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► **To cite this version:**

Purificación Pérez-García, María José Latorre-Medina, Francisco Javier Blanco-Encomienda. Fostering Professional Ethical Competence During Teacher Training Practice. *Pedagogika*, 2015, 118 (2), pp.5-27. 10.15823/p.2015.01 . halshs-01536024

**HAL Id: halshs-01536024**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01536024>**

Submitted on 9 Jun 2017

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# Fostering Professional Ethical Competence During Teacher Training Practice

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**Abstract.** Professionals who have undergone their training at university should possess not only the knowledge-base necessary to practice in their chosen profession, but also the ethical principles that ensure responsible professional practice and the corresponding benefits for society. The research project addressed in the present article aimed to contribute to fostering ethical competence and commitment amongst future teachers. During the experience the participants had the opportunity to design tasks that stimulated reflection, critique and ethical awareness.

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**Keywords:** *ethics, practical training, professional competences, knowledge, University.*

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## Introduction

The present research is based on three presuppositions. First, that professional ethics, as a significant and necessary aspect of the comprehensive training of students, can and should be taught explicitly during the course of study (Arenas et al., 2013). The attitudes and values that a professional should possess are not innate, but rather they are learned, *ergo* they should be taught. This means that exercising their future profession in a responsible, fair and respectable manner should not be left to chance, as something students simply arrive at intuitively; on the contrary, they should be provided with notions, tools and styles as reference points to guide them. This premise leads us to pay special attention to a number of key questions when training professionals. In this regard, a

good professional is one who is equipped and competent in a specific area of knowledge, who is valued by society for their endeavours to the benefit of others, and who receives some kind of compensation in return (Caride, 2002). In order to reach this level, during their time at university professionals must develop four types of competence, namely: a) cognitive, or 'knowing' (scientific, methodological, instrumental, legal knowledge, etc.); b) technical, or 'knowing how' (skills for application to knowledge); c) social, or 'getting on with others' (the capacity to interact and collaborate effectively with individuals and institutions); and d) ethical, or 'being professional' (values, attitudes and behavioural styles).

The second premise of the present work derives from the studies undertaken by Agejas et al. (2007) and Carr (2005, 2006), which examine in some depth the first presupposition. Notably, it is asserted that "*without ethical competence there can be no professional competence*" (Agejas et al., 2007, 80). All the professions involve an ethical–social commitment by the very social nature of human beings, and this cannot be overlooked when preparing professionals for the future. The ethical aspects of professional practice thus become vital in the process of becoming a competent and effective professional (Mackenzie, 2007).

The third premise is based on the conclusions of a piece of macro-research undertaken in 2001 by the University of Granada, Spain, on the deontological ethics of degree programmes in Law, Psychology, Social Work, Nursing, Teacher Training, Medicine, and Food Technology and Science. The main conclusions of the study regarding Teacher Training (see Pérez, 2005) were that:

- those aspiring to become teachers emphasized the importance of professional ethics in their future profession;
- they felt that professional ethics was rarely touched-on during their university studies;
- those ethical questions they considered to be the most important were those related to: operating with responsibility, effectiveness and impartiality; respect for human dignity; duty, in relation to pupils; collaboration with colleagues to improve the professionalization of teaching; continuing professional development and updating of knowledge to ensure quality improvement in teaching; and commitment to the effective working of the school in which a teacher works.
- those ethical principles that the students reported as never or rarely being taught were those related to: demonstrating ethical models of professional conduct; safeguarding the prestige of the institution in which a teacher works; protecting professional secrecy; and putting the benefit of the pupil before personal, professional or financial interests.

These findings point towards those areas in which improvements could be made to professional training. On the one hand, greater visibility in the teacher-training curriculum on professional ethics and deontology; and on the other, the commitment of

university lecturers charged with delivering theoretical content and practical training to teach the deontology of the teaching profession.

The present work seeks to investigate these areas; first, because the university should be playing a decisive role in producing well-rounded professionals (Morgado, 2009), and, second, because employers trust a university that trains young professionals on three levels – theoretical, technical and ethical (Agejas et al., 2007). These issues lead us to question the functions of the university in the current context and, more specifically, its capacity to teach professional ethical competences. While from the very outset universities have been responsible for training professionals from all areas of knowledge, in the present day they must also ensure they are training responsible citizens who are ethically committed to the social reality that surrounds them (Escámez et al., 2005).

### **Professional Ethics, Training and University**

Chamarro (2007) defines ethics as the set of values that govern individual and collective values, which guide people and groups to behave in line with what can be considered ‘the good’ or ‘the moral’. Examining the ethics of the professions, it is asserted that this is the equivalent of saying that today’s professionals have the double challenge of being excellent professionals in order to be good citizens, and being excellent citizens in order to be good professionals (Martínez, 2006).

More specifically, teaching professional ethics at university does not consist of (and nor should it) trite moralizing about professional practices and uses. The idea put forward by Hortal (2002) is that professional ethics needs to be focused on reflection and critique of knowledge and professional practice. Along similar lines, it is argued that ethics is not about learning ten or fifteen commandments or one or two codes of conduct (Savater, 2012). Ethics is the practice of reflecting on what we are about to do and our motives for doing it.

Universities should aim their discourse at identifying what being a good professional consists of, what the limits and rights that must be respected are, what commitments must be assumed and what duties must be fulfilled. Besides, “*a person could not be considered ethical if they acted beyond reproach except when carrying out their professional responsibilities to the extent to which they apply*” (Hortal, 2002, 23).

This mission or function demands of universities that they reconsider their approach to undergraduates’ initial training and the function of the teaching staff or professionals that participate in the practical dimension of students’ education. Universities must also identify the best strategies to stimulate reflective practice and generate ethical attitudes (Lee, Choi, 2013; Martišauskienė, 2009). Martínez (2010) proposes as an imperative for university teaching staff that they select the knowledge and the means to teach it to learners in line with criteria suitable for the aim of training responsible professionals who are prepared to serve society and humanity and that in their teaching they seek the best possible education for their students in the technical and ethical aspects of the profession,

so that they may become professionals who are both technically competent and ethically upstanding. The public role of the university is not defined by its public–private nature but rather by the fact that it constitutes “*a space for ethical learning that endeavours to ensure that its graduates carry out their future professions with a willingness to contribute to creating a society that is inclusive, respectable and democratic*” (Martínez, 2006, 87).

Yet despite the importance they give to this issue, university teaching staff are not clear about the strategies needed to train their students in professional ethics, either in terms of courses (Warnick, Silverman, 2011), teaching placements (García et al., 2009), or content (Martínez, Tey, 2008). Professional ethics is a competence, and, as such, according to the aforementioned authors, requires sufficient time and space to be devoted to it, in order to mobilize cognitive resources to an appropriate level (knowledge, skills and attitudes) and address specific situations efficiently. The practical training phase – the practicum or external placement– is an ideal opportunity to design tasks for students that foster reflection, critique and ethics, as it provides direct contact with the profession (Latorre, Blanco, 2011). To ensure a correct approach to professional practice it is vital that the student develops a favourable attitude throughout their studies, and the practicum is a major step in this direction.

The present work is concerned, then, with teaching professional ethics in such a way as to offer fundamental ethical criteria in the professional sphere, awaken students’ moral conscience in their early professional studies and create a professional ethos or culture appropriate for the profession (Eléxpuru, Bolívar, 2004). It is argued that training professionals does not only entail providing them with specific knowledge and techniques for solving given problems, but rather that they should learn how to behave in line with an internal ethical sensibility. Training should focus on civil responsibility and citizenship, deontology, participation in service-led projects, and the development of autonomy and decision-making (Naval et al., 2011). This approach is what Martínez (2006) calls “*human, personal and social learning*” (87), which has the ultimate aim of self-awareness relative to one’s own attitudes, interests and values and encourages moral development through the use of dilemmas stemming from professional practice.

### **Aim of the Present Work**

The project outlined in the present article is coordinated by the University of Granada, Spain. The aim of the study is to contribute to fostering competence in the area of ethical commitment, during the teaching practice assignment (practicum) of the Teacher Training degree (Early Years). The vehicle for the study is a series of seminars linked to the practicum and a range of associated tasks. The specific objectives of the work are:

- to encourage recognition of the impact of the practicum on student learning, among the key protagonists, namely the academic tutors (university lecturers), the professional tutors (school teachers) and the students themselves;

- to design seminars following the parameters of professionalism (ethics) and professionalization (knowledge);
  - provide the practicum with content and a systematic structure by means of the reflective seminars;
  - experience the use of case studies as an active methodology to develop ethical commitment during the practicum;
  - develop a virtual learning/reflection journal to guide the development of the seminar sessions;
- create learning materials specifically to stimulate the development of ethical commitment (professionalism) during the seminars;
- compile printed and / or digital material related to the ethical commitment of the educator.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The practicum is an assignment that is split into two parts. The first, Practicum I, is undertaken by students in their third year of the Degree in Teacher Training (Early Years Education) at the University of Granada, Spain. The second, Practicum II, is completed in the fourth year of the degree. The present study focuses entirely on Practicum I, with 141 third-year students participating in the sample, out of a total of 251 on this Practicum. Applying simple random sampling, and considering the population to be finite, according to Tagliacarne (1968) we would require a minimum of 130 participants, which has been exceeded.

### ***Context of the Study***

*“If a university education is to also include ethical learning that is effective, we need to construct spaces in which such values are present in a routine, habitual and daily manner”* (Martínez, Tey, 2008, 28). The teacher-training placement can provide such a space. Zabalza (2003, 2011) understands a practicum to be the period of training that the students spend in working contexts pertinent to the profession in question: in factories, firms, services, etc.; it constitutes, therefore, a training phase <...> that students spend outside the University, working with professionals from the sector in real-life work scenarios. The major contribution of this time is that it brings together academic and professional training, which makes it possible to integrate knowledge with skills, attitudes and values that enable individuals to become better professionals and better people.

The learning experience presented in this work was carried out during the weekly seminars. From our perspective, the seminar offers the space and time in which the endeavours of the university lecturer as academic tutor come into their own. It is the moment for deconstructing reality, in which the tutor helps to break down daily reality for the student, to ‘label’ it and attach the appropriate theoretical name to what they see (Pérez,

2011). It is the contrast between “reality / lecture notes from the degree” and the place where the student’s professionalism and ethical commitment begin to be made visible.

### ***Procedures and Instruments***

First, we established the attitudes the students presented regarding professional ethics. For this purpose we used the approach designed by Hirsch (2005), the Attitude Scale About Professional Ethics. This was a five-point scale on which 1 represented “totally disagree” and 5 represented “entirely agree”, which we distributed amongst the 141 participating students during the first seminar.

Second, we designed the seminars via which a series of stories was to be developed. On the one hand, the design was based on parameters of professionalism and professionalization. It is important to distinguish these two concepts, as teachers need to be aware of how the practicum might be focused: towards professionalism (the political–social)?; towards professionalization (more geared to knowledge and autonomy)?; or towards responsible conduct (more of the ethical dimension) that distinguishes one’s professional identity? While it is important not to overlook any of these aspects, it is the second and third dimensions that should be foremost in the student’s practical learning experience. On the other hand, the seminars were organized applying the active methodology of case studies (Campos et al., 2008; Exley, Dennick, 2007; Nilson, 2010) which was carried out by means of the following steps: a) forming the groups; b) setting aside time to clarify doubts and queries regarding the situation being studied; c) group-work; d) capturing and organizing data: reflecting on the experience and recommending actions that contribute to resolving the issue, proposing alternatives or addressing the dilemma; e) delivering a verbal or written report in which the students debate, share and exchange ideas; and f) concluding with an overview of the case by the lecturer and final group discussion.

The seminars were carried out over the course of four months of teacher-training practice, once a week for two hours each session. Of the 13 seminars, ten were organized in small-group format, comprising only those students supervised by a given academic tutor and addressing topics related to teaching practice. The three remaining seminars were in large-group format, bringing all the students together at the beginning, middle and end of the practicum.

Each of the two hours was devoted to a different topic aimed at enabling students to acquire professional competences and, in particular, ethical commitment. The opening of each session was spent explaining the different sections and topics for observation by the students in the schools, including: school context; adaptation period; activities; routines; classroom discipline; child development; diversity in the classroom; and the school’s teaching methodology. The students were given support tools to help them in their observations and reflections, such as a two-page theoretical summary to refresh their memory of what they had already studied during their course to date and an online bibliographical source. They were also given tables and questions to provide guidance on the topic they were to observe and compare in school during the week. For the remainder

of each session students were invited to study professional ethical commitment and related competences, following the case study sequence outlined above. To this end, a story was read in the seminar and students had to complete a template, in accordance with the recommendations of Warnick and Silverman (2011). These authors assert that the use of a schema to resolve case study analysis provides a guide in relation to a given situation; it is not about producing absolute answers, but rather helping students to systematize an objective procedure in ethical decision-making and thus avoid unnecessary relativism.

On the basis that “*attitudes are not possible to evaluate directly; they are inferred via visible actions*” (Bolívar, 1995, 94), in order to be sure that the present work was truly stimulating professional ethical competence among the students we required the collaboration of the teachers (professional tutors) at the schools. Their task consisted of testing, in the day-to-day activities of the students in the classroom, whether they demonstrated attitudes suggesting ethical commitment. To help teachers in this task we provided them with the following indicators to assess the performance of the students, specifically; their willingness to behave in a socially desirable manner; their behaviour, their capacity to show respect and tolerance; and their awareness of the fact of ethical commitment. In addition, as professional tutors we asked them to note in writing what *being an ethical professional* meant to them.

The students were assessed by the professional tutors using these indicators, on the basis of two instruments. The first was an observation scale that we adapted from Hirsch (2005) and reduced to 20 questions. The tutor observed the conduct of each student during their time in the classroom, indicating to what extent they had perceived each behaviour (1 = not at all, 2 = rarely, 3 = sufficiently, 4 = to a significant degree, 5 = frequently).

The second measurement instrument was a *biogram*, a simple graphic representation of the individual’s learning trajectory in a biographical context (Domingo, 1999). In completing the *biogram*, tutors were asked to highlight particular events or behaviours amongst the students that caught their attention.

## Results

Table provides a picture of the results obtained from the project. The content refers to the descriptive data on the attitudes shown by these aspiring teachers towards professional ethics.



*Table. Average and Standard Deviation (SD)*

Professional ethics items	Av.	SD
I like to deal with professionals who have sound scientific knowledge	4.28	.78
I feel better when I am mindful of the professional needs of my colleagues	3.89	.86
I am prepared to accept the consequences of my professional errors	4.67	.51
I like dealing with professionals who take my opinion into account	<b>4.80</b>	.47
Acquiring new professional knowledge is satisfying	<b>4.79</b>	.45
Upholding confidentiality is important in professional life	4.53	.71
I am satisfied with the profession I have chosen	<b>4.79</b>	.53
Keeping one's knowledge up to date is essential to being a good professional	4.69	.54
I like it when my colleagues value how I deal with people	4.70	.55
Fulfilling my professional commitments on time is important	4.67	.53
It is a major achievement to be doing professionally what I most enjoy	<b>4.81</b>	.53
If I am not continually learning I will not be able to deal with new situations and professional challenges	4.13	.81
I don't need to put myself in the place of my clients or users to understand their needs	<b>2.17</b>	1.29
It is easier to do the work if one feels identified with the profession	4.31	.81
I believe people who think they know it all in the profession are not to be trusted	3.64	.88
The solution to the problems of society is a technical matter that does not require the citizens to be listened-to	<b>2.25</b>	1.33
So as not to make mistakes in my professional capacity, I must be aware of the limits of my knowledge and skills	4.09	.85
The profession is a source of identity for its members	3.85	.88
I don't like having to continuously learn	<b>2.10</b>	1.09
I think I can resolve major professional issues by listening to others	4.15	.78
I must gain the confidence of the people for whom I work by acting with honesty	4.50	.65
I behave like a good professional when I am being sensitive to the needs of others	4.34	.79
I am prepared to take time over updating my knowledge regarding aspects of my profession	4.52	.58
I prefer working as part of a team because the result is of a higher quality	3.89	.95
There are ethical decisions of such importance in my profession that they cannot be left only to the criteria of organizations	4.04	.78
Doing the right thing professionally enables me to be at ease with myself	4.43	.74
I am prepared to spend money on my training	4.11	.81
Institutions that do not encourage team-work amongst their professionals are making a mistake	3.91	.85

So long as science and technology continue to make advances, there is no need to be concerned about their consequences	<b>1.86</b>	.93
When exercising my profession it is of great help to have a positive attitude in the face of difficult situations and challenges	4.38	.75
I am worried that I might end up conducting my profession simply out of routine	3.97	1.02
I am convinced that in order to be a good professional I will have to make sacrifices	4.11	.92
I may need training in ethics so as to be able to deal with conflicts in my professional work	3.96	.85
To make good professional decisions one has to have self-confidence	4.52	.65
I think it's necessary to do new things to keep progressing in the profession	4.64	.55
Working hard is a part of my personal development	4.34	.74
I consider it essential to take into account ethical issues when exercising my profession	4.09	.85
I should not take major professional decisions without first assessing their consequences	4.46	.72
I enjoy having to learn something new	4.46	.68
The solution to the problems of society is not the job of teaching professionals	<b>2.03</b>	1.14
It's good to have aspirations, but not unbounded ambition	3.84	.99
To exercise my profession well I cannot limit my development solely to technical skills	4.20	.71
To be a good professional I cannot ignore the problems of the society in which I live	4.54	.64
I am not prepared to exercise my profession just for the money	4.34	.89
I think it is wise to take the risk of getting things wrong as a part of improving my professional practice	4.31	.73
In the profession, helping others is more important than achieving success	4.31	.75
It's not essential that I practice the values of my profession to be able to work in that profession	<b>1.90</b>	.97
What mainly interests me about my profession is the money and prestige it can give me	<b>1.67</b>	.92
Professional success means nothing if it does not enable me to be a better person	3.96	1.00
A job well done is worth nothing if it does not contribute to helping others	4.14	.89
A good professional should take the time to assess the consequences of their actions	4.25	.76
I chose this career so as to be helpful to people	4.11	.91
Coherence with one's ethical principles is more important than earning money	4.10	.85
I respect the opinions of clients and users regarding my professional work	4.39	.71
I convey my own values when exercising my profession	4.45	.71

These findings indicate that for the majority of future Early Years teachers: they enjoy dealing with professionals that take their opinion into account; they find it satisfying to acquire new professional knowledge; they are satisfied with the profession of their choice; they understand it to be a major achievement to do professionally what they most enjoy; they are able to put themselves in the position of the children to understand their needs; they understand that the solution to societal problems requires the citizens to be listened-to; they enjoy continuing learning and development; they believe it is important to be concerned about the advances made by science and technology; they think it is essential to understand and practice the values of the profession in order to work in that profession; and, lastly, what matters least to them in their profession is earning money and prestige. We should point out that none of the items left the students feeling indifferent as all the scores were either above or below 3.

## Conclusion

As a result of the present work we did not expect to make the participants more ethical, but rather to help them to think about their professional performance from an ethical perspective – that was, to enable them to reflect on whether their conduct was appropriate, in light of the norms, duties and responsibilities pertinent to the teaching profession.

Specifically, through this experience we have succeeded in:

- stimulating reasoning and reflection amongst the students in their decision-making and professional performance, and encouraging them to inwardly absorb guidelines based on ethical parameters that enable them to resolve situations they are facing, efficiently and effectively;
- transmitting to future teachers that the subjects they studied and the attitude with which they approached their profession were of equal importance. In other words, this experience enabled them to see that it was of no use to achieve outstanding grades if they were then unable to exercise their chosen profession from an attitude of being of service to others and with professional integrity;
- responding to the demands of the Delors Report (1996). The initial training received by students must be in tune with the conclusion of this report, which highlights the need to educate people in how to acquire knowledge, learn to learn, learn to live with others, and learn to be. This conclusion calls for Education Faculties to commit to fostering the ethical–professional commitment of their students throughout their course of study;
- producing an excellent professional. In accordance with Martínez (2010), being an excellent professional requires one to be both competent and upstanding, and for this three basic requirements must be fulfilled: to be well informed in the sphere of the profession, make prudent decisions when exercising one’s profession, and

demonstrate the moral feelings that are congruent with the activity in question. That is to say, competent professionals must be morally upright. The adjective 'excellent' can only be applied to those professionals who are ethically mature. Our students must be clear that it is not enough to possess comprehensive knowledge, or to put what they know into practice (know-how and procedures), but that they must also display decision-making in their daily work that conforms to professional ethics – knowing how to relate to others, and knowing how to be (attitude).

Ultimately, we got the students to demonstrate courage in the face of responsibility during the practicum. One must not remain impassive when faced with a difficult situation. Being mindful of the personal dignity of the other person means being aware of the limits that need to be imposed in order to make a legitimate educational intervention (García et al., 2010). During the practicum the attitude of the students is put to the test as they are witness to a range of challenges, in response to which they must act and this involves taking a personal stance. Circumstances permitting, they are able to demonstrate their skills as a teacher.

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## Profesinės etinės kompetencijos plėtojimas pedagoginės praktikos metu

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### Santrauka

Specialistai, įgiję universitetinį išsilavinimą, turi būti sukaupę ne tik žinių, kurios būtinos profesinėje veikloje, bet ir gebėti vadovautis etikos principais, kurie užtikrintų atsakingą ir visuomenės gerovei reikalingą profesinę veiklą. Tyrime, pristatomame šiame straipsnyje, analizuojamos būsimųjų mokytojų etinės kompetencijos plėtros ir atsidavimo darbui problemos. Tyrimo dalyviai turėjo galimybę kurti užduotis, kurios skatino refleksiją, kritiką ir etinį sąmoningumą.

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**Esminiai žodžiai:** etika, praktinis mokymas, profesinės kompetencijos, žinios, universitetas.

Įteikta / Received 2014-12-14  
Priimta / Accepted 2015-01-12