



# Pre-service teachers' ethical stances on unethical professional behaviors: The roles of professional identity goals and efficacy beliefs



Altay Eren <sup>a,\*</sup>, Anıl Rakıçoğlu-Söylemez <sup>b,\*\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Abant İzzet Baysal University, Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Sciences, Gököy Campus, 14280 Bolu, Turkey

<sup>b</sup> Abant İzzet Baysal University, Faculty of Education, Department of Foreign Language Education, Turkey

## HIGHLIGHTS

- PTs' ethical stances on unethical teacher behaviors were examined.
- PTs' ethical stances on unethical teacher behaviors were manipulated.
- Possible roles of professional commitment and sense of efficacy were considered.
- PTs' commitment was important to preserve their ethical stances.
- Mediating roles of PTs' sense of efficacy were also important.

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## ABSTRACT

By considering the mediating roles of efficacy beliefs, this study examined whether pre-service teachers' ethical stances on student-related unethical teacher behaviors significantly differed according to the levels of their professional commitment when they received bogus negative feedback for their teaching competencies. Pre-service teachers ( $n = 128$ ) were assigned to either experimental groups (i.e., high commitment-negative feedback/low commitment-negative feedback) or control groups (i.e., high commitment-no feedback/low commitment-no feedback). The results revealed that pre-service teachers' ethical stances on unethical teacher behaviors significantly differed according to their professional commitment. Notably, this result was significantly explained by the mediating roles of efficacy beliefs.

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## 1. Introduction

With the necessity of making moral judgments and developing broader professional moral concern across the school, community and society (Hansen, 2011; Husu & Tirri, 2007; O'Flaherty & Gleeson, 2017; Tirri, 1999), teachers are expected to act with the ethical dimensions of the teaching profession in mind. Likewise, pre-service teachers (PTs) are expected to establish the preliminary bases of professional acknowledgment of morality during their professional preparation (Izadinia, 2013). The nature of teaching dispositions is established and further developed during the

teacher education process (Toom, Husu, & Tirri, 2015). Thus, teacher education programs provide a basis for the teaching-related ethical decisions that PTs will make throughout their professional lives.

Intriguingly, previous studies have not addressed how teachers make moral decisions related to the ethical challenges of the teaching profession and whether these decisions were influential in the early phases of their career development (i.e., teacher education). Relevant literature suggests that individuals from different fields of study (e.g., business administration) tend to adopt unethical professional behaviors when they receive negative feedback on their professional competencies (Gollwitzer, 1986). This applies particularly to those who have high levels of professional commitment, which is considered one of the crucial aspects of professional identity goals (Gollwitzer, Kappes, & Oettingen, 2011, pp. 115–149; Marquardt, Gantman, Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2016).

The present study has focused on whether PTs with high

\* Corresponding author.

\*\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [eren\\_a@ibu.edu.tr](mailto:eren_a@ibu.edu.tr) (A. Eren), [sanil@ibu.edu.tr](mailto:sanil@ibu.edu.tr) (A. Rakıçoğlu-Söylemez).

commitment to teaching indicate a closer stance to unethical professional behaviors upon receiving bogus negative feedback on their teaching competencies and whether PTs' ethical stances on unethical professional behaviors differ according to their professional commitment and sense of efficacy as crucial parts of their professional identity goals. Addressing these issues is important for at least two crucial reasons. First, it is of international concern to bring the ethical stances of PTs to the foreground during teacher education, framing the teacher as a moral person (Campbell, 2014; OECD, 2009; Tirri, 2014). Thus, the present study sheds light on how PTs' ethical stances are affected during teacher education, in particular, when they receive negative feedback on their teaching competencies.

Second, there is a general consensus on the importance of highlighting the moral aspects of the teaching profession in teacher education programs (Osguthorpe, 2009; O'Flaherty & Gleeson, 2017; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011, 2013; Tirri, Toom, & Husu, 2013). However, this consensus does not capture the factors potentially influencing teachers'/PTs' ethical decision-making processes. By revealing possible effects of PTs' professional commitment and sense of efficacy on their ethical stances on unethical teacher behaviors, the current study may contribute to theoretical and practical attempts to strengthen the moral aspects of teacher education programs.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Self-completion theory

The SCT (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) hypothesizes that individuals with certain professional identity goals (e.g., becoming a manager) aim to collect certain professional symbols (e.g., seeking to develop strong management skills) related to relevant professional competencies. Thus, individuals desire to complete and pursue long-term goals relevant to their professional identity goals by collecting tangible/intangible symbols (Marquardt et al., 2016). Regardless of the type of symbols desired to be attained, these symbols represent professional competence (e.g., academic titles) (Harmon-Jones, Schmeichel, & Harmon-Jones, 2009). According to Gollwitzer (1986), self-symbolizing refers to the process of identity-related symbol collection and whenever a professionally committed individual with a specific identity goal experiences/perceives a threat to the related symbols s/he desires to collect, a state of incompleteness in the identity goal arises (Marquardt et al., 2016).

Accordingly, the SCT predicts that to compensate for goal incompleteness, an individual who experiences a threat to his/her goal enhances self-symbolizing efforts by pursuing socially accepted norms—which could even be immoral (Gollwitzer, 1986). In doing so, the individual adopts existing symbols to be affirmed by the so-called professional norms (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011). Thus, the SCT has a certain intersection with morality and identity goal pursuits (Jordan et al., 2011). Despite the importance of the mentioned premises of the SCT, the possibility of pursuing immoral behaviors as symbols to collect remains an unexplored topic to date in teaching and teacher education.

### 2.2. Professional identity goals

Professional identity refers to the “perception of oneself as a professional” (Robson, 1998, p. 586). Similarly, professional identity goals refer to the professional goals that individuals strive to achieve (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2012; Gollwitzer et al., 2011, pp. 115–149). Professional identity has been defined by a number of variables, related concepts and processes in teacher education

studies (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Some of the well-known concepts of professional identity have been reported as job satisfaction (Moore & Hofman, 1988), self-image, self-evaluation (Beijaard, 1995; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000), professional commitment (Canrinus, Helms-Lorenz, Beijaard, Buitink, & Hofman, 2012), and efficacy beliefs (Lamote & Engels, 2010).

Due to the future-oriented nature of identity goals in teacher education (Canrinus et al., 2012) and the role of values added to the teaching profession (Akbari & Tajik, 2012; Bullough, 2011; Campbell, 2014; Day & Gu, 2007), commitment to teaching and sense of efficacy have long been considered crucial parts of professional identity goals (Ingersoll, Alsalam, Quinn, & Bobbitt, 1997). Thus, in the current study, PTs' professional identity goals are described in terms of their commitment to teaching and efficacy beliefs.

#### 2.2.1. Commitment to teaching

Commitment to teaching refers to “the degree of internal motivation, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction teachers derive from teaching and the degree of efficacy and effectiveness they achieve in their jobs” (Ingersoll et al., 1997, p. 2). Considering the effectiveness of teaching practices, teachers'/PTs' commitment to teaching has been examined in a number of studies (Eren & Tezel, 2010; Mulcahy, 2011; Watt & Richardson, 2007, 2008). These studies have largely focused on determining teachers'/PTs' motivations for teaching.

The results of these studies exposed that PTs' professional engagement, career development aspirations and career choice satisfaction were significantly related to altruistic (e.g., making a social contribution), intrinsic (e.g., ability to become a teacher), and extrinsic (e.g., job security) reasons to become teachers, indicating that these concepts are highly related to wider aspects of the teaching profession. Similarly, teacher commitment is also regarded as a nested concept located both within the individual and in the personal values, interests, relations and context of their work (Campbell, 2013; Fransson & Frelin, 2016). Therefore, it can be claimed that constructing a positive professional identity containing an effective moral reasoning ability is more or less related to developing certain levels of sense of efficacy, commitment to teaching, and job satisfaction in relation to morality (Day & Gu, 2007).

#### 2.2.2. Teacher efficacy beliefs

Teacher efficacy beliefs are the perceptions of the beholders rather than their actual performances (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). The role of teacher efficacy beliefs has been extensively investigated in the teacher education literature (e.g., Pajares, 1992; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). The overall results of these studies demonstrated that teachers'/PTs' efficacy beliefs are crucial to performing well in teaching-related tasks and highly relevant to their teaching-related decisions (Shaughnessy, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007).

Considerable research showed that teachers who held high efficacy beliefs were more eager to utilize learner-centered teaching practices and exerted more effort to increase students' engagement with the lessons and academic achievement (Klassen & Tze, 2014; Woolfolk Hoy & Spero, 2005). The results of these studies indicate that teachers' teaching-related ethical decisions may be more or less belief-driven.

### 2.3. Ethical decisions, commitment to teaching, and efficacy beliefs

Ethics are at the core of professional knowledge, and that competence in disciplinary knowledge is not only a matter of

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