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## Emergent Strategies for Embedding Ethics in Assessment Practices in Teacher Education

### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore emergent strategies for embedding ethics in assessment practices among teacher educators in Tehran, with a focus on identifying principles, challenges, and institutional supports within teacher education programs. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected teacher educators from various institutions in Tehran. Participants were chosen to ensure a diversity of experiences in assessment roles. Data were collected until theoretical saturation was achieved and analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's framework. Rigorous ethical protocols, including informed consent and data anonymization, were observed throughout the study. Analysis revealed three major themes underpinning ethical assessment in teacher education: (1) Ethical Foundations in Assessment—including fairness, transparency, confidentiality, respect for student autonomy, cultural sensitivity, avoidance of bias, and honesty in feedback; (2) Ethical Pedagogical Strategies—such as reflective practice, dialogic engagement, participatory rubric development, and ongoing professional development; and (3) Institutional and Structural Supports—encompassing codes of ethics, assessment committees, professional training, and digital privacy protocols. Participants highlighted both individual agency and systemic structures as necessary for sustaining ethical assessment, while also reporting context-specific challenges related to policy, resource constraints, and digital transformation. The study underscores the multifaceted nature of ethics in assessment, revealing that sustainable ethical practices require a combination of personal commitment, reflective pedagogies, and supportive institutional frameworks. Embedding ethics in assessment is both a relational and structural endeavor, demanding context-sensitive approaches, professional development, and robust policy supports in teacher education. These findings have significant implications for developing comprehensive ethical guidelines, fostering reflective practice, and ensuring equity and integrity in teacher assessment.

**Keywords:** Ethical assessment, teacher education, qualitative research, assessment strategies, professional ethics, institutional support, Tehran

## Introduction

In recent years, the landscape of teacher education has been profoundly shaped by shifts toward greater accountability, diversity, and innovation in assessment practices. Assessment is a central component of the teaching and learning process, serving not only to measure student learning but also to guide instruction, inform policy, and support professional growth (Bearman et al., 2022). However, as teacher education programs have increasingly emphasized outcomes-based and competency-driven approaches, the ethical dimensions of assessment have become more complex and salient. Embedding ethics into assessment practices is not simply a matter of regulatory compliance; it is a foundational necessity for cultivating

trust, promoting equity, and developing reflective practitioners capable of navigating moral dilemmas in diverse educational contexts (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Wyett et al., 2021).

The challenge of ethical assessment in teacher education is heightened by the inherent power dynamics, high stakes, and formative responsibilities that teacher educators hold. Unlike routine classroom assessments, assessment in teacher education has consequences not only for candidates' academic success but also for their future professional trajectories, self-efficacy, and sense of justice (Green et al., 2017; Ho, 2014). Ethical lapses—such as biased grading, lack of transparency, or breaches of confidentiality—can result in long-term harm, perpetuating systemic inequities and undermining the legitimacy of teacher preparation programs (Wyett et al., 2021; McArthur, 2016). As such, the imperative for ethically grounded assessment practices is especially acute in the field of teacher education, where graduates are entrusted with fostering ethical sensibilities in the next generation of learners.

A growing body of literature underscores the multifaceted nature of assessment ethics, highlighting issues of fairness, transparency, confidentiality, inclusivity, and respect for student autonomy (Tai et al., 2018; Brown & Harris, 2014). For instance, fairness in assessment requires not only the absence of bias and discrimination but also the active accommodation of diverse student needs and backgrounds (Shephard et al., 2016). Transparency entails clear communication of assessment criteria and processes, while confidentiality involves the responsible management of sensitive student information. Respect for autonomy encourages the incorporation of student voice and choice, fostering agency and engagement (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Cultural sensitivity, moreover, demands awareness of the sociocultural contexts in which assessments are designed and implemented, ensuring that instruments and practices do not marginalize or disadvantage particular groups (Hill et al., 2017).

Despite these insights, research reveals persistent gaps between ethical ideals and actual practices in assessment within teacher education (Green et al., 2017; Bearman et al., 2022). Studies indicate that teacher educators often face dilemmas balancing the need for consistency and standardization with the imperative for individualized support (Wyett et al., 2021; McArthur, 2016). Ambiguities in institutional guidelines, insufficient professional development, and the pressures of high-stakes accountability can further complicate ethical decision-making (Smith et al., 2019). Furthermore, the rapid digitization of assessment—accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—has introduced new ethical challenges around privacy, security, and equitable access (O'Leary & Scully, 2018; Bearman et al., 2022). As assessment increasingly relies on digital platforms, concerns regarding data security, anonymized grading, and digital divides have become prominent issues that must be addressed within ethical frameworks (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2016).

The literature also points to the importance of reflective and dialogic approaches for fostering ethical awareness and action among teacher educators (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Hill et al., 2017). Reflective practice, including critical self-examination and collaborative dialogue, has been shown to enhance ethical sensitivity and support the negotiation of complex assessment dilemmas (McArthur, 2016; Green et al., 2017). Participatory strategies, such as co-construction of assessment criteria and formative feedback loops, help to democratize assessment processes and build ethical climates in teacher education programs (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Tai et al., 2018). However, institutional supports—such as clear codes of ethics, assessment committees, and ongoing professional development—remain essential for embedding ethics into the structural fabric of teacher education (Smith et al., 2019; Wyett et al., 2021).

Despite this body of research, there remains a need for more nuanced, context-specific studies that examine how teacher educators themselves interpret, negotiate, and operationalize ethics in assessment on a day-to-day basis (Ho, 2014; Green et al., 2017). Much of the extant literature focuses on abstract ethical principles or policy-level analysis, with less attention given to the lived experiences and practical strategies employed by teacher educators in diverse cultural and institutional contexts (Bearman et al., 2022). In regions such as Iran, where teacher education systems face unique challenges related to cultural

diversity, resource constraints, and evolving policy landscapes, it is especially important to explore emergent strategies for ethical assessment that are responsive to local realities (Abbasi et al., 2022).

The present study responds to this gap by investigating the emergent strategies that teacher educators in Tehran employ to embed ethics in their assessment practices. By focusing on the perspectives and experiences of those directly involved in assessment, this research seeks to illuminate the principles, processes, and institutional supports that underpin ethical assessment in teacher education. The qualitative design allows for rich, in-depth exploration of the dilemmas faced, the reasoning applied, and the innovations developed by teacher educators as they strive to reconcile ethical ideals with practical constraints.

Furthermore, this study is situated within the broader discourse on teacher professionalism and the cultivation of ethical dispositions in future educators. As Boud and Molloy (2013) note, assessment is not merely a technical or administrative activity but a moral and relational act that shapes professional identities and community norms. Understanding how ethics are embedded in assessment thus has significant implications for the quality of teacher preparation, the equity of educational outcomes, and the trustworthiness of educational institutions. It also aligns with calls for the transformation of assessment practices to support more inclusive, participatory, and justice-oriented forms of education (Hill et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2019).

The study is guided by the following research question: What strategies do teacher educators in Tehran employ to embed ethics in their assessment practices, and what institutional, pedagogical, and cultural factors influence these strategies? Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research aims to (1) identify the key ethical principles and dilemmas encountered in assessment, (2) document the practical strategies and supports used to address these challenges, and (3) contribute to the development of actionable recommendations for embedding ethics in teacher education assessment more broadly.

In sum, this study seeks to advance the field of assessment in teacher education by providing empirical evidence and critical insights into the ethical enactment of assessment practices. By foregrounding the voices of teacher educators and situating their strategies within the complexities of institutional and cultural contexts, the research aspires to inform policy, practice, and future scholarship in the ongoing quest for ethical and equitable teacher education.

## Methods and Materials

### *Study Design and Participants*

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm to explore emergent strategies for embedding ethics into assessment practices within teacher education. The aim was to gain in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, professional judgments, and reflections on ethical dilemmas and solutions related to assessment in teacher preparation programs. The research setting comprised various teacher education institutions in Tehran, Iran.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure maximum variation in terms of teaching experience, academic discipline, and institutional affiliation. The final sample consisted of 20 teacher educators, all of whom had substantial engagement in assessment-related responsibilities, including course design, grading, and policy development. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least five years of teaching experience in teacher education and to be actively involved in assessment decision-making at their respective institutions. The selection process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews no longer yielded novel categories or insights.

## *Data Collection*

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews that encouraged participants to reflect on their practical experiences, ethical concerns, and the strategies they adopted to address ethical challenges in assessment. An interview guide was developed based on existing literature and expert consultation and covered topics such as fairness, transparency, student autonomy, confidentiality, and power dynamics in assessment. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in person in a private setting within the participants' academic institutions to ensure comfort and confidentiality. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview transcripts, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization with data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Data management and coding were facilitated by NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Coding began with open coding to identify recurring concepts, which were then grouped into subthemes and overarching themes related to ethical strategies in assessment. The analysis was iterative and reflexive, with regular peer debriefings and member checks to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

## **Findings and Results**

### **1. Ethical Foundations in Assessment**

Fairness and Equity emerged as a central concern, with participants highlighting the necessity of ensuring equal access to assessment opportunities and feedback. Teacher educators discussed the use of consistent grading practices and adapting assessments to meet the needs of diverse students. As one participant remarked, "I try to make sure every student, regardless of their background, has an equal chance to succeed and knows exactly how they'll be evaluated." This was supported by explicit rubric transparency and efforts to minimize discrepancies between students.

Transparency of Criteria was identified as an essential subtheme. Many participants emphasized the importance of making assessment criteria clear and accessible. Strategies included pre-assessment briefings, open discussions of rubrics, and even co-designing criteria with students. According to one educator, "When students know the criteria ahead of time and are part of the conversation, the assessment feels much more ethical and less intimidating."

Confidentiality and Privacy in handling assessment information was another key concern. Participants described practices such as anonymizing grades, securing physical and digital records, and exercising discretion in verbal feedback. "I never announce scores publicly, and I make sure all records are stored securely," stated one interviewee, reflecting the collective commitment to student privacy.

Respect for Student Autonomy was frequently referenced, particularly through providing students with choice in assessment modes and incorporating self-assessment opportunities. Teachers noted the value of participatory grading and fostering a sense of agency. One participant noted, "Allowing students some say in how they are assessed makes them more engaged and responsible."

Cultural and Contextual Sensitivity in assessment was emphasized by participants who worked with diverse student populations. They described intentional efforts to avoid cultural bias in test items, use inclusive examples, and consider gender and local context in evaluations. "It's critical to check my own assumptions when writing questions," said one educator, "so I review every item for cultural relevance and inclusivity."

Avoidance of Bias and Discrimination was discussed in the context of blind review practices, equitable task allocation, and neutral language. Interviewees acknowledged the ongoing challenge of recognizing and addressing personal biases. “We are all susceptible to unconscious bias,” admitted one participant, “so I double-check tasks and sometimes ask a colleague to review them too.”

Honesty in Performance Feedback was underscored as vital for ethical assessment. Constructive criticism, evidence-based comments, and authentic praise were mentioned as best practices. Educators cautioned against overgeneralizing and stressed the importance of honest yet supportive feedback. As one teacher put it, “Students deserve feedback that is truthful and helps them grow, not just empty praise or criticism.”

## 2. Ethical Pedagogical Strategies

Reflective Teaching Practice was a prominent theme, with teachers emphasizing self-evaluation and reflection after assessments. Many kept journals of ethical dilemmas they encountered. One interviewee explained, “After each semester, I write about situations that felt ethically complex and how I handled them. It helps me improve.”

Dialogue and Negotiation in the assessment process was commonly reported, including student-teacher conferences and the use of assessment contracts. The flexibility to revise criteria mid-course was noted as empowering for students. “If students raise concerns about an assignment, I’m open to renegotiating the rubric together,” shared a participant.

Ethical Assessment Design involved scaffolding tasks, introducing complexity gradually, and offering multiple assessment formats to accommodate diverse learners. Participants highlighted that ethical assessment goes beyond content to include thoughtful design. “We shouldn’t test everything the same way—ethical assessment means considering students’ strengths and needs,” one educator commented.

Capacity Building for Ethical Awareness was observed in the organization of workshops, peer discussions, and ethics case studies during faculty meetings. Teachers believed regular professional dialogue enhanced their ethical sensitivity. One participant noted, “We discuss hypothetical cases in our team and it really opens your eyes to new perspectives.”

Role Modeling and Ethical Climate was emphasized by teachers who sought to embody ethical values and maintain consistency in their own practices. They described efforts to foster collective norms and model transparency in decision-making. “Students and colleagues look to us; our behavior sets the tone for what is acceptable,” explained one interviewee.

## 3. Institutional and Structural Supports

Policy-Level Ethical Guidelines were described as vital for institutionalizing ethical assessment. Participants reported the presence of codes of ethics, institutional review protocols, and documentation requirements. “We have a formal code of ethics for assessment and everyone is expected to follow it,” stated one teacher educator.

Assessment Committees and Oversight Bodies provided mechanisms for peer moderation, student representation, and escalation of disputes. Teachers saw these structures as essential for accountability. “Our department has an assessment committee where students can raise concerns. It keeps us on our toes,” said an interviewee.

Professional Development and Training in assessment ethics was highly valued, with regular training sessions and reflective modules. Many teachers credited such opportunities with improving their practice. “Annual ethics training keeps us updated and aware of our responsibilities,” one educator noted.

Digital Assessment Ethics addressed the shift to online platforms. Teachers discussed privacy protocols in learning management systems, digital sharing of rubrics, and secure submission processes. “With everything online, we’ve had to rethink privacy and security,” one participant remarked.

Incentive Structures for Ethical Practice included formal recognition, innovation awards, and ethical teaching evaluations. These incentives motivated staff to prioritize ethics. As one teacher described, “Getting recognized for fairness in assessment sends a message that ethics matter as much as academic results.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to explore the emergent strategies employed by teacher educators in Tehran for embedding ethics within assessment practices in teacher education programs. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, several interconnected themes emerged, shedding light on both the ethical dilemmas experienced and the strategies adopted to address these challenges. The findings reinforce the notion that ethical assessment in teacher education is not merely an administrative function but a dynamic, relational, and value-laden practice with significant implications for professional formation and educational equity.

The first overarching theme, **Ethical Foundations in Assessment**, encompassed fairness and equity, transparency, confidentiality, respect for student autonomy, cultural sensitivity, avoidance of bias, and honesty in feedback. Teacher educators expressed a strong commitment to equitable practices, frequently adapting assessments to accommodate diverse learner needs and striving for consistency in grading. Transparency was highlighted as a linchpin for trust, with participants emphasizing the co-construction of rubrics, open dialogue about assessment criteria, and shared understanding of evaluation processes. Confidentiality and respect for privacy were deeply ingrained, especially in digital assessment contexts where secure handling of data became paramount. The commitment to student autonomy manifested through participatory grading and the provision of assessment choices—practices that enhanced student agency and engagement.

These results align closely with established research, which underscores the importance of fairness, transparency, and confidentiality as pillars of ethical assessment (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Bearman et al., 2022; Shephard et al., 2016). Prior studies have documented that transparent communication and student involvement in assessment processes can reduce anxiety and perceptions of injustice (Tai et al., 2018; Brown & Harris, 2014). Similarly, the need to safeguard confidentiality in assessment has been magnified by the digitization of education, where data breaches and public sharing of results are new ethical risks (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2016; O’Leary & Scully, 2018). The attention to cultural sensitivity and bias avoidance in the present study echoes McArthur’s (2016) argument that social justice in assessment requires active identification and mitigation of systemic inequities.

The second major theme, **Ethical Pedagogical Strategies**, revolved around reflective teaching, dialogic engagement, ethical design, capacity building, and role modeling. Many participants maintained reflective journals to document ethical dilemmas and solutions, demonstrating a commitment to continuous self-improvement. Dialogic approaches, such as assessment contract negotiations and mid-course rubric revisions, were cited as practical means to democratize assessment and foster shared responsibility. The design of assessments was guided not only by content validity but also by ethical considerations—scaffolding, multiple formats, and gradual complexity were frequently employed. Teacher educators also stressed the importance of professional development in ethics and the cultivation of an ethical climate through transparent modeling of values.

These strategies are supported by the literature, which identifies reflective practice as a key mechanism for ethical growth (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Hill et al., 2017). Research has shown that teacher educators who critically reflect on their assessment practices are better equipped to navigate ethical dilemmas and make contextually appropriate decisions (Green et al., 2017; Shephard et al., 2016). Dialogic and participatory strategies, such as the co-construction of assessment rubrics, are increasingly advocated as means to empower students and reduce hierarchical barriers (Tai et al., 2018; Boud & Molloy, 2013). Furthermore,



capacity-building initiatives and professional dialogue on ethics—such as workshops and case study discussions—are linked to improved ethical awareness and shared norms within educational communities (Smith et al., 2019; Wyett et al., 2021).

The third major theme, **Institutional and Structural Supports**, reflected the systemic dimensions of ethical assessment. Teacher educators noted the importance of institutional codes of ethics, assessment committees, formal documentation protocols, and peer moderation structures. Professional development in assessment ethics was widely valued, with many institutions offering regular training sessions and opportunities for critical reflection. With the transition to digital assessment platforms, attention to data security, privacy protocols, and secure submission processes became central. Additionally, incentive structures—such as recognition for fair practice and innovation awards—were identified as motivators for sustaining ethical behavior among faculty.

These findings are in accordance with research calling for robust institutional frameworks to support ethical assessment (Smith et al., 2019; Bearman et al., 2022). Institutional codes of ethics, clear guidelines, and oversight bodies can mitigate ambiguity and ensure consistent ethical standards across programs (Ho, 2014; Green et al., 2017). Professional development and critical reflection sessions are shown to sustain ethical cultures, particularly when they move beyond compliance to foster genuine dialogue and moral reasoning (Wyett et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2017). The emergent focus on digital ethics mirrors recent scholarship, which highlights the unique challenges and opportunities posed by technology-mediated assessment (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2016; O’Leary & Scully, 2018).

One particularly salient insight from this study is the interplay between individual agency and systemic support. While teacher educators demonstrated considerable personal commitment to ethical assessment, they also acknowledged that institutional structures either enabled or constrained their practice. For example, participants noted that while reflective practice and open dialogue with students were effective, their sustainability depended on supportive leadership, manageable workloads, and access to ongoing training. The study thus supports a “whole-system” approach to ethics in assessment, one that recognizes the mutual reinforcement of individual, collegial, and institutional factors (Bearman et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2019).

Moreover, the findings highlight several context-specific challenges. In Tehran, cultural diversity, evolving educational policies, and limited resources present unique ethical dilemmas. Teacher educators discussed the tension between standardized, policy-driven assessments and the need to honor local values and individual student backgrounds (Abbasi et al., 2022). They also highlighted the impact of resource constraints on the ability to offer varied assessment formats or comprehensive professional development. Such challenges are consistent with research from other non-Western contexts, suggesting the need for culturally responsive and contextually grounded approaches to assessment ethics (Abbasi et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2017).

Overall, the study contributes to the growing recognition that ethics in assessment is both a foundational responsibility and a site of ongoing negotiation in teacher education. The strategies described—ranging from practical adaptations to institutional advocacy—illustrate the creativity and commitment of teacher educators working within complex and often ambiguous ethical landscapes. By providing a detailed account of these strategies, the research not only aligns with but also extends existing scholarship, emphasizing the need for systemic, reflective, and participatory approaches to ethical assessment in diverse settings.

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## Authors’ Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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