

# Gender Differences in the Perceptions of Educational Ethical Standards

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## **Abstract**

This manuscript reviews the use of ethical standard codes in education to determine the differences in perceptions between women and men. The ethical standards listed describe Mississippi's Educator Code of Ethics, providing an overview of each code. Based on each of the Standards, a Mann-Whitney Wilcoxon methodology was used to determine variances in the beliefs of men and women. Results showed men and women are similar in their perceptions of ethical standards.

**Keywords:** Code of Ethics, Ethics, Gender, Teacher Perception

## **1. Introduction**

Many states have a set of standards or codes by which educators must govern themselves, commonly known as the Educator Code of Ethics. These codes cover many areas of an educator's roles and responsibilities in which they should exemplify ethical behavior, such as relationships with students and parents, fiscal management, and confidentiality. A code of ethics governs the duties in a particular profession to ensure that one operates with fidelity and integrity. Approximately 75% of corporate organizations in the U.S. have adopted codes of ethics (White & Montgomery, 1980; Somers, 2001). Many other professions have a code of ethics by which practitioners must adhere, such as lawyers, doctors, realtors, and nurses (Numminen et al., 2009). The establishment of codes of ethical conduct has decreased misconduct cases within other helping professions (Guarneri & Achilles, 2009). Therefore, all educators must be provided with their state or district code of ethics and be properly trained on all components to decrease the number of ethical infractions of educators. "Ethics training is an important part of educating administrators and teachers to ensure they are adequately prepared to make professional decisions" (Beck & Murphy; Hutchings, as cited in Davenport, Thompson, & Templeton, 2015).

Educators are expected to govern themselves by high standards of moral and ethical conduct since they hold important positions requiring a high level of public trust and

responsibility in working with children (Umpstead, Brady, Lugg, Klinker, & Thompson, 2013). At one time, educators were believed to be individuals who held some of the highest morals and values in society; however, recent incidents and scandals have raised concerns about the need to ensure educators are aware of appropriate ethical behavior (Davenport, Thompson, and Templeton, 2015). Educators should first encounter these standards during their education preparation program. According to Davenport et al., many states, such as Texas and Mississippi, now require educator preparation programs to incorporate instruction on educator code of ethics into their curriculum. The Mississippi Process and Performance Guidelines require that educator preparation programs within the state embed and assess the Mississippi Educator Code of Conduct and professional dispositions at multiple checkpoints throughout the program (Mississippi Department of Education, 2021).

This study explores whether gender play a role in the perceptions of ethics in teacher education. Research shows how men perceive implications of ethical standards differently from women. The inconsistencies in how male and female leaders interpret the ethical standards can adversely affect the organizations' practices and cause conflict and discombobulation within.

This study is significance due to the rise of women in leadership positions in k-12 settings. It also illustrates the different roles that men and women play in ethical decision in education with focus on two questions:

1. How do gender ethical perceptions influence ethics in teacher education?
2. What are the differences in gender perceptions of ethical standards?

### **Ethical Standards**

The Mississippi Educator Code of Ethics Standards of Codes consists of 10 standards (Mississippi Department of Education, 2011). **Standard 1**, Professional Conduct, focuses on various aspects of the job, including maintaining high standards, engaging in a variety of individual and collaborative learning, providing professional education services in a nondiscriminatory manner, and maintaining competence regarding skills and knowledge.

**Standard 2**, Trustworthiness includes properly representing facts concerning an educational matter, advocating for fair and equitable opportunities for all children, and embodying the characteristics of honesty, diplomacy, tact, and fairness for students. Educators play a critical and influential role in children's lives; therefore, they should always display appropriate and ethical behavior in front of their students (Guarneri & Achilles, 2009). **Standard 3**, Unlawful Acts, emphasizes that educators abide by federal, state, and local statutes and local school boards' policies. "In many states, codes of ethics are tied to discipline systems because educational professionals are legally obligated to care for the children they oversee and instruct. This legal duty can be enforced directly by government bodies" (Umpstead, Brady, Lugg, Klinker, & Thompson, 2013, p. 187). **Standard 4**, Educator/Student Relationship, is often considered one of the most important and violated standards in education. This standard elucidates that educators should fulfill the mentor role, advocate for students, and maintain a

healthy professional relationship. Thus, when educators engage in inappropriate relationships, it negatively impacts the students and/or their families and may have lasting effects. Violation of Standard 4, can have severe consequences on the educator, such as discharge from employment, suspension or revocation of the educator's license, civil liability, and criminal sanctions (Wurtele, Mathews, & Kenny, 2019).

**Standard 5** addresses Educator/Collegial Relationships, which explains that educators must be careful to have a professional relationship with their colleagues and refrain from personal intimate relationships in the workplace. Further, they should not discuss information about their personal lives; discuss engage in controversial about religion or politics; or exploit their counterparts through bribery or any act of extortion. **Standard 6** discusses alcohol, drugs, and tobacco use or possession. This standard prohibits alcohol, tobacco, or non-approved drugs in on-campus facilities and school functions off-campus. It also reiterates that any observation should be documented and reported to the appropriate personnel. Standard 7 focuses on Public Fund and properties, thus stating that educators must use school funds or any items the school owns for school-related purposes only, and appropriately document any authorizations to expend those funds. Further, **Standard 7** prohibits the embezzlement of funds and the use of school equipment for personal reasons.

**Standard 8** discusses Remunerative Conduct, which states that employees must “maintain integrity” in the acceptance of gifts, favor or any extra compensation, whether physical or monetary, follow the school procedures and guidelines. **Standard 9**, Maintenance of Confidentiality, explains that employees must not share students' records with any third party unless approval is granted. Further, the educator cannot share confidential information with the students, such as the answers to an exam, prior to administering them. Lastly, **Standard 10** deals with Breach of Contract or Abandonment of Employment. When educators are hired, they are expected to fulfill the contract for the time specified. Failure to carry out that obligation for the said contract is a strict violation of ethical behavior and could result in the suspension of the educator license for one year.

### **Incidents of Violation of Standards and Ethics among School District Educators**

There has been an influx of educators who have violated the code of ethics throughout the school districts in the state. The names of educators and their violations are presented in the Licensure Commission meetings, stating whether they were expelled or suspended from the profession, the length of time of the expulsion or suspension, or whether their educator's licenses were revoked and the length of time of the revocation. For example, a 22-year-old teacher engaged in sexual acts with a student under the age of 19 and distributed material with apparent obscenity. Within a year, another 22-year-old teacher was indicted for engaging in sexual misconduct with a student under the age of 19. Further, a teacher in a rural school district's licenses were revoked because she allegedly changed the responses of her students on a state curriculum exam and aided students in choosing the correct responses on the exam. In another rural district, a football coach sent text messages to a 16-year-old female in the school where he coached. His text messages included the coach complimenting the student on looking nice in jeans; another text stated that he was about to

take a nap so that he could “dream.” Texting a student is a violation of ethical behavior of an educator. One teacher’s license was suspended because he abandoned his classroom and did not notify school officials of his absences. Apparently, he completed a day’s work and never returned, never responded to attempts to contact him, and never provided any professional documentation about his departure. Subsequently, he violated Standard 10, breaching his contract.

Occurrences and recurrences of violations of any of the ten ethics have prompted district and state educational leaders to reevaluate the need for a more structured series of ongoing training, reiterating the standards and providing educators a more secure mean of communication in regard to questions they may have as they face incidents or any potential to violate any standard.

### **Incorporating of Standards in Curriculum**

The college of education featured in this study ensures that all preparation programs incorporate the content of the standards throughout the curriculum. Since the state department of education highly encourages that the standards are introduced and reiterated in teacher preparation programs, the college adheres to this mandate by embedding content in courses, includes assignments and activities that assess knowledge of the standards at various checkpoints in the curriculum. Further, the college requires students to attend seminars, workshops, webinars, and/or leadership forums and academies that engage students in opportunities to reinforce knowledge of appropriate, professional practices of educators. As a prerequisite for student- teaching placement, teacher candidates are required to attend a workshop in which they are provided in-depth training and coverage of the Mississippi Educator Code of Ethics and expectations of dispositions. The interactive training allows candidates to ask questions, respond to codes, and receive practical examples of code adherence and violations. Special emphasis is placed on Standard 4, Educator/Student Relationships, due to the number of teachers who violated this standard. Unfortunately, there have been instances where educators formed inappropriate relationships with students, such as communication outside of school hours and romantic/sexual relationships that have caused imprisonment or revocation of licenses. “By the nature of the role, a teacher has inherent authority over a student, and as such, a sexual interaction between a teacher and a student represents a violation of boundaries” (Fromuth & Holt, 2008, p. 165). Students learn, through content and practice, that it is important for educators to use their position of authority with prudence to ensure the safety of all students and to ensure that they understand, respect, and abide by all the standards in the Code of Ethics.

### **2. Literature Review**

Research from Heinz, M., Keane, E., & Davison, K. (2021) indicates that because teaching is often associated with women, this may impact the number of males teaching in post-secondary education significantly higher than in k-12 education. Findings from the authors argue that secondary education requires much more nurture and caring, which is often a greater trait of female teachers. In a conversation piece, panelists Brunet & Currie

(2021) seem to agree that masculinity and femininity are very ambiguous and often polarized rather than understanding that these traits can be irrespective of gender. In addition, there is a consensus that better training at the post-secondary level will help understand how to handle the gender differences in candidates and will help move the profession to new heights as candidates will have different needs in their development as professionals. For instance, how to handle these needs properly and ethically due to the sensitive nature of their gender, age, and/or other characteristics.

Further, it is important to examine how this educational development of educators contributes to ethical understanding. That is, whether teachers who have had higher education can warrant engaging in more ethical decision-making. According to an article by Gurley and Dagley (2020), teachers who have completed a master's in educational leadership programs had higher confidence regarding issues of moral behavior. Perhaps, one could infer that these programs' curriculum offers more ethics classes than undergraduate degrees. This is further endorsed by research from Christian and Pacino (2013), which calls for more ethical classes. The researchers argue that this approach to education can help by creating environments conducive to high ethical standards.

Such curriculum must be tailored to include legal issues in Ethics moving forward. Using anti-bullying laws as an example, a study from Kueny and Zirkel (2012) highlights an important issue of distinguishing between what behaviors violate the law and which are unethical. Teachers must understand how to handle these situations. If teachers take classes addressing this in their college studies, they may be more inclined to have a better understanding before taking a job.

In the Code of Ethics in teacher education, the role of emotions is often an overlooked subject. Educators often disagree and engage in emotional decisions when dealing with politics in the classroom and bureaucracy (Glanz, 2010). Sometimes these irrational behaviors violate ethical behavior. Research from Niesche & Haase (2012) suggests that there should be a perpetual, ongoing process rather than a specific code of ethics. In other words, the code of ethics is a living document that changes with the situation presented. Further, Burroughs & Barkauskas's (2017) research introduces the concept of social and emotional learning, or "SEL." The researchers note a lack of "ethical competence" and call for a more uniform definition regarding secondary education.

### **3. Methods**

The statistical technique used in this study is the Mann-Whitney Wilcoxon test. This statistical technique was chosen because it is a non-parametric statistical technique that analyzes the mean difference between two independent groups (men's ethical perspectives and women's ethical perspectives). The research was designed to discover if there were any significant differences between genders. Using a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree, this study included 27 survey items on the Mississippi Code of Ethics.

In this study, there were thirty-eight participants who received and completed the survey,

thus resulting in a 100% response rate. The survey was developed by college's teacher preparation faculty, with items reflective of Code of Ethics and research conducted on the pre-service educators.

The study first examined whether there would be a statistical difference in the responses of twenty-one males vs. seventeen females. Regarding the ethnicity makeup of the sample, 94.7% identified as Black or African American, 2.6% identified as White, and 2.6% identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native. The gender makeup of the study included 76.3% females, 28.9% males, and 2.6% identified as a third gender. Teachers ages 18-23 account for 36.8% of the sample, followed by 23.7% ages 24-30, 18.4% identified as ages 31-35, 10.5% responded 36-40, 7.9% responded 41-45, and lastly 2.6% responded 50 or over. Further, among the sample, elementary grades 3-5 and Pre-K-2 accounted for 32.4% of respondents, the high school reported respondents accounted for 21.6%, middle school 6-8 yielded 13.5%.

### ***Instrument's Reliability and Validity***

To ensure validity, an expert panel of practicing educators, with 10 – 25 years in education with explicit knowledge of the Mississippi Educator Code of Ethics and its components, reviewed the survey and offered feedback on the instrument and its appropriateness for its desired purpose. Panelist members were given sections of the instrument based on their experience and expertise. Based on the feedback and modification the instrument was piloted. Panelist One had more than 20 years in the field of education as a teacher, psychometrist, and professor. Panelist Two had more than 15 years in the field of education as a teacher and administrator. Panelist Three had more than 10 years of experience as a teacher. Panelist Four had more than 8 years of experience as a teacher and researcher. Panelist Five had more than 12 years of experience as a teacher and administrator. Panelist Six had more than 6 years of experience as a teacher. Panelist 7 had more than 10 years of experience as a teacher and adjunct professor.

To ensure reliability, the instrument was piloted with teacher interns with similar demographics of the actual study's participants. The results of the pilot study were analyzed for Cronbach's alpha to examine the instrument's reliability. The reliability was .825, deeming it reliable.

## **4. Results**

The result from the data showed that there were no significant differences in responses among all groups for any of the 27 items on the survey. Further, there were 19 items on the survey that had 70% or more of the respondents choosing "strongly agree," an average of 76.74% (See Table 1). Interestingly, 26% of respondents disagreed that they "need more training on the Educator Code of Ethics." In addition, 13% strongly disagreed. In terms of reprimanding educators for violation of the code of ethics (Q26), only 46% strongly agreed.



Table 1. Strongly Agree Percentages

ITEM	%
Q1. Training includes class instruction, professional development sessions, class assignments, videos or PowerPoints on ethical behavior, etc.	76
Q2. Prior to the training provided by my education program, I had little knowledge about the Educator Code of Ethics.	42
Q3. The training increased my knowledge about the Educator Code of Ethics.	76
Q4. The training is relevant to the work of educators	81
Q5. The training helps educators with making ethical decisions	84
Q6. All preservice and practicing educators should be trained on the Educator Code of Ethics	82
Q7. I am confident in my ability to make ethical decisions as an educator	84
Q8. I am satisfied with the amount and level of training on the Educator Code of Ethics I received from my teacher preparation program.	74
Q9. I need more training on the Educator Code of Ethics.	26
Q10. I believe more training on the Educator Code of Ethics will lead to less educator violations.	69
Q11. The training made me more aware of my responsibilities as an educator.	73
Q12. The training increased my knowledge of the unethical behavior of educator/student relationships, such as electronic communication/texting/phone calls, social networking, sexual contact, discrimination, etc.	75
Q13. The training increased my knowledge of the unethical behavior of educator/educator relationships, such as revealing private information, making false statements, discrimination, etc..	76
Q14. The training increased my knowledge of educator use of drugs and alcohol, such as an educators should not consume or be under the influence of alcohol while on school premises or at a school-related activity.	74
Q15. The training increased my knowledge of an educator's responsibility with public funds and property, such as not submitting fraudulent reimbursements or failure to account for funds received	74

Q16. The training increased my knowledge of the educator's responsibility concerning confidentiality of private student and educator information.	74
Q17. The training increased my knowledge of educator breach of contract and abandonment of employment and consequences, such as suspension of educator license for 1 year not fulfilling contract.	71
Q18. The training informed me on how to report educator misconduct.	76
Q19. The training provided me with real-life scenarios and examples.	76
Q20. If I am aware of an Educator Code of Ethics violation within my school, I will report the educator.	58
Q21. I believe most educators will report a Code of Ethics violation if they are aware of it.	79
Q22. When I started student teaching, I received additional training or there was some discussion of the Educator Code of Ethics <u>at my school site</u> .	63
Q23. I believe most educators follow the Educator Code of Ethics with fidelity.	53
Q24. I believe the Educator Code of Ethics is needed to help educators make ethical decisions.	74
Q25. I believe the Educator Code of Ethics lists realistic expectations for educators.	79
Q26. Educators who violate the Code of Ethics should be reprimanded.	46
Q27. Whether through personal experience or news media, I am aware of educators who have violated the Educator Code of Ethics.	58

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore whether gender played a role in the perceptions of ethics in teacher education. The study indicates that more empirical data is needed to understand the role of ethics in teacher education. The authors of this study have contributed a method that can be used by researchers to explore this topic. If done so correctly and building on this study, the future results will be promising and impactful.

While the present study yielded no statistically significant results in differences between gender, there are many key takeaways that are important to understanding this stream of research. For instance, question 9 pertained to educators self-reporting that they needed more training in ethical behavior. The p-value of .08 was close enough to be significant that it signals there needs to be more information readily available about ethics. For instance, more training and workshops could be available for educators to understand better. If done correctly, educators may be able to have more knowledge of what is expected of them and, thus, yield better results.

In addition, while no significant difference was yielded for question 8, asking educators if



they are satisfied with their level of ethical training may explain a trend. Having a .112 p-value, it appears there could be those educators who feel that more training is not needed. In other words, this may suggest that some educators either feel that they need more training or those who feel more training will not help. Thus, creating a dichotomy within the field of education on the level of understanding of the code of conduct.

## **6. Implications**

The implication of this paper is targeted at education practitioners. Perhaps K-12 teachers could be required to take a yearly online training course on the Educator Code of Ethics.

Comparable to a generalized standardized test, this could give much-needed data on ethics and create a bar to which all schools would have to meet. In other words, in addition to the much-needed workshops and training, teachers and administrators would have to obtain a set score each year and report that data. This would also give a uniform database for researchers to obtain useful findings.

## **7. Limitations**

As with all empirical studies, the present paper is not without limitations. It appears the current study may need to be built upon to tweak the methodology to have statistical findings. Having no significant results, however, has set a standard for methods of future studies. In other words, this study has limitations that scholars can use to build on this topic.

## **8. Future Research**

Future research in this field is much needed. Further, the results that may have been largely insignificant may pose an interesting scholarly debate. The insignificance may suggest the males and females view ethics similarly. Perhaps, these questions may contribute to the literature by suggesting that future researchers may want to find alternative ways to measure the intentions of this study.

- Future researchers may want to examine different angles due to the gap in data. This stream of research warrants empirical results and consistency in the field of education.
- Future researchers may expand this study to include teacher candidates from all state institutions or even expand to regional colleges/universities. Having a larger number of participants may yield different results.
- Future research may also include beginning teachers with 0-3 years of experience. This group of students should have received ethics training in their teacher preparation program; therefore, examining their application of the ethics training will be helpful to preparation programs for designing of future trainings.

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**Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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