

Between Promise and Peril: Educator Perspectives on Ethical AI Adoption in Education

Anne Tapp Jaksa^{1*}, Ph.D.; Joseph J. Jaksa², Ph.D.

¹Teacher Education Saginaw Valley State University, University Center, Michigan

²Criminal Justice, Saginaw Valley State University, University Center, Michigan

*Corresponding author: Anne Tapp Jaksa, Email: artapp@svsu.edu; Co-author: jjjaksa@svsu.edu (JJJ)

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers transformative potential in education, from personalized instruction to streamlined administrative tasks. Yet, it also raises complex ethical concerns, including algorithmic bias, data privacy, academic integrity, and equity. This study investigates how educators in P-12 and higher education perceive and address these challenges. Drawing on a systematic literature review and qualitative focus groups, the findings reveal both enthusiasm for AI's benefits and uncertainty around ethical implementation. In response, the paper introduces a six-principle ethical framework for responsible AI integration. Grounded in both empirical insights and theoretical foundations, the framework offers practical guidance to support educators navigating AI's ethical frontier.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, ethics, education, teacher education, algorithmic bias, data privacy, educational technology.

Introduction

This study is guided by the frameworks of Contextual Integrity (Nissenbaum, 2001), which addresses privacy within specific social contexts, and Responsible Innovation (Stilgoe et al., 2013), emphasizing anticipation, reflexivity, inclusion, and responsiveness in technological adoption. These frameworks help interpret the ethical concerns educators face as they integrate AI into classrooms, providing a theoretical foundation for our exploration of the intersection between technology and ethics in education.

This study explores the following research questions:

1. How do educators in P-12 and higher education perceive the ethical risks and benefits of AI integration?
2. What specific concerns do educators identify regarding bias, privacy, and academic integrity?
3. What support or guidance do educators feel is needed to implement AI responsibly?

Artificial Intelligence is transforming how education is delivered, assessed, and managed across the globe [1]. Applications range from AI-driven tutoring systems [2] to automated grading tools and predictive analytics for student success [3]. However, this rapid adoption brings profound ethical challenges. Educators face questions about algorithmic bias, data privacy, equity of access, and how AI might alter pedagogical relationships [4]. These challenges are particularly acute in P-12 settings, where minors' privacy and developmental considerations add further complexity [5].

While many educators express interest in AI's potential benefits, they often lack training in evaluating ethical risks or implementing responsible practices [6]. Moreover, the legal landscape around AI use in education remains fragmented, creating uncertainty for institutions [7]. This paper addresses this gap by examining educators' perceptions and proposing a practical framework for ethical AI adoption in P-12 and higher education contexts.

Literature Review AI Integration in Education: Promise and Peril Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming educational environments through tools such as adaptive learning platforms, predictive analytics, and generative technologies like ChatGPT [2,8]. AI's potential to personalize instruction, automate routine tasks, and support data-informed teaching has made it attractive to institutions globally. However, the literature simultaneously warns that premature or uncritical adoption may reproduce or exacerbate existing inequities in education [9,3].

A growing body of research critiques the "techno-solutionism" framing of AI, calling for greater scrutiny of whose problems AI purports to solve and at what cost [10,4]. Scholars stress that AI tools are not neutral but carry embedded assumptions from their developers, often reinforcing biases, especially when applied without contextual knowledge of learners.

Algorithmic Bias and Decision-Making A major concern centers on algorithmic bias, wherein AI systems trained on historical data reproduce discriminatory patterns [11]. In educational settings, this can manifest in risk predictions that disproportionately flag students from minoritized backgrounds or in automated grading systems that misinterpret dialectical or neurodivergent expression [8]. Benjamin (2019) [10] frames these issues as examples of "coded inequity" and cautions against deploying AI without rigorous, equity-focused auditing practices.

Data Privacy and Surveillance Educational AI systems require vast data inputs to function effectively, raising significant privacy concerns. In P-12 environments, legal protections like the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) are in place, but many tools lack transparency about how student data is collected, stored, and shared [5,3]. Critics argue that the

datafication of learning risks turning students into “data subjects” without their informed consent [9].

Academic Integrity in the Age of Generative AI Generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, present new ethical dilemmas for academic integrity. Cotton et al. (2023) [12] note that students and faculty alike are uncertain about what constitutes fair use of AI-generated content. While these tools offer scaffolding benefits for learners, they also challenge long-standing assumptions about authorship, originality, and assessment.

Equity and the Digital Divide While AI promises enhanced access and efficiency, its benefits remain unevenly distributed. Schools and universities with fewer technological resources struggle to adopt and sustain AI tools, often widening existing gaps in learning outcomes [2,4]. Furthermore, many AI systems lack inclusive design principles, posing barriers for linguistically diverse, neurodivergent, and low-income learners [7].

AI Literacy and Educator Preparedness Emerging literature underscores a critical gap in AI literacy among educators. AI literacy encompasses both technical competence and ethical judgment regarding AI tools [7]. Akgun and Greenhow (2021) [6] argue that teacher preparation programs often overlook these competencies, leaving future educators underprepared. Similarly, Roll and Wylie (2022) [13] stress the importance of

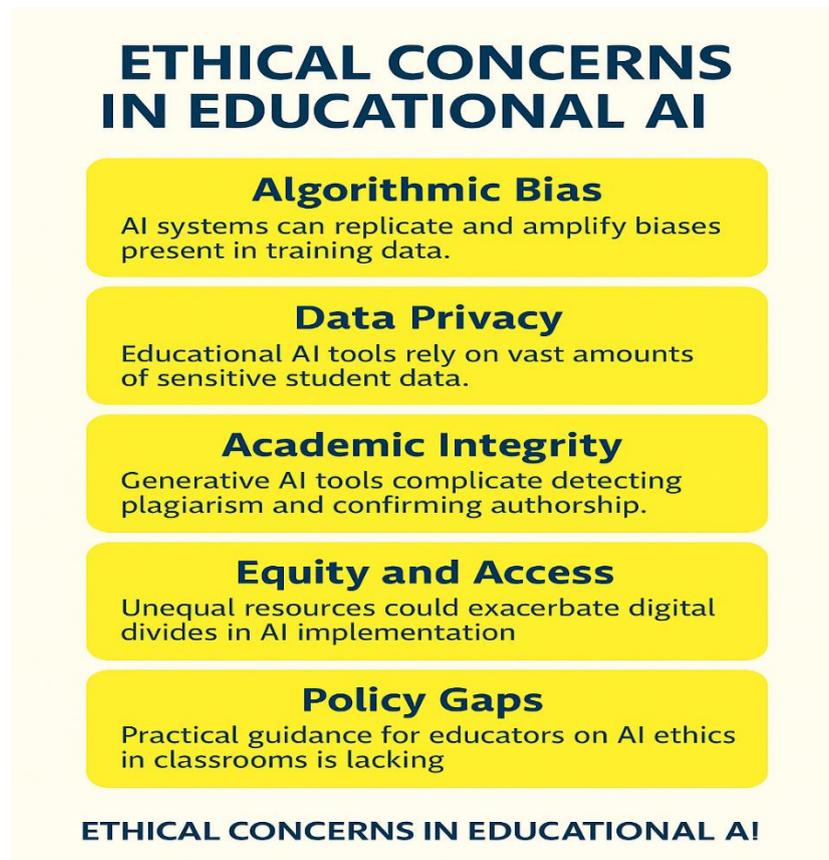
integrating AI ethics into professional development, not merely tool training.

Policy and Practical Guidance International bodies such as UNESCO (2021) [14] and the OECD advocate for responsible AI grounded in human rights, transparency, and accountability. Yet, implementation remains fragmented. Classroom educators frequently report a lack of clear, context-sensitive guidance on how to evaluate or adopt AI ethically [4,7]. This policy-practice disconnect reinforces the urgency for practitioner-informed frameworks that bridge theory with on-the-ground realities.

Research Gaps Despite the growing scholarship, significant gaps remain. Few empirical studies explore how educators perceive and apply ethical AI principles in daily practice. Moreover, longitudinal research on how these perceptions evolve with experience and exposure is still lacking. There is also limited cross-cultural research comparing ethical frameworks and educator preparedness across global contexts.

Ethical Concerns Building on both the literature review and the voices of educators in our study, this section outlines five core ethical challenges associated with AI integration in education. These categories—algorithmic bias, data privacy, academic integrity, equity and access, and policy gaps—represent the most pressing and recurrent themes across educational settings.

Figure 1: Core Ethical Concerns in AI Integration Synthesized from literature and focus group findings, this graphic summarizes the five most pressing ethical issues educators face when integrating AI into teaching and learning contexts.



Current Guidelines and Gaps

While frameworks such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Recommendation on the Ethics of AI provide important high-level ethical principles, practical, context-specific guidance for educators remains limited [14]. Numerous studies indicate that

teachers and faculty often feel unprepared to critically assess AI tools or to make informed decisions regarding their ethical integration in classrooms [6,7]. This highlights a significant gap between policy recommendations and the practical realities educators face in daily teaching contexts.

To enhance methodological rigor, participants' demographic information was collected to understand contextual variation. P-12 educators ranged from early-career teachers to veterans with over 20 years of experience, across various subject areas and districts. Higher education faculty represented humanities, social sciences, and STEM. Pre-service teachers were junior-year teacher candidates.

The focus groups were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol, including questions such as: "What excites or concerns you about AI in your classroom?" and "What ethical issues, if any, have you encountered or anticipated in using AI tools?" Data were analyzed using NVivo, employing inductive coding. Two researchers independently coded transcripts and met to discuss discrepancies, achieving a 90% agreement rate, thereby ensuring inter-coder reliability.

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods design to examine the ethical challenges surrounding AI integration in education. First, a systematic literature review was conducted, searching databases including ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science for publications between 2019 and 2025. Keywords used in the search included "AI ethics," "artificial intelligence education," "algorithmic bias," "privacy," "higher education," and "P-12 education." The final analysis incorporated 56 peer-reviewed studies that directly addressed ethical issues in educational contexts. Additionally, four focus groups were held, involving P-12 teachers (n=18), higher education faculty (n=7), pre-service teachers (n=36), and educational administrators (n=4). Semi-structured interviews explored participants' perceptions of AI's benefits, ethical concerns, and their professional development needs related to AI. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) [15] methodology.

Findings

Enthusiasm for AI's Potential

Across all groups, participants expressed enthusiasm about AI's potential benefits in educational settings. Higher education faculty noted how AI tools could save significant time on tasks like grading essays, allowing more time for creative teaching activities. Similarly, P-12 teachers described how their students found AI-powered learning applications engaging and tailored to individual learning needs. These perceptions are consistent with recent literature highlighting AI's promise in enhancing learning engagement and instructional efficiency [2].

Deep Ethical Concerns

Despite recognizing AI's potential, educators voiced considerable concerns. Faculty expressed anxiety about how AI systems might unfairly categorize students as "at-risk," revealing underlying algorithmic biases. P-12 teachers worried about the extensive collection of student data, particularly when

parents might be unaware of how such data is used or stored. Higher education faculty raised questions about maintaining academic integrity, expressing uncertainty about how to detect AI-generated student work given current institutional policies. These concerns echo warnings in recent scholarship about the ethical pitfalls of adopting AI in educational contexts without sufficient safeguards [12,8].

Lack of Training and Guidance

A prominent theme emerging from the focus groups was educators' lack of training and guidance on the ethical implications of AI. P-12 teachers reported being encouraged to adopt innovative technologies but received little information about legal or ethical limitations. Pre-service teachers similarly admitted feeling unsure about how to integrate AI into their future classrooms in ethically responsible ways. This widespread gap reflects ongoing challenges in teacher preparation programs and professional development efforts, as documented in recent studies [6].

This research contributes to existing literature by offering an educator-informed ethical integration model rooted in real-world classroom practice. Our findings extend prior work [6,9] by proposing actionable strategies educators can use to assess tools, minimize risks, and uphold student rights.

Practically, our framework offers teacher education programs and professional development facilitators a structured approach to train future educators in AI ethics. Policymakers may also adapt our findings to shape ethical guidelines and district-level protocols that respond to teachers' expressed needs.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a profound tension between the optimism surrounding AI and the significant ethical concerns it provokes. While educators across P-12 and higher education settings are eager to leverage the benefits of AI, many feel ill-equipped to navigate its associated risks. Consistent with Williamson et al. (2023) [9], this study underscores the need for professional development that goes beyond technical training to address ethical decision-making. In response to these needs, we propose a preliminary framework for ethical AI adoption. This framework emphasizes transparency, requiring educators to understand and explain how AI tools function. It calls for bias auditing to ensure systems are equitable and data minimization to protect student privacy. An equity lens must guide all AI implementation to avoid deepening educational disparities. Additionally, policies on academic integrity should be updated to account for the realities of AI-generated content [12]. Finally, professional development must incorporate legal considerations and real-world ethical scenarios to prepare educators for responsible AI use [7]. Figure 2 summarizes the proposed framework, outlining six key principles to guide ethical AI integration across educational levels.

Figure 2: Framework for Ethical AI Integration in Education.

Principle	Description
Transparency	Educators must understand and explain how AI functions to students.
Bias Auditing	Schools should vet tools for algorithmic bias using diverse input.
Data Minimization	Collect only essential student data with transparent privacy policies.
Equity Lens	Ensure AI use bridges rather than deepens digital divide.
Policy Alignment	Update academic integrity policies to reflect AI capabilities
Professional Development	Provide ethical and legal training through real-world scenarios

This study’s findings are limited by the small sample size and potential self-selection bias of participants. Additionally, as AI technologies rapidly evolve, the ethical concerns identified here may shift, warranting continuous reevaluation.

Future research should involve longitudinal studies tracking changes in educators’ perceptions, the development of validated ethical training modules for pre-service programs, and international comparative studies to explore how cultural contexts influence ethical concerns around AI in education.

Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence in education offers undeniable promise but also serious ethical risks. This study highlights the pressing need for practical, discipline-specific guidance to help educators integrate AI in ways that are responsible, equitable, and transparent. Educators are not merely users of technology—they are gatekeepers of student trust, privacy, and opportunity. As AI capabilities evolve, so too must the ethical frameworks and professional development that guide its use.

Our findings reveal that while educators are eager to harness AI’s potential, they lack the tools, training, and institutional policies necessary to do so ethically. The framework proposed in this study offers a starting point for embedding ethical decision-making into AI adoption across educational levels. Importantly, this framework was informed not only by theoretical literature but by the lived experiences and concerns of teachers, faculty, and administrators.

To ensure that AI enhances rather than undermines learning, we call on teacher preparation programs, universities, policymakers, and edtech developers to collaborate. Developing ethical literacy must become as central to AI integration as technological proficiency. Only then can we prepare educators—and their students—to navigate the AI era with clarity, confidence, and conscience.

Furthermore, institutions must prioritize cross-disciplinary collaboration to co-develop ethical standards that are both legally sound and pedagogically grounded. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of ethical AI training on educator decision-making, as well as explore how student voices can inform more equitable AI practices in classrooms. Only through such comprehensive efforts can the promise of AI in education be responsibly realized.

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