

Research Article

## **Exploring UAE Primary School Teachers' Perceptions of the Ethical Dilemma of Grading Bias**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Ethics are always important in any job, particularly they have great importance in education and are considered as an essential element of the teaching profession. Many studies emphasized ethical dilemmas in different sectors but there is a scarcity of literature in the education sector. Therefore, this study has explored the UAE primary school teachers' perceptions of the ethical dilemma of grading bias. Keeping in mind the biasness of the quantitative approach, this research has used the qualitative approach to clearly analyze the views of interviewees. The results highlighted that teachers are influenced by certain factors that make them subjective and biased regarding their grading practices. The results also reveal some ways of preventing bias, such as using student peer- and self-evaluation. Finally, the teachers' responses regarding the importance of professional ethics indicate that such ethics help them re-think, analyze, and visualize issues before making any decisions, and also control their emotions and thoughts about others. This research can be considered as a guide for researchers who are keen to analyze the ethical dilemmas in the educational sector. Moreover, the findings of the study can help the teachers in developing strategies to avoid grading or subjective bias.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Grading bias, Subjective bias, Ethical Dilemma, Educational Management, Teacher Perception.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Many organizations have established codes of ethics in order to run their systems effectively and protect the rights of all employees. Sultana (2014) defined ethics as "a branch of philosophy concerned with the study of what is good and bad" (p. 44). Al-Hothali (2018) defined it more specifically, he defined professional ethics as "professional ethics derive its importance from directing individual decisions and constituting the work basis approved by practitioners in the working environment" (p. 47). Before knowing the ethics in the teaching profession and their importance, it's essential to know the importance of education. Al-Hothali (2018), explained about education as "it is perceived as the basic pillar of development and the teacher is the most important element of achieving social progress and preparing a generation with spiritual, ideological, emotional and moral values in the light of the goals and aspirations of the community" (p. 47). Whereas, the ethics in teaching profession are defined as "a set of rules, bases and starting points to which the secondary school teacher should adhere to achieve social and professional success and be able to gain the confidence of his students and colleagues" (p. 50) (Sultana, 2014).

Ethics are very important in education because schools use them to develop the personalities of their students while also protecting their rights. They encompass a number of important ideals, such as honesty, integrity, transparency, accountability, confidentiality, objectivity, and respectfulness. Al Sultana (2014) stated that "Ethics in teaching is the practice of ethical codes and a formal perception of behavior and relevant disposition of the teacher" (p. 44). Maxwell (2017) added that "a code of professional conduct is meant to play clear positive, constructive roles in professional life, including aims to inspire public confidence, guide professional conduct, introduce new members to the ethical

norms of the profession, and operate as a standard to assess the legitimacy of allegations of professional misconduct” (p. 325). Ethics are essential elements of the teaching profession; teachers should have positive moral characteristics that are reflected in their behaviors and practices. According to Al-Hothali (2018), “the teacher is responsible for social construction, achieving the goals of curricula, and representing a role model for students” (p. 47).

The code of professional conduct should concentrate on the moral aspects of teachers, as they are considered the most important element of any educational organization. Teachers are also the individuals who most often face issues regarding students and their learning. Al-Hothali (2018) stressed that “adherence to professional ethics contributes to controlling the expected behavior of all parties towards the profession in order to create the best moral environment that provides better learning and educational outputs” (p. 49). In addition, Hu (2015) defined teachers’ professional ethics as “the sum of the code of conduct and the necessary moral which should be followed by the person engaged in the teaching profession and is the specific performance of general social ethics in the teaching profession” (p. 1,028). Teachers do not only teach knowledge; they also deal with students’ souls and minds. They are responsible for preparing students for their future workplace. Heideri et al. (2015) stated that “teachers with more professional ethics will be more successful in conducting the society to reach its exalted goals” (p. 2,461). Moreover, they noted that “teachers with professional ethics will make attempts to enhance such factors as physical, mental, intellectual health, social responsibility, commitment, modesty, honesty, creativity, accuracy, bravery, generosity, and flexibility among their students” (p. 14,621).

Grading is an important element of the teaching and learning processes because it indicates the performance levels of students in educational institutions. “Giving grades is one of many activities associated with teaching” (Zoeckler, 2007, p. 82). It is “the way in which teachers structured their grading, assigned values to different assignments, and weighted categories of similar assignments like homework, tests and quizzes, essays, projects, and so on” (Zoeckler, 2007, p. 91). The ethics of grading students in educational institutions have created concerns among educators, and grading is considered an ethical dilemma for teachers. According to Zoeckler (2007), “It is commonly taken for granted that grades are merely a kind of mathematical expression of the learners’ progress in any given class” (p. 82). He further added that “The extent to which grades and grading actually account for and reflect the truth about students in a classroom is an important measure of the moral value of both the process and the product of grading” (p. 87). Tierney (2015) maintained that exams and other types of assessments can have serious consequences for students, as they can affect students’ level and motivation. Grading involves two main steps: 1) scoring the work and 2) calculating grades. Both steps involve decision-making skills that are highly dependent on the teacher’s values, experience, and time pressure. Therefore, grading is considered a moral aspect of teaching and learning. Grades given to students should be deemed valid and reliable to ensure their authenticity. These ethical concerns do not apply to summative assessments in the UAE educational system, in which students’ names are kept anonymous and many teachers are involved in the marking and grading process. However, these ethical concerns do apply to formative assessments, in which the teacher is responsible for grading students based on their performance in the classroom.

Teachers often struggle with assigning grades because they wish to reward students who behave well, despite their average progress levels, and punish disruptive students, despite high progress levels. Many teachers take student behaviors inside the classroom into consideration while grading and connect them with academic achievement. Although several teachers use rubrics, some still give weight to student behavior and allow their subjective opinions to influence their grading. Some teachers also factor in students’ previous performance while grading. Teachers’ subjective perceptions of student behavior, such as disruptiveness, also influence the grading process.

The following main research question was used to support the collection of in-depth and meaningful data for the present study. This question was followed by four sub-questions to facilitate an understanding of the participants’ perceptions of ethical grading:

1. How can ethics guide authentic and realistic grading?
  - a. *Why do some teachers have subjective grading bias?*
  - b. *What are the factors that influence grading?*
  - c. *How can teachers avoid being biased while grading students?*
  - d. *What is the role of ethics in grading?*

This case study aimed to explore UAE primary school teachers' perceptions of the ethical dilemma of grading bias and how ethics can guide authentic and realistic grading. Exploring teachers' experiences and perceptions of ethics in grading is valuable for highlighting the best grading strategies and practices.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Brackett et al. (2013) highlighted the influence of teachers' emotions on their grading practices. They claimed that student evaluation is an important component of the teaching profession and that student evaluations should be authentic because they can affect students either positively or negatively. Although teachers typically use multiple criteria to evaluate student work, it is unclear whether emotions are factored into the grading process. The findings of their study revealed that teachers' emotions may make their grading practices biased. The teachers who participated in that study stated that positive emotions about their students caused them to give higher grades to them, while negative emotions caused them to give low grades. These teachers asserted that evaluation programs are needed to prepare teachers to carry out authentic grading and evaluation practices.

Subjective grading bias involves the conscious decision to increase a student's grades because of their past academic performance, effort, or personality, or decrease the grades of an unfavorably viewed student due to their laziness, disruptive behavior, or lack of effort. Sometimes, subjective grading bias can be unconscious (Person, 2013). Teachers' grading process can be affected by many factors, consciously and unconsciously. Malouff (2008) listed several factors that affect grading, which include polite students; hardworking students; students who like the subject and the teacher; students who are eager to receive high grades; students who always help the teacher; students who need high grades for a certain reason, such as praise, entrance into a competition, or entrance into a specific major; attractive students; students who act in intelligent ways; and students with relatives known by the teacher. Malouff (2008) believed that grading bias can be avoided if the teacher does not know which student completed the work being graded. The names of students can be hidden by simply folding back the cover sheets of their papers. Grading bias can also be prevented by using detailed grading criteria, such as rubrics. Rubrics should be shared with the students before they are assigned the relevant task.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The quantitative studies are subject and concept-specific, in such studies, the respondent is generally bound to respond within the provided option. Whereas, the qualitative approach gives freedom to the respondent in explaining his or her views about a specific question or scenario. To gather the appropriate response, this study has used the qualitative case study approach for answering the research questions. The qualitative research approach allows for the discovery of several explanations for situations and phenomena (Creswell, 2012). The data collection tools used in this case study are in-depth interviews and observation. One important feature of the case study approach is that the case can be described within certain parameters (a certain time and place). To conduct a case study, the researcher should investigate and advocate for cases that show various perspectives on the same problem or process (Creswell, 2012). The participants in this study were four teachers working in a primary school in Al Ain. The school was chosen randomly. The participants differed in terms of years of teaching, age, and the grade levels taught. All of them experienced the ethical dilemma of grading students based on their behaviors. The participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in this study.

Iacono et al. (2009) stated that "the case study relies on multiple sources of evidence and multiple data collection techniques" (p. 41). This study used one main method of data collection: semi-structured interviews. The purpose behind this was to gather teachers' views and perceptions on one of the ethical dilemmas they face in their careers, which is grading students ethically. This was an appropriate method because "interviewing is expected to broaden the scope of understanding for investigated phenomena, as it is a more naturalistic and less structured data collection tool" (Alshenqeeti, 2014, p. 40). The interviews consisted of ten open-ended questions designed to explore the ways in which teachers graded students. Some questions used in the interviews are given below:

- *Which factors influence grading?*
- *How can teachers avoid being biased while grading students?*
- *How can teachers grade students ethically?*

The four interviews were conducted in person. The English language was used to interview the English subject teachers, and Arabic was used with the local teachers. The researchers had to translate the Arabic interviews into English. All four interviews were recorded using an Apple iPhone 7 device. Each interview lasted approximately 25–35 minutes. The interviews took place in the teachers' classrooms. Analyzing qualitative data is challenging because it requires the use of text instead of numbers, and the focus is on the intended meaning of the language (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). To analyze the data, the researcher first created a file that included the transcribed and observed data. Second, a codebook was created for the codes that were derived from the data in that file. A codebook can be defined as a set of codes and definitions used to direct and aid the analysis of qualitative data (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Third, each response was manually coded to identify words, phrases, themes, and subthemes that matched the aim of this analysis. A code is a qualitative inquiry representing a word or phrase essential to the study (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Fourth, after the codes were generated, they were compared so that they could be classified into meaningful units and, then, themes and subthemes. To ensure the validity and reliability of the codes and themes, another researcher reviewed the transcribed data using the codebook and found no issues in the coding of the data.

### 3. FINDINGS

The first theme generated from the data was concerned with why some teachers have subjective bias in grading. Some teachers are biased because students do not meet their expectations. In other words, students do things the way they want to, not in the way the teachers want them to. One teacher said:

*In the writing class, I want all the students to follow certain writing procedures, such as brainstorming, scaffolding, and then starting a draft. There are some students who do not meet my expectations. They refuse to brainstorm and scaffold before writing. They want to write their draft directly. For me, I don't mind, but when it comes to grading, they get low grades because of this, even if their drafts are great, simply because their behavior contradicts my expectations.*

When student work does not meet teachers' expectations, teachers tend to underestimate it. Furthermore, teachers compare students' works, which may be another reason behind their underestimation of some students' works. One teacher confessed the following:

*I know it is not fair to compare students' work, but I would like to give the full mark for work that is free of errors. I know that students are different in terms of their abilities and learning styles, but I don't consider these issues when I am grading their work.*

In brief, regarding the reasons for subjective bias, the interviewees pointed to teachers' expectations of students' performance. Teachers have high expectations from the beginning, and they wait for the students to reach these expectations. When students cannot reach them, the teachers feel disappointed and start comparing students' work, which leads to the underestimation of some of it. Some teachers mentioned that they have a subjective bias because they do not know how to use rubrics to evaluate students' work; therefore, they use their personal judgments. Furthermore, some teachers are not knowledgeable enough about professional ethics.

The second theme suggests that external factors influence teachers' grading of students. For example, if there is a lack of supervision and follow-up on the part of the administrators (AVPs and HOFs), student behavior, teacher-student relationships, teacher-parent relationships, and student performance history can all affect grading. All participants agreed that student behavior and teacher-student relationships, especially, can affect grading. These two subthemes are related to one another: Student behavior, either negative or positive, affects teacher-student relationships. Teachers tend to be generous when grading polite students, even if their work does not meet expectations. On the other hand, disruptive students will likely receive lower grades. One teacher stated that:

*If I give a disruptive student a good grade, that means I encourage her negative behavior. Once, I tried not [to] consider one of the disruptive student's behavior, and I followed the rubric in grading her work, and she got really good mark. In turn, she kept misbehaving that day. I told her to stop, and she disrespectfully replied, "So what? I got a high grade. What are you going to do? You can't lower my mark, because I included everything in the rubric." I was astonished by her answer. Therefore, I decided to consider student behavior while I am grading to stop disruptive behaviors.*

One teacher talked about teacher-student relationships and said that:

*I have strong relationships with some of my students. They always help me in organizing my classroom, checking homework, and organizing my files. Their level in my subject is very low, but I always tend to give them extra marks for helping me. I think of this as a kind of appreciation for the service they do for me.*

Another teacher stated:

*One of my students is the school VP's daughter. Therefore, I tend to give her grades she does not deserve simply to please the VP and for the sake of my personal interests, such as receiving good evaluations and permission for increased leave hours.*

Regarding the research question about the factors that influence grading, most of the interviewees agreed that student behavior and teacher-student relationships play a significant role in grading bias. They also mentioned that a lack of supervision and follow-up on the part of the administrators (AVPs, LTs), teacher-parent relationships, and student performance history influence the way they grade their students. Conversely, the interviewees also discussed ways of preventing grading bias, such as using student peer- and self-evaluation; having clear, detailed rubrics for both teachers and students; sharing grades with other teachers, AVPs, and HOFs; having a deep understanding of the professional code of ethics (student rights); and using more objective tests. Some of the responses indicated that teachers are aware of their bias during grading. Teachers assert that the roles of the AVP and HOF are very important because their job is to ensure that students are graded fairly. One interviewee stated the following:

*Unfortunately, the HOF never looked at the way I graded my students. Her concern is only the product, which should look neat and decorated.*

In addition, the teachers believe that sharing the graded work of their students with other teachers asking for their opinion can help prevent bias because these other teachers may see things from a different perspective. The final theme generated from the data deals with the role of professional ethics. The teachers claimed that the ethics of the profession help them re-think, analyze, and visualize ideas before making any decisions; control their personal emotions and thoughts about others; and recognize the interests of their students. Teachers' awareness of professional ethics is very important in avoiding bias in classroom practices. The lack of this awareness pulls teachers away from thinking about the value of being fair with students. One interviewee said the following:

*I have never read the codes of conduct of my profession, and I have never heard anyone talking about professional ethics in this school, especially the principal. All I hear is to push students to pass and not to fail them. If people in my school think like that, I may not realize the importance of ethics in my profession.*

The teachers stated that thinking about ethics and values helped them control their positive and negative emotions about students, which can lead to fair and authentic grading. Therefore, considering the role of the ethics of the profession will help teachers avoid grading bias, re-think, analyze, and visualize issues, control personal emotions and thoughts about others, and recognize the interests of the students.

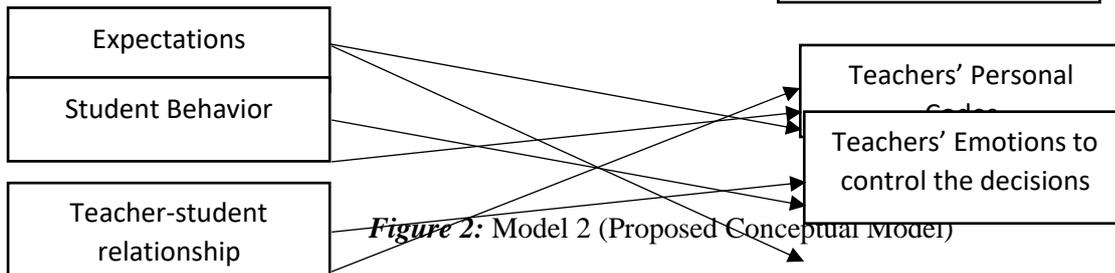
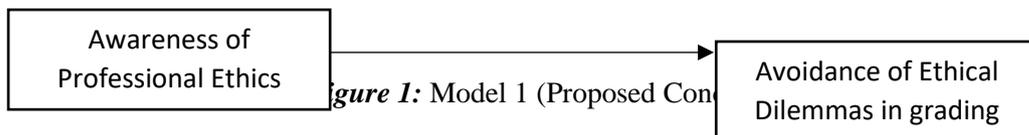
Table 1 summarizes the responses of the four teachers to the interview questions about how ethics can guide authentic and realistic grading. The responses are classified into four themes, which are further divided into subthemes.

**Table 1:** A Summary of Teachers' Perceptions of the Ethical Dilemma of Grading Bias and How Students can be Graded Ethically

Themes	Subthemes	Number of responses based on the interviews (four total interviewees)
Reasons for subjective bias	• Teacher expectations	3
	• Less understanding of using rubrics	2
	• Less understanding of professional ethics	2
	• Underestimation of student work	3
		4

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison of one student's work with another's</li> </ul>	
Factors influencing grading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lack of supervision and follow-up on the part of the administrators (AVPs, HOFs)</li> <li>• Student behavior</li> <li>• Teacher-student relationships</li> <li>• Teacher-parent relationships</li> <li>• Student performance history</li> </ul>	<p>3</p> <p>4</p> <p>4</p> <p>3</p> <p>3</p>
Ways of preventing grading bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student peer- and self-evaluation</li> <li>• Having clear, detailed rubrics for both teacher and student</li> <li>• Sharing grading with other teachers, AVPs, and HOFs</li> <li>• A deep understanding of the professional code of ethics (student rights)</li> <li>• Using more objective tests</li> </ul>	<p>4</p> <p>3</p> <p>4</p> <p>2</p> <p>3</p>
Role of the ethics of the profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help re-think, analyze, and visualize issues</li> <li>• Control personal emotions and thoughts about others</li> <li>• Recognize the interests of students</li> </ul>	<p>4</p> <p>4</p> <p>3</p>

On the basis of results and findings, the study has derived two conceptual models. Model 1 (See figure 1) shows that if teacher will be more aware of professional ethics, he or she will avoid the ethical dilemmas in grading. The model 2 (See figure 2), shows that the expectations of teachers, student behavior and teacher-student relationship can influence the teacher's emotions to control decisions and teacher's personal codes.



Based on the participating teachers' perceptions, this study, which was undertaken at a primary school in the UAE, attempted to explore the ethical dilemma of grading bias and how ethics can guide authentic and realistic grading. As shown in Table 1, teachers are sometimes biased in their grading. They set their own expectations regarding the teaching and learning processes and expect all students to meet those expectations. Zoekler (2007) rightly said, "Teacher expectations and perceptions of student attitudes also affect grades" (p. 86). He also wrote about "How teachers formed initial expectations of their students' work and conveyed these expectations in their grading, and how those expectations changed as the school year progressed, causing changes in assignments and in grades" (p. 91). Students' contradicting of these expectations lead to the teachers thinking that these students refuse to work. Zoekler (2007) wrote, "Student effort and attitude are tied to teacher expectations, and all of these are in turn tied to student motivation" (p. 86). Teachers also face problems when they begin comparing

students' work. Unfortunately, this causes tensions between teachers and students, which can influence their relationship negatively.

Teachers should become conscious of the factors that lead to biased grading. One of these factors is student behavior. Most of the time, disruptive and misbehaving students give their teachers the impression that they are aiming to disturb the lesson because they do not care about learning. Therefore, when grading their work, teachers view them as useless and punish them with low grades. Some teachers take revenge on their disrespectful students by failing them or giving them low grades, even if those students are high achievers. Teacher-student relationships can also cause bias. Teachers prefer nice, polite students; so, their relationship with such students will likely be positive. They will be very flexible when grading these students' work. Because of their bias, the teachers forget the role of ethics in grading. Zoeckler (2007) wrote, "If students can trust their teachers, and vice versa, and parents can trust their schools, then many minor controversies which might arise from second-guessing what is being done in school can be avoided" (p. 88). Only two teachers pointed out that a deep understanding of the professional code of ethics is needed, which indicates that the practices most teachers use in their classrooms are chosen based on their own, and not students', interests. Teachers are often driven by their emotions when they grade students, and this can be considered as an unfair practice. This ethical dilemma can be resolved if the teachers become more aware of professional ethics.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The teachers should increase their awareness of professional ethics in order to avoid ethical dilemmas in grading. Certain factors influence teachers' daily decisions, such as their expectations, student behavior, and teacher-student relationships. These factors also affect teachers' personal codes and sometimes allow their emotions to control their decisions. The teachers mentioned the lack of supervision by the AVP and the HOF as a factor, though being an ethical teacher has nothing to do with being supervised by others. Teachers should believe in professional ethics and work towards embodying them for the interests of their students.

## **6. IMPLICATIONS**

Ethical dilemmas are important to be studied in the educational sector. This qualitative study used the case study approach to highlight the ethical dilemmas in school education. It has emphasized the ways which can teachers use to avoid the ethical dilemmas of grading bias. Therefore, due to the broad context of this research, it has provided several theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. In terms of theoretical implications, this research has discussed the different approaches to avoid ethical dilemmas in grading. In addition, the study has expanded the literature on ethics, professional ethics, grading issues, grading bias and ethical dilemmas in the context on school education. It happens many times that the teacher is forced by some external factors to improve the grades. This situation is very difficult to be handled by teachers but the awareness of professional ethics can help them to avoid such ethical dilemmas. Therefore, this research has diverted the attention towards developing strategies and plans that can be helpful for teachers in avoiding the ethical dilemma of grading bias. This study is entirely different from prior studies, as they either highlighted the other ethical issues or merely focused on the teachers' professional ethics. Future studies focusing on grading bias can consider this research as a guideline. The methodological implications of this research originate from the way to data collection. This research has gathered the data by conducting interviewees of teachers. Instead of merely focusing on the qualitative approach, the study has used the case study method to provide an appropriate solution for the problem. Thus, the methodology used by this research is unique and future studies can use such methodology for keenly analyzing any research problem. Besides, providing several theoretical and methodological implications, this research has also highlighted some practical implications. It has directed the attention of school teachers and principals to focus on developing strategies to avoid ethical dilemma of grading bias. Most importantly, the findings of this research can help the teachers in getting aware of professional ethics.

## **7. LIMITATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study has suggested several ways for teachers to avoid being biased in grading students but still, it has some limitations which can help future studies in their development. First, this study is limited to a

single primary school. It would be beneficial if future studies can include other primary and secondary schools, which probably experience different types of ethical dilemmas with regard to grading students. Second, this research has only emphasized on the ethical dilemmas related to grading and future studies can consider the other ethical dilemmas. The third limitation is the number of interviewees and the approach used by this study. This research is qualitative in nature and only four interviews were conducted. The studies in the future can emphasize quantitative research based on the models proposed by this study.

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