

Reproducing or Challenging Inequality? Ethical Dilemmas in Educational Decision-Making

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Abstract

This study critically examines how teachers and prospective teachers navigate equality-related ethical dilemmas, and how their decision-making processes may, often unintentionally, reproduce systemic inequities within educational settings. Adopting a basic qualitative research design, the research engaged participants from diverse subject areas and institutional contexts to explore how they interpret and make sense of ethical dilemmas related to equality and discrimination. Data were generated through a researcher-developed instrument that invited participants to articulate their reasoning in ethically charged scenarios and reflect on the social, cultural, and institutional factors shaping those choices. Content analysis revealed that prospective teachers tended to prioritize support for students perceived as disadvantaged, whereas teachers more frequently invoked legal compliance and institutional regulation as moral anchors. These findings highlight persistent ethical tensions between equity, professional responsibility, and accountability, underscoring the need for ethically and critically informed teacher education and professional development that foreground reflexivity and social justice in educational practice.

Keywords: *Ethical dilemmas, teacher decision-making, equity in education, equity and justice, education policy*

Introduction

Teachers are expected to treat all students equally; however, decisions enacted in the name of equality may paradoxically contribute to the reproduction of inequality within the classroom. This tension constitutes a central ethical dilemma in education, where principles such as fairness, professional responsibility, and institutional accountability intersect yet frequently conflict in practice, rendering pedagogical decision-making inherently complex and value-laden (Apple, 2019; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Bourdieu, 2006).

These ethical tensions cannot be separated from broader structural transformations in education shaped by neoliberal policies. Increased emphasis on performativity, accountability, and standardized assessment may pressure teachers to prioritize measurable outcomes over students' diverse needs and contextual realities (Ball, 2003). In this context, teachers are often positioned between institutional demands and ethical responsibilities toward students, while critical perspectives emphasize the need for educators to act as transformative intellectuals capable of questioning inequitable educational structures (Giroux, 2011; Hill, 2007).

Ethics concerns obligations, responsibilities, and rights, with teachers' ethical obligations corresponding to students' rights. Equality, in this sense, involves determining the distribution of benefits, burdens, and educational opportunities (Aydın, 2015). Yet, conceptualizing equality as uniform treatment obscures the differentiated realities of students, whose needs, backgrounds, and access to resources vary. Accordingly, equality in education is inseparable from issues of distributive justice, recognition, and representation, and an uncritical commitment to sameness may undermine equity and social justice (Freire, 1970).

From the standpoint of reproduction theories, schools function not only as sites of knowledge transmission but also as mechanisms through which existing

social hierarchies are maintained through routine practices and decisions (Apple, 2019; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Bourdieu, 2006). Within this framework, teachers' interpretations of equality, and their responses to ethically challenging situations, become pivotal in either reinforcing or disrupting structural inequality.

In classroom contexts, ethical dilemmas arise when competing imperatives, such as the fair distribution of limited resources (distributive justice), the recognition of students' diverse identities (recognition), and alignment with or resistance to dominant curricular narratives (representation), come into tension. Ethical dilemmas emerge when professional responsibilities conflict with ethical principles (Bergman, 2013; Roos & Bagger, 2024) and manifest as internal conflict (Roche, 1997), while also being shaped by institutional pressures that constrain teachers' professional judgment. Within the scope of inclusivity and equality, these dilemmas involve determining whether educational practices genuinely provide equitable opportunities, since approaching justice from a "different but equal in value" perspective requires ethical deliberation (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014). When such dilemmas do not yield ideal solutions, they place teachers, schools, and educational systems under strain (Pope et al., 2009), often generating ethical stress (Bornemark, 2020; Howe et al., 2018) with lasting consequences for students.

Although a substantial body of research addresses teachers' ethical dilemmas in general terms (Aydın et al., 2020; Cevent Nisani & Ugurlu, 2024; Kanat & Erkan, 2021; Saban & Çelik, 2020; Tezcan & Güvenç, 2020), insufficient attention has been paid to how these dilemmas relate specifically to equality and how they may operate as mechanisms in the reproduction of inequality. This gap is significant, as decisions grounded in fairness often involve implicit judgments that shape students' access to resources, recognition, and long-term educational trajectories.

Studies conducted in Turkey within the scope of inequality have examined how students' exposure to discrimination due to socioeconomic characteristics, failures, or successes (Aslan, 2017; Balkız & Göktepe, 2014; Güleriyüz & Kılcan, 2021; Özoğlu & Gür, 2023) affects achievement. Sürücü and Ünal (2018) found that equal treatment increases student motivation, while Ekinci and Burgaz (2009) emphasized the importance of non-discriminatory practices for psychological safety and classroom climate. Teachers are therefore expected to avoid favoritism, ensure inclusive communication, and address cultural diversity (Banks, 2022), as adherence to equality principles also shapes students' orientations toward justice in social life.

The purpose of this study is to examine how prospective and in-service teachers navigate ethical dilemmas related to equality and to evaluate whether their decisions contribute to the reproduction of inequality. By comparing these groups, the study also seeks to reveal how professional experience and institutional constraints shape ethical decision-making across distributive justice, recognition, and representation. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed:

1. How are the decisions of teachers and prospective teachers in the face of ethical dilemmas that require equality/cause discrimination?
2. Is there a difference between the decisions of teachers and prospective teachers in the face of ethical dilemmas that require equality/cause discrimination?
3. What influences the decisions of teachers and prospective teachers in the face of ethical dilemmas that require equality/cause discrimination?

Theoretical Framework

Teacher Professional Ethics and Ethical Dilemmas

Teacher professional ethics requires that educational decisions be made fairly, transparently, and in the best interest of students; however, within the complex social fabric of the classroom, such decisions frequently give rise to ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas can be analytically understood as clustering around three interrelated dimensions: distributive justice (Strike & Soltis, 2009), recognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), and representation (Apple, 2019; Gay, 2018).

Distributive justice dilemmas emerge in decisions concerning how limited resources, such as time, attention, and instructional support, are allocated among students, often placing teachers between the principle of providing “the most help to those in greatest need” (beneficence) and the expectation of treating all students fairly. Recognition dilemmas, by contrast, concern the extent to which students’ cultural, linguistic, and social identities are acknowledged and validated, reflecting tensions between universalist curricular approaches and the need for inclusive, pluralistic practices (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Banks, 2022). Representation dilemmas focus on whose knowledge and perspectives are legitimized within the curriculum, situating teachers between critically reinterpreting dominant narratives and complying with official curricular requirements (Apple, 2019; Gay, 2018).

When confronted with these overlapping demands, often under conditions of time pressure and curricular constraints, teachers’ ethical sensitivity may be challenged and their moral reasoning processes constrained (Kaya et al., 2023; Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). In this context, ethical leadership and reflective practice become critical resources for navigating such dilemmas (Arar et al., 2016; Berkovich & Eyal, 2020; Wang et al., 2025).

Reproduction of Inequality in School

School environments can function as sites where social inequalities are reproduced, with teachers' decisions in ethically charged situations playing a central role in this process (Glazer, 2022). For instance, low academic expectations for low achieving or students with special needs may restrict their access to educational opportunities, thereby reinforcing inequality (Schwab & Alnahdi, 2020). Similarly, culturally insensitive pedagogical practices may marginalize students from diverse backgrounds and exclude them from meaningful participation in the curriculum (Gay, 2018).

External pressures, such as exam-oriented systems and intensive curricula, may further encourage teachers to prioritize “standard” student profiles, rendering disadvantaged groups less visible within classroom practices (Pantić & Carr, 2017). Moreover, subtle and often unintended micro-biases can cumulatively position certain students at an academic and social disadvantage (Sue et al., 2019). Consequently, while teacher decisions and classroom interactions hold the potential to challenge structural inequalities, they may also operate as implicit mechanisms through which such inequalities are sustained and reproduced.

Method

Research model

A basic qualitative research design was employed to identify the decisions made in ethical dilemmas requiring equality or causing discrimination and the factors influencing these decisions. Basic qualitative research aims to understand how individuals interpret their experiences and attribute meaning to them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this context, the study focused on how prospective teachers and teachers make sense of ethical dilemmas related to equality and discrimination and how they explain their decisions. Data analysis was

conducted by identifying recurring patterns and themes in participants' accounts.

Study group

The study group consists of prospective teachers studying at Sinop University Faculty of Education and teachers working in public schools. Maximum variation sampling was used in determining the study group. In addition to prospective teachers and teachers being from different branches, these two groups were purposefully selected due to their different experiences and awareness levels. Teachers were chosen to see the current situation, while prospective teachers were selected to view the future situation. Studies conducted with participants who have diverse perspectives or experiences can provide researchers with rich and comprehensive insights into the research topic (Patton, 2001). Descriptive information about the study group is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive information of participants

Teachers		Prospective teachers	
Gender	F	Gender	F
Female	12	Female	15
Male	2	Male	8
Age		Department	
22-30	2	Preschool Teaching	7
31-40	7	Science Teaching	2
41+	5	Social Studies Teacher Education	9
		Guidance and Psychological Counseling	5
Service period			
1-10	4		
11-20	5		
21+	5		

The study group of the research consists of 23 prospective teachers and 14 in-service teachers working at different levels (preschool, primary and secondary education) and in various branches (Classroom, Turkish, Mathematics, English,

Religious Culture, Social Studies, Guidance, Biology, Fashion Design) in public schools.

Data collection tool

The data collection tool used in the research was developed by the researcher. First, a literature review was conducted, and the dilemmas experienced by teachers were identified. Within the scope of the research, four different dilemmas were created regarding equality, inequality, discrimination issues, and related to students with special needs, disinterested/slow-learning students, interested/hardworking students who cannot achieve high grades, and students from different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, participants were asked to rank the factors that could influence their decision when faced with these dilemmas. The interview form, which was submitted for expert opinion, was revised according to the suggestions.

Data Collection and Analysis

A total of 14 in-service teachers and 23 prospective teachers participated in the study. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis to capture a diverse range of perspectives across gender, age, and departmental disciplines; however, the number of male teachers was limited due to lower volunteer participation. Different data collection methods were employed according to participants' preferences. Some in-service teachers agreed to be interviewed, with some consenting to audio recording while others preferred not to be recorded; for the latter, their responses were transcribed in real time during the conversation. Additionally, some in-service teachers and all prospective teachers chose to provide their responses in written form using the interview form. Data collection proceeded until data saturation was reached, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of participants' interpretations and decision-making processes. This approach is consistent with established practices in

qualitative research, which prioritize depth and richness of understanding over statistical generalizability (Creswell, 2013; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Content analysis was preferred for data analysis. Content analysis is the process of systematically examining data by creating specific themes or categories (Krippendorff, 2018). Themes were determined first. Themes were identified based on literature and preliminary interviews, focusing on the dilemmas most frequently encountered by teachers. Accordingly, the themes are related to students with special needs connected to equality, disinterested/slow-learning students, interested/hardworking students who cannot achieve high grades, and students from different cultural backgrounds. Codes were created from participants' responses within the framework of these themes. The frequency of preference among participants was highlighted. The responses of prospective teachers and teachers were examined comparatively and supported with examples from their statements.

Validity and Reliability

Steps proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed for the validity of the research. Participants' statements were shared with them, and their comprehension was tested. Data source triangulation was performed to ensure data diversity. Peer review (expert opinion) was obtained for research questions and the data collection tool. For the reliability of the research, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), the data analyzed were submitted for peer review. In sharing the results, transparency was ensured by making direct quotations from the data, and objectivity was reflected by describing the process in detail. Raw data are available for sharing when necessary.

Results

The data have been comparatively analyzed under the following themes:

1. Dilemmas causing equality/inequality between students with special needs and other students
2. Dilemmas causing equality/inequality between low achieving/disengaged students and others
3. Dilemmas causing equality/inequality between those who put in effort but get low grades and those who get high grades
4. Dilemmas causing equality/inequality between students from different cultural backgrounds and others
5. Factors influencing the decisions of teachers and prospective teachers

Dilemmas causing equality/inequality between students with special needs and other students

The inclusive education practice, which allows students with special needs to continue their education in the same environment as their peers, can sometimes lead teachers to make challenging decisions. While trying to provide the attention needed by inclusive students, teachers may neglect other students or have to deal with such a perception formed among students and parents. The responses given by teachers and prospective teachers to the first dilemma asked within this context are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' views on equality between students with and without special needs

Codes	Prospective Teachers (f)	Teachers (f)
Paying more attention to the inclusion student	21	9
Paying equal attention to all students	1	5
Explaining the situation to parents	10	2
Considering extra attention as unfair	1	0

Most of both teachers and prospective teachers indicated that they would pay more attention to the inclusion student. This pattern suggests a shared tendency to prioritize differentiated support within the classroom. However, the ways in which this approach is articulated differ between the two groups. While some teachers emphasized maintaining equal attention to all students, prospective teachers more frequently referred to explaining the situation to parents, indicating a concern with external understanding and justification. The view that additional attention might be unfair was expressed only marginally, suggesting that such differentiation is largely normalized among participants. The statements of teachers and prospective teachers on this subject are given below.

"This is a situation I have personally experienced. I believe that we need to pay more attention to our students who may be disadvantaged. Their parents also indicate that they need more support and communicate with me more frequently... My other parents and students are also aware of this situation."

Teacher 11

"I would abandon the thought that I was infringing on the rights of others. I would tell myself that if conditions are not equal, I need to think not equally but fairly, and I would approach my students in this way. I would inform my other parents and students and encourage them to empathize." Prospective teacher 9

"I would pay as much attention to the parent of my special needs student as I do to my other students and their parents because the parent of my special needs student should also be aware that they need to put in more effort than the parents of my other students. Thanks to their effort, my work will have a greater impact on their child compared to others." Teacher 8

Dilemmas causing equality/inequality between low achieving/disengaged students and others

In classrooms, there are students with different learning levels, different readiness, and different interests. In some classrooms, the number of students is well above the ideal number. Additionally, teachers are expected to complete the curriculum within a certain time frame. Based on these factors, the second dilemma asks how to navigate between low achieving/disengaged students and fast learners when adjusting the pace of teaching. The responses given by teachers and prospective teachers are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Participants' views on equality between low achieving/disengaged students and other students

Codes	Prospective Teachers (f)	Teachers (f)
Adapting learning to each student's pace	15	7
Teaching in a way that suits the majority	6	1
Keeping up with the curriculum	4	2
Moving on, if slow learning cannot be supported	1	0
Preferring level-based grouping	1	0
Repeating lessons after class for struggling students	4	0
Using differentiated methods (peer assistance, homework, etc.)	0	7

The responses show that prospective teachers tend to focus on adapting learning to each student's pace, reflecting an awareness of individual needs. Teachers, in contrast, emphasize using differentiated strategies such as peer assistance, suggesting practical adaptations in real classroom settings. Prospective teachers also sometimes prioritize the majority, while this approach is largely absent among teachers. Overall, the data indicate a shift from idealized individualization in prospective teachers toward a balance of individual support and classroom feasibility in practicing teachers. The answers given on this subject are presented below.

"If there is an IEP report for slow-learning students, I make a separate plan for them... I always have extra worksheets in class. My advanced students can solve them ahead of time without disturbing anyone. I made an agreement with the children on this. I have individual meetings with students who are struggling."

Teacher 6

"I pair students who learn the topic quickly with those who learn more slowly, asking them to explain the subject to their peers. The student who learns well will both review and avoid being idle in class." Teacher 7

"When choosing the teaching profession, I had to consider all of these factors. By sacrificing my own time and effort, I would create activities according to my students' learning levels. While attending to my slow-learning students, I would ensure that my fast-learning students were engaged in another activity."

Prospective teacher 9

"I think you should shape your teaching based on the number of students who have learned the topic at the end of the lesson. If the majority are low achieving, you can briefly re-explain the topic; if the majority are fast learners, you can move on to the next topic. You can give homework to low achieving."

Prospective teacher 22

Dilemmas causing equality/inequality between those who put in effort but receive low grades and those who receive high grades

Some students, despite putting in a lot of effort in classes and exams, may not achieve high grades for various reasons. Teachers observe this situation and may experience uncertainty about how to respond when these students care about receive low grades despite their efforts. The responses given to the third dilemma prepared in this context are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Participants' views on equality between students who exert effort but receive low grades and those who receive high grades

Codes	Prospective Teachers (f)	Teachers (f)
Giving additional grades based on effort	13	10
Viewing extra grading for effort as unfair	9	0
Including effort in assessment from the outset	1	6
Using alternative motivational strategies	6	0
Applying equal grade adjustments to all students	2	0
Providing alternative exams for effortful students	0	1

The responses indicate that both prospective teachers and teachers recognize the value of rewarding student effort, with most favoring giving additional points. However, prospective teachers show a tension between fairness and encouragement, as nearly half consider extra points unfair to other students. Teachers, on the other hand, integrate effort into assessment more systematically, often including it in the evaluation from the outset, reflecting strategies to balance recognition of effort with fairness. Other approaches, such as alternative motivational methods or exams, appear less frequently but indicate diverse considerations in promoting equity. Some of the responses from teachers and prospective teachers are presented below.

"It's the dilemma we experience most often, and no matter how much we try to be fair, it's the clash of concrete and abstract where we can't escape the 'did I do the right thing?' dilemma. The points we give to students whose effort we appreciate, let's say +10, also become the +10 points we promise to other students." Teacher 3

"Unfortunately, we encounter these situations in education. Each student's readiness is different, as are their interests and needs... If different options related to the learning outcome are offered, everyone will gravitate towards the option that suits them. For me, there's a term called 'being on the journey'; some students complete this journey faster, some slower, but if there's effort, it can't be ignored. However, there shouldn't be injustice for children who complete the task, and most importantly, there shouldn't be room for objection. An initial plan and scoring tool can be created, and the scoring system can be shared with

students, so there can be a point range for showing effort, thus ensuring fairness within the classroom." Teacher 13

"I think it would be unfair to other children who rightfully earned high grades. I would talk to the child whose effort I've noticed without lowering their motivation, try to delve into why the result was negative, and attempt to guide them correctly to eliminate the problem, but I would give them the grade they actually earned." Prospective teacher 3

Dilemmas causing equality/inequality between students from different cultures and others

In classrooms, students from different ethnic cultures, like those from the dominant culture, can sometimes lead to undesirable behaviors due to reasons such as language, belonging, shyness, or insecurity, or teachers may think so. Based on this situation, the responses of teachers and prospective teachers to the final dilemma prepared are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Participants' views on equality between students from different cultural backgrounds and other students

Codes	Prospective Teachers (f)	Teachers (f)
Grouping students to work among themselves	6	0
Integrating students into mixed-group classroom activities	17	14

The responses show a strong consensus among both prospective teachers and teachers in favor of mixed-group activities to integrate students from different cultural backgrounds. This suggests that participants view collaborative work not only as inclusive but also as compatible with classroom management. The consistent use of non-discriminatory language further indicates an awareness of cultural equity and a commitment to creating an inclusive learning environment. However, although participants framed mixed-group activities as inclusive

practices, such approaches may also be interpreted differently within critical perspectives emphasizing cultural recognition and the risks of colorblind approaches to diversity. Quotes from the responses are given below.

"I would have them work mixed with the class because these students will exist in society in the future as well. All students should learn to work together regardless of ethnic background." Teacher 9

"I should not alienate the student. First, I should erase the ethnic classification from my mind. I should prevent students from doing this as well. I should ensure their integration and adoption of rules by giving weekly homework in small groups. I am the one who will teach them everything. They will develop their character based on what I do." Prospective teacher 18

Factors influencing the decisions of teachers and prospective teachers

Teachers and prospective teachers were asked to rank the factors that influence their decisions in situations such as the ethical dilemmas used in the research. The comparative ranking of factors influencing the decisions of teachers and prospective teachers is presented in Table 6. Participants ranked each factor from 1 (least influential) to 10 (most influential). The values presented in Table 6 represent the aggregate scores calculated from participants' rankings. Accordingly, categories with higher total scores were interpreted as having greater influence on participants' professional decisions.

Table 6: Teachers' and pre-service teachers' views on factors influencing their decision-making

Category	Prospective Teachers	Teachers
Parents	71	61
Administrators	63	69
Laws and Regulations	25	107
Worldview	46	86
Students	32	100
Colleagues	67	65
Religious Beliefs	95	37
Sanctions	68	64
Immediate Social Environment	87	45
Personal Interests	100	32

The responses reveal distinct patterns in how teachers and prospective teachers perceive the influences on their professional decisions. Teachers emphasized formal and external factors such as laws, students, and broader worldviews, suggesting that their decision-making is guided by institutional expectations and practical classroom responsibilities. In contrast, prospective teachers highlighted personal and social influences, including worldviews, immediate social circles, and religious beliefs, reflecting a stronger role of individual values and personal context in their reasoning. Both groups considered factors such as personal interests and sanctions as relatively less influential, indicating a shared understanding of professional boundaries. These findings suggest a developmental shift: as individuals gain classroom experience, decision-making appears to move from personally or socially driven considerations toward adherence to institutional norms and student-centered responsibilities.

Discussion

This study examines how teachers and prospective teachers navigate ethical dilemmas involving students with special needs, low achieving/disengaged students, low achieving yet effortful students, and students from diverse cultural backgrounds, with a particular focus on the notion of equality. Decision-making

in such dilemmas emerges as a multi-layered process shaped not only by individual value judgments and experiential knowledge but also by broader social, cultural, legal, and institutional constraints. Within this complexity, equality does not function as a fixed principle but as a context-dependent construct, continuously reinterpreted in practice. In line with research showing that societal inequalities are often reproduced within classroom interactions (Douglas, 1964; Hammersley & Woods, 1976; Turner, 1997), participants' responses reflect how broader structural disparities permeate micro-level pedagogical decisions.

A dominant pattern emerging from the first dilemma is the prioritization of students with special needs, grounded in a need-based understanding of fairness rather than strict equality. However, this orientation simultaneously reveals a fundamental tension: allocating additional attention to one student inevitably redistributes limited instructional resources, thereby constraining equal treatment across the classroom. This tension can be analytically situated within frameworks of distributive justice, where fairness is negotiated through the balancing of needs, desert, legal rights, and equality (Miller, 1999). However, in practice, these principles do not simply lend themselves to balance; rather, they frequently compete for priority under conditions of limited time and resources, requiring teachers to make consequential choices between them. From this perspective, what appears as a departure from equality may be understood as a context-sensitive enactment of justice, yet such enactments remain inherently tension-laden rather than fully resolved. Supporting this interpretation, legal and institutional mechanisms, such as individualized education programs (IEPs) and resource rooms, are framed as structural means of mitigating inequality, but they do not remove the need for teachers to navigate these competing demands in situ (Rousseau, 2012; Russell, 1999). This interpretation further aligns with Rawls's (1971) argument that practices seemingly deviating from formal equality can be justified when they advantage the least privileged, as well as

with utilitarian perspectives that evaluate such decisions in terms of their broader social benefit (Mill, 1863; Sen, 1999). Participants' emphasis on the greater needs and long-term societal contributions of students with special needs reflects this reasoning. At the same time, the data reveal the coexistence of an alternative stance advocating absolute equality, highlighting a persistent conceptual divide. Rather than being resolved, this divide points to the ongoing necessity of negotiating between competing normative commitments. This divergence appears to be shaped not only by normative commitments but also by practical constraints, including classroom management challenges, perceived impacts on other students, and the level of family support (Avcı & Sakallı Demirok, 2022; Sadioğlu et al., 2012). Consistent with prior research, more positive attitudes toward students with special needs among less experienced teachers and prospective teachers suggest that professional experience may recalibrate these ethical orientations over time (Güleryüz & Özdemir 2015; Pesen Demirhan, 2021; Toy & Duru, 2016).

Low achieving or disengaged students constitute another group through which the tension between equality and fairness becomes particularly visible. These students are often also among the least privileged, which intensifies the ethical stakes of instructional decision-making by aligning questions of academic performance with broader issues of social disadvantage. Differences in readiness, interest, and cultural capital position students at varying levels within the same classroom, complicating the implementation of equal learning opportunities. Within the constraints of mandated curricula and crowded classrooms, participants' responses indicate that equality is often negotiated through pragmatic compromises rather than principled consistency. Importantly, prioritizing support for such students is not uniformly endorsed as a social justice imperative; rather, it reflects a normative orientation that may be valued differently by teachers depending on their beliefs and professional contexts. A central tension emerges here: while individualizing instruction is framed as an

equitable response to diversity, it simultaneously introduces a competing form of inequality by reallocating time and attention away from higher-performing students. In this sense, providing additional support to low-achieving or disengaged students may, at times, be perceived as extending resources to those who have not demonstrably “earned” them, further complicating teachers’ judgments. This tension is reflected in the divergence between prospective teachers and in-service teachers. A dominant tendency among prospective teachers is the endorsement of individualized learning as a more egalitarian approach, whereas practicing teachers demonstrate greater reluctance, favoring more time-efficient strategies. Although the literature consistently supports the effectiveness of individualized instruction in heterogeneous classrooms (Beler & Avcı, 2011; Mutlu & Öztürk, 2017; Rock et al., 2008; Waid, 2016), the data suggest that its practical implementation is constrained by structural factors. In this regard, differences in student levels are frequently perceived as a “time trap,” leading teachers to adopt alternative strategies such as peer support to manage workload and maintain instructional flow (Boyras & Kocabaş, 2018; Bilgin et al., 2023; Güven & Aydın, 2007). These patterns also point to the role of institutional expectations, which may implicitly encourage efficiency-oriented practices or, alternatively, support more differentiated approaches. Similarly, the tendency to teach according to the class average or majority preference, as reflected both in this study and in prior research (Mutlu & Öztürk, 2017), further illustrates how institutional pressures, particularly curriculum demands and class size systematically shape decision-making processes. As a result, practices intended to maintain efficiency may inadvertently reproduce the very inequalities they seek to manage. Effort, as an evaluative criterion, introduces a different yet related dimension to these ethical considerations. Across participants, effort is consistently constructed as a morally valued behavior that can legitimize deviations from strictly performance-based assessment, such as the allocation of additional

points despite low achievement. However, this construction also raises interpretive challenges, particularly regarding how effort is defined, observed, and comparatively assessed across students with differing abilities and learning trajectories. However, this position reveals a conceptual ambiguity when examined through the lens of deservingness and equality (Miller, 1999).

Questions regarding the visibility, comparability, and interpretation of effort, particularly in relation to ability and learning pace, complicate its use as a fair evaluative standard. In this sense, what counts as “deserved” recognition may become ambiguous, potentially generating tensions in judgments about whether additional rewards reflect effort, need, or perceived entitlement. While prior research similarly indicates that rewarding effort is perceived as enhancing student motivation (Özbaş & Akdağ, 2024), the findings suggest that such practices require a more systematic grounding to avoid arbitrariness. In this sense, participants’ emphasis on process-oriented assessment and the inclusion of performance-based evaluation can be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile this tension, aligning assessment practices more closely with a balanced understanding of deservingness and equality.

In the Türkiye context, increasing cultural diversity in classrooms over the past decade introduces a distinct dimension to questions of equality, where legal frameworks intersect with pedagogical practice. Within this framework, equality can be initially interpreted through Miller’s (1999) concept of legal rights, as Article 42 of the Constitution guarantees access to education without discrimination. However, the existence of formal rights does not automatically ensure their realization in practice, as equality in education extends beyond access to encompass participation, interaction, and decision-making processes within the classroom (Sunal, 2011). The findings of the present study suggest a strong discursive alignment with this legal and normative framework, as participants predominantly report efforts to prevent segregation and to promote the inclusion of culturally diverse students. This orientation reflects a perceived

commitment to cultural sensitivity and inclusive pedagogy. In parallel, previous research supports the presence of such sensitivity among teachers, indicating that cultural differences are increasingly acknowledged in educational processes (Kotluk & Kocakaya, 2019). Yet, this apparent alignment is complicated by contrasting findings in the literature, where a lack of awareness regarding cultural diversity is shown to result in insensitive communication patterns that may disrupt the learning process for culturally diverse students (Çağlayan, 2022; Saada, 2025).

This divergence points to a critical gap between declared attitudes and practices enacted. While participants articulate a sensitivity to cultural differences, empirical studies suggest that such sensitivity does not consistently translate into classroom practice, thereby generating discrepancies between perception and implementation (Bregnbæk, 2019; Karsli-Calamak & Kilinc, 2019). The consequences of this gap are not merely pedagogical but also structural, as cultural mismatches between teachers and students have been shown to influence educational outcomes and, by extension, reproduce broader social inequalities (Aygül & Korkmaz, 2018). Taken together, these findings indicate that cultural sensitivity functions as a contested and unevenly realized construct, shaped by individual dispositions as well as contextual constraints, rather than as a uniformly enacted principle across participants.

The findings indicate that ethical decision-making is shaped by different sets of factors for teachers and prospective teachers, reflecting a distinction between experiential and ideational orientations. For teachers, decisions are primarily grounded in legal frameworks, student-related factors, and broader worldviews, whereas prospective teachers rely more on worldviews, immediate surroundings, and religious considerations. This suggests that ethical judgments are context, and experience, dependent rather than uniform. The prominence of legal considerations among teachers aligns with prior research emphasizing the regulatory basis of professional practice, where adherence to legal frameworks

guides ethical behavior (Erdemli & Güner-Demir, 2018). When facing uncertainty, teachers' tendency to seek administrative support further reinforces the role of institutional structures in decision-making (Uzun & Elma, 2012). In this sense, legal norms function as both constraint and resource. In contrast, prospective teachers' responses reflect more value-oriented reasoning shaped by respect, freedom, and religion (Özer Keskin et al., 2013). This indicates a more theoretical approach to ethical dilemmas, influenced by abstract principles rather than classroom experience. This orientation is consistent with characteristics attributed to Generation Z, including critical thinking, openness, and sensitivity to discrimination (Demir, 2022; Karadoğan, 2019). Overall, the findings point to a shift from rule-based decision-making among teachers toward value-based reasoning among prospective teachers, highlighting the role of experience, context, and sociocultural orientation in shaping ethical judgments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how teachers and prospective teachers respond to ethical dilemmas with a focus on equality, highlighting how such decisions may reproduce or mitigate inequality. The findings indicate that individuals at different levels of experience approach the same dilemmas through distinct rationales, suggesting that ethical reasoning is shaped by both professional experience and contextual constraints. Prospective teachers tend to adopt a more idealistic and student-centered stance, emphasizing personal worldviews and immediate contexts in supporting disadvantaged students, which underscores the role of values and socialization in developing ethical sensitivity. In contrast, experienced teachers, while recognizing similar needs, largely ground their decisions within legal, regulatory, and institutional frameworks. This tension

between “what should be done” and “what can be done” reflects how structural constraints can delimit ethical intentions in practice.

The study contributes to literature by demonstrating the importance of analyzing ethical dilemmas through empirical decision-making processes rather than abstract theorization. The comparative perspective between prospective teachers and practicing teachers reveals how professional socialization shapes moral reasoning and its practical implications. At the practical level, the findings point to the constraints teachers face under legal, administrative, and curricular pressures, indicating the need for policy approaches that enhance teacher autonomy and support ethical decision-making. Accordingly, ethics in education should be understood not only as a code of conduct but as a capacity that must be actively developed and supported within educational systems. Based on these findings, two complementary directions are proposed. First, teacher education programs should integrate theory with practice to enable prospective teachers to test and refine their ethical orientations in authentic contexts. Second, systemic measures are required to support practicing teachers, including in-service training focused on ethical leadership, legal arrangements that enhance professional autonomy, and more flexible curricula that accommodate teacher initiative. Strengthening both prospective and practicing teachers in these ways is essential for reducing inequality within classroom contexts.

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