Conceptual Article

Received: 18 September 2026
Accepted: 22 November 2026
Published: 26 November 2026

Developing a Theoretical Model of Professional Ethics Education for Preschool Education Students Through the Integration of Social Learning, Moral Development, and Self-Determination Theories

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Cite this article:

Nguyen Nguyen Binh (2026). Developing a Theoretical Model of Professional Ethics Education for Preschool Education Students Through the Integration of Social Learning, Moral Development, and Self-Determination Theories. Revista Cultura Científica, (24), pp. 2848–2856. https://doi.org/10.70517/revcc2624228

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Abstract

This article develops a theoretical model of professional ethics education for students majoring in preschool education by integrating observational learning, moral-cognitive development, and autonomous motivation, based on an analysis of foundational and contemporary scholarly literature relevant to preschool teacher education. The author proposes an integrated model with two axes that connect Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory, and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. The first axis explains behavioral mechanisms and judgment competence through the social environment, role models, and pedagogical experiences; the second clarifies the process of value internalization and the development of autonomous motivation. The two axes interact, linking cognition and motivation with ethical behavior. The conceptual analysis emphasizes the importance of moving from external compliance toward the development of autonomy and professional responsibility, providing a theoretical basis for innovating curricula and the pedagogical cultural environment in preschool teacher education.

Keywords: Professional ethics; Preschool Education; Integrated theoretical model; Moral judgment; Autonomous motivation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of comprehensive educational reform and increasing international integration, the quality of the teaching workforce, particularly preschool teachers, is subject to increasingly complex professional requirements. Given the profession's substantial emotional demands and its role in laying the foundations for children's personal and social development in early childhood, professional ethics is not merely a personal quality; it has become an important factor shaping educational quality, children's safety, and their best interests. Although domestic and international studies have affirmed the urgent importance of professional ethics education, the reviewed teacher-training literature still leaves important theoretical questions unresolved. Most studies primarily describe the current situation, administrative management, or separate solutions such as integrating course content or increasing practicum time. However, a systematic integrated theoretical framework that explains how students may develop professional ethical dispositions is still lacking.

In particular, limited research on the specific nature of preschool pedagogical work and the interconnected responsibilities of caring, nurturing, and educating young children has constrained the development of effective training approaches. Professional ethics cannot be formed formally through the imposition of standards or one-way theoretical instruction; rather, it results from complex interactions among the social environment, moral cognition, and learners' internal motivation. Therefore, developing a comprehensive theoretical model to guide professional ethics education for students majoring in preschool education has become an urgent requirement in both theoretical and practical terms.

To address this research gap, this study focuses on developing an integrated theoretical model based on the dialectical combination of three foundational theories in modern psychology and education: Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory, and Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. This integration provides a comprehensive, multidimensional analytical framework: Social Learning Theory clarifies the roles of the environment and role modeling; Moral Development Theory explains the evolution of moral thinking and judgment; while Self-Determination Theory explains the mechanisms of internalizing professional values, developing autonomous motivation, and strengthening behavioral self-regulation. In this way, the study provides a coherent theoretical basis for coordinated improvement in ethics education, responding to the continuing need for improvement in preschool teacher education.

Research on professional ethics education for student teachers in general, and preschool education students in particular, has examined curricular preparation, professional values, practical experience, and the relationship between ethical understanding and professional conduct. In Vietnam, the doctoral research of Bùi Thị Tuyết Mai [1] explored theoretical foundations and educational measures for professional ethics education in pedagogical colleges. Dương Huy Cẩn and Lê Hồng Cẩm Tú [2] examined the management of professional ethics education activities for preschool education students at Đồng Tháp University, while Nguyễn Thị Côi and Hoàng Hải Hà [3] discussed the development of teachers' professional qualities and ethics in pedagogical training. Nguyễn Thị Sen [4] considered professional ethics education for preschool education students in Điện Biên. Together, these sources underscore the importance of combining educational goals, institutional arrangements, practical training, and opportunities for reflection rather than relying solely on a prescribed code of conduct.

Research conducted within the author's own professional context is also relevant. Nguyễn Nguyên Bình and Lê Nguyễn Kim Anh [5] investigated professional ethics education among teachers in public preschools in Phú Nhuận District, Ho Chi Minh City, identifying practical limitations in educational content and implementation. A later study of students at national colleges of education [6] documented both enabling conditions and obstacles in ethics education for future preschool teachers and proposed improvements. The present study builds on this preschool-specific empirical and institutional context but has a different purpose: it seeks to clarify and integrate the explanatory mechanisms of observational learning, moral judgment, and motivation in a theoretical model. Accordingly, its contribution is a proposed conceptual integration rather than a new empirical demonstration of effectiveness.

International scholarship provides complementary evidence and pedagogical approaches. Freakley and Burgh [7] described the use of a community-of-inquiry approach to strengthen ethical thinking among teacher education students, emphasizing reasoned dialogue, examination of moral problems, and collaborative reflection. Blanuša Trošelj and Ivković [8] examined professional ethics in preschool teacher education, thereby connecting professional values with teacher preparation more directly. Chen [9] discussed curricular organization, teaching methods, and evaluation for moral education in higher education; this work addresses tertiary education generally rather than preschool teaching specifically. Similarly, the quasi-experimental study by Albooghobeish and colleagues [10] investigated professional ethics instruction among nurse anesthesia students, finding improvements in organizational commitment and job involvement. Its different disciplinary setting limits direct transfer to preschool teacher education, but its use of varied teaching methods offers a relevant pedagogical comparison. Recent educational work on self-determination theory further highlights the importance of autonomy support, competence, relatedness, and internalized motivation for learning and professional development [11].

Considered together, these studies draw attention to curricular content, social and institutional environments, practice-based learning, dialogue, and learners' active participation. They do not, however, directly establish that the particular two-axis integration proposed in this article is empirically effective. The review therefore distinguishes established findings in the cited publications from the mechanisms advanced here as a theoretical proposition. It also places greater emphasis on literature directly concerned with preschool teachers and student teachers than on broader discussions of political culture or digital transformation whose connection to professional ethics education is only indirect.

Although the above literature offers many practical perspectives and highly applicable solutions, the literature review indicates that several core research gaps remain to be addressed in this study.

First, many reported ethics-education approaches remain isolated or fragmented, focusing mainly on revising the content of individual courses or increasing practicum time, without establishing a coordinated integrated system that closely connects training objectives, pedagogical methods, the school's cultural environment, and coordination mechanisms among educational stakeholders.

Second, although preschool-specific research is available, further work is needed to explain the theoretical mechanisms relevant to students majoring in preschool education. Many existing investigations emphasize current practices or outcomes and do not highlight the distinctive emotional labor of preschool teachers within the dialectical relationship among caring for, nurturing, and educating young children.

Third, in the context of digital transformation and comprehensive educational reform, there remains a lack of an integrated, multidimensional theoretical model that integrates modern psychological and educational theories to guide approaches for developing students' reflective capacity, emotional regulation, and internalization of professional values.

To fill these research gaps, this study does not stop at describing the current situation or proposing administrative solutions, but focuses on developing and standardizing an integrated theoretical model based on the dialectical combination of three foundational theories: Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory, and Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. This integrated approach addresses the fragmentation of previous studies, thereby providing a sound scientific basis for comprehensively explaining the mechanisms through which professional cognition, intrinsic motivation, and ethical behavior form and develop among students majoring in preschool education.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical research design involving critical literature analysis, comparison, and conceptual synthesis rather than primary fieldwork or experimental intervention. Its documentary basis comprises foundational monographs on social learning, moral development, and self-determination, together with relevant research on professional ethics and preschool teacher education. Older foundational works are included because their theoretical propositions are indispensable to the integrated model; contemporary empirical and pedagogical publications are used to examine the model's educational relevance. The references were selected purposively for conceptual relevance and source credibility, rather than through an exhaustive systematic-review search. No new participants, surveys, observations, interviews, or individual-level research data were collected for this article.

The theoretical analysis was organized into three sequential activities. First, the author identified and examined established sources on professional ethics in preschool education and the central constructs of the three theories. Second, the concepts and proposed mechanisms were compared: role modeling, observational learning and self-efficacy were considered alongside moral reasoning, ethical judgment, basic psychological needs, and internalization. Third, conceptual synthesis was undertaken to connect the three theories into two mutually influential axes and to specify their potential implications for teacher education, practicum experiences, and reflective instruction. The procedure evaluates conceptual compatibility and generates propositions that can be investigated subsequently; it does not provide statistical estimation or experimental confirmation of causal relationships.

The proposed model was assessed for internal coherence by considering whether each component had a distinguishable explanatory role, whether the interaction between the two axes was theoretically plausible, and whether the resulting educational implications remained consistent with the preschool context. The analysis also acknowledges conceptual boundaries: observing appropriate behavior does not by itself establish moral character, moral reasoning does not guarantee corresponding action, and autonomous motivation is not identical to intrinsic enjoyment. These distinctions help avoid overstating the explanatory reach of the model while providing a transparent starting point for subsequent qualitative and quantitative evaluation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis suggest that preschool teachers' professional ethics is not merely a reflection of general social moral standards in the pedagogical environment, but a system of values, principles, behavioral

standards, and a distinctive sense of responsibility governing all of a teacher's professional activities.

In terms of its characteristics, preschool teachers' professional ethics is specialized and has particular ethical and humanistic significance:

First, it entails distinctive emotional labour, requiring patience, compassionate care, and the ability to regulate emotions in response to the complex psychological and physiological changes of children in their earliest years.

Second, one important outcome of preschool teachers' professional work is the development of the earliest foundations of human personality; therefore, every ethical behavior or failure to meet standards can have long-term consequences that shape children's overall development.

Third, the close integration of care, nurturing, and education requires ethics to be expressed consistently throughout everyday professional practice, demanding a high degree of unity among words, attitudes, and deeds.

Regarding its structural components, preschool teachers' professional ethics comprises the following core elements: (1) a devoted sense of responsibility and love for children; (2) a system of appropriate pedagogical conduct standards in relationships with children, colleagues, and parents; (3) respect for children's rights and the assurance of their physical and psychological safety; and (4) the capacity for reflection, emotional regulation, and professional self-regulation in response to practical pressures.

In the context of comprehensive educational reform, digital transformation, and deep international integration, ethical requirements for preschool teachers are undergoing a fundamental shift from a model of "passive compliance" to one of "autonomous competence and accountability." This development reflects changing professional expectations, in which the pedagogical environment is influenced by markets, technology, and global humanistic values in multiple ways.

First, professional ethics education increasingly emphasizes a shift from compliance-based conduct towards autonomous professional responsibility. Previously, teachers' ethical behavior was often influenced by administrative pressure, school rules, or fear of reprimand. In educational contexts that emphasize professional autonomy and creative teaching, preschool teachers are expected to act from internal motivation, a deep professional conscience, and a commitment to the welfare of children. Autonomous ethics enables teachers to transform social standards into personal convictions, remain committed to humanistic values, and protect children's best interests voluntarily rather than under external control.

Second, there is a need for flexible adaptation to legal frameworks and transparent accountability. Preschool childcare, nurturing, and education are now strictly governed by legal systems and demanding professional standards. Therefore, teachers' ethical qualities must be translated into the ability to protect children's rights, uphold appropriate pedagogical conduct, and provide clear and transparent accountability to management agencies, parents, and the wider community. In the Vietnamese context, recent studies have also highlighted the urgency of integrating professional ethics education with skills for preventing violence, ensuring safety, and protecting children's best interests in preschool institutions [12].

Third, moral integrity is needed to address the challenges of digital transformation and cyberspace. The explosion of information technology creates an open educational environment while also giving rise to unprecedented ethical issues. Modern preschool teachers interact not only with children in the classroom but must also behave appropriately in digital spaces, facing issues involving the security of personal information, privacy, and children's image data. Ethical qualities require teachers to possess digital reflective capacity and maintain integrity and safety in all online interactions.

Explaining the mechanisms through which professional ethics forms and develops among students majoring in preschool education requires a systematic approach that simultaneously considers the social, cognitive, and motivational factors influencing the development of professional behavior. Professional ethics is not simply the result of receiving externally prescribed standards; it is also formed through the process by which individuals learn, evaluate, internalize values, and regulate their behavior in specific pedagogical contexts. Therefore, approaches that focus only on communicating rules or training isolated behaviors are insufficient to fully explain the professional ethical development of future teachers.

On this basis, this study proposes integrating three classical foundations in psychology and education: Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory [13, 14], Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory [15, 16], and Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan's Self-Determination Theory [17, 18], to construct a theoretical framework explaining the formation and development of professional ethics among students majoring in preschool education. Each theory provides a distinctive lens: Bandura emphasizes mechanisms of learning and behavioral regulation through observation, experience, and social interaction; Kohlberg focuses on explaining the development of moral judgment and reasoning; while Deci and Ryan clarify the psychological conditions that promote value internalization and the formation of autonomous motivation for action.

This combination provides a basis for viewing professional ethics as a multidimensional developmental process in which the educational environment, moral cognition, personal motivation, and actual behavior interact and complement one another. It should be emphasized that the two-axis structural framework presented below is the result of synthesis, application, and an original proposal by this study, rather than a model directly developed or tested by Bandura, Kohlberg, or Deci and Ryan themselves.

The first theoretical axis focuses on explaining the relationship between the influence of the educational environment and the process of receiving, evaluating, and practicing professional ethical standards. Combining Bandura's theory [13, 14] with Kohlberg's theory [15, 16] makes it possible to address two dimensions simultaneously: behavioral learning through social interaction and the development of individuals' cognitive and moral-reasoning capacities.

According to Bandura [13, 14], human behavior is formed not only through direct experience but also through observing and learning from role models in the social environment. Observational learning comprises four core components: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. These components show that learning behavior is not passive; it is influenced by cognitive activity, the ability to perform, and factors that motivate individuals to choose a behavior. In preschool teacher education, teacher educators, practicum supervisors, and the school's cultural environment provide meaningful professional behavioral models for students. By observing interactions with children, communication with parents, conflict resolution, and the performance of childcare and educational responsibilities, students can identify concrete expressions of ethical values such as respect, fairness, love, and responsibility. These experiences help connect theoretical knowledge with practice and provide a basis for students to gradually develop and adjust appropriate professional behavior.

In particular, the concept of self-efficacy in Bandura's theoretical system [13, 14] helps explain the role of confidence in one's ability to carry out necessary actions in complex professional situations. Through teaching practice, simulated scenarios, feedback, and problem-solving experiences, students can strengthen their confidence in their ability to respond appropriately and fulfill professional responsibilities. However, the study also notes that self-efficacy is not equivalent to moral character; appropriate behavior also depends on one's value system, judgment competence, and the specific conditions of the educational environment.

As a complementary perspective, Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory [15, 16] provides a basis for explaining the development of moral cognition and reasoning beyond merely observing and reproducing learned behaviors. According to Kohlberg [15, 16], the development of moral reasoning is considered across three levels: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional, with six stages of cognitive development. This distinction reflects differences in how individuals explain the rightness of behavior, ranging from focusing on immediate consequences and social approval to considering more general moral principles. Applied to preschool teacher education, this approach requires a shift from asking students to memorize and comply with regulations toward developing their ability to identify, analyze, and resolve ethical issues arising in practice.

Moral dilemmas—for example, a conflict between pressure to protect a school's reputation and the responsibility to report care-related mistakes honestly, or between parents' requests and the principle of ensuring the child's best interests—can be used to organize discussion and critical debate. Students are thereby encouraged to analyze relevant values, identify the basis for decisions, and defend their reasoning using appropriate professional principles. In addition, professional reflection helps students reconsider their own decisions and actions, identify the influence of bias, emotions, or situational pressures, and adjust their responses accordingly. This is a pedagogical application intended to support the development of moral reasoning, not an independent stage in Kohlberg's theoretical model [15, 16].

Thus, combining Bandura [13, 14] and Kohlberg [15, 16] provides a theoretical basis for connecting behavioral learning from the social environment with the development of moral judgment and choice. The environment provides role models and opportunities for experience, while reasoning and reflection help students evaluate, select, and adjust behavior based on professional ethical principles. However, correct understanding and the ability to perform a behavior do not automatically ensure that individuals will act appropriately in every circumstance. This makes it necessary to further consider the role of motivation and value internalization through the second theoretical axis.

Whereas the first axis focuses on behavioral learning mechanisms and the development of moral judgment competence, the second theoretical axis clarifies the psychological conditions that encourage individuals to voluntarily accept, enact, and maintain professional standards. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory [17, 18] provides a foundation for explaining the internalization of externally originating requirements, leading to forms of motivation that differ in their degree of autonomy.

According to Deci and Ryan [17, 18] and later educational synthesis [11], supporting the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is important for motivational quality and personal development. At the same time, the transformation from extrinsic motivation to autonomous motivation through the internalization of life goals and values is a core foundation for sustaining ethical behavior voluntarily and over time, rather than under external controlling pressure [18]. In preschool teacher education, the need for autonomy is reflected in students being given explanations and opportunities for discussion so they understand the meaning of professional standards and can proactively accept and fulfill their responsibilities. The need for competence is associated with their sense of ability to apply knowledge and skills to handle pedagogical situations. The need for relatedness reflects recognition, support, and a sense of belonging to the professional community, developed through positive relationships with lecturers, classmates, and practicum supervisors.

Supporting these psychological needs facilitates internalization, through which ethical standards initially followed in

response to external requirements may gradually be accepted by individuals as values that are personally meaningful. According to Deci and Ryan [17, 18], internalization can be considered through forms of extrinsic regulation that differ in their degree of autonomy, from external regulation and introjected regulation to identified and integrated regulation. For Preschool Education students, this transition may be reflected in a shift from following childcare and education regulations to meet assessment requirements toward proactively fulfilling professional responsibilities because they deeply understand the significance of these standards for children's safety, rights, and development. When values such as love, respect, fairness, and responsibility are accepted and integrated into students' personal value systems, they have a stronger motivational basis for maintaining appropriate behavior even in the absence of direct supervision.

It should be noted that autonomous motivation is not entirely synonymous with intrinsic motivation. A professional action may be performed voluntarily because an individual recognizes and accepts its value, even though the activity itself does not necessarily provide direct enjoyment. Therefore, the goal of professional ethics education is not only to stimulate interest in the profession but also to promote the internalization of professional values and responsibilities. Moreover, internalization does not occur separately from the environment and experience. Positive role models, practical activities, supportive feedback, and opportunities to participate in resolving ethical issues can simultaneously strengthen students' competence, sense of autonomy, and relatedness. Conversely, a training environment characterized by imposition, control, or a lack of respect may constrain the development of autonomous motivation, even when students appear to comply with external regulations. From an integrative perspective, the two theoretical axes interact and complement each other in the formation and development of professional ethics. The first axis explains how students receive, evaluate, and practise professional standards through role models, experience, and moral reasoning; the second clarifies the conditions that encourage individuals to voluntarily accept and maintain those standards as meaningful professional values. The relationship between the two axes is not a fixed, linear sequence of transformation, but a process of reciprocal influence among the educational environment, cognition, motivation, and behavior.

The theoretical value of the proposed two-axis model lies in connecting three explanatory dimensions: behavioral learning and practice, the development of moral judgment competence, and value internalization associated with autonomous motivation. This approach helps clarify the conditions and mechanisms that may narrow the gap between moral cognition and professional behavior, while providing a basis for designing educational activities that strengthen role modeling, experience, reflection, and support for learners' autonomy.

Thus, integrating the three theories establishes a systematic theoretical framework for proposing a model of professional ethics education for students majoring in preschool education. This framework guides training innovation by combining the development of cognition, practical competence, and autonomous moral motivation, contributing to the preparation of future teachers who can fulfil their professional responsibilities conscientiously when caring for, educating, and protecting children. However, the relationships proposed in the model require further research and empirical testing to determine their appropriateness in specific training contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has clarified the theoretical foundations of professional ethics education for students majoring in preschool education, emphasizing the distinctive nature of emotional labor and children's rights. Its central contribution is the proposal of an integrated two-axis model based on three theories: Social Learning Theory (Bandura), Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan). The first axis explains behavioral mechanisms and judgment competence through the social environment, role models, experience, and reflection; the second clarifies the internalization of standards and the development of autonomous motivation, linking cognition with behavior. Theoretically, the article contributes an integrated approach connecting three dimensions: behavioral practice, the development of moral judgment, and value internalization. Practically, the model provides a theoretical rationale for educational improvement: integrating ethics education with practical experience and moral-dilemma scenarios; building a pedagogical cultural environment that promotes positive role modeling; and shifting management toward supporting autonomy, competence, and accountability. The article's notable value lies in developing a systematic theoretical framework grounded in the distinctive nature of emotional labor. However, the model has not been empirically tested, so its proposed relationships require empirical testing in relevant training contexts. Future research should expand the scope to emerging contexts such as digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and inclusive education to improve training quality.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

Funding

No external funding was reported for this study.

Data Availability

No original empirical dataset was generated or analysed.

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