

Teaching Pedagogical Ethos

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Abstract

The article profiles ethos as a practice-oriented, reflexive attitude between morality (action) and ethics (justification) and demonstrates its minimal presence in teacher education. The focus is on the research project PETAL, which is based on the ELBE manual and promotes ethos-related competencies in a 24-hour seminar. Didactically, students work on school situations using a threefold approach: (1) reflexive three-step, (2) ambiguity analysis and moral positioning, and (3) assumption of responsibility. To analyse the value of the seminar and the didactic approach, reflection texts of 52 students were evaluated before and after the seminar using GABEK. Results show an understanding of ethos as a structure of values (including respect, empathy, justice) and increasing differentiation towards social-emotional dimensions. Conclusion: It is possible to promote ethos; however, stronger curricular anchoring and systematic spaces for reflection are needed.

Keywords: Pedagogical ethos; teacher education; professionalisation; moral decision making capacity (moral competence); PETAL.

1. Introduction

To implement pedagogical ethos in teacher education, we must clarify what ethos adds to moral action and ethical reflection in professional practice. Despite divergent definitions (Cramer & Oser, 2019; Rödel et al., 2022; Oser et al., 2021; Schauer et al., 2025), consensus is growing that ethos describes a practical, profession-specific stance that guides teachers' situated decisions. The following Section briefly describes and distinguishes the terms morality, ethics, and ethos. Section 3 argues that ethos can be deliberately fostered in teacher training, setting up Section 4's PETAL (Pedagogical Ethos of Prospective Teachers) project as an applied model.

2. Clarification of terms

Morality concerns concrete choices about what is good, historically linked to virtue and practically developed through responsibility and experience (Benner, 2006; Oser, 1998; Lind,

2019). In pluralistic school contexts, moral rules and communal norms guide action but reveal limitations when faced with conflict-laden situations. While ethics functions as a reflective meta-level that examines and reorients moral reasoning within educational aims (Benner, 2006; Lind, 2019) and deepens understanding, excessive reflection can inhibit action. Ethos is a lived, practice-bound attitude that mediates between moral action and ethical reflection (Rödel, 2025; Campbell, 2003). In teaching, pedagogical ethos guides the application of virtues such as prudence, justice, and responsibility in profession-specific dilemmas. Instead of offering a set of rules, ethos operates as a cognitive-practical orientation that enables competent positioning and action.

In brief: morality addresses what is done, ethics why it is justified, and ethos how justification and action become a habitual, professional stance.

3. Ethos as a topic in teacher education

Curricular reviews show pedagogical ethos is often relegated to implicit mentions or general aims, and only rarely translated into concrete learning designs (Schauer, 2024). The debate has shifted from teachability to promotability of moral/ethos-related competences (Benner, 2006; Lind, 2019; Colnerud, 2015). Deliberative, practice-oriented formats — such as dilemma discussions, Just Community, Lind's KMDD (Lind, 2019) — reliably foster perspective-taking, justification, and responsibility as performative capabilities rather than mere declarative knowledge.

As a dimension of professionalisation, ethos forms part of a reflective teacher habitus supported by structured practice, peer exchange, and guided reflection (Zierer et al., 2019; Rödel, 2025; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013). Based on these theoretical concepts, Section 4 introduces PETAL: a seminar-based, research-informed approach that explicitly embeds pedagogical ethos in teacher training and empirically tracks changes in students' attitudes and decision-making.

4. PETAL Research Project

The research project PETAL (Pedagogical Ethos of Prospective Teachers), funded by the TNF¹, builds on the ELBE project (Ethos in the Teaching Profession), funded by the Robert Bosch Foundation.

The aim of the ELBE project was to develop a didactic approach and a manual for lecturers in teacher training to integrate a pedagogical ethos into teacher education. ELBE is a manualised,

¹ Tyrolean promotion of young talent: <https://www.tirol.gv.at/arbeit-wirtschaft/wirtschaft-und-arbeit/foerderungen/wissenschaft-forschung/tiroler-nachwuchsforscherinnenfoerderung/>

profession-specific training of moral decision-making skills for teacher training students: It practices positioning, justification and reflective action on job-typical dilemmas. In contrast to the Jena model (structural dovetailing), the Konstanz dilemma discussion (general moral competence), VaKE (for female students) (Schauer et al., 2025, p. 150ff) and Lind (judgment or the moral judgement, 2019, p. 22), ELBE makes pedagogical ethos visible and actionable for teacher training. Building on this, the PETAL project aims to analyse how this manual and the didactic approach change students' pedagogical ethos and whether they can practice their moral decision-making skills this way. In both projects (ELBE and PETAL), it is assumed that the pedagogical ethos of teachers is reflected in decision-making processes, not in the concept of *judgment* or the *moral judgement*.

In summary, it can be said that in the PETAL project, pedagogical ethos is seen as a “practical attitude” (Rödel, 2025, p. 22), which allows individuals “to perceive, assess and evaluate situations, to reflexively review these assessments and evaluations and to act accordingly” (Rödel, 2025, p. 22, translated). Thus, it's about a stance towards one's own conduct. If this is *habitualised*, both the ELBE and PETAL projects speak of ethos or attitude. Since it is therefore also a reflection task, it is assumed that this can be learned by prospective teachers (Rödel, 2025, p. 22).

For this purpose, a didactic approach was developed and a manual (Rödel et al., 2022) with concrete examples and suggestions for training was designed². This didactic concept is used for the seminar units in the PETAL project.

4.1. Didactic concept

The starting point for practicing moral decision-making skills is the example (Buck, 2019). These are school situations that students in teacher training have personally experienced and perceived as ambiguous. These specific situations are examined in a circular manner and from various previously unknown perspectives. Three approaches are used to practice pedagogical ethos and thus moral decision-making skills:

² An evaluation was conducted on the use of the ELBE-manual. Lecturers (n=11) used the manual and the didactic concept primarily in short, often digital sequences. The lecturers praised the structure, the three-step approach and the references to the EPIK domains for being practical. Further results can be found in Schauer et al. (2025, p. 150ff)

I. Three-step process,

II. Ambiguities and

III. Personal moral positioning, assumption of responsibility and evaluation.

These three levels are not worked on chronologically. They flow into one another and are only arranged in sequence for the sake of clarity (cf. Fig. 1).

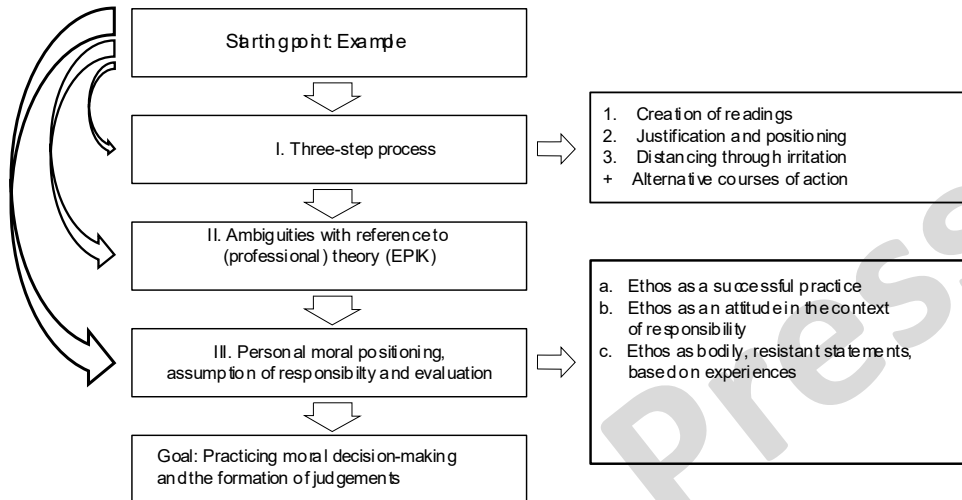


Figure 1. Didactic approach in the ELBE manual. Source: Rödel et al. (2022, p. 25).

In the Three-step process, teacher-training students work on their own interpretations of the practical example by commenting on it using reflexive questions. Subsequently, the students are forced to judge the teacher's example and actions in it and justify this judgment. Students thus use this example to define their own position and see how their perspective compares to the views of their peers in the seminar group. By using further reflexive approaches and triggering irritations, students should gain some distance from their own points of view and open themselves to new perspectives. In addition, alternative courses of action can be discussed.

At the level of professional theory, ambiguities in the examples are addressed and examined using the theoretical literature. It is important to address the ambiguities perceived in the examples in concrete terms, to take a clear position, to justify it, and to discuss the different positionings in relation to the EPIK domains³.

³ The EPIK domains are part of a professionalisation model that is used to work through which areas of competence teachers need for professional action. Due to space restraints, please refer to publications by Schratz et al. (2008) and Schrittemser et al. (2010)

As a third level, special emphasis is placed on one's own moral positioning, assumption of responsibility and evaluation. In doing so, ethos is addressed as (a) *a successful practice*, (b) as an attitude in the context of responsibility, and (c) as bodily, resistant statements, because it is precisely in physical expression that nuances of what is actually meant become apparent.

4.2. Research design of the project

In order to pursue the research question of the PETAL project: (How) does the use of the ELBE manual, together with school situations and the didactic three-step, change students' view of pedagogical ethos and what considerations arise from this in the context of professionalisation for teacher education?, reflexive texts (n=102) written by students (n=51) were used. The aim was to evaluate how students describe the pedagogical ethos before and after the seminar units, and to identify any developments or changes evident through the application of the didactic approach. To this end, students write reflective texts on pedagogical ethos before and after the implementation of the didactic approach described in Section 4.1 in a teacher education seminar group (6 units of four hours each).

The reflection texts are analysed using the qualitative text analysis method *GABEK®*. This is an acronym and stands for "Ganzheitliche Bewältigung von Komplexität" (Holistic Coping with Complexity; Zelger, 2020). *GABEK®* is a knowledge organisation method in which opinions and attitudes are networked, supporting the recognition of connections and the understanding of complex situations. The analysis process using *GABEK®* comprises five key steps: i) dividing the texts into short units of meaning of 1-3 sentences each, ii) manually coding key terms within these units, iii) marking explicit and implicit evaluations, iv) coding causal relationships between the key terms, and v) creating hierarchical structures to reduce complexity and identify overarching themes. Philosophical concepts of understanding, explaining, learning and the perception of gestalt serve as the background for this. Students' personal views are superimposed and ordered by *GABEK®*.

4.3. Key findings

Before and after the seminar, students use similar terms for ethos like values, beliefs, moral principles, empathy, appreciation or guiding principles, but after the seminar they more strongly emphasise responsibility, fairness, relationship work, consideration of needs and professional action. The justification of one's own actions as a basis for future decisions becomes more important. Overall, the changes in formulations remain small, but become more concrete with regard to consequences for practice.

For example: Although diversity was not surveyed, students address it indirectly through justice, individuality and appreciation. By the end, diversity-related considerations are more pronounced with a deeper understanding of inclusion, individual advancement and structural

inequality. “While I previously emphasised that all children should receive equal educational opportunities, I now realise that it is not enough to strive for equal opportunities” (B93, translated). “[...] Every student should be given equal opportunities and it is my responsibility to ensure that I do not take any actions that violate these principles” (B60, translated). “By recognising the autonomy and individuality of the students, they can develop better and create a positive learning environment” (A34, translated). These statements indicate a shift from formal equal treatment to a reflexive, value-based practice that addresses barriers and views diversity as a resource (see Schauer, 2026, for more findings).

Initially, a “supportive learning environment” is associated with responding to individual needs, flexibility, fairness, communication and cooperation. It is seen as a basis for successful learning and “teaching for all”, with self-reflection and mutual respect being key. After engaging with pedagogical ethos, trust, rules, consequences, collegial exchange and the teacher–student relationship become more apparent. The importance of error culture, room for new ideas and connection to personality development is emphasised. Self-reflection shifts from individual reflection to collaborative discussion among colleagues, and personal growth is recognised as an ongoing learning process. Overall, the focus shifts from professional development and fairness to value orientation, trust and relationship building. Or, in other words, from universal “learning success for all/teaching for all” to “personality development and development spaces”.

5. Conclusion and outlook

The students’ reflections illustrate considerations of how pedagogical ethos manifests, what influences it, and how it can be shaped by critical reflection. Students use similar and everyday terms related to ethos, such as attitude and mindset, synonymously in their reflections (Zierer et al., 2019, p. 21). The extent to which ethos can be understood as a bridge between morality and ethics, or to other theoretical considerations, is not yet addressed in the students’ presentations. This does not seem surprising, as this specific expertise has not been addressed in training so far.

Nevertheless, the students address possible changes in subjective theories and attitudes through reflection as a specific feature of the pedagogical ethos (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). The students also perceive the exchange with fellow students and lecturers as an opportunity to gain distance from the situations (Benner, 2006, pp. 181–182). One explanation for these insights would be that students are already at the end of their studies and have had many opportunities for reflection and exchange, and the associated professionalisation process in their studies.

As briefly shown in Section 3, educational scientists, philosophers, and teacher educators are concerned with how to implement pedagogical ethos in the training of prospective teachers so that teachers can act professionally and ethically in decision-making processes. The students already seem to have the basis of a reflexive approach. Now it is important to convey the

theoretical framework in order to expand their expertise in the professionalisation process. In addition, it is necessary to check whether students' decisions change after completing the seminar or become more conscious, and whether ethical considerations serve as the basis for these decisions. These questions cannot be answered within this project.

However, on the basis of the rather low level of discussion of pedagogical ethos in teacher education and the results to date, it seems important to increasingly address the question of a teacher's good actions in the sense of ethics, as well as addressing ethical judgments in dealing with school situations, both in training and practice. This is precisely where ELBE offers specific added value for teacher training: ELBE is a manualised, profession-specific training of moral decision-making skills for teacher training students. It practices positioning, justification, and reflective action on job-typical dilemmas and makes pedagogical ethos visible and practically usable for teacher training. The benefit lies in the structured, repeatable practice of realistic decision-making situations, the explicit interweaving of theory, role understanding and action, as well as the promotion of conscious, well-founded judgments that facilitate the transfer into everyday school life.

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