

Article

Examining Ethical Behaviour of Social Work Educators in Classroom Settings: Key Considerations for Students

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Abstract

Ethical behaviour within the educational realm, particularly among social work educators, plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and professional development of students. This study examined the ethical behaviour of social work educators in classroom settings, including the ethical dilemmas they encounter, the support and resources available to them, and students' feedback on their ethical conduct. In-depth interviews were used to collect data from 12 participants (four social work educators and eight social work students). The findings showed that social work educators generally maintained ethical standards but were confronted with educator–student relationship challenges and dilemmas. Some participants experienced pressures arising from family ties and closeness with students, which undermined firmness, integrity, and accountability. There is a need for social work educators to ensure healthy boundaries in teacher–student relationships, involving the fair and unbiased treatment of students, nurturing their diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment.

Keywords: Social work educators, Ethical behaviour and dilemmas, Classroom setting, Educator–student relationships, Nigeria

Introduction

Ethics are values lived out through an ethical information process that results in ethical norms. They originate from the cognitive and affective assessments of behaviours and circumstances (Saariluoma, 2020). Each person creates their own code of conduct based on their personal ideals, which shapes their decisions and behaviours. However, a professional's code of ethics embodies the values of the field and is translated into rules of behaviour (Strom-Gottfried, 2008). In general, these principles protect privacy and confidentiality, support treating people as whole persons, promote the moral use of social media and technology, affirm and uphold the intrinsic worth of all people, human rights, social justice, autonomy, and participation, and strive to uphold professional integrity (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2018). In light of this, behaviours or acts that may jeopardize the welfare, health, or safety of the public are referred to as "unprofessional conduct." Acts that blatantly violate one or more regulatory act requirements or that directly affect a professional's ability to practice are examples of unprofessional behaviour (Matyas, 2023).

Social work educators have an ethical responsibility to conduct themselves in the classroom in order to influence the future of social work practitioners. These educators must place a high premium on social justice, diversity, and inclusion while creating a learning environment where every student feels valued and respected (Garran et al., 2014). Social work educators have a duty to uphold strict professional boundaries, refrain from any



discriminatory or personal preconceptions, and create a safe space for polite and honest dialogue (Oliver et al., 2017). It is imperative to be transparent and truthful when it comes to grading and evaluations and to provide students constructive feedback to foster their growth (Balch et al., 2016; Freeman & Dobbins, 2013). Educators of social work should be duty-bound to act as moral role models for their students, encouraging them to embrace and use the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics in their professional lives (Joiner, 2019). By promoting a climate of learning, respect, and integrity, ethical social work educators hope to empower students to become morally aware and culturally competent practitioners (Russell & Keller, 2011).

There are several challenges social work educators face when it comes to acting morally in a classroom setting. Teaching complex and sensitive issues may be quite challenging, as it often involves guiding students through discussions on racism, inequality, trauma, and personal values (Russell & Keller, 2011). They may find it challenging to balance their personal beliefs with an open dialogue and a range of opinions. It could be difficult to keep professional distance when dealing with students who might reveal personal details (Ucko, 2014). Furthermore, keeping up with evolving ethical standards and adjusting to fresh issues and challenges in the field are ongoing tasks (Reamer, 2017). Bias, prejudice, and favoritism are potential issues that need to be actively addressed (Shiramizu & Yamamoto, 2017).

Static educational standards and compensation can make social work educators feel underappreciated and unsupported, which lowers their desire to follow moral principles or give their all in their teaching roles. This could result in a decline in moral behaviour and dedication within the field (Joseph, 1992). More so, maintaining moral principles may be challenging while still fulfilling academic requirements, giving students fair evaluations, and creating a supportive learning atmosphere. To overcome these challenges, educators must be committed to promoting moral behaviour in both practice and instruction, as well as ongoing introspection and learning (Bourke, 2017). In addition, it is imperative that social work educators receive ongoing training in order to uphold social work ethics and instruct upcoming professionals in moral behaviour and decision-making (Hermsen & Embregts, 2015).

For example, social work educators are obligated by ethics to evaluate students' performance fairly and honestly in order to protect the public and the students' potential clients, regardless of the factors influencing the students' academic progress (Gary, 2014). Like all educators, social work educators hate and are afraid to give poor grades to students who may have many other qualities, yet they are the gatekeepers to the field. Professional domains such as social work are bound by an implicit social contract with society, which they have to uphold through the training and supervision of their own practitioners' competence and quality (Gary, 2014).

Ethical practice is one of the most significant facets of the social work profession and is essential to students' socialization and professional growth (Papouli, 2014). Professional action requires making ethical decisions, which can be difficult and complex since they must take into account a range of ethical conundrums brought on by the conflicting interests and values of those involved (Papouli, 2016). Dolgoff, Harrington, and Loewenberg (2012) argue that social workers should be able to choose between right and wrong and base their decisions on their professional ethics, as they have an ethical duty to act as moral agents.

Further, in order to satisfy their own unique intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for initially choosing an education and career in social work, social work instructors must assess the curriculum expectations for social work students (Joseph & Shon, 2020). Conversely, conflicts of interest arise when an employee's personal, financial, professional, sexual, and/or spiritual interests interfere with their ability to meet a client's wants or interests (Strom-Gottfried, 2008).

The NASW Code mandates that social workers avoid conflicts of interest and use professional discretion and impartial judgment (NASW, 2008). In this direction, an organization's implementation of its objective and procedures can have a significant impact on the quality of the work experience; however, these can be difficult to understand, adjust, and balance. Understanding the relationships and conflicts that occur within the educational institution is part of this (Spitzer, Silverman, & Allen, 2015). Silverman (2015) defined this as organizational awareness, which includes understanding the organization's structures, culture, evaluation, and goals.

The future of the social work profession is shaped by social work education. Thanks to an education that emphasizes knowledge, academic excellence, research, evidence-based practice, values, and ethical standards, social work students will join the field with the abilities necessary to practice as professionally competent social workers in an ethical manner (Bradford, 2018). In light of the aforementioned, the aim of this research is to investigate the moral conduct of social work educators in classroom environments, in connection to the appropriate use of oneself and the maintenance of relationships with student social workers, ethical dilemmas, support and resources available, and students' feedback.

The following research questions were answered in the study:

1. How well do social work educators adhere to and carry out professional codes of conduct?
2. What are the ethical dilemmas social work educators encounter in the classroom?
3. What are the support and resources available for social work educators at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN)?
4. What are the student feedbacks to social work educators' ethical adherence?

It is believed that this study will provide valuable insights into the dynamics of educator-student relationships and serve as a resource for educators, administrators, and policymakers in the field of social work education.

Materials and Methods

Sampling Area

The study was carried out in the Social Work Department of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). The social work program was established in 1976 in the Department of Sociology/ Anthropology, and the Social Work Department was given independent status as a department in 2006 (Mbah, Ebue, & Ugwu, 2017). The Social Work Department is one of nine departments in the Faculty of Social Sciences. As a

pioneering department, it set the groundwork for graduate and postgraduate social workers in Nigeria. The undergraduate program provides highly qualified individuals for professional practice in social work, and graduates are anticipated to take critical positions in public and commercial entities around the country (Faculty of the Social Sciences [FSS], 2017). Currently, the department has 45 faculty members of all academic ranks.

The department of social work at UNN was purposively chosen for the investigation. This purposeful selection was made in light of the study's focus on the future of professional social workers in Nigeria and around the world. Among Nigeria's federal and state universities that teach social work, the department at UNN is the pioneer department and the first institution to produce social work professionals throughout the federation. The researchers purposively selected to investigate social work educators' adherence to the social work code of ethics, as well as how they manage ethical problems and dilemmas with students in the classroom.

Sampling of Participants

The researchers purposively sampled twelve participants for the study. Participants included both male and female educators who had taught for at least three years, and eight social work students comprising males and females, two from each level (first year to final year). The sample comprised two senior and two junior faculty members, and a male and female social work student in each level of the social work degree program ($n = 12$). The social work educators were purposively selected from among the 45 faculty members of varied academic positions. This number of participants for each division of job rank was deemed sufficient due to thematic saturation of in-depth data on social work educators' ethical obligations, obstacles, and dilemmas.

Second, we purposively selected one male and one female in the senior ranks, as well as one male and one female in the junior ranks. The rationale was to ensure that the findings were not skewed toward one gender's experience, as well as to ensure equity and inclusion in the findings in terms of ethical conduct and management of obstacles and ethical issues in service requirements. Furthermore, the purposeful selection of both genders was influenced by their respective experiences, attitudes, and distinctive challenges as social work educators. The social work educators who participated in the study ranged in status from assistant lecturers to senior lecturers. Conversely, among the students of social work, the researchers purposively selected a male and a female from each level of the degree program. The rationale for choosing both genders in each degree level was to ensure inclusivity and maintain balanced feedback among the selected students.

Data Collection

The in-depth interviews (IDIs) were held on UNN premises. The IDIs were conducted based on pre-information and appointment scheduling, which included availability and willingness to participate. Each participant took part in the IDIs on distinct days and times as agreed upon. For the social work educators, participants were divided into two categories: junior and senior social work educators who were available and consented to the interview during the study period (April and May 2023). Among the students, male and female participants from each degree level were purposively selected for the study. The

language of the instrument and IDIs is English, since social work educators and students teach and learn in English respectively. The researchers conducted a preliminary test of the IDI instrument's content with undergraduate social workers and a psychology educator. The undergraduate social workers were not part of the study sample, but they contributed individual viewpoints and experiences with educators, whilst the psychologist provided insights into the psychological and emotional components of the study. The pretest was conducted to check that the questions contained no ambiguity or culturally inappropriate content, to evaluate the flow of the interview, and to ensure that the language and tone were courteous and intelligible to the participants.

Each IDI session lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. The IDIs were recorded and noted with the participants' agreement. All of the researchers took part in the study, with one in charge of conducting the interviews and another recording responses and taking notes. All of the researchers contributed to the development of the study instruments, taking into account varied perspectives and personal experiences in adhering to ethical commitments, as well as reoccurring issues and dilemmas with social work students. All IDIs were carried out at the offices of social work educators and in classroom settings.

Data Analysis

The IDIs were analyzed using a thematic approach reflecting regular patterns and insights into ethical behaviour among social work educators and students in classroom settings. The IDIs were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were read several times by the researchers to gain a grasp of the data. Codes were initially generated to capture basic views such as academic integrity, fairness in grading, professional boundaries, professional boundaries and sexual attraction, respect for students' dignity, and avoidance of institutional rules. These codes were further grouped into four broader themes: "educators' ethical behaviour in the classroom," "ethical dilemma," "support and resources," and "students' feedback." These themes were guided by the conceptual framework of the study, as well as the research questions. NVivo software was used to support coding and organization of the data. The researchers used peer debriefing and observer triangulation to boost the reliability of the qualitative results (Zamawe, 2015).

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study provides an overview of the demographic attributes characterizing the four social work educators and eight social work students of the Department of Social Work. The demographic data of the social work educators showed representation of both males and females (two males and two females). The data also shows that the participants were within the age bracket 38–64 years. Of the four participants, two were married, one widowed, and one single. The religious affiliation of the participants showed that all were Christians, and all had tertiary education, which was expected given that a university education is a precondition to becoming a social work educator. The monthly income level of the participants ranged from N115,000 to N365,000. The participants had a work experience in the university of not less than three years. The student participants comprised four females and four males, aged between 17 and 24 years. All the students were single and Christian,

across all levels of study (100–400 levels). In total, the participants comprised four social work educators and eight undergraduate social work students.

Note on the role of demographic data: These attributes are reported to characterize the sample and contextualize the findings. Because the study is qualitative and exploratory, demographic attributes are not used here as explanatory variables; they are described to assist readers in assessing transferability to comparable settings.

Theme 1: Educators' Ethical Behaviour in the Classroom

Fairness and Justice

All participants indicated the observance of appropriate educator–student relationships devoid of personal, financial, and romantic relationships that could exploit or impair their objectivity in classroom concerns. The participants also revealed that they ensure transparency and accountability in grading and assessment and treat all students with respect irrespective of backgrounds such as gender, religion, and ethnic affiliation. A male participant stated: "Once you have knowledge of the values, competence, confidentiality, non-judgmental attitude, purposeful expression of feelings, and among others, then that will enable you to relate well with your students." Similarly, another male participant defined ethical behaviour as "a kind of restriction of social work practitioners from unacceptable behaviours, and acting within the framework of ethical principles as prescribed in social work ethics." Other participants agreed that ethical behaviours are moral principles and professional standards that are considered right, fair, just, and honorable in teaching and learning. These responses revealed their knowledge of what is acceptable and what is not, indicating that social work educators are attuned to the rules of engagement with students.

A male participant narrated his experience:

When you are dealing with students, you are not expected to demand for financial reward or otherwise. If you do, though not done in the open, you are sending a wrong message to the student. I am saying that any relationship with students should be guided by an acceptable behaviour within the confines of social work ethics. Although, some male and female students attempt to lure us. If you oblige to such invitation, just know that you are stepping out of the boundaries of the ethics of the profession. (IDI, JL, M, 38 years, P1)

To buttress the specific behaviours expected of a social work educator, a female participant said:

First, you have to be strict; second, you have to keep your word; and third, there should be no partiality in the treatment of students. Once they notice preferential treatment, they will react. Again, you do not go out of your way asking for kickbacks or bribes and all those gifts. You do not say, "Give me something," before you do your job, maybe as a result of project supervision. Or during the submission of files, you demand envelopes [bribes], no. You should always be honest with the students. If students see you as corrupt, they will not respect or trust you. Grade students based on merits, but that does not mean that you do not help students depending on the situation. But then you do not do it in such a way that will put you in trouble. (IDI, SL, F, 63 years, P4)

Upholding Institutional Standards

With regard to specific ethical behaviour in the classroom, participants disclosed that they teach according to the institutional rules, applying strict principles where necessary. A male participant aged 64 years said: "We do not need to misguide students, or tell false stories about ourselves. Sometimes I use a real life scenario about myself to give case examples." Furthermore, a female participant stated:

As a social work educator, it is essential to prepare class lessons and provide accurate information, as teaching fundamentally involves sharing knowledge. If you do not prepare class lessons, students might ask questions that would push the educator to turn the question into an assignment. That is unethical. Where you do not know, there is nothing difficult in telling the students, let me read it up. In fact, I have had an occasion where I was facilitating a learning process. I explained a concept within the context of what I was teaching, not knowing that the trend had changed. After the class session, the young man [student] approached me and said there is a new trend. I should read up on it. He knew that was the much I know. So I thanked him and had to go back and read it up to update my knowledge. (IDI, SL, F, 63 years, P4)

Gatekeeping

In the study, participants shared examples of positive outcomes resulting from social work educators' ethical behaviour in the classroom. Most social work educators affirmed that some students would individually appreciate their educators on graduation or after graduation, narrating how their strict measures and punishments in terms of professional conduct have shaped them and been of help in the wider society. The participants disclosed that some of their graduate products are doing well in their field of endeavor as a result of being strict with them. The participants indicated that while some students see their experiences with social work educators as wicked and heartless, a good number see their educators as role models. A male participant aged 64 years revealed: "Some of our graduate students are doing well abroad, even beyond expectation. They are happy with us." The male participant further stated:

Some of the graduated students still maintain close relationships with me both within and outside the country. They ask after me and my family and work. They also invited me for marriage ceremonies, burials, and many other such events. For me, it is a testament that I taught them well and conducted myself in an ethical manner. If I had gone the opposite way, I might not have received such respect and accolades. This is self-fulfilling to me as an educator. (IDI, SL, M, 64 years, P3)

Ethical Behaviours and Opposite Sex

The study revealed similar relationships between educators and female and male participants. For the female participants, all revealed that they maintain healthy boundaries with both female and male students on an equal basis. For the male participants, they indicated that they maintain professional relationships with both female and male students, having in mind ethical and institutional rules. A female participant also said that with regard to relationships with students, especially of the opposite sex, educators should be mindful of touching, playing, or displaying behaviours that are undesirable of an educator.

According to the participants, this promotes learning abilities, respect for the students, and rules. A male participant narrated:

If you are close to a female student, you try not to bring yourself where you will be indicted by the school authority or the student. Showing that you like a student does not mean that you are going to step out of the ethical boundaries of the profession. You are not expected to go closer to a female student without self-control. Because if you do emotionally, you will entangle yourself in what you are not expected to do. And when this happens, you will be made to face institutional discipline if reported. So, it is an offense to engage with your students in a love affair. (IDI, SL, M, 64 years, P3)

Power Dynamics and Respect for Students' Dignity

Participants disclosed that they do not use their power as educators to intimidate, manipulate, threaten, or silence students. However, data showed that the social work educators invoke their powers in the classroom when students become disobedient or disruptive. Participant 3, aged 64, reflected: "The dilemma concerning use of power and respect for students do not always have clear solutions, but require ethical reasoning and emotional intelligence and professional judgement."

Concerning respect for students' dignity, participants revealed that students are given equal opportunity to share their thoughts in the classroom. Some participants stated that when questions are posed to students about a particular topic, everyone is free to provide feedback. Participants reported that student feedback shows their level of understanding of a certain topic. Others revealed that students' freedom of expression is limited when it is directed toward another student in a disorderly manner, such as bullying a fellow student for an answer viewed as incorrect or embarrassing. Participant 3 said:

At the beginning of the class in a semester, I usually give out the rules that will govern a smooth educator–student relationship. During the period, I let them know that there are no right and wrong answers in the classroom. My intention is to encourage everyone to speak up and be bold to communicate their knowledge and understanding of the topic under discussion. My intention is to make sure that every student participates in the class activities. But sometimes, when some students do not speak up or shy away from questions, I do point to them randomly to answer questions. (IDI, SL, M, 64 years, P3)

Another participant narrated:

I have noted students who shouted a fellow student down because he was trying to explain a sexually related story by calling the names of private parts. The student was trying to explain what happened between two lovers that turned to quarrels. Although the students were interested at the beginning of the story, they were quick to shout the narrator down because he was going deeper than they thought about the sexual intercourse between the lovers. (IDI, SL, F, 63 years, P4)

Analytic observation. These two accounts illuminate the delicate boundary that social work educators must negotiate between inclusive pedagogy and the exercise of legitimate authority. On one hand, Participant 3's strategy of publicly establishing "no right or wrong answers" and randomly calling on shy students reflects an intentional effort to democratize

classroom voice and draw out participation. On the other hand, random calling may itself be experienced by reticent students as a coercive exercise of educator power, a tension the participant acknowledges when he notes that the dilemma of power versus respect "do[es] not always have clear solutions." Similarly, the classroom-shaming incident illustrates how peer dynamics, rather than the educator, constrained a student's free expression – presenting a distinct challenge in which the educator must decide whether, and how, to intervene to protect a student's dignity without stifling open discussion of sensitive content. Both examples suggest that respecting student dignity is not a passive rule but an active, situation-specific judgment requiring the emotional intelligence and professional reasoning the participants themselves invoked.

Theme 2: Ethical Dilemma

Academic Integrity and Cheating

For the overall well-being and professional development of students, all study participants indicated that social work educators prepare students for service to society. To them, the university has a set of job descriptions and regulations guiding service. According to the participants, working according to the rules helps to build a better society. Participant 3, a senior lecturer aged 64, said: "Once the students imbibe this set of professional standards, they will help in developing the society. Because the right thing is done." A female participant said:

You know that teachers are role models. Beside what we teach, students look up to you, and are well prepared. Most of our students fit in well in the society due to their appreciation of ethical conduct and learning while in school. (IDI, JL, F, 39 years, P2)

Similarly, a male participant said:

Yes, a well-trained student is expected to perform creditably in the society. This is because this ethics we are talking about are derived from the societal values. When we instill these ethical conducts on the students, it means that those norms, cultures, customs and beliefs which are operational in ethics are in practice. (IDI, JL, M, 38 years, P1)

A female participant narrated her experience:

With my experience, I have not had any bad experiences with students I have taught since I started as a graduate assistant. Somehow the students tend to appreciate me; I do not know why. I cannot say that I have not had a problem with any student, maybe because of the way I handle or relate with them. I think this is the way I relate with them. When they are about to graduate, or after graduation, they will come to say thank you. But that does not mean that I do not discipline them when they go wrong. But I discipline with caution. (IDI, SL, F, 63 years, P4)

However, all participants noted that some circumstances could affect the professional integrity of educators, such as family relationships, acquaintances, and students with mental health and disabilities issues. For example, a female participant stated:

In this case, students with disabilities are often given special advantages due to their disabilities. For me this could undermine the academic integrity of the social work educators. I mean that emotions in assessment and grading based on these set of persons are a serious issue. One may not entirely avoid being bias in this regard, not based on financial inducement or kind gestures, but on subjective grounds. ... Things like this threaten academic integrity in the educational environment. (IDI, SL, F, 63 years, P4)

In line with this, a male participant also revealed that:

Financial inducement by the students is a regular occurrence. But acceptance of such financial reward to upgrade students or the likes of it is a thing of the conscience. This is where you face that dilemma. The question that comes to mind is, do you favor or disfavor him/her after accepting a reward? In that situation, if you choose to award a grade, it has to be the lowest grade. This is because you have accepted a gift. (IDI, JL, M, 38 years, P1)

Fairness and Objectivity in Grading

All participants made reference to the general social work ethics as prescribed by all social work educators must adhere to. The participants believed that there should be equal treatment of all students, not minding their ethnicity, religion, gender, or socioeconomic status. To them, the values of social work – such as service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, and integrity – provide the basis for practice. Participant 4 stated:

For all social workers the principle of fairness should apply to all. But you find that certain conditions may push someone to deviate from the rules. Personal affection or interest may blind one into suspending some rules just to satisfy personal decision as against professional judgement. For example, in some institutions of learning, some students pay for grades, but you know this is not acceptable. That it is operational in such settings does not mean that you should fit into it. (IDI, SL, F, 63 years, P4)

A male participant indicated:

... pressures from superiors lead to preferential treatment of some students over others in the same situation such as late submission of class assignments or class attendance requirements as a prerequisite for seating in an examination. Taking that into consideration is a factor in maintaining fairness among the students. While a good number of students are faithful to their studies, others are not, some of which have the intention to come from behind to influence decisions. (IDI, JL, M, 38 years, P1)

Dual Relationships and Professional Boundaries

On professional boundaries, all participants acknowledged the existence of the code of conduct for the staff of the institution. They revealed that UNN clearly spells out offences and penalties for offenders in the code of conduct of the institution. The participants emphasized that extortion of students, sexual advances and abuse (particularly of female students), bullying, name calling, and insults on students due to power and authority are prohibited. The participants further revealed that those caught in the act have been dealt with according to the extant laws of the university. The participants maintained that such

rules and regulations toward engaging students are in line with professional boundaries expected of social work educators. However, a female participant said:

Engaging female students in private emotional issues is common among some educators on campus. A few have been caught in the act taking sexual advantage of female students in their offices. Others were caught in hotels outside the university environment. It has also been found that some students are used to run personal errands unrelated to coursework at no cost. (IDI, JL, F, 39 years, P2)

... some educators are friends with their students on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. They share private conversations, late-night chatting, and inappropriate online communication that should not be between educators and students. ... Although some students knowingly and unknowingly lure their educators into the act of misbehaviour, it is bad on the part of educators to allow their emotions to overrule their professional selves. (IDI, SL, M, 64 years, P3)

Synthesis of contradictory evidence. Across Themes 1 and 2, participants simultaneously asserted the maintenance of ethical boundaries and described recurring situations that strain those boundaries – gift- and bribe-taking culture, pressure from superiors to favor certain students, family and acquaintance ties, and, most notably, the normalization of "students attempt[ing] to lure us." Rather than treat these as simply separate findings, we read them as constituting the central ethical dilemma of the study: educators must uphold standards while operating within an environment that actively pressures them to deviate. The educators' consistent framing of these pressures as external (imposed by students or superiors) rather than as failures of their own judgment suggests a possible desirability bias in self-reporting – an important caveat we discuss further below.

Theme 3: Support and Resources

Regarding the availability of institutional resources, training, or support in place to assist in upholding ethical behaviour as a social work educator, the majority of participants stated that they had not attended such training; instead, through public notices, staff members were encouraged and equally warned against sexually harassing or exploiting students on campus. All participants suggested improving the support and resources available to educators about ethical behaviour, including a good learning environment, improved remuneration, quality assurance, and the government's commitment to improving educator welfare and educational standards. However, a participant recounted:

I attended two different trainings. The first one was with a program sponsored by the government of the United States on auxiliary social work training. The US government also trained us on the ethics of the social work profession. I also attended another three days of training with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in collaboration with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, on ethical standards. (IDI, SL, F, 63 years, P4)

The findings suggest that structured, systematic, ongoing ethics training is the exception rather than the rule. Where training exists, it appears to be project- or partner-sponsored rather than an integrated institutional commitment. This gap is significant, since the study's

data repeatedly show educators navigating complex ethical judgments (power, boundaries, dual relationships) with little formal institutional scaffolding to guide them – supporting the case for the mentorship and refresher-training recommendations discussed below.

Theme 4: Students' Feedback and Educators' Response

Students' Feedback

The study elicited the student challenges of ethical feedback on the educators. Findings revealed that there is no operational mechanism for students to air their views, perceptions, and evaluation of their educators' ethical conduct in the classrooms. Findings indicated that most students usually discuss among themselves issues relating to ethical behaviours of educators in the classrooms. Most participants showed that they were not keeping close relationships with the educators, making it impracticable to share their observations about the educators for fear of victimization or hatred. According to the findings, those who were close to some of the educators manage to relate the impression of the class members to the educators.

For example, a 300-level female student, aged 21, disclosed that sometimes she would approach a lecturer in a friendly way to share the position of her classmates on a particular issue. She stated:

Most times, students come to lectures behind schedule, and usually, the educator will not allow them in the classroom. But later, I would discover a way of pleading on behalf of my classmates. I would, in a cheerful mood, tell the educator where the students are, commending him/her, and where they dislike. For me, I believe the message would be communicated without hurting feelings. Even though he/she would not completely adhere to the initial strictness of not allowing students in once lectures begin, we do experience lately a slight adjustment by asking those who come late to classes why they are late. Those who gave reasonable excuses were allowed to participate in the classroom learning. (IDI, ST, 300 Level, F, 21 years, P6)

Another male student revealed:

We do receive term papers from our lecturers to turn in and deliver on a specific day. Yet, a few of us would never turn in ours to the class representatives on time. The class representatives would then ask students who didn't submit on time to send their work straight to the relevant lecturer or educator. This is because everyone received a strong warning to submit on a specific day, but some people chose not to because of unforeseen home emergencies or health problems. Some instructors might reject late submissions or take points off the likely final grades. It troubles many students, it affects their motivation, and there is no one to talk to. (IDI, 400 Level, F, 23 years, P8)

Educators' Response

With regard to how social work educators elicit feedback from students about their teaching and ethical conduct, the majority affirmed that some students who maintain good relationships with the educators would reveal the impression of most students. The student participants revealed that on an individual basis, students would give a scorecard on the

ethical conduct of educators, particularly on strict measures, decency, and responsibility to lectures and grading of students. A male student said: "The commendations by students encourage and empower educators to do more." A senior lecturer revealed:

Some students would come to you to commend your pattern of teaching. They would encourage you to keep it up. In addition to commending your style of teaching, some would seek your fatherly advice toward achieving their educational pursuits. For me this is an indication of unsolicited feedback coming from them. It is quite encouraging and self-satisfying. (IDI, SL, M, 64 years, P3)

Another senior lecturer narrated her experiences of feedback from students about her teaching and ethical conduct:

We do not have a process in place for student feedback at the university. Personally, I have never sought feedback before. But the way I get feedback is that in a class, you may have one, two, or three people who are relatively close to you. When they come in private, they will tell you what the other students are saying about you. They want you to change in both positive and negative ways. Yes, when you receive such feedback, you endeavor to improve in areas where you are falling short, as long as what they have pointed out is accurate. It is not everything they say you will do. Once I look at it and ascertain that it will improve my public image, I will adjust. (IDI, SL, F, 63 years, P4)

Analytic observation on student voice. The students' accounts raise a systemic concern that the educator-focused analysis risks overlooking. Both the absence of a formal feedback mechanism and students' stated fear of victimization if they were to voice concerns directly create a structural vulnerability for students: their only avenue for raising questions about educator conduct is an informal, personality-dependent channel through a peer who happens to be "close" to a given educator. Moreover, the 400-level student's complaint that "there is no one to talk to" regarding inconsistent grading signals a gap in due process. From the student perspective, this is not merely a matter of missing feedback forms; it is an accountability deficit with direct implications for student dignity—the very value the educators in Theme 1 professed to uphold. We hold that this tension deserves explicit recognition in the study's conclusions.

Discussion

The study examined the ethical behaviour of social work educators in classroom settings with key considerations for students. This finding is similar to that of Gary (2014), who revealed that social work educators have an ethical obligation to evaluate students' performance fairly and honestly in order to safeguard the public and the students' potential clients. The current study found that, in an academic setting, the primary responsibilities of social work educators are to provide training to aspiring social workers, maintain academic integrity and professional boundaries, ensure fairness in grading, and respect students' dignity and freedom. Kahveci (2023) revealed that positive teacher behaviours and attitudes include effective communication and ethical attitude, professional competence and dedication, and individual support and trust, and that students are more confident, motivated, and satisfied with their learning and more likely to trust their teachers when they exhibit these behaviours. In agreement, Bradford (2018) stated that social work education

shapes the future of the social work profession, and IFSW (2018) pointed that all social workers have moral obligations, upholding the intrinsic worth of all people, human rights, social justice, autonomy, and participation. The present study is also in line with Matyas (2023), who found that unprofessional behaviour includes acts that flagrantly breach one or more regulatory act requirements or that adversely impact a professional's capacity to practice.

Ethical dilemmas. Findings showed instances or experiences involving social work educators in relation to ethical dilemmas. The findings revealed that, in an effort to strike a balance between professional standards and student culture, social work educators significantly rely on the prescription of social work ethics. The findings conclude that social work educators consider the implications of alternatives before making a decision. The study agrees with Papouli (2016), who revealed that making ethical decisions is a requirement of professional conduct, and these decisions can be challenging and complex since they must consider a variety of ethical dilemmas resulting from the competing interests and values of people involved. The present study is in line with Joiner (2019), who showed that social work educators should encourage their students to accept and use the NASW Code of Ethics in their professional lives by serving as moral role models.

A key contribution of the present study is the identification of the *structural* character of these dilemmas. Beyond isolated judgment calls, educators described external and systemic pressures—bribery culture, pressure from superiors to favor students, family and acquaintance ties, and the pervasive "students attempt to lure us" dynamic. This framing suggests that maintaining ethical conduct in the classroom is not only an individual moral exercise but also an institutional and relational one. Where prior work has emphasized the importance of training (Hermsen & Embregts, 2015) and organizational awareness (Spitzer, Silverman, & Allen, 2015), the present findings add that these supports are largely absent in the studied context, leaving educators to rely on professional norms and personal conscience in the face of structural temptation.

Support and resources. Findings revealed that the majority of social work educators have not attended training or support systems designed to help them uphold ethical behaviour as educators. Instead, staff members were encouraged and cautioned against sexually harassing or molesting students or abusing their position on campus through public notices. In agreement with the present study, Hermsen and Embregts (2015) revealed that, to guarantee compliance with social work ethics and to mentor upcoming professionals in moral practice and decision-making, it is imperative that social work educators undergo ongoing training. Joseph (1992) found that social work educators may feel underappreciated and unsupported when educational standards and pay stay the same, which could lower their motivation to maintain moral principles or devote themselves fully to their teaching responsibilities, resulting in a fall in moral behaviour and dedication within the field. This is crucial, as refresher trainings are capable of updating educators on the effect of sustained moral conduct in the discharge of duties.

Students' feedback. The student participants revealed that, on an individual basis, students would give a scorecard on the ethical conduct of educators, particularly on strict measures, decency, and responsibility to lectures and grading of students. Kahveci (2023) pointed that negative behaviours and attitudes—such as discrimination and injustice, classroom

management and communication problems, and occupational incompetence and irresponsibility – reduce students' motivation to learn, self-confidence, and respect for teachers, and these negative behaviours impede their social development.

Here, however, it is important to foreground a finding the participant accounts make plain: **the absence of any formal feedback mechanism and students' stated fear of victimization.** The educators in this study largely interpreted informal, personality-dependent feedback as adequate or even encouraging. Yet from the student perspective, this arrangement leaves concern-raising dependent on access to a sympathetic peer and on the goodwill of a given educator – conditions that cannot reliably protect student dignity or ensure due process. We suggest that the informal feedback described by participants, while sometimes effective on a small scale, is not an adequate substitute for systematic student evaluation mechanisms, and that this institutional gap constitutes a genuine limitation on the profession's gatekeeping obligations. This reading extends the findings of Kahveci (2023) and Trevithick et al. (2004) by linking educator communication patterns not only to classroom climate but to the integrity of the accountability structures around them.

Positive outcomes of ethical conduct. Conversely, the study's participants gave instances of how moral behaviour in the classroom by social work educators has produced favorable results. Based on the results, educators confirmed that some students would thank them personally at graduation or later, explaining how their severe rules and penalties had influenced their behaviour and helped them in the outside world. The study also showed that fostering students from the moment they enroll in college yields positive outcomes, and disclosed that students express gratitude and admiration for their teachers upon graduation as they recognize the benefits of following the rules. The present study agrees with Russell and Keller (2011), who indicated that the goal of ethical social work educators is to enable students to become morally conscious and culturally competent practitioners by creating an environment that values learning, respect, and integrity.

Challenges in upholding moral conduct. The study's conclusions showed that the majority of social work educators discussed obstacles they had encountered when attempting to uphold moral conduct while instructing social work students. Most instructors stated that there are clear problems, some expected and some unexpected, including students begging to reverse a decision or attempting to persuade the teacher with gifts or money. Spitzer, Silverman, and Allen (2015) disclosed that part of the difficulty is comprehending the relationships and tensions that arise inside the educational setting, which is in line with the present finding as regards the challenges that confront social work educators in the educational system.

Implications for Social Work

The study's conclusions make it clear that social work educators were aware of the institutional ethical standards as well as those of social workers. In the areas of academic integrity, fairness in grading, awareness of appropriate professional boundaries, and respect for students' dignity and freedom of expression in the classroom, the educators described their challenges and successes with students. In a similar vein, social work students expressed their preferences for, and dislikes of, ethical conduct in the classroom they found objectionable through direct conversations with certain professors.

In this regard, educators have a duty to educate and train social workers at all levels for the efficient provision of human services. According to Obe (2014), the purpose of education and training is to prepare social workers for a higher level of quality and consistency throughout their social work careers. It is evident from listening to the perspectives of service users, their carers, students, and practitioners that the ability to transform, rather than just provide a service, is what drives them. There is ample evidence that the impact and effect of high-quality social work on those receiving it is transformational in their lives. Furthermore, educators' communication patterns help explain their rigidity, classroom management, and communication problems. Trevithick et al. (2004) stated that social work educators' ability to communicate is how they interact to express their regard and concern for others. Therefore, social work educators need to evaluate the curriculum objectives for social work students in order to meet their own distinct intrinsic and extrinsic motives for first selecting an education and profession in social work (Joseph & Shon, 2020).

Furthermore, both the social work educators and the students are subject to ethical behaviour. Adherence to ethical standards is a precondition for effective social work education and service delivery to society. Hence, ethical behaviour is an important aspect that needs to be inculcated in social work students because they are individuals who will practice professionally with clients (Kamarudin, Ibrahim, & Aun, 2021). Ethics is the character, behaviour, and combination of moral principles that influence an individual's behaviour (Kamri, 2008). Therefore, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) competencies embedded in social work curricula are specifically designed to assure students recognize biases—explicit or implicit—by groups, government, or organizations, which might perpetuate social injustice (Rogerson, Prescott, & Howard, 2022).

Two pragmatic implications follow directly from the study's findings. First, given the demonstrated absence of systematic ethics training, the institution should institute **refresher and refresher-oriented ethics training** for social work educators, moving beyond ad hoc public notices toward structured, recurring professional development. Second, given the documented gap in formal feedback mechanisms and students' fear of victimization, the department should establish **confidential, formalized processes for student feedback** on educator ethical conduct, so that students are not dependent on informal, personality-based channels to raise concerns. These two measures, taken together, would directly address the structural pressures identified in the results.

Limitations

The researchers admit that there are several clear limitations to the current study. The study's sample size was restricted to Nigeria's first social work university, excluding a small number of recently established tertiary institutions that offer social work in various parts of the country. As a result, the researchers support comparable research at other Nigerian universities. Furthermore, because social work students' viewpoints may differ more from those of social work educators in other tertiary institutions, more student perspectives should be included in future research. Punitive methods for teachers who willfully transgress ethical standards both inside and outside the classroom should be the subject of future research. In order to ensure seamless and productive learning environments throughout Nigerian educational institutions, such findings would offer a solid foundation

for institutional implementation of checks and balances in ethical behaviours between educators and students.

The researchers also acknowledge a methodological limitation inherent in self-reported data. Because the educators were aware of the ethical standards they were expected to uphold, and because they framed the pressures to deviate as largely external (arising from students or superiors), the findings may reflect a degree of social desirability bias. Future research should incorporate observational methods and a substantially larger and more independent student voice to triangulate and validate educator self-reports. Despite these drawbacks, the study's conclusions remain relevant among Nigerian social work educators, higher education institutions, and policymakers, as well as to students in general. All of this would restore the importance of routinely assessing teachers' behaviour and instructional strategies through in-service training and retraining in order to advance and safeguard students' best interests.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study examined the ethical behaviour of social work educators in classroom settings, with particular reference to students. Findings from the study indicated that social work educators are aware of the ethical standards and of the ethical dilemmas that arise with students in the classroom setting. Further findings disclosed the lack of support and resources as a reminder and guideline for maintaining ethical behaviour at all times. On the part of the students, findings revealed the likes and dislikes about educators in the classroom who, in students' view, do not encourage teaching and learning. There are high demands for professional standards among social work educators. Hence, social work educators should demonstrate a high understanding of ethical practice and boundaries, particularly in connection with male and female students, and should keep abreast of the ethical dilemmas inherent in their interactions with students.

Consistent with these findings, the study's results support two principal recommendations. First, including strict evaluation procedures and focused refresher training sessions is essential to maintaining and improving ethical behaviour among social work educators in classroom settings, directly addressing the documented absence of structured ethics training. Second, one of the ways of sustaining professional standards is by instituting mentorship programs that pair high-ranking educators with newcomers, in order to foster an environment of shared ethical knowledge and experience; the study's findings on the uneven and informal nature of current support systems lend concrete support to this recommendation. The study further recommends establishing formal, confidential student feedback mechanisms to remedy the demonstrable gap in students' ability to voice concerns about educator conduct without fear of victimization.

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