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Unveiling ethical challenges: An in-depth analysis of unethical behavior in Albanian preschool education

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ABSTRACT

Background: The study delves into the prevalence and severity of unethical behavior among educators and parents in Albanian early childhood education institutions, a topic previously unexplored.

Objective: The research aims to identify the most common unethical behaviors among educators and parents, understand the primary determinants of unethical behavior in preschool settings, and provide recommendations for policy development in Albanian public preschools to improve ethical norms.

Settings: The study was conducted in Albanian early childhood education institutions, focusing on both educators and parents as key stakeholders.

Methods: A comprehensive analysis was undertaken, utilizing questionnaires administered to educators and parents, drawing on codes of ethical behavior and thematic analysis to identify and categorize unethical behaviors. Statistical analysis using SPSS was employed to derive insights from the data.

Results: Findings revealed a notable discrepancy between educators' and parents' perceptions of unethical behavior, with guardians reporting higher frequencies of unethical conduct. The most prevalent unethical behaviors included unequal treatment of children, favoritism, and use of punishment by educators, while parents commonly violated norms such as disrespecting educators and encouraging physical aggression in children.

Conclusion: The study underscores the importance of addressing unethical behavior in Albanian preschool settings through enhanced awareness, training, and policy interventions. Strategies to foster better communication between educators and parents, improve professional standards, and combat discrimination are imperative for creating a more ethical environment conducive to positive child development.

Keywords: breach of behavior; preschool education; Albania; values education; policy implications

1. Introduction

Unethical conduct within educational settings presents a significant challenge worldwide, with detrimental effects on students, educators, and the broader community [29]. In Albania, like in many other

countries, instances of unethical behavior among educators and parents in early childhood education institutions raise serious concerns [18]. Recent data indicate a notable prevalence of such misconduct, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive understanding and effective interventions to address this issue[9].

There is a gap in understanding the specific determinants and manifestations of such conduct within Albanian early childhood education institutions [43]. While previous studies have examined ethical norms and misconduct in diverse cultural and educational settings [25, 44], there is limited research focused on the unique socio-cultural context of Albania and its implications for ethical behavior in preschool environments. Thus, this paper contributes novel insights by providing a comprehensive analysis of the prevalence, determinants, and implications of unethical behavior among educators and parents in Albanian early childhood education institutions. By elucidating the specific socio-cultural factors influencing unethical conduct and exploring the intersections between individual, institutional, and societal dynamics, this study offers a nuanced understanding that is essential for the development of targeted interventions and policy initiatives tailored to the Albanian context.

Ethical education is intricately intertwined with early childhood practices for children attending these institutions, saturating their daily preschool activities with such values, as knowledge is inherently imbued with values [28, 6]. Despite the ubiquity of ethical values in early childhood education, its curricula often neglect this vital aspect [39]. Analysis activities in early childhood institutions indicates a relative neglect of ethical and social issues, despite the broad range of activities in which children are engaged in [26].

Recognized as a fundamental element of early childhood education, ethics contributes a social perspective, bridging internal and external realities and facilitating adaptation to the ever-evolving societal needs [38, 44, 13]. Scholars contend that cultivating ethical values directly influences societal quality and the evolving quality of children's lives [24]. It enhances children's conflict resolution skills [45], and fosters a perception of commitment, as well as loyalty [34]. Ethical education that is continuous, systematic and that starts early serves as a foundation for imparting democratic values, civic rights [1], leadership values [30], and anti-corruption principles in the life of a child [19]. By instilling the concept of 'otherness,' ethical education promotes acceptance of diversity, resulting in diminished prejudice and social stigma [11], heightened self-acceptance, and increased environmental awareness and care [8].

The integration of ethics into early childhood educational systems necessitates a systematic and conscientious effort to comprehend societal contexts and cultivate a profound understanding of moral and ethical principles [36]. Crucially, such integration must be fundamentally motivated, as ethical values should not be treated as social heritage or theoretical rules but as instruments evolving from the need to address issues and be beneficial to individuals, institutions, and society at large [13].

2. Instilling ethical values in preschool children

2.1. The family's role in developing ethical values in children

The primary conduits through which values are transmitted to young children are primarily the family unit, followed by the early childhood institution [15]. The family, being the initial and paramount social structure for young children, serves as the foundational entity for presenting and perpetuating values across generations. Within this familial context, children acquire their initial understanding of ethical norms [17]. Families exercise a significant influence on their children's ethical development through the exhibition of either ethical or unethical behaviour, serving as models that children emulate [47]. The pivotal role of parents in their children's ethical development is underscored by their representation as models, guiding children's behaviour [28]. The

ethical teachings imparted by parents are contingent upon their personal ethical beliefs [41]. Moral modelling exhibited by parents is indicative of their children's morality, with this relationship being influenced by socialization processes such as adaptability, cohesion, and positive communication [6].

During the formative years, a child's initial exposure to ethical perceptions occurs within the parent-child relationship [46]. Values are initially embraced on an emotional basis, and only later, as cognitive abilities mature, do children engage in analytical assessments of these values. Children adopt the attitudes demonstrated by parents as models of values, incorporating them through processes of identification and simulation [10]. Over time, these adopted attitudes transform into habits, becoming intrinsic components of the child's ethical conduct. Consequently, parental attitudes assume a pivotal role in shaping their children's moral education and in fostering the ability to distinguish between right and wrong [22].

2.2. Early childhood education institution's role in developing ethical values in children

Early childhood education institution assumes a significant role in the ethical development of children, serving as a crucial institution where they undergo socialization with peers and initiate the formation of values, attitudes, and behaviours aligned with societal expectations [4]. Within this age cohort, children emulate and model the behaviours of parents and teachers, with the conduct, attitudes, and social values exhibited by these influential figures serving as prominent structural models for children [32]. Research indicates that social-emotional learning during the early years establishes a foundational framework for subsequent ethical development later on, influencing children's behaviour [35].

The extensive literature on teaching practices underscores the potency of implicit methods, particularly role-modelling, as effective channels for teaching ethics [10, 35]. This is particularly salient when ethical education is the focus. Ethical role-modelling encompasses actions that elucidate the concept of care to children [10; 37], encompassing genuine care, active listening, empathic responses, and the creation of a moral climate conducive to reciprocal support and interaction between teachers and children. In this context, teachers are expected to serve as moral agents actively contributing to societal improvement through their roles as value educators, achieved through deliberate instruction, modelling, and sustained investment in professional and personal growth [37; 38]

3. The Albanian context

Albanian preschool starts at the age of 3 years old until 6 years old, and it is not compulsory education. Although the Albanian preschool curriculum outlines values as objectives and principles, it lacks tangible activities integrated into daily interactions with children [7], thus preschool-aged children in Albania are provided with opportunities for the cultivation of values and morals haphazardly and not consistently [8]. The inclusion of moral education in preschool teacher preparation programs is inconsistent, with prospective teachers often lacking support on how to incorporate moral development into everyday activities or guidance on appropriate tools for teaching ethics [5].

The Curricular Framework for Preschool Education in Albania [3] places a predominant emphasis on fostering children's social, cognitive and physical development in preparation for formal schooling. Notably, there is an intensive focus on cognitive development encompassing pre-reading, pre-writing, and pre-mathematical skills, with comparatively less attention devoted to physical and motor development. The instruction of ethics appears fragmented and isolated within the curriculum. This disparity might be attributed to remnants of the recent totalitarian society within the Albanian education system, where the endeavour to rapidly attain the standards of advanced societies is incongruent with the present school reality. The National Curriculum Guide for Preschool education [3] underscores the importance children's active participation, yet,

paradoxically, children often lack decision-making authority and must adhere to adult directives during the daily activities of preschools, highlighting the gap between the written and the hidden curriculum [42]. Furthermore, the assessment of teachers' performance is frequently measured on their capacities in maintaining order in the classroom rather than evaluating the quality of their interactions with children [37].

Albanian parents on the other hand are not consistently cognizant of the pivotal role they play as moral educators [20]. Parental transmission of their moral beliefs commonly occurs through narratives and explanations justifying their perspectives, or through daily discussions and comments among family members regarding day-to-day situations. The predominant model in family education in Albania continues to be rooted in obedience, especially prevalent among the less educated residing in extended families [23]. Conversely, more emancipated families, characterized by smaller nuclear units comprising only parents and children, tend to emphasize education based on negotiation and the encouragement of individual identity [48].

The principal aims of this investigation were to delineate instances of unethical conduct within the Albanian early childhood education and to suggest recommendations for the formulation of national policies and programs aimed at fostering ethical advancement within the Albanian Education System starting from the early years. The study sought to address the following research issues:

- What are the prevalent and consequential manifestations of unethical behaviour exhibited by educators and parents in the context of preschool education?
- What are the primary determinants influencing the unethical conduct of educators and parents within the sphere of preschool education?

4. Methods

4.1. Population - sampling and participants

The sampling framework for this quantitative research was derived from the statistical yearbook of education from the Ministry of Education, and from the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT). Our study specifically targeted the public sector at the preschool education level in Albania, encompassing a total of 1773 public preschools with 4,144 teachers engaged in preschool education. The sample size for this study within the targeted group of teachers was determined as 352, employing a 95% confidence level and a 5% confidence interval (CL 95%, CI 5%). For the purpose of achieving the required number of participants, we randomly selected 370 educators and 370 guardians to participate in the study. In pursuit of triangulation, an equivalent number of parents, whose children were attending preschool in the classes of the selected educators, were also included. After the analysis of descriptive statistics and missing data the final sample consisted of 362 educators and 362 guardians.

The research design, aligned with the study's objectives, utilized a sequential stratified sampling approach. The distribution of preschool educational institutions across cities was proportionate to the total number of institutions per city. Research teams were established in each municipality in Albania. In the initial phase, these teams randomly selected public preschool institutions. Subsequently, in the second phase, the teams randomly selected the educators, followed by the random selection of individual children in the third phase. Parents were then approached, and their participation in the study was sought out.

The study participants consisted of 362 educators, predominantly female (97.8%) with a minority being male (2.2%), and an equivalent number of parents (N= 362), with the majority being female (77%) and the minority male (23%). This gender distribution in the sample of educators reflects the cultural context of Albania, where preschool education has traditionally been a female-dominated profession (Sula et al., 2019). Culturally, Albania, like many other countries, has traditionally assigned caregiving roles to women, including

those in early childhood education. This cultural expectation often leads to a higher proportion of female educators in preschool settings. In the same line with this explanation, the gender distribution in the sample of guardians reflects the cultural context of Albania, where mothers traditionally take on the primary caregiver role for young children. This phenomenon is reflective of broader societal norms and gender dynamics prevalent in Albania [49].

4.2. Measures

Following a comprehensive review of existing literature, it was discerned that no prior instrument existed for gauging unethical behaviour within the Albanian preschool education. Consequently, the imperative to develop and validate a new measurement tool for unethical behaviour emerged. In the formulation of the questionnaires, diverse methods were employed to generate types of unethical behaviour. Extensive scrutiny of prior research and theoretical frameworks was conducted to identify instances of behaviour aligning with the defined parameters of unethical conduct within the educational context. Additionally, the Codes of Ethical Behaviour for Teachers in Albania [33] were referenced to discern examples of both ethical and unethical conduct. A total of 125 educators and guardians were asked to list all unethical behaviours that they have seen or experienced, yielding a pool of 1114 items.

Through a meticulous and systematic process, and subsequent exclusion of behaviours deemed unfit for inclusion, a refined set of 100 distinct items pertaining to unethical behaviour in all levels of education was established. Out of a total of 100 distinct items related to unethical behavior, 25 were specifically identified as relevant to preschool education. From this subset of 25 unethical behaviors, two distinct scales were meticulously developed: one to assess educators' unethical behavior within early childhood institutions, and the other to evaluate guardians' unethical behavior within the same institutional context. Items receiving a mean score of five or lower on the rating were excluded from consideration. The research staff of the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tirana were approached to participate in a further refinement process, involving a rigorous item-by-item review. A pool of 27 experts, comprising 60% of the staff, agreed to participate. This process was followed by thematic analysis to delineate variables for each scale. While analyzing the reliability and validity of the scale used might be standard practice, it wasn't essential for the current study's objectives. Our primary focus was to describe the prevalence of unethical behaviors among participants, not to test specific hypotheses about those behaviors. Therefore, a robust psychometric evaluation of the scale, while valuable in future research, wasn't necessary for this initial exploration of the phenomenon in Albania.

In the educator scale, a nuanced analysis led to the identification of 10 independent dimensions encapsulating unethical behaviour. These dimensions encompassed lack of respect toward children, inequality in treatment, prejudice, violation of privacy, abuse, biased evaluation, lack of preparation, absence of professionalism, unwillingness to collaborate, and sexual misconduct.

The same thematic dimensions were applied to the parents' questionnaire. These dimensions included unethical communication and verbal abuse, physical and psychological abuse, violations, utilizations, prejudice and discriminations.

The constructed scale assessing educators' unethical behaviors comprised 10 distinct behaviors, while the scale targeting guardians' unethical behaviors encompassed 11 distinct behaviors. Each participant was tasked with evaluating each item across two dimensions: (1) frequency, indicating the occurrence frequency of the behavior on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, and (2) severity, measuring the perceived severity of the behavior when it occurs, also on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5.

4.3. Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 22). Initially, the data underwent scrutiny to assess homogeneity of variance and normality distribution. Subsequent analyses involved the application of descriptive statistics alongside inferential procedures such as bivariate correlations, T-tests, and Anova to derive meaningful insights from the dataset.

5. Results

Table 1 indicates that a notable proportion of both teachers and parents lack adequate understanding of ethical procedures in preschool, with approximately 16% of caregivers and 30% of guardians reporting having little or no knowledge regarding these procedures.

Table 1. Knowledge of Ethical code within the preschool system.

Classification		Educators		Guardians	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Significance of adhering to the Code of Ethics	Low	6	1,7	13	3,6
	Moderate	122	33,7	130	35,9
	High	229	63,3	204	56,4
	Not sure	5	1,3	15	4,1
	Total	362	100%	362	100%
Understanding ethical procedures	No understanding	13	3,6	24	6,6
	Minor	25	6,9	80	22,1
	Moderate	160	44,2	181	50
	Significant	142	39,2	69	19,1
	Not sure	22	6,1	8	2,2
	Total	362	100%	362	100%

Tables 2-3 demonstrate the results regarding the frequency and severity of unethical behaviour by both caregivers and guardians in the Albanian preschools. In addition, **tables 4** and **5** show the comparison of the frequency of unethical behaviour between educators and parents.

According to the study findings (**Table 2** and **3**), there is a notable discrepancy between the perceptions of parents and educators regarding the occurrence of unethical behavior by educators in the preschool system. Guardians tend to report a higher frequency of unethical conduct by educators compared to the self-reports that the educators report of themselves. Both groups, however, acknowledge a lower frequency than the perceived severity of unethical behavior. Instances deemed as more severe are reported to occur less frequently.

The data in **Table 2** reveal that the most prevalent ethical breach by preschool educators, as reported by both parents and educators, is the request towards parents to provide didactic materials and hygienic products. Nonetheless, such action is considered less serious due to the known existing shortages in public kindergartens. Other commonly reported unethical behaviors by educators include imposing prolonged periods of standing still, excessive paper-and-pencil assignments, and the use of cell phones instead of interacting with children, negatively impacting the quality of teacher-child communication and modeling of inappropriate behavior.

The behaviour that is infrequent, but considered severe is the unequal treatment of children based on personal relationships of teachers. Additionally, psychological and physical punishment of children is acknowledged as a form of unethical behavior. Another significant finding is that neglecting to report unethical behaviors of colleagues is a frequent violation by teachers.

Table 2. Prevalence and importance of the most common unethical behaviors among educators in the Albanian early childhood education institutions.

Behaviours	Based on Educators				Based on Guardians			
	Frequency		Gravity		Frequency		Gravity	
	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS
The educator displays unequal treatment towards children	1,4	0,9	3,3	1,7	1,6	1,1	3,4	1,7
The educator shows favouritism by giving preferential treatment to children with whom they have a personal acquaintance	1,4	0,8	3,4	1,7	1,8	1,0	3,4	1,6
The educator employs his/her authority to punish children	1,4	0,7	3,3	1,7	1,7	1,0	3,3	1,6
The educator uses cell phone instead of interacting with children	1,6	0,8	3,2	1,6	1,8	0,9	3,2	1,5
The educator forces the children to queue	1,6	0,9	3,0	1,6	1,7	1,0	2,9	1,6
The educator overlooks unethical behaviours exhibited by other colleagues	1,7	1,2	3,4	1,7	1,7	1,1	3,6	1,5
The educator requests parents to furnish hygienic items	2,4	1,5	2,6	1,6	2,5	1,5	2,6	1,6
The educator requests parents to contribute financially for the support staff, such as guards or cleaning staff	1,4	1,0	3,2	1,7	1,7	1,2	3,1	1,7
The educator requests parents to supply didactic materials for their children	2,6	1,6	2,5	1,6	2,5	1,5	2,7	1,6
The educator requests parents to furnish heating/cooling equipment for the kindergarten	1,4	0,8	3,1	1,7	1,6	1,1	3,1	1,6

Table 3. The prevalence and importance of the most common unethical behaviors among guardians in the Albanian early childhood education institutions.

Behaviours	Based on Educators				Based on Guardians			
	Frequency		Gravity		Frequency		Gravity	
	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS	M	DS
Guardians engage in inappropriate communication with educators	2,0	1,0	3,7	1,5	1,9	0,9	3,7	1,4
Guardians derogate their own child in the presence of peers or educators.	2,0	1,0	3,8	1,5	1,9	1,0	3,8	1,4
Guardians criticize the educator regarding the quality of teaching.	1,5	0,8	3,6	1,6	1,5	0,8	3,6	1,5
Guardians endorse psychological coercion as an accepted disciplinary measure for their children's education	1,6	1,0	3,7	1,6	1,6	0,9	3,8	1,6
Guardians endorse physical violence as an accepted disciplinary measure for their children's education	1,5	0,9	3,7	1,7	1,6	0,9	3,8	1,6
Guardians encourage their child to use physical aggression with their peers	1,9	0,9	3,8	1,5	1,7	1,0	3,8	1,6
Guardians collect their children from the kindergarten later than the agreed-upon schedule, as specified by the institution's regulations	2,2	1,0	3,0	1,4	2,1	1,0	2,9	1,4
Guardians do not respect educators	1,6	0,8	3,8	1,6	1,5	0,8	3,7	1,6
Guardians leverage their personal and familial connections to exert influence on the educators.	1,7	1,0	3,7	1,5	1,9	1,2	3,6	1,5
Guardians hold discriminatory attitudes towards children with disabilities.	1,7	0,9	3,9	1,6	1,6	0,9	3,9	1,6
Guardians demonstrate discrimination against children based on their family backgrounds (rural, Roma, Egyptian).	1,6	0,9	3,8	1,5	1,7	1,0	3,8	1,5

Table 4. Comparative analysis of the incidence of unethical conduct among educators and guardians.

		N	M	DS	*t*	*p*
Educators' unjust treatment towards children	Educators	355	1,33	0,54	-5,283	0,000
	Guardians	358	1,60	0,78		
Educators' discriminatory behaviour towards children	Educators	351	1,15	0,39	-4,387	0,000
	Guardians	353	1,32	0,61		
Educators' low preparation for teaching	Educators	352	1,36	0,57	-1,745	0,081
	Guardians	346	1,44	0,60		
Deficiency in professional conduct	Educators	357	1,38	0,45	-3,451	0,001
	Guardians	359	1,52	0,64		
Children completing personal tasks of educators	Educators	354	1,96	0,90	-1,829	0,068
	Guardians	361	2,09	0,99		
Guardians verbal abuse	Educators	361	1,62	0,62	-0,778	0,437
	Guardians	352	1,66	0,68		
Guardians' involvement in aggressive behaviour.	Educators	361	1,56	0,67	0,782	0,435
	Guardians	356	1,52	0,68		
Violations by guardians	Educators	361	2,23	0,78	1,722	0,085
	Guardians	347	2,13	0,78		
Utilization by guardians	Educators	355	1,53	0,78	-3,689	0,000
	Guardians	333	1,78	1,01		
Prejudice by guardians	Educators	352	1,56	0,68	-0,633	0,527
	Guardians	345	1,59	0,74		

Table 5: Comparative analysis of the gravity of unethical conduct among educators and guardians

		N	M	DS	*t*	*p*
	Educators	316	3,39	1,58	0,205	0,837
Educators' unjust treatment towards children	Guardians	322	3,36	1,51		
	Educators	305	3,62	1,65	0,49	0,624
Educators' discriminatory behaviour towards children	Guardians	311	3,56	1,57		
	Educators	306	3,31	1,58	-0,01	0,992
Educators' lack of professional preparation for teaching	Guardians	300	3,32	1,54		
	Educators	321	3,37	1,46	0,515	0,607
Deficiency in professional conduct	Guardians	320	3,31	1,44		
	Educators	318	2,79	1,43	-0,393	0,694
Children completing personal tasks of educators	Guardians	320	2,84	1,40		
	Educators	330	3,66	1,45	0,225	0,822
Guardians verbal abuse	Guardians	324	3,63	1,37		
	Educators	316	3,75	1,51	-0,001	0,999
Guardians' involvement in aggressive behaviour.	Guardians	308	3,75	1,52		
	Educators	338	3,32	1,18	15,481	0,000
Guardians' violations	Guardians	344	2,12	0,81		
	Educators	301	3,66	1,49	0,238	0,812
Utilization by guardians	Guardians	295	3,63	1,46		
	Educators	322	3,78	1,43	0,402	0,688
Guardians' prejudice	Guardians	312	3,74	1,43		

Table 3 shows that the most frequently violated school norms by parents as reported are in coming to collect their children from school much later than the agreed time slots and not attending Parent-Teacher meetings. Additionally, inappropriate or offensive communication by parents towards educators is identified as a serious ethical violation. Verbal violence from parents is not only an ethical breach but it can also serve as a model to children. Educators, however, report that they often do not report such instances, potentially indicating a lack of trust in the leadership of the early childhood institution, and the ethical structures of their institution.

Furthermore, another frequent ethical breach by the parents as reported is in comparing their children's achievements with those of others and insulting their child in the presence of their peers or educators. These behaviors, rooted in the perception of children as parental property, not only breach ethical standards but also infringe upon the rights of children. Educators frequently refrain from reacting or reporting these unethical behaviors.

An examination of the data reveals differences between parents and educators in various categories of unethical behavior within the preschool system, particularly regarding educators treating children unequally, showing bias against children, especially those with special needs, low professionalism, and allowing parents to abuse of their time.

The statistical analysis in **Table 5** indicates standard deviations, statistical differences and medians through a simple t-test for the categories of unethical behavior among educators and parents in the early childhood education system. The research suggests that differences between educators and parents concerning the significance of ethical violations are observed primarily in violations of parents.

6. Discussion

6.1. Unethical behaviour of educators and parents

Data show that only a very small percentage of teachers (6%) are not aware of their school's ethical standards. Parents' percentage is higher at 22%, but only 10% don't think the moral code is beneficial to their kids' welfare. Nonetheless, 30% of parents and 16% of educators are not aware of the preschool's ethical practices. These impressive numbers suggest that teaching and educating educators—and parents alike—about the application of ethics code of conduct seems to be crucial.

The fact that both groups consider that it is the other group to behave more unethically aligns with previous research that people view their own behaviour more positively than they do other people's behavior (Wojciszke, 2005).

6.2. Unethical behaviour of educators

Asking parents to provide learning materials for kids, or hygienic products for the kindergarten, although unethical, can be explained by the challenging circumstances and little funding to public preschools. This could therefore prompt preschool educators to ask parents for help in providing basic sanitation supplies and didactic resources.

An even more troubling ethical dilemma arises when youngsters are asked to sit politely and behave while having less freedom to move about in their learning environment. This method is predicated on the idea that children's order and discipline are more significant than their independence and creativity. As mentioned in [21], education in Albania is still based on practicing obedience, even though policy documents encourage freedom and responsibility over obedience.

Use of cell phones by teachers while teaching models such behaviour in children. In a world that sees significant increase of cell phone usage in young children, and studies report emotional and behaviour issues related to cell phone usage, such as hyperactivity or inattention [40], it is necessary to inform teachers of the dangers of such modelling in children.

This study brought to light an issue of high concern, such as children's physical and/or psychological punishment, and lack of reporting of unethical behavior of teachers from their colleagues. Such conduct could be connected to the perceived absence of safeguarding structures in preschool institutions in Albania, a lower standard of social and professional responsibility, a lack of trust that such reporting will be kept confidential, as well as lack of organizational culture. Punishment interventions, both physical (such as spanking or hitting) or psychological (such as making a child feel inappropriate, uncapable, unappreciated, unwanted, making fun of child's efforts, etc.) are unacceptable in the Albanian pre-university system's Code of Ethics [33], but our study shows that they still prevail, even though studies show that punishments such as these are not only unethical but all unlikely to change a child's behaviour [31]. Trainings on other ways to discipline children and sensitizing both teachers and parents on the harm of punishment are advised. Moreover, efficient bylaws ensuring functional structures in reporting and proactive interventions are suggested.

6.3. Unethical behavior of parents

Parents not respecting the institution may be due to the low level of joint understanding between parents and their children's preschool institution, as well as lack of respect for educators' time and efforts. Studies have confirmed the significance of the relationships between parents and preschool teachers and its effect on young children's development [2]. It is the responsibility of the preschool to actively pursue and improve such relationships. Thus, creating mechanisms for meaningful communication are necessary.

The significant degree of discrimination in the Albanian educational system is one of the most troublesome concerns identified by this study. Certain disorders cause parents to be prejudiced toward other children in fear of their offspring's wellbeing. Prejudice towards children with special needs is very frequently reported. Parents fear their child could become ill, contract an infection, be negatively impacted, or mimic the actions of other kids who have unusual growth patterns. The lack of knowledge regarding children with special needs and autism spectrum disorder is an issue that causes prejudice in Albanian parents [14]. Additionally detrimental to kids, this kind of modelling affects children's social development, as they are encouraged to show prejudice against their peers [12]. Thus, ongoing information and training of parents in accepting special needs children is advisable. Furthermore, the lack of ancillary teachers, the high teacher/child ratio, the overall condition of the infrastructure, and the absence of heating are other issues that parents are worried about at public kindergartens.

Physical and psychological abuse is acceptable to parents when it comes to child discipline. It has also been stated that parents encourage their child to show physical violence towards their peers. Educators also confirmed that such behaviour is related to the enduring belief that using violence as a disciplinary measure is appropriate.

Additionally, parents attempt to pay more covertly for improved care for their child from teachers or make use of personal and family connections. Even worse, given that this is one of the most common ethical transgressions committed by educators, it is commonly tolerated by them. This supports the idea that one must purchase an educator's time and can be seen as a cultural attitude linked to a lack of confidence in their professionalism.

6.4. Teacher and parent differences on severity and frequency of unethical behaviour

Parental reports of unethical behaviour—whether from staff or other parents—are more common. These variations imply that parents are more conscious of the moral transgressions that happen in the preschool institution by educators and parents alike. Conversely, these results might suggest that teaching staff are afraid to disclose instances of unethical behaviour. When it comes to the evaluation of their work and professionalism, educators are more sensitive than parents with respect to ethical transgressions in the preschool system. But parents justify their ethical violations, while teachers regard these violations as unacceptable. Finding ways to communicate openly and freely about such sensitive issues is advisable. As research suggests, a caring and ethical environment allows children to have positive and meaningful learning experiences [2; 37], enhances children's wellbeing [18; 22], promotes positive social behaviour [27], and promotes children growing up as moral agents in society [16].

7. Conclusions

The study sheds light on the pressing issue of unethical behavior among educators and parents in Albanian early childhood education institutions, providing valuable insights and implications for policy and practice. Several key conclusions emerge from the research:

Need for Ethical Awareness and Training: The findings underscore the critical need for raising awareness and providing training on ethical conduct among both educators and parents. A significant proportion of participants lacked adequate understanding of ethical procedures, highlighting the importance of educational initiatives to promote ethical awareness and adherence to codes of conduct.

Discrepancy in Perceptions: The notable divergence between educators' and parents' perceptions of unethical behavior underscores the importance of open communication and mutual understanding between these key stakeholders. Addressing this disconnect is essential for fostering a collaborative and ethical environment in early childhood education settings.

Importance of Policy Interventions: The study highlights the necessity for policy interventions aimed at improving ethical norms in Albanian public preschools. Such interventions should include the development and implementation of clear ethical guidelines, mechanisms for reporting unethical behavior, and strategies for fostering a culture of professionalism and respect.

Combatting Discrimination and Abuse: Efforts to address discrimination and abuse, both among educators and parents, are paramount for ensuring the well-being and safety of children in early childhood education settings. Strategies should focus on promoting inclusivity, combating prejudice, and providing support for children with special needs.

Enhancing Professionalism and Accountability: Enhancing professionalism among educators and fostering a culture of accountability are crucial for promoting ethical conduct. Providing support for educators, establishing clear expectations, and implementing mechanisms for accountability can help uphold ethical standards and prevent misconduct.

In conclusion, addressing unethical behavior in Albanian early childhood education institutions requires a multifaceted approach encompassing awareness-raising, policy development, and fostering collaborative relationships between educators and parents. By prioritizing ethical conduct and creating a supportive and respectful environment, stakeholders can work together to ensure the well-being and positive development of young children in preschool settings.

Declaration of interest

The authors of this article declare no conflicts of interest. Prior to conducting the study, informed consent was obtained from all participating educators and parents, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality of their responses. This ethical approach ensured compliance with research protocols and safeguarded the rights and welfare of all participants involved in the study.

Limitations

The research was based on self-reporting; thus, it is important to keep in mind the possible tendency that respondents might be prone to present a more favourable image of themselves.

Educators may also have been affected by a fear of what people would think of their comments and who would read them. Educators may also worry about how their work would be viewed if they disclose ethical standards infractions.

In acknowledging that our sample leans towards mothers and educators were mainly woman, future studies aiming for a more balanced perspective could explore recruitment strategies such as partnering with fathers' groups.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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