

Fostering Responsible Conduct Among Trainees Through Integration of Ethics into the Curriculum: A Case Study of Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development

Kikomeko Joseph¹ & Dr. Muweesi Charles²

¹ Muteesa I Royal University, Uganda

² Busitema University, Uganda

Correspondence: Kikomeko Joseph, Muteesa I Royal University, Uganda.

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Abstract

Professional ethics constitutes a foundational aspect of vocational training; however, a considerable proportion of Ugandan curricula tends to emphasize technical skills while exhibiting inadequate consideration of moral development. This qualitative case study investigated the mechanisms by which the integration of ethics into the curriculum fosters responsible conduct among trainees at the Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development, situated within Mpigi District. Guided by Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, the study employed an exploratory case study design. Data were collected through analysis of curriculum documents, semi-structured interviews with ten lecturers, and focus group discussions with twenty-five final-year students.

The findings suggested that a hybrid strategy, comprising both stand-alone ethics modules and their infusion into technical courses, may enhance trainees' cognitive apprehension of principles such as integrity, confidentiality, and professional responsibility. Nevertheless, the practical application of these principles appeared to remain inconsistent, potentially attributable to the pervasive influence of the hidden curriculum, extant societal corruption, and the paucity of practical ethical dilemmas presented. The investigation, therefore, posits that curriculum integration alone might prove insufficient without a congruent alignment between inculcated values and prevalent institutional practices. The recommendations encompass: (1) the establishment of an institutional Ethics Committee; (2) the incorporation of practicum-based ethics assessments; (3) the provision of faculty training in ethics pedagogy; and (4) governmental enforcement of ethical codes for interns and practitioners, all of which endeavor to bolster ethical training within social development institutions.

Keywords: curriculum integration, professional ethics, responsible conduct, moral development, Nsamizi Training Institute, vocational training, hidden curriculum

1. Introduction

The integration of ethics into education traces back to ancient philosophical traditions, notably Aristotle's concept of *ethos*, which emphasized character formation through habituation and practical wisdom. In professional and vocational training, formalized ethics education emerged prominently in the 20th century alongside the growth of professional associations that established codes of conduct in fields such as medicine, engineering, law, and social work (Sulmasy, 2020). Globally, concerns over professional misconduct, ranging from corruption to negligence, prompted pedagogical shifts toward embedding ethics within disciplinary curricula rather than treating it as an isolated subject (Fort, 2021).

In Uganda, the history of ethics in higher and vocational education is intertwined with the liberalization of the education sector in the 1990s, which expanded access but also raised questions about quality and moral

standards (2022). Early approaches often confined ethics to standalone “General Studies” or humanities courses. Over the past two decades, however, there has been a gradual move toward infusion models, where ethical concepts are embedded within technical or professional modules to enhance relevance and application (Kuteesa, 2021). This evolution reflects broader national development priorities. Uganda’s Vision 2040 positions ethical humanism and moral responsibility as foundational pillars for sustainable socio-economic transformation (Muyingo, 2018).

Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development (NTISD), founded in 1952/1953 in Mpigi District as a center for training social welfare and community development workers, exemplifies this context. The institute has historically focused on producing professionals equipped to address structural social challenges such as poverty, child protection, gender-based violence, and community empowerment in both urban and rural settings (Twikirize, 2014). Graduates are expected to uphold high standards of integrity, confidentiality, and social justice, particularly when working with vulnerable populations through government departments, NGOs, and community-based organizations.

Despite these expectations, current issues reveal a persistent gap. Ugandan society continues to grapple with widespread corruption, negligence, and unprofessional conduct among technically skilled graduates, including those in social development fields. Reports highlight cases where practitioners engage in bribery, falsification of records, or exploitation of clients, undermining public trust and development efforts (Muwanga, 2018). In the education sector itself, phenomena such as the “hidden curriculum”, where institutional practices contradict formal teachings on honesty, exacerbate the problem (Musenze, 2021). Large class sizes, overloaded curricula, and limited faculty preparation for ethics instruction further compound these challenges (Bennaars, 2019; Ejuu, 2022).

This study is important because technically competent but ethically deficient professionals pose risks to vulnerable communities and national development goals. By focusing on Nsamizi, a premier public tertiary institution dedicated to social development training, the research illuminates practical strategies and barriers within a real-world vocational context.

1.1 Justification of Key Concepts

Responsible Conduct denotes behavior aligned with professional codes, moral principles, and societal expectations. It represents the behavioral outcome of effective ethics education rather than mere knowledge acquisition (Namukasa, 2023). *Curriculum Integration* involves systematically embedding ethical concepts into technical modules instead of isolating them, justified by evidence that context-specific learning enhances relevance and retention (Bakabulindi, 2020; Kuteesa, 2021). *Trainees* refer to adult learners at Nsamizi, who enter programs with pre-existing value systems shaped by cultural, socio-economic, and personal experiences. Unlike schoolchildren, their moral reasoning requires critical engagement to challenge and advance existing frameworks (Kohlberg, 1981). These concepts are central to understanding how Nsamizi can bridge the persistent “knowing-doing” gap in professional ethics.

1.2 Problem Statement

What is already known is that ethics education improves cognitive moral reasoning and that integrated approaches are generally more effective than isolated courses in professional training (Fort, 2021; Rest, 1986; Sulmasy, 2020). In Uganda, studies document high awareness of ethical principles among students but frequent justification of corrupt practices as “survival” mechanisms (Muwanga, 2018). Vocational and social work training institutions, including those like Nsamizi, have introduced ethics components in response to national concerns over graduate misconduct.

The problem, however, is evident in the rising cases of unethical conduct among social development practitioners, such as misappropriation of funds, breach of confidentiality, and exploitation, despite technical training. This misconduct erodes public trust, hampers service delivery to vulnerable populations, and contradicts Uganda’s development aspirations (Opolot, 2019). Evidence from the education sector shows that institutional hypocrisy and the hidden curriculum often undermine formal ethics teaching (Ejuu, 2022; Musenze, 2021).

Past studies have largely focused on standalone ethics courses or general higher education, with limited attention to infusion models in vocational social development training. Few have examined real institutional cases like Nsamizi or explored the interplay between curriculum strategies, trainee application, and contextual challenges in Uganda’s corruption-prone environment (research gap).

This research must be conducted to provide evidence-based insights into effective integration strategies while identifying practical barriers. The proposed solution is a comprehensive examination of Nsamizi’s mixed infusion approach, offering actionable recommendations to align curriculum, institutional culture, and societal support for fostering genuine responsible conduct.

1.3 Purpose of the Paper

This investigation seeks to elucidate the mechanisms through which the integration of ethical principles into the curriculum may foster responsible conduct among trainees at the Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development.

1.4 Research Objectives

The present investigation was delineated by the subsequent objectives:

- 1) To delineate the pedagogical strategies employed for the integration of ethical principles within the curriculum at the Nsamizi Training Institute.
- 2) To assess the comprehension and practical application of ethical principles by trainees during their programmatic instruction.
- 3) To evaluate the specific challenges encountered by instructional staff in promoting responsible conduct via curriculum integration.

1.5 Research Questions

This investigation was designed to address the subsequent interrogatives:

- 1) What pedagogical strategies are currently employed for the integration of ethical principles within the curriculum at the Nsamizi Training Institute?
- 2) In what manner do trainees comprehend and practically apply ethical principles during their programmatic instruction?
- 3) What specific challenges do instructional staff encounter in fostering responsible conduct through the integration of curriculum components?

1.6 Significance of the Study

- 1) **Academic Contribution:** This investigation is anticipated to augment the existing body of knowledge pertaining to ethics pedagogy within vocational and social work education in sub-Saharan Africa, thereby furnishing empirical insights for curriculum developers and scholarly researchers.
- 2) **Professional Practice and Industry:** Social development practitioners and instructional personnel at institutions such as Nsamizi may acquire tangible strategies for ameliorating the theory-practice disparity, thereby enhancing professional integrity in practical field applications.
- 3) **Policy Formulation:** The emergent findings are projected to inform the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), the Ministry of Education and Sports, and the Ministry of Public Service concerning the development of policies for ethical integration and the rigorous enforcement of professional codes of conduct.
- 4) **Societal Impact:** Through the promotion of responsible conduct among prospective social workers, this investigation may facilitate enhanced service provision to vulnerable communities, a diminution of corruption, and the strengthening of social cohesion within Uganda.

1.7 Scope of the Study

- 1) The delimitation of this investigation pertains to the Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development (NTISD) in Mpigi District, Uganda; it serves as a single-site case study designed to offer an in-depth analysis of ethics education. The investigative focus encompasses final-year trainees, lecturers, and curriculum developers within social work and development programs, as these stakeholders offer the most relevant insights into the efficacy of current pedagogical strategies.
- 2) Regarding its substantive scope, this investigation is centered upon three pivotal areas: the strategies employed for curriculum integration, the level of trainees' ethical understanding and application, and the challenges that impede the fostering of responsible conduct. The investigation covers the 2023–2025 academic period, thus enabling an assessment of the institute's most current practices.
- 3) Although the qualitative design provides rich, contextual data, it inherently limits the generalizability of the findings beyond NTISD. Furthermore, the reliance upon participant self-reporting may present a potential for social desirability bias. These limitations were addressed through the rigorous triangulation of data sources, which included document analysis and focus groups, thereby verifying accuracy and strengthening the validity of the conclusions.

1.8 Theorization

The theoretical underpinning for this investigation is Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (Kohlberg, 1981). Kohlberg posited that moral reasoning progresses through three distinct levels, namely,

Pre-conventional (characterized by a focus on punishment/reward and self-interest), Conventional (marked by conformity to social norms and authority), and Post-conventional (defined by adherence to universal ethical principles and social contracts). Each of these levels encompasses two stages, with advancement potentially occurring through cognitive conflict and exposure to higher-stage reasoning via moral dilemmas and dialectical engagement.

The theory explains moral development as a cognitive process stimulated by an active engagement with moral issues, as opposed to passive adherence to rules. The theory has been widely applied within professional ethics education for the design of interventions that foster progression toward principled reasoning (McLeod, n.d.; structural-learning.com, 2023).

Kohlberg's theory is chosen because it directly addresses the study's focus on moving trainees beyond rule compliance toward internalized professional ethics. It justifies active integration methods, such as case studies, reflective journals, and ethical dilemmas, over didactic teaching. In the context of Nsamizi, the theory relates to the topic by framing curriculum integration as a mechanism for creating cognitive disequilibrium that advances trainees from conventional (societal approval or fear of punishment) to post-conventional reasoning, where they uphold integrity even in corrupt environments. This supports the examination of strategies that stimulate moral growth and the challenges that hinder progression, such as contradictory institutional practices. A supplementary lens from Rest's (2020) Four Component Model (sensitivity, judgment, motivation, character) complements Kohlberg by emphasizing the behavioral application gap observed in findings.

2. Literature Review

Variable 1: Strategies for Curriculum Integration

Background and global studies show varied approaches, including case-based learning in medicine (Sulmasy, 2020), infusion in business (Fort, 2021), and hybrid models in TVET (Kuteesa, 2021). In Africa, service learning and role-plays connect ethics to community realities (Nakkazi, 2022). Faculty training and team-teaching are critical, as technical instructors often lack ethics preparation (Bennaars, 2019). What previous studies found is that context-specific, experiential strategies enhance relevance and retention. What is missing is in-depth case analysis of infusion in Ugandan social development vocational institutes, particularly how local corruption examples function as teaching tools.

Variable 2: Trainees' Understanding and Application

Understanding is cognitive, while application is behavioral. Rest's (2020) model highlights the need for sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character. Ugandan studies reveal that students define ethical terms well but justify misconduct due to survival pressures (Muwanga, 2018). Field-based training improves integrity during internships (Nabwire, 2023). Previous findings indicate assessment tied to conduct strengthens the application (Opolot, 2019). Missing is an exploration of how workplace role models mediate curriculum effects in social development training.

Variable 3: Challenges in Fostering Responsible Conduct

The hidden curriculum often contradicts formal teaching (Musenze, 2021). Overloaded curricula, subjective assessment, cultural relativism, and large classes pose barriers (Ejuu, 2022; Bakabulindi, 2020; Namukasa, 2023). In Uganda, institutional hypocrisy in education undermines ethics efforts. Studies elsewhere note similar disjunctions in responsible management education (Olanya, 2023) issuing is institution-specific analysis of how these challenges manifest at vocational social work institutes and their impact on moral development progression per Kohlberg.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of ethics integration at a single institution. The population comprised curriculum developers, lecturers, and final-year trainees at Nsamizi Training Institute. Purposive sampling selected 10 lecturers experienced in ethics-infused courses, while stratified random sampling selected 25 final-year students from social work and development programs.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews (guided by the three research questions, with four probe questions each), curriculum document analysis (syllabi and course outlines), and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns, with codes developed around strategies, understanding/application, and challenges. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail.

Table 1. Distribution of Study Respondents

Category	Role	Number	Rationale for Selection
Lecturers	Course tutors / Department heads	10	Experienced in delivering ethics-infused courses
Students	Final-year Social Work & Development	25	Have completed ethics modules and field attachments
Total		35	

The table shows that 35 respondents participated. Lecturers offered insights into curriculum design and teaching challenges, while students provided perspectives on understanding, application, and lived experiences. This distribution enabled rich, triangulated qualitative data while remaining manageable for in-depth analysis.

4. Interview Findings

Finding on Objective 1: Strategies for Integration

Nsamizi employs a mixed “stand-alone plus infusion” model. Technical modules dedicate sessions to ethics (e.g., “honesty in budgeting” in project planning). Lecturers use local newspaper cases of NGO fund misappropriation and require reflective journals during field attachments. This aligns with hybrid approaches recommended in Ugandan TVET (Kuteesa, 2021) but adapts them to social development realities.

The use of real Ugandan examples makes ethics concrete and relevant, bridging theory-practice gaps as per Kohlberg’s emphasis on cognitive conflict. However, implementation varies by lecturer preparedness, suggesting the need for standardized guidelines to ensure consistency across departments.

Finding on Objective 2: Trainees’ Understanding and Application

Trainees demonstrated a strong cognitive grasp of principles like integrity and confidentiality but reported inconsistent application. Some “cut corners” when supervisors modeled unethical behavior, yet others cited classroom debates as giving them the courage to refuse to falsify records. This mirrors the knowing-doing gap in Ugandan higher education (Muwanga, 2018; Nabwire, 2023).

Curriculum integration builds moral awareness and initial courage, supporting progression toward post-conventional reasoning. Nevertheless, environmental influences heavily mediate actual behavior, highlighting that cognitive gains alone do not guarantee responsible conduct without supportive field contexts.

Finding on Objective 3: Challenges Faced by Lecturers

Prominent challenges included institutional hypocrisy (e.g., bribes for administrative services), large classes hindering dialogue, outdated materials, student resistance to “preachy” topics, and subjective assessment of ethics. The hidden curriculum was frequently cited as undermining teachings. These echo broader Ugandan and African education challenges (Ejuu, 2022; Musenze, 2021).

Such contradictions create cognitive dissonance for both lecturers and trainees, stalling moral development at conventional levels. Addressing these requires systemic alignment between formal curriculum and institutional practices to make ethics education credible and effective.

5. Discussion

Discussion on strategies aligns findings with global and regional best practices while noting contextual adaptations at Nsamizi. Infusion combined with local cases enhances relevance (Sulmasy, 2020; Fort, 2021; Kuteesa, 2021), and reflective journals promote metacognition central to Kohlberg (1981). However, variability in implementation points to the need for faculty development (Bennaars, 2019).

Discussion on understanding and application confirms cognitive gains but persistent behavioral gaps influenced by role models and environment (Rest, 2020; Muwanga, 2018; Nabwire, 2023). This supports Kohlberg’s stage progression model while underscoring external variables.

Discussion on challenges validates the destructive role of the hidden curriculum and societal factors (Musenze [CITE_1]; Ejuu [CITE_2]; Olanya [CITE_3]). Without cultural and institutional alignment, integration efforts may risk failure, as cognitive conflict alone cannot overcome contradictory modeling.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

Integrating ethics into the curriculum at Nsamizi significantly enhances trainees’ cognitive understanding of

professional responsibility and provides tools for moral courage. Nevertheless, the translation into consistent responsible conduct is hindered by the hidden curriculum, societal corruption pressures, and insufficient practical application opportunities. Kohlberg's framework elucidates that while curriculum strategies stimulate reasoning, progression to post-conventional levels likely necessitates a supportive ethical ecosystem. The veritable fostering of responsible conduct ostensibly demands a congruence between taught values, institutional practices, and broader societal norms. Without this alignment, vocational training in social development might risk producing graduates who comprehend ethics yet subsequently fail to enact them, thereby potentially perpetuating cycles of misconduct.

6.2 Recommendations

- 1) Institutions such as Nsamizi should establish a standing Ethics Committee to monitor internal operations for consistency with taught values, including transparent assessments and anti-corruption measures.
- 2) Curriculum developers, in collaboration with the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), should strengthen practicum ethics assessments by incorporating supervisor feedback on observed behavior.
- 3) Lecturers, for the purpose of fostering ethical discussions within expansive classes and ensuring the objective assessment of moral growth, demonstrably necessitate regular capacity-building workshops.
- 4) Through the Ministry of Public Service and the Ministry of Education, the Government should endeavor to enforce a uniform code of ethics for all interns and social development practitioners, an initiative which ought to be coupled with robust monitoring mechanisms.
- 5) Finally, educationists and professional bodies like the National Association of Social Workers of Uganda (NASWU) should promote ongoing research and sharing of best practices in ethics infusion to build a national culture of responsible professional conduct.

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