

Moving Beyond Literacy and Numeracy: Cultivating Ethico-Pedagogical Sensitivity in Elementary Education

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: 02-12-2025

Revised: 20-12-2025

Accepted: 19-01-2026

Keywords:

Ethico-Pedagogical
Sensitivity, Elementary
Education, Holistic
Education, Classroom
Ecology, Teacher
Development

ABSTRACT

Global educational discourse is increasingly dominated by standardized metrics in literacy and numeracy, often marginalizing the essential ethical and socio-emotional dimensions of learning. This qualitative phenomenological study addresses this critical gap by exploring the cultivation of "ethico-pedagogical sensitivity" among elementary teachers. Ethico-pedagogical sensitivity is defined as the teacher's cultivated capacity to perceive, interpret, and respond ethically to the nuanced moral, emotional, and relational dynamics within the classroom. The research employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participatory observations with 15 purposively selected elementary teachers in Indonesia, recognized for their ethical pedagogical approaches. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo 12. Key findings reveal that teachers develop this sensitivity through three primary, interrelated practices: "facilitated reflective dialogue" on everyday moral dilemmas, "intentional empathy modeling," and the subsequent fostering of an "ethico-pedagogical classroom ecology." These practices foster a learning environment where ethical concerns are made visible and integral to the learning process, thereby educating the whole child. The study concludes that a narrow, instrumental focus on literacy and numeracy is insufficient for holistic child development in the 21st century. Cultivating ethico-pedagogical sensitivity is paramount for meaningful, transformative education that prepares students for complex societal challenges. The implications suggest a critical need for systemic shifts in teacher education programs and professional development to move beyond technical competency, integrating frameworks from the ethics of care, phenomenological pedagogy, and critical pedagogy to equip teachers as reflective moral agents who educate the whole person. This research contributes to the growing international discourse on rehumanizing education in an era of standardization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global educational landscape is heavily characterized by an intense, often myopic, emphasis on measurable outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Driven by international assessments like PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), this focus pressures national curricula, school accountability systems, and daily classroom practices to prioritize cognitive development and technical skills above all else (Lingard & Lewis, 2021; Sellar et al., 2017). This paradigm, while recognizing the importance of foundational academic competencies, risks reducing the rich, complex process of education to a transactional and economically driven enterprise (Biesta, 2015).

In this model, the primary purpose of schooling becomes the production of human capital, measured by test scores, thereby neglecting the crucial task of educating the "whole child"—a complex being endowed with cognitive, social, emotional, ethical, and civic capacities that all require deliberate nurturing for a flourishing and democratic life (Noddings, 2013; Palmer, 2017). The elementary classroom, as a primary site of socialization and identity formation, must therefore be urgently re-envisioned as a space for holistic human development that extends far beyond academic benchmarks.

In response to this reductive trend, a robust body of scholarly work has long advocated for the integration of ethical, relational, and socio-emotional dimensions in education. Movements such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Character Education have gained traction, aiming to address these non-academic areas (Durlak et al., 2011). However, a significant portion of the literature critiques many of these programs as being additive, scripted, or implemented as standalone interventions, often failing to become authentically woven into the fabric of daily pedagogical interactions and the core academic curriculum (Kristjánsson, 2020; Kohn, 2021). They can sometimes resemble a "vaccination" model, where lessons on empathy or respect are delivered periodically but do not necessarily transform the underlying classroom culture or the teacher's fundamental pedagogical stance. This paper introduces and operationalizes the concept of "ethico-pedagogical sensitivity" to address this critical integration gap. Drawing from seminal philosophical and pedagogical works, this concept synthesizes Max van Manen's (2016) notion of "pedagogical tact"—the instantaneous, intuitive, and non-codifiable capacity to act in situationally appropriate, pedagogically sound ways—with Nel Noddings' (2013) "ethics of care," which posits caring, reciprocal relations as a foundational moral imperative for education. Further informed by Biesta's (2015) concept of "world-centered education" and the traditions of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2018; Giroux, 2020), ethico-pedagogical sensitivity is thus defined as a teacher's cultivated, perceptive attunement to the subtle moral, emotional, and interpersonal undercurrents in the classroom, enabling them to respond in a manner that fosters caring relationships, ethical growth, and a critical engagement with the world. Despite its strong theoretical foundations, a significant empirical gap remains in understanding how this sensitivity is concretely manifested, developed, and sustained by teachers within the specific, often pressurized, context of contemporary elementary classrooms, which are dominated by literacy and numeracy demands and standardized testing regimes.

This study aims to empirically explore the strategies, practices, and reflective processes through which elementary teachers cultivate and enact ethico-pedagogical sensitivity within their daily professional lives. The central research questions guiding this inquiry are: How do elementary teachers perceive, develop, and demonstrate ethico-pedagogical sensitivity in their daily classroom interactions beyond the formal curriculum of literacy and numeracy? What are the core practices that constitute this sensitivity, and how do they shape the classroom environment? We hypothesize that such sensitivity is not merely an innate trait but a dynamic, professional skill and a moral orientation that is developed through deliberate reflective practice, specific pedagogical actions, and a supportive professional culture. This research employs a qualitative phenomenological design, utilizing sustained participatory observations and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with practicing elementary teachers to capture the lived experience and essence of this sensitivity.

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the international discourse on holistic and humane education by identifying specific, actionable practices that teachers

employ to navigate the ethical dimension of their work. We argue that these practices, when systematized and understood, can form a robust framework for both pre-service and in-service teacher development—a framework that positions ethico-pedagogical sensitivity not as a peripheral "add-on" or a soft skill, but as a core, indispensable pedagogical competency. This fundamental shift in perspective is essential for creating learning environments that are not only intellectually stimulating and academically rigorous but also ethically nurturing, socially just, and emotionally responsive, thereby truly honoring the complexity of the children we serve.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a rigorous qualitative research design with a transcendental phenomenological approach. This approach was deemed most appropriate as it seeks to understand the essence, underlying structures, and shared meanings of a particular lived experience—in this case, the experience of cultivating and exercising ethico-pedagogical sensitivity in the elementary classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology allows for a deep exploration of the “lifeworld” of the teachers, focusing on their perceptions, intentions, and the ways in which they make sense of their pedagogical interactions. It moves beyond mere description to interpret the fundamental nature of this sensitive practice.

2.2. Population and Sampling

The participants comprised 15 elementary school teachers (Grades 1-6) from a diverse range of public and private schools in urban and semi-urban areas of West Java, Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique, specifically criterion sampling, was used to select information-rich participants (Patton, 2015). The primary criterion was that participants were identified by their peers, school principals, or district supervisors as demonstrating a strong, observable commitment to the ethical and relational aspects of teaching, as evidenced through their classroom management style, student-teacher relationships, and integration of socio-emotional learning. The sample included both early-career (n=5) and experienced teachers (n=10), with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 25 years, to capture a variety of perspectives and developmental trajectories. This deliberate selection ensured the research could yield rich, relevant, and thick data central to the phenomenon under investigation.

2.3. Instrument

Data collection was conducted over an intensive six-month period to ensure depth and saturation and involved two primary, complementary instruments:

1. **Semi-structured Interview Guide:** This guide contained open-ended questions and probing prompts designed to elicit teachers' detailed perceptions, experiences, and reflective processes regarding ethical dilemmas, student relationships, and their pedagogical decisions. Example questions included: "Can you describe a recent, specific situation where you felt you had to respond to more than just the academic need of a student? What was going through your mind? What guided your ultimate response?" and "How do you understand your role in fostering a sense of fairness or care in your classroom?" Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.
2. **Participant Observation Sheet:** A detailed observation protocol was developed to document specific classroom interactions, teacher language (both verbal and para-

verbal), non-verbal cues, and the overall classroom atmosphere that exemplified ethico-pedagogical sensitivity. Observations focused not only on formal lessons but, crucially, on the "in-between" moments: transitions, group work, recess, conflicts, and informal conversations. The protocol included space for descriptive notes, reflective notes, and initial analytical memos (Emerson et al., 2011).

The procedure involved two sequential, iterative phases: an initial phase of non-participant observation (3-4 extended sessions per teacher across different subjects and times of day) to document practices in context, followed by an in-depth, phenomenologically-oriented interview (90-120 minutes each) to explore the reasoning, reflections, and lived experiences behind the observed actions. This sequencing allowed the interview questions to be informed by the observations, leading to richer, more grounded data. The interview and observation guides were validated for content and construct validity by a panel of three experts in pedagogy, educational ethics, and qualitative research. A pilot study with two teachers not included in the main sample was conducted to refine the instruments and procedures.

2.4. Data Analysis

All interview transcripts and field notes constituted the data corpus, which was imported into NVivo 12 software for systematic organization and analysis. The analysis followed the rigorous six-step process of reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2022): (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading and immersion; (2) generating initial codes across the entire dataset; (3) searching for themes by collating codes into potential theme clusters; (4) reviewing themes, checking them against the coded extracts and the entire dataset for coherence and prevalence; (5) defining and naming themes, articulating the essence and scope of each theme; and (6) producing the report, weaving the analytic narrative together with vivid data extracts. This iterative and recursive process, which involved moving back and forth between the data, coded extracts, and emerging themes, ensured that the identified themes were firmly grounded in the empirical data while allowing for theoretical interpretation. To enhance trustworthiness and credibility, member checking was conducted with several participants, and peer debriefing sessions were held among the research team to critique and refine the emerging thematic structure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the rich observational and interview data revealed three central, interconnected themes that characterize the cultivation and enactment of ethico-pedagogical sensitivity: Facilitated Reflective Dialogue, Intentional Empathy Modeling, and the co-creation of an Ethico-Pedagogical Classroom Ecology. These themes represent the core practices and resulting environment through which teachers move beyond a narrow academic focus to educate the whole child.

3.1. Key Findings: Themes of Ethico-Pedagogical Sensitivity

Theme 1: Facilitated Reflective Dialogue as Ethical Apprenticeship

A predominant finding was that teachers consistently and skillfully engaged students in structured, open-ended conversations about moral dilemmas arising from everyday classroom life. This practice went far beyond simple rule enforcement or top-down moral instruction. It functioned as a form of "ethical apprenticeship" (Hansen, 2021), where students learn to navigate moral complexity through guided practice. For instance, when a student's prized possession was taken without permission, a common teacher response

observed was not merely to retrieve the item and reprimand the culprit. Instead, teachers facilitated a dialogue that explored the perspectives and feelings of all involved parties—the owner's sense of violation, the taker's motivations (which often revealed a lack of social skills or a different understanding of ownership), and the role of bystanders. One Grade 3 teacher with 15 years of experience articulated this approach: "It's not just about finding who is right or wrong. That's the easy part. The harder, more important work is to help them see the world from the other's eyes—the feeling of loss and insecurity, the broken trust. We talk about how we can repair that relationship, not just return the object. The apology is the beginning, not the end." These dialogues, often termed "philosophical inquiries" or "circle time" by some participants, served as practical exercises in ethical reasoning, perspective-taking, and collaborative problem-solving, aligning with Dewey's (1997) concept of education as a social process and reconstruction of experience.

Theme 2: Intentional Empathy Modeling: Making the Implicit Explicit

The second major theme was the conscious and deliberate effort by teachers to model empathetic and caring behavior in their interactions with both students and colleagues. This transcended simply "being nice"; it was a strategic pedagogical practice. Teachers were observed explicitly "thinking aloud" their own emotional and ethical processing. For example, when a lesson was disrupted, a teacher might state: "I'm feeling a bit frustrated by the noise because I'm worried not everyone can hear the instructions. I need to take a deep breath and then we can figure out together how to proceed more calmly." This meta-cognitive modeling demystifies empathy and self-regulation, showing students that these are active, learnable skills. Furthermore, teachers consistently acted as "ethical amplifiers," publicly noticing and naming student acts of kindness, solidarity, or courage. When a student helped another who was struggling, a teacher would comment, "I saw how you noticed Adi was confused and you patiently showed him your way. That act of kindness helped him feel included and supported." This practice makes the implicit ethical dimension of classroom life explicit, bringing it into the realm of collective awareness and valuing it as highly as academic achievement (Noddings, 2013).

Theme 3: Fostering an Ethico-Pedagogical Classroom Ecology

The consistent application of Facilitated Reflective Dialogue and Intentional Empathy Modeling did not occur in a vacuum; it actively fostered a distinct and palpable classroom ecology. This third theme describes the emergent, self-reinforcing environment where ethical sensitivity becomes a distributed capacity of the classroom community. In these environments, data showed students beginning to spontaneously initiate ethical interventions. They would articulate concerns about fairness without teacher prompting ("That doesn't seem fair to her"), mediate minor conflicts among peers ("Let's ask him why he did that first"), and show a heightened, proactive awareness of classmates in distress, offering comfort or seeking adult help. The classroom was transformed from a space where morality was solely the teacher's responsibility to enforce into a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) where ethical sensitivity, care, and justice were shared communal responsibilities, as exemplified by the student behaviors emerging from the pedagogical approaches detailed in Table 1. This ecology represents the ultimate fruition of ethico-pedagogical sensitivity, where the teacher's cultivation leads to a self-sustaining moral culture.

Table 1: Examples of Ethico-Pedagogical Sensitivity Practices in Daily Classroom Interactions

Classroom Situation	Typical Response (Focus on Compliance & Academics)	Ethico-Pedagogically Sensitive Response (Focus on Relationships & Ethical Growth)
A student crying after being teased	"Don't cry. It's not a big deal. Just ignore it." or "Who did this? They will be punished."	Approaching calmly and validating feelings: "You look really upset. Would you like to talk about what happened?" then facilitating dialogue between the victim and perpetrator to build understanding and repair the relationship.
Uncohesive group work with one student dominating	Assigning tasks authoritatively or merely reprimanding the dominant student.	Guiding group reflection: "What challenges are you experiencing working together? How can we ensure all voices and ideas are heard? What agreements can we make for more equitable collaboration?"
A low-achieving student giving an incorrect answer	"That's not quite right. Can anyone help?" or immediately providing the correct answer.	Appreciating effort and courage: "Thank you for being brave and sharing your thinking. That means a lot. Let's examine the steps you took together to identify where clarification is needed."
Chaotic and noisy transition moment	Yelling, threatening with punishment, or writing names on the board.	Modeling calmness and using "I" statements: "I'm feeling overwhelmed by this noise and worried we might be late. Let's all take a deep breath together and find a calmer way to transition."

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study offer a robust, empirical validation and extension of several key theoretical frameworks in education. The practice of Facilitated Reflective Dialogue powerfully resonates with and operationalizes Noddings' (2013) ethics of care, which emphasizes dialogue as a fundamental component of caring relations. For Noddings, genuine dialogue is not a Socratic method to reach a predetermined answer but is open-ended, reciprocal, and aimed at mutual understanding and growth. The teachers in this study embodied this principle by using dialogue not to control behavior but to explore moral complexity, validate emotions, and foster a shared understanding of how to live well together. This approach stands in stark contrast to the "moral inoculation" model of some character education programs, instead positioning ethical development as an ongoing, relational, and dialogic process (Hansen, 2021). It also aligns with Freire's (2018) critique of the "banking model" of education, instead promoting a problem-posing education where students engage with real-world moral problems as active co-investigators.

Similarly, the theme of Intentional Empathy Modeling provides a tangible, pedagogical expression of van Manen's (2016) elusive concept of pedagogical tact. Van Manen argues that tact is a form of practical knowledge that is manifested in action, often non-verbal and instantaneous. By consciously modeling their own ethical and emotional processing, these teachers were making their internal, tacit "tact" visible, audible, and therefore pedagogically available for student apprenticeship. This modeling demystifies the process of being an ethical actor, demonstrating that empathy, self-regulation, and careful judgment are skills that can be observed, practiced, and refined, not just innate qualities (Jennings & Greenberg, 2019). This practice is also strongly supported by research in social learning theory (Bandura, 2018) and the neuroscience of mirroring, which underscores the power of observational learning for emotional and social competencies.

The emergence of a distinct Classroom Ecology as a core theme underscores the profoundly systemic and relational nature of ethical development. It suggests that ethico-pedagogical sensitivity is not merely an individual teacher attribute but a relational capacity that, when consistently enacted, can shape the very culture and social fabric of the classroom (Biesta, 2015). This finding directly challenges the prevailing neoliberal discourse that locates educational quality almost exclusively in individual teacher competency metrics or aggregated student test scores (Sellar et al., 2017). Instead, it points to the critical need for an ecological and situated view of education, where the quality of interpersonal relationships, the moral climate, and the sense of community are recognized as central, indispensable conditions for meaningful learning and human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This ecology is what creates a 'holding environment' (Kegan, 2018) where students feel safe enough to take intellectual and social risks, make mistakes, and engage in the difficult work of ethical growth within the supportive classroom environment central to our conceptual model (Figure 1).

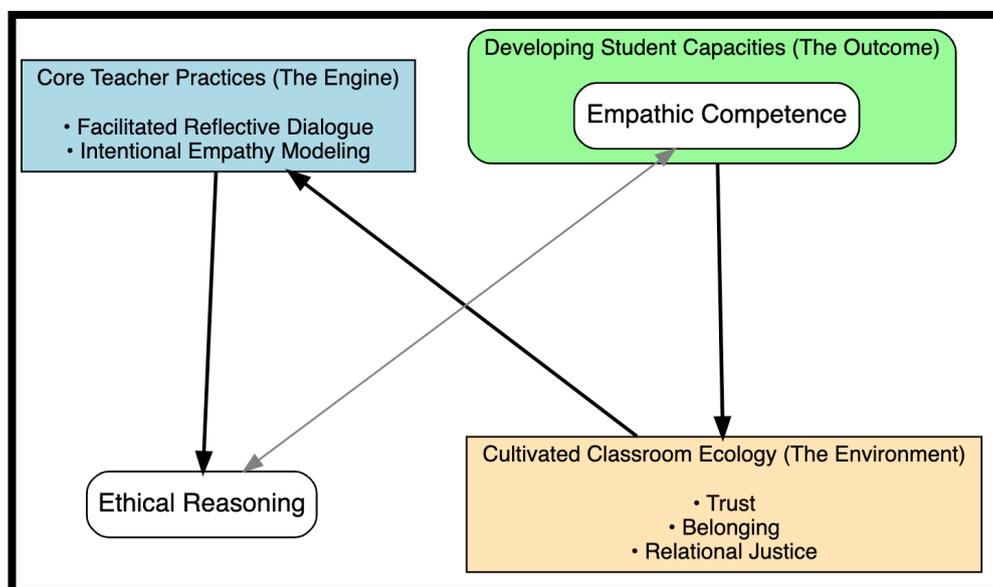


Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Developing Ethico-Pedagogical Sensitivity

The conceptual model in Figure 1 illustrates this dynamic, cyclical, and reinforcing process. Teacher practices are the engine that drives the development of student capacities. These growing student capacities, in turn, actively co-create a classroom ecology characterized by trust, belonging, and relational fairness. This supportive ecology then provides positive feedback, reinforcing the teacher's practices and creating a context that

demands and sustains ever-deeper levels of ethico-pedagogical sensitivity. This creates a virtuous cycle of ethical growth for all members of the classroom community.

3.3. Limitations and Research Implications

While this study provides valuable insights into ethico-pedagogical sensitivity, several limitations should be acknowledged. The qualitative, context-specific nature of this research within the Indonesian educational context limits its generalizability. The reliance on self-selected teachers recognized for their ethical approaches may not represent the broader teaching population. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional design captures a snapshot in time rather than longitudinal development.

These limitations suggest several promising directions for future research. Longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of ethico-pedagogical sensitivity on student outcomes would provide valuable insights into its sustained effects. Comparative research across diverse cultural and educational contexts could reveal how this sensitivity manifests differently across various systems. Furthermore, action research projects involving teachers in co-designing professional development based on this framework would bridge the gap between research and practice. Mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative measures with qualitative depth could also strengthen future investigations in this area.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates conclusively that the prevailing emphasis on literacy and numeracy, while important, provides an insufficient framework for meaningful elementary education. Ethico-pedagogical sensitivity emerges not as a supplementary skill but as a fundamental pedagogical competency that transforms classrooms from sites of knowledge transmission into moral communities. The identified practices of facilitated reflective dialogue, intentional empathy modeling, and ecological cultivation provide concrete pathways for integrating ethical education into daily classroom life, thereby realizing truly transformative education.

Moving forward, several strategic actions are recommended. Teacher education programs should integrate modules on phenomenological reflection, ethics of care, and pedagogical tact through supervised analysis of classroom practices. Schools should implement structured professional learning communities where teachers collaboratively examine ethical dilemmas and pedagogical decisions. Policymakers need to develop assessment frameworks that recognize and value positive classroom ecologies and teacher relational competencies. Educational institutions should create cultures that explicitly honor ethical dimensions of teaching, protecting time and space for these practices amid academic pressures. Ultimately, these collective efforts will foster educational environments that not only develop academic competencies but also nurture the ethical, social, and emotional capacities essential for human flourishing in the 21st century

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