

Forging Future Moral Leaders: The Role of Pre-Service Teacher Education in Countering Societal Moral Decline

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ABSTRACT

The societal moral crisis, characterized by the degradation of ethics and social responsibility, poses a significant challenge to national sustainability. Education, particularly pre-service teacher education programs, holds a crucial role as the vanguard in addressing this issue. This article aims to analyze the strategic role of pre-service teacher education in shaping prospective teachers into agents of moral change, capable of confronting and countering the trend of societal moral decline. Employing a conceptual analysis and literature review approach, this paper examines how pre-service education programs can systematically integrate character development. The analysis reveals that the role of prospective teachers transcends mere knowledge transfer, demanding that they become moral exemplars who internalize values such as integrity, empathy, and social responsibility. Effective pre-service education programs must equip prospective teachers with competencies in moral literacy, character-based pedagogy, critical thinking regarding social issues, and the ability to foster empathy within the classroom. This paper concludes that transforming the pre-service teacher education curriculum—with an explicit focus on character formation—is a fundamental investment in 'forging' a future generation of leaders who are not only academically competent but also morally exemplary.

Keywords: Character Education, Pre-Service Teachers, Moral Decline, Teacher Exemplarity, Moral Competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary era presents a striking paradox: while human civilization witnesses an unprecedented acceleration in technological advancement and globalization, it concurrently faces a significant erosion of the societal moral fabric. This material progress does not automatically correlate with ethical maturity. On the contrary, the public sphere is increasingly characterized by a degradation of ethics, rising intolerance, and the weakening of social cohesion and responsibility. This condition collectively indicates a systemic and profound moral crisis, one that threatens the very foundation of a nation's sustainability [1].

The manifestations of this crisis are observable across various facets of life, from the proliferation of disinformation that corrodes public trust to the normalization of corruptive behaviors and the diminishment of interpersonal respect. These symptoms are not isolated incidents but are representative of a broader shift in values, where virtues such as honesty, empathy, and integrity have been relegated to the periphery. This challenge is further complicated by the penetration of digital technology, which, without a robust moral filter, can accelerate the spread of divisive narratives and unethical behaviors.

In confronting this existential challenge, educational institutions have historically been positioned as the primary bulwark. Education, in its ideal conception, has never been a mere process of knowledge transfer. Far beyond that, it is an incubator for character, a space where a society's cherished values are instilled, nurtured, and transmitted from one generation to the next. Its most fundamental function is to form a complete human being—an individual who is not only intellectually competent but also morally mature and possessed of integrity [2].

In practice, however, this essential mission of education is under immense pressure. The metric-driven demands of the modern era, coupled with curricular standardization and global competition, have pushed educational systems to prioritize cognitive academic achievements. Consequently, the moral and affective domains of education have often been marginalized, treated as "soft skills" of lesser importance than the mastery of science and technology. This shift in focus has inadvertently weakened education's role as a moral incubator.

The epicenter of the effectiveness of character education lies in the figure of the teacher. The success or failure of any moral education initiative ultimately hinges upon the capacity of the teacher to act as a moral exemplar. Teachers are not merely facilitators of information; they are architects of character whose actions, words, and

entire demeanor inside and outside the classroom constitute the most influential hidden curriculum for students. Without teachers of character, even the most sophisticated character education programs become hollow rhetoric.

Herein lies the most crucial problem. The most fundamental weak point in the effort to revitalize character education is not found with in-service teachers, but at their formative foundation: pre-service teacher education. Numerous studies consistently demonstrate that these preparatory programs often fail to adequately equip teacher candidates with the theoretical frameworks and, more importantly, the pedagogical competencies to navigate the complexities of moral education in the real world [3,4].

The consequences of this preparatory gap are severe. Teacher candidates enter the profession ill-prepared, often perceiving character education as an administrative burden or an ancillary subject rather than the core of their professional identity and practice. This failure to internalize their role as moral agents leaves them ill-equipped to confront and counter the trends of moral decline that their students bring from external environments, thereby inadvertently perpetuating the very cycle of the problem.

Proceeding from this critical analysis of the problem, this article undertakes three interconnected primary objectives. First, this research aims to deeply analyze the strategic role of pre-service teacher education as the most fundamental and high-leverage point of intervention in the effort to create agents of moral change. This analysis will move beyond mere affirmation of this role to dissect why this point of intervention is far more effective than later-stage interventions.

Furthermore, the second objective is to comprehensively identify and formulate the essential moral competencies that must be an inseparable part of a pre-service teacher's graduation profile. These competencies encompass multiple dimensions, from moral literacy and emotional intelligence to empathy and the capacity for critical thinking regarding contemporary ethical dilemmas. This identification is crucial as a basis for redesigning relevant and impactful educational programs.

Ultimately, as the culmination of this analysis, this paper proposes a conceptual framework for the transformation of curriculum and pedagogy within pre-service teacher education programs. This framework is designed to explicitly and systematically prioritize character development, no longer as a peripheral component, but as the very heart of the entire educational process. Thus, this research is not merely diagnostic but also prescriptive, offering an adaptable model for 'forging' a future generation of truly exceptional educators.

The Concept of Character Education: Beyond Mere Behavior

In contemporary academic discourse, character education has evolved from a mere behavioral intervention program into a holistic approach to the development of the whole person. By definition, character education is the systematic effort to cultivate virtues that are fundamental to both the individual and society. The most influential framework in this field often refers to the tripartite model popularized by Lickona, which encompasses moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action [5]. This model asserts that complete character does not end with a conceptual understanding of what is right, but also involves emotional commitment and manifestation in tangible behavior.

However, a sharper analysis reveals that the implementation of this model is often trapped in a shallow, technical-rational approach, where character is reduced to a checklist of traits. Scholars such as Kristjánsson critique this approach and advocate for the return of character education to its philosophical roots in Aristotelian virtue ethics [6]. In this perspective, character is not about "what one should do," but rather "what kind of person one should be." The focus shifts from adherence to external rules to the cultivation of internal dispositions or virtues such as practical wisdom (phronesis), courage, justice, and compassion. Thus, authentic character education aims to shape being, not merely doing.

The Modern Moral Crisis: Challenges in the Digital and Post-Truth Era

The urgency of character education becomes increasingly relevant when confronted with the complex moral landscape of the modern era. The current crisis is not merely a regression to an idealized past, but a multifaceted phenomenon driven by contemporary structural forces. One of the primary drivers is hyper-individualism, where an overemphasis on personal autonomy often erodes a sense of collective responsibility and concern for the common good. This is exacerbated by a post-truth intellectual climate, where the lines between fact and fiction are blurred, and truth claims are often judged based on emotion or group affiliation rather than empirical evidence.

This condition is dramatically intensified by the architecture of digital and social media. Echo chambers and filter bubbles create polarized realities, inhibit empathetic dialogue, and often become fertile ground for the spread

of hatred and disinformation. For the younger generation of digital natives, this challenge is particularly acute. They must navigate their moral identities and relationships in environments that are often anonymous, unmoderated, and fraught with ethical pitfalls, from cyberbullying to online radicalization. This crisis demands more than mere moral advice; it demands sophisticated moral competence to think critically, empathize, and act ethically in a fragmented world

The Teacher as a Moral Exemplar: A Professional Competence

In response to the challenges of the moral crisis, all relevant literature points to one central figure: the teacher¹⁸. The role of the teacher as a moral exemplar is not a cliché but a fundamental pedagogical pillar. However, a critical analysis moves beyond the passive notion of the teacher as a "role model." Being a moral exemplar is an active and deliberate professional practice, not merely a byproduct of a good personality. It involves what Fenstermacher terms "manner," which is the way teachers embody intellectual and moral virtues in every pedagogical interaction—from how they respond to student questions and resolve conflicts to how they demonstrate intellectual humility [7].

Furthermore, this concept of exemplarity is rooted in the idea of the teacher's practical wisdom or *phronesis*. A teacher of character not only knows moral principles but also possesses the wisdom to apply them judiciously in the ambiguous and contextual ethical dilemmas of daily classroom life. Therefore, moral exemplarity must be viewed as a complex professional competence that can and must be developed through education and reflection, not simply assumed as an innate trait. This shifts the paradigm from merely "recruiting good people" to "educating morally competent professionals."

The Strategic Position of Pre-Service Teachers: A Critical Intervention Point

If the teacher is the center of the solution, then pre-service teacher education is the most strategic and high-leverage point of intervention. It is during this phase that the professional identity, pedagogical beliefs, and moral dispositions of a prospective teacher are formally shaped for the first time. Intervening at this stage is far more effective than later remedial efforts, as beliefs formed during teaching practice tend to be difficult to change. Thus, pre-service programs hold the key to breaking the cycle in which morally underprepared teachers produce students who are also morally vulnerable.

Unfortunately, extensive empirical evidence reveals a significant gap between what is needed and what is provided. Many teacher education programs worldwide are criticized for focusing too heavily on a technical-rational approach—emphasizing instructional strategies and classroom management—while neglecting the inherent ethical and moral dimensions of the teaching profession. As a result, many teacher candidates report feeling unprepared to handle complex moral issues in the classroom and often lack the language or framework to reflect on their practice from an ethical standpoint. This structural failure to explicitly and systematically integrate character development into the teacher education curriculum represents the greatest obstacle to forming a generation of educators capable of meeting the challenges of the current moral crisis.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing a conceptual analysis and systematic literature review design. This approach was chosen because the research objective is not to test a hypothesis empirically, but rather to construct a coherent theoretical argument, critically analyze existing concepts, and synthesize diverse ideas to generate a new framework. Conceptual analysis allows the researcher to dissect and clarify the meaning and relationships between key variables—such as character education, moral exemplarity, and pre-service teacher education—while a systematic literature review ensures that the resulting argument is grounded in relevant, credible, and comprehensive academic evidence.

The data sources for this study are secondary in nature, derived entirely from academic literature. The data collection process was conducted by searching reputable international journal databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The inclusion criteria for the selected literature were: (1) publication in a peer-reviewed journal; (2) relevance to the core research topics, namely character education, teacher professional ethics, and teacher education curricula; and (3) a publication date largely within the last 10-15 years to ensure relevance to contemporary issues, with some exceptions for foundational seminal works.

Data analysis in this study utilizes the thematic synthesis technique. This process involves three primary stages. The first stage is coding, in which the researcher systematically reads all collected literature and identifies key

concepts, ideas, and findings. The second stage is the development of descriptive themes, where similar codes are grouped to form themes that summarize the content of the literature. The third stage, which forms the core of the analysis, is the generation of analytical themes. At this stage, the researcher moves beyond summarization to interpret, compare, and critique the relationships between themes in order to construct a new argument or conceptual model that answers the research questions. This process ensures that the findings of the review are not a mere compilation, but a sharp and contributory synthesis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

The discussion will presents a critical analysis by placing the key findings from the source document into a dialogue with the broader academic discourse. The objective is to debate, strengthen, and add nuance to the paper's main argument. This analysis is divided into two primary focal points: (1) deconstructing the essential competencies of the teacher as a moral agent, and (2) reformulating the vision of pre-service teacher education as an arena for character formation.

3.2. Discussion

Deconstructing the Teacher's Moral Competencies: Between the Ideal Exemplar and Professional Reality

One of the most fundamental findings of this analysis is the emphasis on the teacher's role as a moral exemplar, or *teladan*. This idea, deeply rooted in the national educational philosophy through the adage "*Ing ngarsa sung tuladha*", posits that a teacher's consistent behavior in demonstrating honesty, discipline, and responsibility is the primary medium of character education. This finding resonates strongly with the academic literature. The concept is parallel to the notion of "manner" proposed by Fenstermacher, wherein a teacher's virtues are visibly manifested in every pedagogical act [7]. Sanger & Osguthorpe further conceptualize this as the core of "the moral work of teaching," which is inseparable from professional practice [1].

However, it is here that a crucial academic debate emerges. Is being an exemplar an innate trait or a professional competence that can be trained? If viewed as an innate trait, the solution would be to simply "recruit good people." In contrast, Schussler, Stooksberry, & Bercaw argue that the moral and ethical development of teachers is a professional trajectory that can and must be systematically cultivated [8]. Furthermore, Kristjánsson warns against a superficial understanding of exemplarity, which risks becoming mere behavioral mimicry [6]. Without a foundation of practical wisdom (*phronesis*)—the ability to reason ethically in ambiguous situations—exemplarity can become a fragile moral veneer. The findings in this paper push the debate toward the second view: that being an exemplar is a complex professional competence that must be an explicit goal of teacher education programs.

Another essential competence identified is empathy and social concern, which, according to the source document, should be instilled through tangible activities such as community service. This finding aligns with theories in moral psychology that emphasize the importance of an "ethic of care" and affective development as the foundation for prosocial behavior [9]. The debate in the literature, however, lies not in the "what" (the importance of empathy) but in the "how" (the method of instilling it). Thornberg & Oğuz found that many pre-service teachers, despite agreeing on the importance of empathy, often lack the pedagogical skills to facilitate social activities effectively [3]. Without deep facilitation, such activities risk becoming mere formalities that fail to touch students' moral dispositions. This gap between intention and implementation is the primary challenge, wherein this paper argues that pre-service programs must explicitly teach the pedagogy of empathy, not just encourage social activities.

A New Vision for Teacher Education: From Technical Transmission to Character Transformation

Another central finding is the call to integrate character values into the entire curriculum, rather than isolating them in a separate course. This recommendation directly supports the consensus in character education research, which indicates that an "infusion" or cross-curricular approach is far more effective than separate, add-on programs [10,11]. An integrated approach allows pre-service teachers to see how moral values are relevant in every discipline, from honesty in data analysis to empathy in literature.

Nevertheless, this call for integration sparks a fierce debate regarding its feasibility and implementation. Cochran-Smith critically highlights that the teacher education curriculum is already densely packed with various technical and theoretical demands [12]. Adding the complex task of "infusing moral values" without providing a

clear model, sufficient time, and adequate training for teacher educators themselves can lead to shallow and inconsistent implementation. Revell & Arthur also question whether all teacher educators possess the expertise to teach the moral dimensions of their respective fields [13]. In response to this debate, this paper argues that character integration is not an "add-on" but demands a fundamental redesign of the curriculum. This means the program's priorities must shift from a technical-rational paradigm to a humanistic-holistic one.

4. CLOSURE

The finding that the teacher education institution must itself function as a conducive moral ecosystem—a safe, caring, and integrity-filled environment—extends the framework of character education from K-12 schools to the higher education level [14]. This idea is conceptually powerful: how can an institution produce teachers of character if it does not practice a culture of character itself? Yet, herein lies the debate between idealism and institutional reality. Maxwell & Schwimmer highlight the inherent tension between the mission of universities, which is often driven by research metrics and competition, and the mission of forming ethical and caring professionals [15]. The findings of this paper radically challenge that status quo. It asserts that for teacher education programs specifically, the institutional ethos cannot be separated from its pedagogical mission. The teacher education institution must become the prototype of the school community it wishes to create, because ultimately, pre-service teachers teach the way they were taught.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Bagus Nurul Iman and Desy Lusiya contributed as a data collector, Hanikah contributed as an analyst in the field. Dewi Yuningsih participated as a proofreader.

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