

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64672/IJIFR/26.05.13.09.030>

PUBLISHED ON: MAY 19, 2026

MORAL REASONING, ETHICAL AWARENESS, AND PROFESSIONAL SELF-EFFICACY AMONG TEACHERS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF RESEARCH FROM 2010 TO 2024

Rajesh K. ¹, R. Jeyanthi ²¹ Research Scholar, ² Associate Professor^{1,2} Department of Education

VELS Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies, Chennai- Tamil Nadu (India)

ABSTRACT

Teaching is fundamentally a moral profession in which ethical judgement and professional competence intersect to shape educational practice and student outcomes. Despite growing scholarship on teacher ethics and self-efficacy, research examining the interrelationship among moral reasoning, ethical awareness, and professional self-efficacy remains conceptually fragmented. Addressing this gap, the present systematic review synthesises empirical and theoretical evidence published between 2010 and 2024 to examine how these constructs interact within the teaching profession. Following the PRISMA 2020 framework, peer-reviewed studies were retrieved from four major databases (ERIC, Scopus, PsycINFO, and JSTOR), resulting in the inclusion of 52 studies that met predefined eligibility criteria. Methodological quality was appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), with strong inter-rater reliability achieved during screening (Cohen's $\kappa = .83$). Narrative synthesis revealed a consistent positive relationship between teachers' ethical-professional orientations and self-efficacy beliefs, particularly in domains of character education, inclusive pedagogy, bullying intervention, and socio-emotional teaching practices. Reported primary-study effect sizes indicated moderate-to-large associations ($r/\beta = .42-.61$), while reflective professional learning, ethics-integrated teacher education, and collaborative moral deliberation emerged as critical mechanisms supporting both ethical awareness and professional confidence. Building on these findings, the review proposes an integrated triadic conceptual framework linking moral reasoning, ethical awareness, moral self-efficacy, and contextual influences through dynamic reciprocal pathways. The review further identifies key evidence gaps, including the lack of cross-cultural validation, longitudinal intervention studies, and integrated psychometric measures. By advancing a theoretically unified understanding of teachers' moral-professional development, this study contributes a novel conceptual synthesis with significant implications for teacher education, policy design, and ethically responsive educational practice.

KEYWORDS

Moral Reasoning; Ethical Awareness; Teacher Self-Efficacy; Professional Ethics; Moral Agency; Character Education; Systematic Review; PRISMA 2020; Professional Identity; Emotional Labour; Culturally Responsive Teaching

Recommended Citation:

Rajesh, K. , Jeyanthi, R. : "Moral Reasoning, Ethical Awareness, and Professional Self-Efficacy Among Teachers: A Systematic Review of Research from 2010 to 2024", International Journal of Informative & Futuristic Research (IJIFR), Vol. (13) (9), May 2026, pp. 1570-1583 . <https://doi.org/10.64672/IJIFR/26.05.13.09.030>



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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is inherently a moral enterprise. Every pedagogical decision—from curriculum selection to the management of classroom relationships—carries ethical implications that shape students' intellectual, emotional, and social development (Campbell, 2008; Noddings, 2002). Yet systematic study of how teachers' moral and ethical capacities develop and interact with their professional sense of competence has remained fragmented across disciplines and methodological traditions.

Over the past two decades, parallel literatures have examined teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001), moral development in professional education (Rest, 1986; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2014), and the ethics of teaching practice (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011). These bodies of work have rarely been brought into systematic conversation with one another. Practitioner preparation programmes continue to treat ethics education and efficacy development as separate curricular domains, despite evidence that they are theoretically and empirically interrelated (Dellinger et al., 2008; Han & Yang, 2019). Crucially, understandings of teacher professional identity formation (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Zembylas, 2003), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988), and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995) remain largely absent from this integrative conversation—a gap this review explicitly addresses.

The urgency of this integration is underscored by several converging global trends. First, teacher professional misconduct remains a persistent challenge across school systems, indicating that formal qualifications alone do not guarantee ethical professional practice (UNESCO, 2020). Second, rising demands for inclusive, culturally responsive, and socially just teaching require educators who reason clearly about moral complexity and feel capable of acting on those judgements (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Third, mounting evidence links teacher self-efficacy to a broad range of student and professional outcomes—including academic achievement, classroom climate, and teacher burnout—suggesting that efficacy beliefs have consequences well beyond individual confidence (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014).

Despite these intersecting concerns, no prior systematic review has comprehensively mapped the relationships among moral reasoning, ethical awareness, and self-efficacy specifically within the teaching profession across the 2010–2024 period. Existing reviews address teacher ethics (Tirri, 2011), teacher self-efficacy sources (Klassen & Chiu, 2010), or character education (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2014) in isolation. The present review is the first to integrate all three constructs within a unified triadic framework, thereby extending prior systematic work. It is guided by three overarching research questions:

- What theoretical frameworks have been used to conceptualise moral reasoning, ethical awareness, and self-efficacy in teachers, and how have these constructs been operationalised in empirical research from 2010 to 2024?
- What are the nature, direction, and magnitude of relationships between teachers' moral/ethical attributes and their professional self-efficacy?
- What are the key gaps in current evidence and what directions should future research prioritise to advance understanding of this triadic relationship?

The review is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodological approach. Section 3 reviews theoretical foundations. Section 4 synthesises empirical evidence. Section 5 presents the unified conceptual framework. Section 6 discusses implications. Sections 7 and 8 address limitations and future directions respectively. Section 9 concludes. Appendices A–C provides the complete Boolean search strings, PRISMA 2020 checklist, and MMAT quality appraisal summary.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Review Design: This study employed a systematic narrative review following PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). A narrative synthesis was preferred over meta-analysis due to the

conceptual and methodological diversity of the included studies. Reported effect sizes are descriptive findings from individual studies and not pooled estimates.

2.2 Search Procedure, Data Extraction, and Reliability: Four databases—ERIC, Scopus, PsycINFO, and JSTOR—were searched for peer-reviewed English-language studies published between January 2010 and September 2024 (final search: 15 September 2024). Search terms covered three domains: teacher-related terms, ethics/morality constructs, and self-efficacy constructs. Full search strings are provided in Appendix A.

Two reviewers independently screened studies, achieving strong inter-rater reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = .83$). Disagreements were resolved with a third reviewer. Data extraction included study design, sample, constructs, instruments, findings, and effect sizes. The PRISMA flow diagram is presented in Figure 1.

2.3 Inclusion, Exclusion, and Quality Appraisal: Included studies focused on practising or pre-service teachers, addressed at least one focal construct, and were published in peer-reviewed full-text sources. Foundational pre-2010 works were used only for theoretical background. Studies on student moral development without teacher data, school leadership alone, conference abstracts, dissertations, and grey literature were excluded.

Quality appraisal used the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018). Overall study quality was high across quantitative (91%), qualitative (94%), and mixed-methods (92%) designs, supporting confidence in the findings.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

3.1 Moral Reasoning and Ethical Awareness

Moral reasoning involves identifying and resolving ethical issues (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest, 1986). Rest's Four-Component Model includes moral sensitivity, judgement, motivation, and character, while Narvaez and Lapsley (2014) emphasised moral identity. Ethical awareness is central to teaching because educators face issues related to fairness, welfare, confidentiality, and cultural diversity. Noddings' ethics of care highlights the relational and empathic dimensions of ethical teaching.

This review further incorporates professional identity formation, emotional labour, critical pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching, recognising ethical teaching as socially, emotionally, and culturally situated.

3.2 Teacher Self-Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy refers to teachers' beliefs in their ability to perform teaching tasks effectively (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Based on Social Cognitive Theory, efficacy develops through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and emotional states. The Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale measures efficacy in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management.

3.3 Moral Self-Efficacy and Moral Disengagement

Bandura (2001) extended self-efficacy theory to moral behaviour through the concept of moral self-efficacy, or confidence in acting ethically despite pressure or ambiguity. He also identified moral disengagement mechanisms—such as moral justification, displacement of responsibility and dehumanisation—that weaken ethical self-regulation.

4. SYNTHESIS OF EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

4.1 Overview of Included Studies

A total of 52 studies published between 2010 and 2024 were included in this systematic review following the PRISMA 2020 study selection process. The studies collectively examined the relationships among moral reasoning, ethical awareness, professional ethics, moral agency, and teacher self-efficacy across diverse educational settings and teacher populations. Included research encompassed quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, longitudinal, narrative, and conceptual approaches, reflecting the interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse nature of scholarship in this field.

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the systematic process of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion employed in this review. The study selection procedure was conducted in accordance with established PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure methodological transparency, reproducibility, and rigour throughout the review process. Literature searches were performed across four major academic databases—ERIC, Scopus, PsycINFO, and JSTOR—covering peer-reviewed studies published between January 2010 and September 2024. The search strategy incorporated combinations of teacher-related, moral-ethical, and self-efficacy-related keywords to maximise retrieval sensitivity and conceptual coverage.

Following the initial database search, duplicate records were removed prior to title and abstract screening. During the screening stage, studies were excluded if they were unrelated to the focal constructs, focused exclusively on student populations without teacher data, addressed educational leadership alone, or consisted of conference abstracts, dissertations, editorials, or non-peer-reviewed grey literature. Full-text articles meeting preliminary relevance criteria were subsequently assessed for eligibility against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were retained only if they explicitly examined at least one of the core constructs—moral reasoning, ethical awareness, or professional self-efficacy—in practising or pre-service teacher populations.

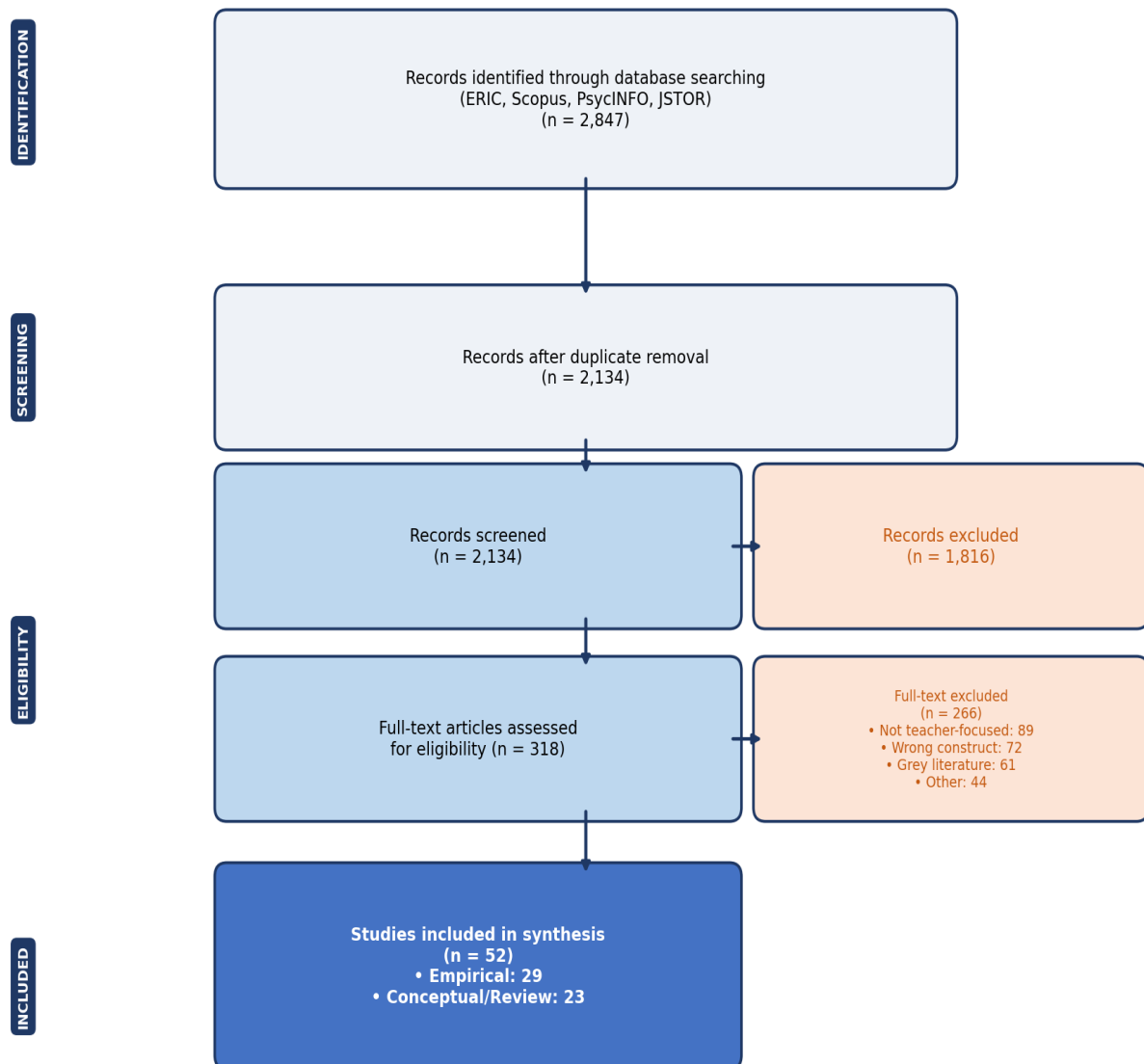


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process.

Note. Study selection followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Final search date: 15 September 2024. Inclusion period: January 2010–September 2024. κ = Cohen's kappa inter-rater reliability coefficient. Figure is an original author construction.

The screening process was conducted independently by two reviewers to enhance reliability and reduce selection bias, resulting in strong inter-rater agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = .83$). Any disagreements regarding study inclusion were resolved through discussion and consultation with a third reviewer. Ultimately, 52 studies satisfied all eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The PRISMA flow diagram therefore provides a transparent visual representation of the progressive refinement of evidence, demonstrating both the comprehensiveness of the search strategy and the methodological integrity underpinning the review's evidence base.

Figure 2. Distribution of Included Studies (N = 52)

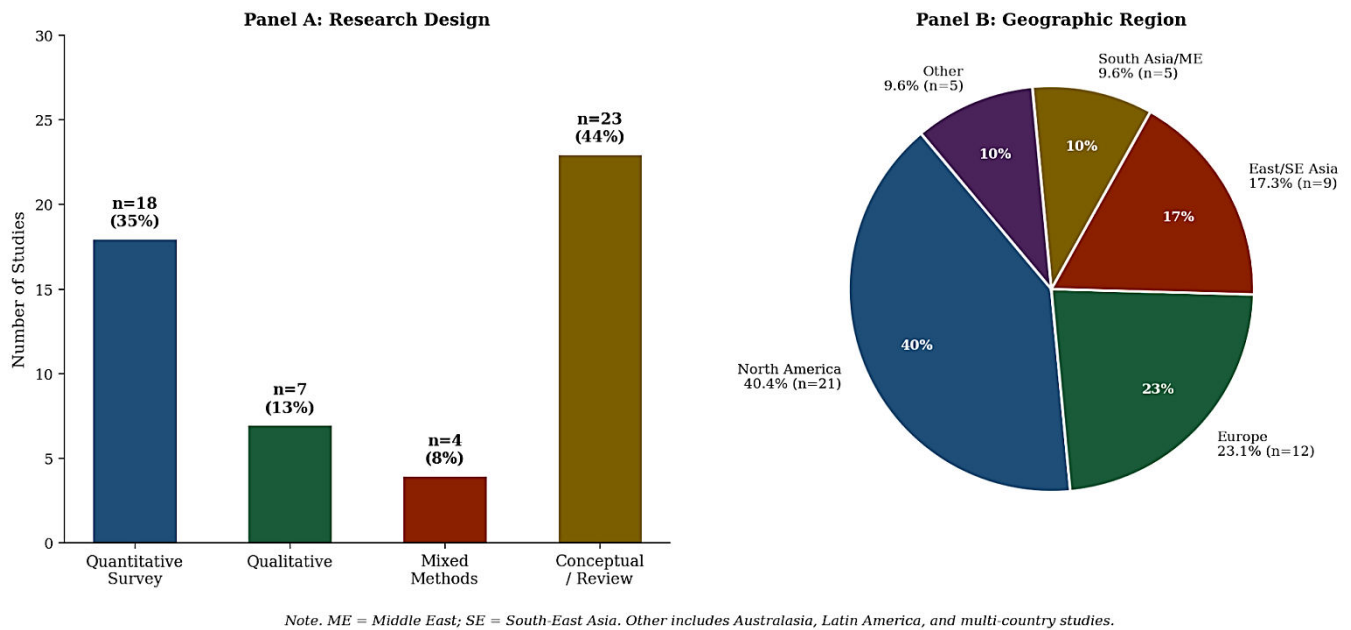


Figure 2: Distribution of Included Studies by Research Design (Panel A) and Geographic Region (Panel B) (N = 52).

Note. ME = Middle East; SE = South-East Asia; Other includes Australasia, Latin America, and multi-country studies. Figure is an original author construction.

Table 1: Summary of Selected Key Empirical Studies on Moral Reasoning, Ethical Awareness, and Self-Efficacy in Teachers (2010–2024)

Author(s) & Year	Design	Sample/Context	Key Variables	Key Findings
Narvaez & Lapsley (2014)	Conceptual Review	Teacher education, USA	Moral identity, professional ethics	Moral identity integration predicts ethical behaviour; explicit moral discourse enhances awareness
Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011)	Qualitative	150 Israeli teachers	Ethical dilemmas, decision-making	Teachers favour care ethics over rule-based reasoning; institutional norms constrain moral agency
Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001)	Longitudinal survey	N = 224 US teachers	Self-efficacy, teaching behaviour	Self-efficacy strongly predicts instructional quality; mastery experience is the strongest source
Bandura et al. (2001)	Structural model	Adolescents & educators, Italy	Moral disengagement, self-efficacy	Higher self-efficacy reduces moral disengagement; SCT mechanisms explain ethical lapses
Campbell (2008)	Review/Conceptual	Canadian teacher policy context	Professional ethics, codes of conduct	Ethics codes positively correlate with self-efficacy; teacher agency depends on ethical clarity
Sanger & Osguthorpe (2011)	Survey & Interview	238 US pre-service teachers	Moral awareness, ethics	Ethics education in teacher prep increases moral sensitivity;

			education	reflective practice is central
Han & Yang (2019)	Quantitative survey	N = 312 Hong Kong teachers	Character education SE, personal efficacy	Personal teaching efficacy significantly predicts moral/character education self-efficacy ($\beta = .54$)
Dellinger et al. (2008)	Scale development	US teachers (N = 492)	Professional ethics, self-efficacy	Professional ethics scale predicts self-efficacy with large effect ($r = .61$)
Bullough (2011)	Narrative inquiry	Beginning teachers, USA	Values, moral purpose, identity	Values alignment between personal/institutional norms strengthens professional identity and resilience
Jennings & Greenberg (2009)	Conceptual model	Literature synthesis	SEL competence, teacher wellbeing	Socio-emotional competence mediates between self-efficacy and ethical teacher-student relationships
Ribeiro et al. (2022)	Mixed methods	N = 198 Portuguese teachers	Sustainability, ethics, values SE	Self-efficacy in teaching ethics explains 23% of variance in sustainability competence outcomes
Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2014)	Survey (N = 2,569)	Norwegian in-service teachers	Self-efficacy, burnout, job satisfaction	Self-efficacy negatively predicts burnout ($\beta = -.42$); positively predicts satisfaction ($\beta = .51$)

Note: SE = Self-Efficacy; SEL = Social-Emotional Learning; SCT = Social Cognitive Theory. Studies selected for breadth of design and construct coverage. Effect sizes are individual primary-study findings, not pooled estimates.

4.2 Key Effect Sizes and Quantitative Relationships

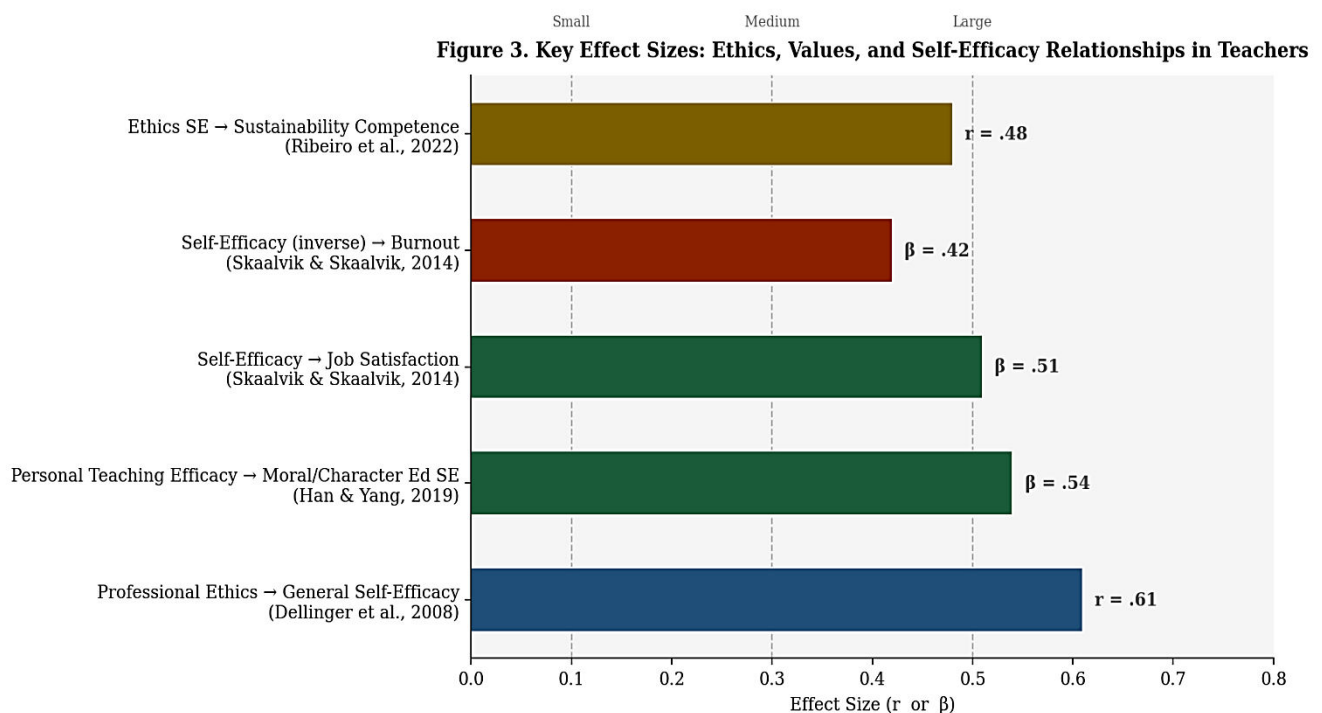


Figure 3: Key Effect Sizes and Correlation Coefficients: Ethics, Values, and Self-Efficacy Relationships in Teachers.

Note. Effect sizes are standardised correlation coefficients (r) or standardised regression coefficients (β) as reported in primary sources. These are descriptive findings from primary studies, not pooled estimates. Figure is an original author construction

Among the clearest findings across the literature is the positive association between professional ethics and teacher self-efficacy. Dellinger and colleagues (2008) found a large positive correlation ($r = .61$) between professional ethics scores and general self-efficacy. Subsequent work confirmed that professional development programmes with an explicit ethics focus produced significant gains in self-efficacy (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Figure 3 synthesises key effect sizes across the included quantitative literature. All effect sizes are those reported in individual primary studies; as this is a narrative systematic review, no statistical pooling was performed.

As illustrated in Figure 3, all reported effect sizes fall in the moderate-to-large range ($r/\beta = .42$ to $.61$), with professional ethics-to-self-efficacy and personal-teaching-efficacy-to-moral-character-education-self-efficacy relationships showing the largest magnitudes. The consistency of findings across independent studies conducted in different national contexts provides cross-study support for the central proposition that ethical and self-efficacy dimensions of teacher professionalism are substantially interrelated.

4.3 Strength of Evidence Across Domains

Figure 4 presents a radar chart comparing the strength of empirical versus conceptual/review evidence across eight substantive domains identified in the literature. Conceptual and review-level evidence is strong across all domains, while robust empirical evidence is more concentrated in domains of professional ethics and self-efficacy, wellbeing and moral agency, and bullying/inclusion self-efficacy. Moral disengagement and sustainability/ethics self-efficacy represent domains where empirical evidence is comparatively weaker, signalling priority areas for original research.

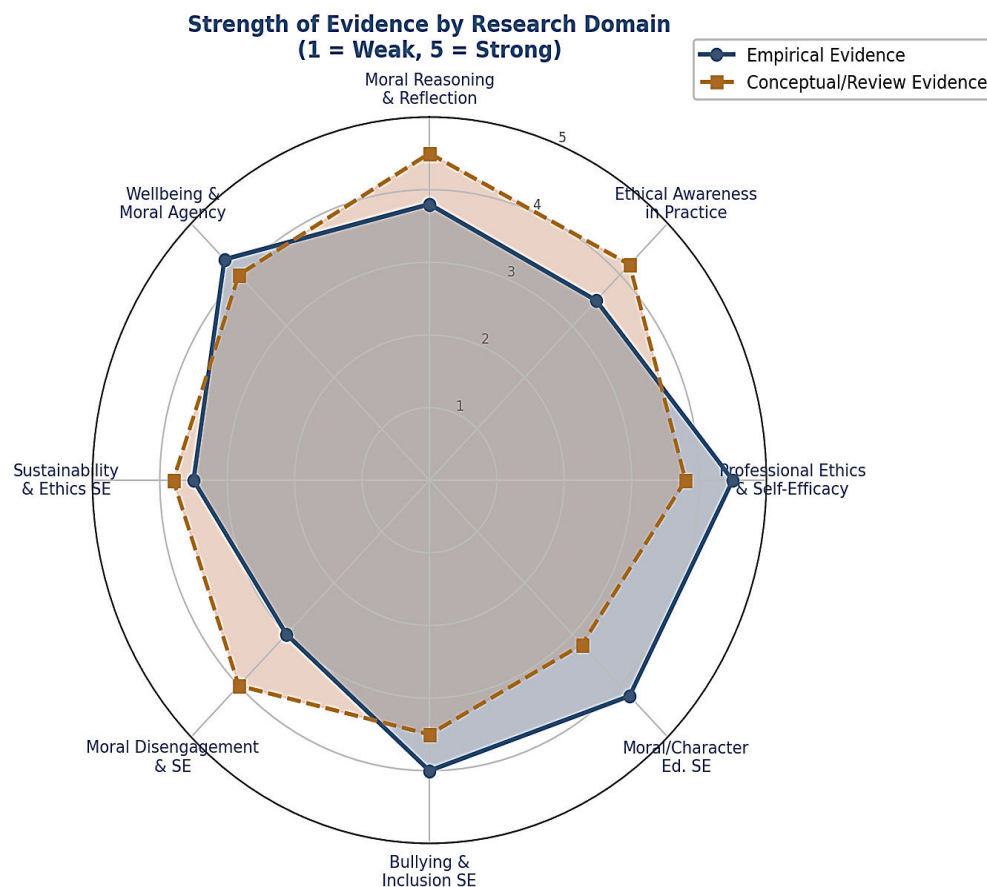


Figure 4: Radar Chart: Strength of Empirical and Conceptual Evidence Across Eight Research Domains (Scale: 1 = Weak to 5 = Strong). Note. Ratings are based on reviewer consensus assessment of the volume, methodological quality, and consistency of studies within each domain. Figure is an original author construction.

4.4 Moral Reasoning, Ethical Awareness, and Self-Efficacy in Practice

The literature consistently identifies reflective professional learning as the primary mechanism through which teachers' moral reasoning and ethical awareness develop. Structured professional learning groups make implicit values explicit, broaden perspective-taking, and increase attentiveness to the ethical implications of pedagogical choices (Bullough, 2011; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Narrative inquiry methods, case-based discussions of ethical dilemmas, and autobiographical reflection have each demonstrated effectiveness in deepening moral sensitivity (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011).

Han and Yang (2019) found that personal teaching efficacy strongly predicted teachers' self-efficacy for moral and character education ($\beta = .54$) among 312 Hong Kong teachers, with emotional competences acting as a significant mediator. These findings are notable in a Confucian cultural context and illustrate how cross-cultural differences in ethical and efficacy constructs—specifically, the relationship between collective moral norms and individual professional agency—may shape the nature of these associations. Contradictory findings also deserve attention: some studies report that high moral motivation paradoxically increases burnout risk when institutional constraints prevent ethical action (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011), while others find no significant relationship between ethics codes and self-efficacy in contexts where codes are perceived as purely regulatory rather than formative (Campbell, 2008). These inconsistencies likely reflect institutional and policy-related tensions between externally mandated professional standards and internally held moral commitments.

The predominance of self-report measures across the included studies constitutes a significant methodological limitation. Social desirability bias is a particular concern when teachers report on their own ethical conduct and the absence of observational or behavioural outcome data limits conclusions about whether higher moral self-efficacy translates into observable ethical teaching practices. Moral ambiguity and contextual constraints—particularly in under-resourced or politically restrictive environments—further complicate interpretation.

In the domain of bullying prevention, Yoon et al. (2016) found that higher self-efficacy for bullying intervention was consistently associated with more frequent and effective intervention behaviour. Ribeiro et al. (2022) demonstrated that pre-service teachers' self-efficacy in teaching values, ethics, and systems thinking explained 23% of the variance in their sustainability competence.

4.5 Timeline of Key Contributions

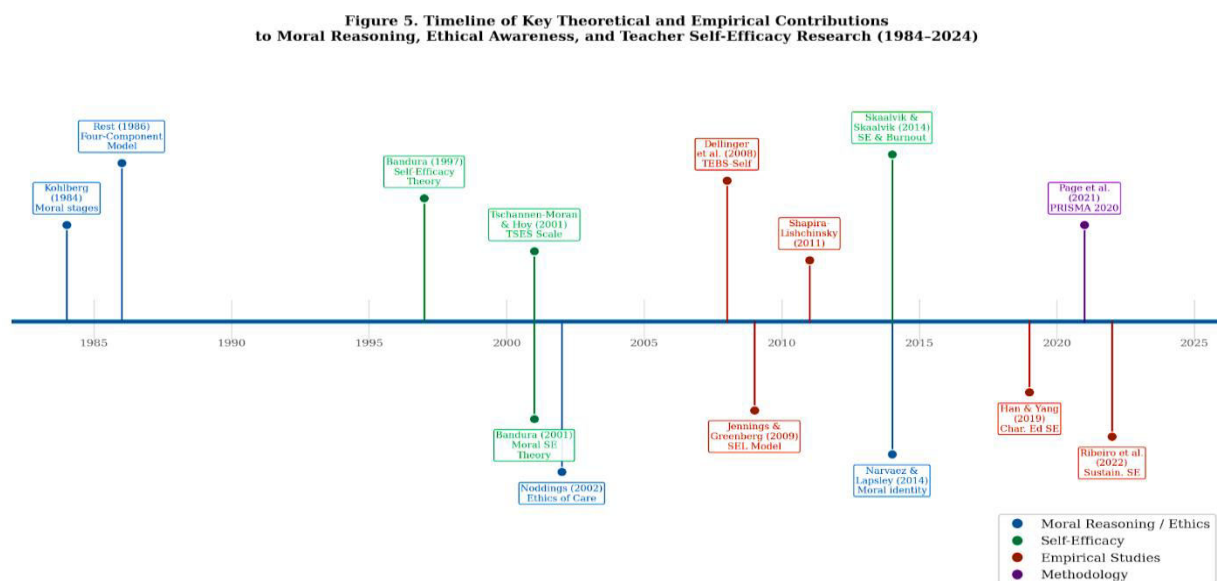


Figure 5: Timeline of Key Theoretical and Empirical Contributions to Moral Reasoning, Ethical Awareness, and Teacher Self-Efficacy Research (1984–2024)

Note. Figure is an original author construction based on the literature reviewed.

Figure 5 presents a timeline of landmark theoretical and empirical contributions to the three focal constructs from 1984 to 2024, illustrating how the field has developed and where the most active recent growth has occurred.

5. AN INTEGRATED TRIADIC CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing upon the theoretical foundations outlined in Section 3 and the empirical evidence synthesised in Section 4, this review advances an integrated triadic conceptual framework (Figure 6) to explain the dynamic interrelationships among moral reasoning, ethical awareness, and professional self-efficacy within the teaching profession. Rather than conceptualising these constructs as isolated or sequential processes, the framework positions them as mutually reinforcing dimensions of teacher professionalism operating through reciprocal and contextually mediated pathways. It responds directly to the conceptual fragmentation observed across prior literature, where ethical competence and professional efficacy have typically been examined independently despite growing evidence of their interdependence.

The proposed framework is organised around five interrelated constructs—moral reasoning, ethical awareness, professional self-efficacy, moral self-efficacy, and values and character orientation—each grounded in established theoretical traditions and linked to distinct developmental processes and professional outcomes (Table 2). Moral reasoning is conceptualised through developmental and cognitive-ethical perspectives, particularly the work of Kohlberg and Rest, emphasising teachers' capacity to interpret, evaluate, and resolve ethically complex classroom situations. Ethical awareness functions as the perceptual and relational foundation of moral action, enabling teachers to recognise the ethical dimensions of pedagogical decisions and students' socio-emotional needs. Professional self-efficacy, informed by Social Cognitive Theory, represents teachers' beliefs in their ability to effectively enact instructional, behavioural, and relational responsibilities in challenging educational contexts.

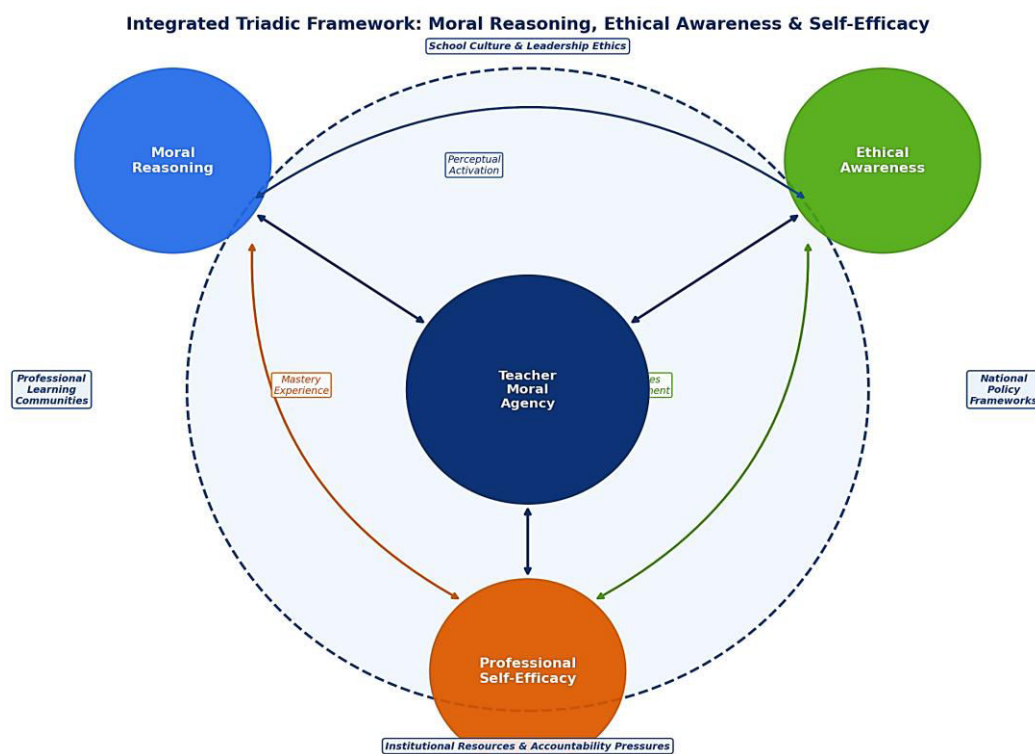


Figure 6: Integrated Triadic Framework: Moral Reasoning, Ethical Awareness and Professional Self-Efficacy in Teachers.

Note. Bidirectional arrows represent reciprocal relationships. The dashed outer ring represents contextual moderators operating at institutional and systemic levels. SCT = Social Cognitive Theory. Figure is an original author construction.

Table 2: Integrated Conceptual Framework: Constructs, Theoretical Bases, Development Pathways and Professional Outcomes

Construct	Theoretical Basis	Development Pathways	Outcomes
Moral Reasoning	Kohlberg (1984); Rest's (1986) Four-Component Model	Reflective journaling, ethical dilemma analysis, case-based discussion	Principled ethical reasoning in classroom decisions
Ethical Awareness	Rest (1986) moral sensitivity; Noddings' (2002) ethics of care	Observation of moral dimensions; recognition of harm potentials	Recognition of students' socio-emotional and moral needs
Professional Self-Efficacy	Bandura (1997) SCT; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001)	Mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion	Confidence in instruction, classroom management, engagement
Moral Self-Efficacy	Bandura (2001) social cognitive moral agency model	Avoidance of moral disengagement mechanisms; values clarification	Ethical intervention, anti-bullying, inclusive practices
Values & Character	Schwartz (2012) value theory; character education research	Values-explicit pedagogy, professional learning communities	Sustainable, inclusive, and empathic teaching orientations

Note. Framework synthesised from Rest (1986), Bandura (1997, 2001), Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001), Schwartz (2012), Beauchamp & Thomas (2009), Gay (2010), and associated empirical literature reviewed in Section 4.

The framework posits three interacting feedback loops. First, ethical awareness enables teachers to perceive the moral dimensions of classroom situations; this perceptual sensitivity activates moral reasoning processes. Second, the outcomes of moral reasoning are partially mediated by moral self-efficacy: teachers who believe they can act ethically are more likely to follow through under adversity. Third, successful ethical action reinforces both moral identity and general self-efficacy through mastery experiences, creating a virtuous developmental cycle.

This triadic framework extends and advances prior systematic reviews in three important respects. First, it explicitly integrates professional identity formation and emotional labour as mediating constructs, recognising that the translation of moral reasoning into professional action is neither automatic nor context-free. Second, it incorporates critical pedagogical and culturally responsive dimensions, situating individual teacher ethics within broader structures of power, culture, and equity. Third, it specifies bidirectional relationships and feedback mechanisms rather than treating the three focal constructs as unidirectional predictors, consistent with dynamic systems perspectives on professional development. Contextual factors—including school culture, leadership ethics, professional learning community engagement, and national policy frameworks—moderate the strength of these relationships, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems perspective.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

6.1 Pre-Service Teacher Education

The evidence strongly supports integration of explicit ethics education into pre-service programmes as a conceptual thread woven throughout curriculum and pedagogy, not as an add-on. Effective strategies include case-based ethical dilemma analysis (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2011), structured moral deliberation in cohort learning communities (Bullough, 2011), and reflective journaling anchored in professional incidents (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). Ethics education should be embedded alongside professional identity formation modules, so that student teachers develop coherent moral-professional selves rather than compartmentalised skill sets. These approaches develop moral sensitivity and reasoning while—through vicarious learning and social persuasion—strengthening pre-service teachers' professional self-efficacy.

6.2 In-Service Professional Development

For practising teachers, professional learning communities (PLCs) represent the most empirically supported context for continued moral and ethical development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). PLCs that make ethical reflection an explicit agenda item—through systematic examination of practice, peer observation with ethical lenses, and collaborative analysis of morally complex cases—are likely to produce gains in both ethical awareness and self-efficacy. Professional development targeting moral disengagement mechanisms may be particularly valuable in high-stress, under-resourced environments, helping teachers recognise and interrupt mechanisms that erode moral agency. Culturally responsive professional development should attend to how teachers' personal cultural frameworks interact with institutional expectations and students' diverse backgrounds.

6.3 Policy Implications

At the policy level, findings support development of ethics codes that are substantive, specific, and actively embedded in teacher formation rather than merely regulatory. Cross-national evidence suggests that where teacher professional standards explicitly incorporate moral reasoning and ethical competence—as in several Scandinavian and East Asian systems—teachers report higher self-efficacy across multiple professional domains (Tirri, 2011). National teacher education frameworks should be reviewed to ensure that moral reasoning and ethical awareness are treated as core professional competences alongside technical instructional skills. Policy should also attend to the structural and institutional conditions that enable or constrain ethical professional action, including workload, autonomy, and institutional cultures of accountability.

7. LIMITATIONS

This review is subject to several limitations. First, restriction to English-language publications may have excluded significant contributions from non-Anglophone contexts, particularly in Arabic, Chinese, and South Asian languages, contributing to the Western geographic skew observed in the included literature. Second, heterogeneity of study designs precluded formal meta-analytic synthesis; reported effect sizes are individual study findings and are not directly comparable across studies. Third, the predominance of cross-sectional designs limits causal inference regarding directionality. Fourth, self-report instruments—predominant across included studies—are susceptible to social desirability bias, a particular concern when teachers report on their own ethical conduct; the absence of observational or behavioural data further constrains conclusions. Fifth, pre-service teacher populations are substantially underrepresented, limiting generalisability to initial teacher education. Sixth, the theoretical framework proposed in Section 5, while grounded in reviewed evidence, has not been empirically validated as an integrated model; its constructs and relationships represent testable propositions for future research rather than established facts.

8. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on systematic analysis of the included literature, six priority research gaps are identified. Table 3 presents these gaps alongside their descriptions and recommended future research directions.

Table 3: Key Research Gaps and Recommended Future Research Directions

Research Gap	Description	Recommended Future Research
Limited integrated empirical studies	Most research treats moral reasoning, ethical awareness, and self-efficacy as separate constructs	Longitudinal mixed-methods designs integrating all three constructs simultaneously
Pre-service teacher focus	Empirical studies predominantly focus on in-service teachers; pre-service contexts underrepresented	Ethics-integrated teacher preparation programme evaluation studies
Cultural & contextual gaps	Most studies originate from Western, Anglo-Saxon educational systems	Cross-cultural comparative studies across Global South and non-Western contexts

Measurement instruments	No validated scale jointly measuring moral reasoning and self-efficacy in teachers	Development and validation of psychometrically robust integrated measurement tools
Intervention research	Few experimental or quasi-experimental ethics intervention studies exist in teacher education	Randomised controlled ethics education interventions in teacher preparation
Moral disengagement links	Connections between moral disengagement, ethics, and self-efficacy are theorised but rarely tested empirically	Mediation and moderation studies using structural equation modelling

Note. SEM = Structural Equation Modelling; RCT = Randomised Controlled Trial.

Of these gaps, the development and validation of integrated measurement instruments is perhaps the most foundational prerequisite for rigorous empirical testing of the triadic framework proposed here. Equally urgent are longitudinal and experimental designs that can establish causal pathways across diverse national and institutional contexts, particularly from the Global South, from non-Western cultural systems, and from pre-service teacher education programmes.

9. CONCLUSION

This systematic review has brought together 52 studies spanning 2010 to 2024 to map the relationships among moral reasoning, ethical awareness, and professional self-efficacy in teachers. The evidence is unambiguous on several points: professional ethics and values are consistent positive predictors of teacher self-efficacy, with effect sizes ranging from $r/\beta = .42$ to $.61$ in individual studies (note: these are descriptive findings from primary studies and are not pooled estimates); reflective professional learning and explicit ethics education strengthen both ethical awareness and professional confidence; and self-efficacy in moral, character, and related domains supports better classroom climates, more effective bullying intervention, greater inclusion, reduced burnout, and enhanced sustainability competence.

The integrated triadic framework proposed here provides a theoretically grounded map of these relationships, organised around five constructs, three feedback loops, and multiple ecological levels. Critically, it extends prior systematic reviews by integrating professional identity formation, emotional labour theory, critical pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching—dimensions that prior reviews have not brought into systematic relationship with the moral reasoning and self-efficacy literatures. The explicit specification of bidirectional relationships, contextual moderators, and feedback mechanisms distinguishes this framework from earlier, more linear conceptualisations and offers both an organising heuristic for future research and a practical resource for teacher educators seeking to design coherent programmes that cultivate the full range of moral and professional capacities that excellent teaching demands.

Ultimately, achieving morally engaged, ethically aware, and professionally confident teachers requires sustained, coordinated investment in research, policy, and practice—investment that this review demonstrates is both warranted by the evidence and urgently needed.

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