and improves students' mastery of learning objectives. Educational studies have consistently demonstrated that teacher commitment significantly predicts students' academic success because committed teachers create meaningful learning experiences that stimulate intellectual growth (Day, 2018).

Teachers' professionalism and instructional effectiveness equally influence academic performance. Professional teachers demonstrate mastery of subject content, pedagogical competence, classroom management skills, assessment literacy, and adherence to ethical standards. Their instructional practices encourage active learning, problem-solving, collaboration, and independent thinking. Effective instruction ensures that learners understand concepts thoroughly, apply knowledge practically, and achieve higher academic standards. Professionalism therefore extends beyond technical competence to include ethical responsibility, accountability, and commitment to educational excellence (Shulman, 1987).

Ethical leadership in schools further strengthens the relationship between teachers' ethics and students' academic performance. School principals who demonstrate fairness, transparency, accountability, and integrity create organizational cultures that encourage ethical behaviour among teachers. Ethical leadership promotes collaboration, trust, shared responsibility, and continuous professional improvement while discouraging corruption, favoritism, and professional misconduct. Such positive school cultures enhance instructional quality and contribute to improved learning outcomes (Bush, 2020).

Teachers' ethical behaviour also influences teacher motivation, which directly affects classroom performance. Teachers who experience supportive leadership, recognition, professional autonomy, and equitable treatment demonstrate greater job satisfaction and commitment to their responsibilities. Motivated teachers are more likely to prepare thoroughly, adopt innovative teaching strategies, participate in professional development, and provide individualized support to learners. These practices positively influence students' academic achievement and overall school effectiveness. The teacher-student relationship represents another crucial pathway through which professional ethics influences academic performance. Respectful, caring, empathetic, and supportive relationships foster students' confidence, emotional well-being, and willingness to participate actively in classroom activities. Students who trust their teachers are generally more motivated to learn, comply with classroom rules, seek academic assistance when necessary, and persevere in overcoming learning difficulties. Conversely, hostile or discriminatory relationships create anxiety, reduce engagement, and hinder academic progress (Pianta, 1999).

Ethics equally shapes decision-making within educational settings. Ethical teachers make objective, transparent, and student-centred decisions concerning discipline, assessment, instructional strategies, and classroom management. Ethical decision-making ensures that educational practices promote justice, equity, and learners' best interests while avoiding bias, favoritism, or abuse of authority. Such fairness enhances students' confidence in the educational process and encourages positive academic behaviour. Teachers' ethical conduct significantly enhances students' motivation by creating supportive learning environments where effort, achievement, and integrity are recognized and rewarded. Motivated students demonstrate greater persistence, curiosity, self-confidence, and willingness to engage in academic tasks. Ethical teachers inspire learners through encouragement, constructive feedback, recognition of individual differences, and equitable treatment, thereby strengthening intrinsic motivation and promoting lifelong learning.

Professional ethics also contributes to effective classroom discipline. Ethical teachers establish clear behavioural expectations, apply rules consistently, and manage disciplinary issues fairly without resorting to intimidation or humiliation. Positive classroom discipline minimizes disruptions, maximizes instructional time, and creates conducive conditions for learning. Students in well-managed classrooms are generally more attentive, cooperative, and academically productive.

Similarly, teachers' professionalism influences students' attendance. Teachers who demonstrate punctuality, commitment, engaging instructional methods, and positive interpersonal relationships encourage regular school attendance. Students are more likely to attend classes consistently when they perceive their teachers as supportive, competent, and committed to their educational success. Improved attendance increases exposure to instructional activities and enhances academic achievement.

Another important outcome of teachers' professional ethics is enhanced academic engagement. Engaged students actively participate in classroom discussions, complete assignments, collaborate with peers, ask questions, and invest sustained effort in learning activities. Ethical teachers promote engagement by respecting students' opinions, encouraging participation, providing meaningful learning experiences, and creating inclusive classrooms that value diversity and individual differences. All these ethical dimensions converge to influence learning outcomes, which represent the knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes, and values students acquire through educational experiences. Positive learning outcomes are reflected in improved examination performance, higher levels of critical thinking, enhanced problem-solving abilities, stronger communication skills, better retention rates, and successful progression to higher levels of education. Research consistently indicates that schools characterized by high ethical standards among teachers experience greater instructional effectiveness, improved student satisfaction, stronger academic achievement, and enhanced institutional reputation (Hattie, 2023). Therefore, strengthening teachers' professional ethics remains a strategic priority for improving educational quality, promoting school effectiveness, and enhancing students' academic performance in public secondary schools.

5. Factors Affecting Teachers' Professional Ethics

Teachers' professional ethics are shaped by a combination of personal values, institutional practices, professional regulations, and broader socio-economic conditions. Although ethical conduct is fundamentally an individual responsibility, the extent to which teachers consistently demonstrate integrity, accountability, fairness, commitment, and professionalism depends largely on the environments in which they work. Educational researchers argue that teachers are more likely to uphold high ethical standards when they operate within supportive institutions characterized by effective leadership, adequate welfare, clear professional regulations, and continuous opportunities for professional growth (Strike & Soltis, 2020). Consequently, understanding the factors that influence teachers' professional ethics is essential for improving educational quality and enhancing students' academic performance.

One of the most important determinants of teachers' professional ethics is school leadership. School principals and administrators establish the ethical climate of the school through their leadership styles, decision-making processes, and enforcement of professional standards. Ethical leaders demonstrate honesty, transparency, fairness, accountability, and respect for both teachers and students. They promote collaboration, encourage open communication, and ensure that school policies are implemented impartially. Such leadership fosters trust and motivates teachers to adhere to ethical principles. Conversely, poor leadership characterized by favoritism, inconsistency, corruption, or lack of accountability often weakens teachers' morale and increases the likelihood of unethical practices (Bush, 2020).

Another significant factor is teachers' welfare, which encompasses the physical, psychological, financial, and professional well-being of teachers. Adequate welfare services, including safe working conditions, healthcare, manageable workloads, housing assistance, and opportunities for career advancement, contribute to teachers' job satisfaction and commitment to ethical practice. It is crystal that teachers who feel valued and supported by their employers are more likely to demonstrate professionalism, dedication, and accountability. Conversely, poor welfare conditions may create frustration, occupational stress, burnout, and reduced commitment to professional responsibilities (OECD, 2020).

Closely related to welfare are salary and motivation. Competitive remuneration and timely payment of salaries significantly influence teachers' morale and ethical behaviour. While ethical conduct should not depend solely on financial rewards, inadequate salaries often contribute to dissatisfaction and may encourage unethical practices such as absenteeism, private tutoring during official school hours, extortion of students, or examination malpractice. Motivational incentives, including promotion opportunities, recognition awards, and performance-based rewards, strengthen teachers' commitment to professional excellence and encourage adherence to ethical standards (Herzberg, 1968).

Professional training equally plays a vital role in promoting teachers' professional ethics. Quality teacher education programmes equip prospective teachers with pedagogical knowledge, subject competence, classroom management skills, ethical values, and professional responsibilities. Pre-service and in-service training enable teachers to understand educational laws, codes of conduct, learner diversity, and ethical decision-making. Well-trained teachers are better prepared to resolve classroom challenges responsibly while maintaining high professional standards (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Another important determinant is teachers' registration and licensing. Professional registration strengthens the status of teaching as a regulated profession by ensuring that only qualified and competent individuals are authorized to teach. Registration bodies establish codes of ethics, investigate allegations of misconduct, and impose disciplinary measures where necessary. Licensing therefore promotes accountability, public confidence, and adherence to professional standards while safeguarding the integrity of the teaching profession.

Finally, community expectations significantly shape teachers' professional ethics. Society regards teachers as role models responsible for nurturing future generations. Parents, community leaders, religious organizations, and civil society therefore expect teachers to demonstrate honesty, discipline, fairness, responsibility, and exemplary conduct both within and outside the classroom. Positive community support reinforces teachers' commitment to professionalism, whereas societal tolerance of corruption, declining moral values, or undue interference in school administration may undermine ethical behaviour.

From above one can logically infer that teachers' professional ethics are influenced by a dynamic interaction of leadership, welfare, motivation, professional preparation, organizational culture, government policies, supervision, professional regulation, continuous learning, and community expectations. Strengthening these factors creates an enabling environment that promotes ethical professionalism, enhances instructional effectiveness, improves students' academic performance, and contributes to the achievement of quality education and sustainable national development (Campbell, 2013).

6. Challenges to Ethical Practice in Public Secondary Schools

Ethical practice is fundamental to the effectiveness of the teaching profession and the achievement of quality education. Teachers are expected to uphold high standards of integrity, fairness, accountability, professionalism, and commitment in carrying out their responsibilities. However, the realization of these ethical standards in public secondary schools is often constrained by numerous institutional, socio-economic, administrative, and political challenges. These challenges not only weaken teachers' professional conduct but also adversely affect instructional quality, students' academic performance, and public confidence in the education system. In many developing countries, particularly Nigeria, persistent systemic deficiencies have created environments in which ethical misconduct has become increasingly difficult to eliminate. Addressing these challenges is therefore essential for strengthening professionalism and improving educational outcomes (UNESCO, 2023).

One of the most pervasive ethical challenges confronting public secondary schools is examination malpractice. Examination malpractice refers to any deliberate act that compromises the integrity, fairness, or credibility of examinations before, during, or after their administration. It includes cheating, impersonation, leakage of examination questions, collusion, falsification of results, and unauthorized assistance to candidates. Teachers who participate in examination malpractice violate professional ethics by sacrificing honesty and fairness for personal or institutional gains. Such practices undermine students' confidence in the educational system, promote academic dishonesty, and devalue educational qualifications. Moreover, examination malpractice discourages hard work and encourages a culture of dependency and corruption among learners (West African Examinations Council [WAEC], 2022).

Closely related to examination malpractice is corruption, which remains a significant obstacle to ethical professionalism in many public secondary schools. Corruption manifests through bribery, extortion, misappropriation of educational resources, manipulation of recruitment and promotion processes, falsification of records, and abuse of official authority. Some teachers may demand illegal payments for grades, admission, or academic assistance, while others engage in unauthorized commercial activities during official school hours. Such unethical behaviour erodes public trust, weakens institutional credibility, and compromises educational quality. Corruption

also diverts resources intended for educational development, thereby reducing opportunities for effective teaching and learning (Transparency International, 2023).

Another major challenge is teacher absenteeism, which has become a recurring concern in many public secondary schools. Teachers who are frequently absent from work without legitimate reasons fail to fulfill their professional responsibilities and reduce students' access to quality instruction. Absenteeism disrupts curriculum implementation, increases students' learning gaps, and lowers academic achievement. It also negatively influences students' attitudes toward punctuality, discipline, and commitment, as learners often imitate the behaviour of their teachers. Persistent absenteeism reflects weak professional ethics and inadequate accountability mechanisms within educational institutions (OECD, 2020).

Ethical practice is further undermined by poor commitment to duty. Commitment involves teachers' willingness to dedicate adequate time, effort, and professional expertise to their instructional responsibilities. However, some teachers exhibit negligence through poor lesson preparation, ineffective classroom instruction, delayed assessment, inadequate supervision of students, and lack of participation in school activities. Such attitudes diminish instructional effectiveness and reduce students' opportunities for meaningful learning. Poor commitment often results from inadequate motivation, low job satisfaction, occupational stress, or weak institutional support, although these factors do not justify unethical professional conduct.

One of the most serious ethical violations within educational institutions is sexual harassment. Teachers occupy positions of authority and trust, making it imperative that they maintain appropriate professional boundaries with students. Sexual harassment includes unwanted sexual advances, inappropriate comments, coercion, exploitation, or any form of sexual misconduct directed toward learners. Such behaviour violates students' rights, causes psychological trauma, undermines academic concentration, and damages the integrity of the teaching profession. Educational institutions therefore have an ethical and legal responsibility to establish preventive measures, reporting mechanisms, and disciplinary procedures that protect learners from abuse (UNICEF, 2022).

Another challenge is favoritism, whereby teachers treat certain students preferentially based on family background, ethnicity, religion, gender, political affiliation, personal relationships, or financial status. Favoritism compromises fairness in classroom participation, assessment, discipline, and access to educational opportunities. Students who perceive unequal treatment often experience reduced motivation, diminished self-esteem, and lower academic engagement. Ethical teaching requires impartiality, justice, and equal respect for all learners regardless of their personal circumstances.

The continued use of corporal punishment in some schools also raises ethical concerns. Although maintaining discipline is an essential responsibility of teachers, excessive or abusive physical punishment violates students' dignity and fundamental rights. Research indicates that harsh disciplinary practices may generate fear, resentment, anxiety, and school avoidance rather than genuine behavioural improvement. Contemporary educational ethics advocates positive discipline, counselling, restorative practices, and behaviour management strategies that respect learners' rights while promoting responsible conduct (UNESCO, 2023).

Financial constraints constitute another major challenge affecting ethical practice. Many public secondary schools operate under inadequate funding, resulting in shortages of instructional materials, poor infrastructure, insufficient technological facilities, and limited opportunities for professional development. Financial hardship may also reduce teachers' morale and contribute to unethical behaviours such as private tutoring during official school hours, extortion of students, or neglect of professional responsibilities. Although financial difficulties do not excuse unethical conduct, adequate educational funding remains essential for promoting professionalism and improving instructional quality.

Similarly, political interference frequently undermines ethical administration within public secondary schools. Political influence in teacher recruitment, promotion, transfer, disciplinary procedures, and school management often weakens merit-based decision-making and reduces institutional accountability. When educational decisions are influenced by political considerations rather than professional standards, teachers may lose confidence in administrative processes, thereby weakening commitment to ethical conduct and professional excellence.

Another challenge confronting teachers is large class size. Overcrowded classrooms make effective classroom management, individualized instruction, continuous assessment, and learner supervision increasingly difficult. Teachers managing excessively large classes may struggle to provide adequate feedback, maintain discipline, or identify students experiencing learning difficulties. These challenges increase occupational stress and reduce opportunities for implementing ethical instructional practices that promote equity and individual attention.

Ethical practice is also affected by inadequate monitoring and supervision. Effective supervision enables school administrators and educational authorities to identify unethical behaviour, provide professional guidance, and enforce accountability. However, weak inspection systems, irregular supervision, and insufficient monitoring often allow unethical practices such as absenteeism, examination malpractice, negligence, and poor instructional delivery to persist without appropriate corrective action. Strengthening monitoring mechanisms therefore remains essential for promoting professional accountability and maintaining educational standards.

Finally, poor working conditions continue to undermine teachers' professional ethics in many public secondary schools. Inadequate classrooms, obsolete instructional materials, limited technological resources, delayed salaries, excessive workloads, insecurity, and poor career progression contribute to occupational dissatisfaction and reduced professional commitment. Teachers working under such conditions often experience stress, frustration, and burnout, all of which may negatively affect their ethical behaviour and instructional effectiveness. Improving working conditions is therefore indispensable for promoting teacher motivation, ethical professionalism, and educational quality.

Conclusion

Teachers' professional ethics remain one of the most significant determinants of educational quality and students' academic performance in public secondary schools. As demonstrated throughout this article, ethical professionalism extends beyond compliance with institutional regulations to encompass the cultivation of integrity, accountability, fairness, competence, commitment to duty, respect for learners, confidentiality, punctuality, and professional responsibility. These ethical virtues create conducive learning environments that enhance instructional effectiveness, strengthen teacher–student relationships, promote learner motivation and engagement, and ultimately improve academic achievement. The theoretical perspectives examined particularly Virtue Ethics and Professionalism Theory affirm that effective teaching is fundamentally both a professional and moral enterprise. Teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge but also moral exemplars whose character and conduct significantly influence students' intellectual, social, and ethical development. Consequently, sustained improvements in students' academic performance cannot be achieved solely through curriculum reforms, infrastructural development, or increased educational funding without corresponding attention to teachers' ethical standards and professional conduct.

The review further reveals that ethical practice within public secondary schools is influenced by multiple institutional and contextual factors, including school leadership, teachers' welfare, professional training, motivation, regulatory frameworks, supervision, and community expectations. Conversely, persistent challenges such as examination malpractice, corruption, absenteeism, favoritism, sexual harassment, political interference, inadequate funding, weak monitoring mechanisms, and poor working conditions continue to undermine professionalism and educational effectiveness. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy interventions that strengthen accountability systems while simultaneously improving teachers' welfare, continuous professional development, and institutional support.

Logically, improving students' academic performance requires the deliberate cultivation of an ethical culture within schools where professionalism, integrity, justice, transparency, and responsibility are consistently upheld. Governments, educational administrators, teacher

education institutions, professional regulatory bodies, school leaders, parents, and the wider community must collaborate in promoting and enforcing high ethical standards within the teaching profession. Such collective commitment will not only enhance instructional quality and learning outcomes but also contribute significantly to educational excellence, human capital development, and sustainable national development.

References

- Aristotle. (2009). *Nicomachean ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published ca. 350 BCE)
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Banks, S. (2012). *Ethics and values in social work* (4th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Biddle, B. J. (1986). Recent developments in role theory. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 12, 67–92.
- Bush, T. (2020). *Theories of educational leadership and management* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Campbell, E. (2013). *The ethical teacher*. Open University Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *Empowered educators: How high-performing systems shape teaching quality around the world*. Jossey-Bass.
- Day, C. (2018). *Professional identity, well-being and effectiveness: The emotional contexts of teaching*. Routledge.
- Federal Ministry of Education. (2022). *Education sector performance report*. Federal Ministry of Education, Nigeria.
- Freidson, E. (2001). *Professionalism: The third logic*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hattie, J. (2023). *Visible learning: The sequel*. Routledge.
- Herzberg, F. (1968). One more time: How do you motivate employees? *Harvard Business Review*, 46(1), 53–62.
- Kant, I. (1998). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1785)
- OECD. (2020). *Education at a glance 2020: OECD indicators*. OECD Publishing.
- Pianta, R. C. (1999). *Enhancing relationships between children and teachers*. American Psychological Association.

Shapira-Lishchinsky, O. (2016). From ethical reasoning to teacher education for social justice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 60, 245–255.

Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 1–22.

Strike, K. A., & Soltis, J. F. (2020). *The ethics of teaching* (6th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Transparency International. (2023). *Corruption perceptions index 2023*. Transparency International.

UNESCO. (2023). *Global education monitoring report 2023*. UNESCO.

UNICEF. (2022). *The state of the world's children 2022*. UNICEF.

West African Examinations Council. (2022). *Chief examiners' report*. WAEC.