

# **Bridging the Perception-Practice Gap: Strengthening Teacher Professionalism and Ethics in Addis Ababa's Private Secondary Schools**

Genet Abebe Gebre, Friezer Berhanu, Eyasu Berento, Mekonnen Abebe

Kotebe University of Education

## **Executive Summary**

This policy brief is based on the research entitled “*Teacher Professionalism, Ethical Conduct and Quality of Education in Private Secondary Schools in Addis Ababa: An Exploratory Research*”. The research was conducted using a mixed method in order to explore teacher professionalism, ethical code of conduct, continuous professional development and perceived quality of education in private secondary schools in Addis Ababa in the 2024-2025 academic year. Despite the fact that professionalism and ethical behavior of teachers play an important role in providing quality education, there is hardly any study that focuses on the perceptions of stakeholders regarding teacher professionalism in Ethiopia's increasing private secondary schools. In this regard, the study explored the aspects of teacher professionalism, ethical behavior, and quality of education in private secondary schools across all eleven sub-cities in Addis Ababa. Data was gathered from 260 teachers, 21 principals, and educational supervisors. While teachers and principals report highly positive perception regarding their professionalism, adherence to ethical principles, and quality of education, supervisory findings reveal several crucial drawbacks such as insufficient pedagogical knowledge of teachers who are not education graduates, traditional teaching practices, high turnover due to contractual nature, and profit-driven approaches which refute professionalism.

## **1. Introduction**

The notion of professionalism is commonly described as a composite of expertise and high standards of professional ethics, though there is no universally accepted definition. Professionalism is more than technical proficiency; it is a collection of qualities such as responsibility, accountability, service, respect, among others (Cruess, Cruess, & Steinert, 2016). This study applies Shulman's Pedagogical Knowledge Model, Freidson's Models of Professionalism, and Sobota's Educational Ethics Theories to analyze professionalism in the context of private secondary schools in Addis Ababa. The idea of professionalism involves not

## RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

only expertise but also moral commitment, reflective judgment, professional development and educational (Sockett, 1993 & Carr, 2003). Freidson (2001) posits that professional logic (autonomy, expert knowledge, codes of ethics) is fundamentally different from the logics of the market and bureaucracy. In market-influenced private schools, external pressures can fragment professional identities through prioritizing short-term exam gains (Beaton, 2010).

Ethical dilemmas and uneven professional standards in private schools are linked to job insecurity, market pressures, and weak enforcement of codes, reflecting broader patterns in Ethiopian education research (Ayenalem et al., 2022; Ayenalem et al., 2023; Okafor, 2024). Private school expansion resulted in increasing access but a growing conflict between market needs and professional values, sometimes resulting in *performative professionalism*.

This policy brief is based on the research entitled “*Teacher Professionalism, Ethical Conduct and Quality of Education in Private Secondary Schools in Addis Ababa: An Exploratory Research*”. The research was conducted using a mixed method in order to explore teacher professionalism, ethical code of conduct, continuous professional development and perceived quality of education in private secondary schools in Addis Ababa in the 2024-2025 academic year. Data gathered from 260 teachers and 21 principals across all 11 sub-cities of Addis Ababa, supplemented by structured supervisor interviews, in 2024/25 academic year. Although teachers and principals report highly positive perception regarding their professionalism, adherence to ethical principles, and quality of education, supervisory findings reveal several crucial drawbacks such as insufficient pedagogical knowledge of teachers who are not education graduates, traditional teaching practices, high turnover due to contractual nature, and profit-driven approaches which refute professionalism.

*260 teachers and 21 principals surveyed across all 11 sub-cities of Addis Ababa, supplemented by structured supervisor interviews — 2024/25 academic year.*

The data gathered from supervisors reveals the deep pedagogical gap among teachers in private secondary schools, understanding professionalism only as technicalities and teachers lacking adequate professional development trainings. Justifiability of policy interventions is apparent due to these diverse perception-practice gaps between the internal stakeholders and external observers. These divergences of professional values, lack of professionalism, in effective implementation of Continuous Professional Development program (CPD) activities are major issues to be addressed at policy and practical levels of private secondary school education in Addis Ababa, which negatively affect the overall quality of education. Even though the private secondary schools stand to have great success in students' academic performance in matriculation examinations, these successes should not compromise the importance of professionalism, ethical codes of conduct and gaps in teachers' professional development.

Although professionalism and ethical behavior of teachers play an important role in providing quality education, there is hardly any study that focuses on the perceptions of stakeholders regarding teacher professionalism in Ethiopia's increasing private secondary schools. In this regard, the study explored the aspects of teacher professionalism, ethical behavior, and quality of education in private secondary schools across all eleven sub-cities in Addis Ababa.

## **2. Policy Problem**

Private secondary schools are rapidly expanding in Ethiopia. However, this growth has also raised a major concern about educational quality and teacher professional standards. Although Ethiopia has established national teacher professional standards, no systematic policy framework exists to ensure that private-school teachers meet these standards or that ethical conduct is consistently enforced.

The lack of supervisory control for teacher professionalism, ethical conduct, and educational quality in private secondary schools creates a regulatory gap. In spite of the purpose of the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP VI: 2020/21–2024/25) which targets teacher licensing and development, outcomes remain uneven due to capacity constraints and the

exclusion of private schools from systematic monitoring. The key policy problem is the divergence between internal stakeholder perceptions of professionalism, ethical conduct and quality, and external observations of structural and pedagogical deficits.

### **3. Opportunities for Policy Influence**

The eight opportunities presented below, organized into two categories, are derived from teacher self-reports and principal ratings. These opportunities reflect both internal consensus among school stakeholders and existing assets already present within private schools that can be strategically leveraged for educational reform.

#### **3.1. Teacher-Centered Capacities**

Teacher-centered capacities; include opportunities rooted in teachers' own skills, knowledge, and relationships; the human capacities that form the foundation for pedagogical reform. *Strong subject matter knowledge* represents teachers' high confidence and competence in their content areas, providing the essential foundation upon which *pedagogical skills* can be built. *Structured lesson planning* demonstrates that teachers consistently prepare well-crafted lesson plans aligned with curriculum standards, offering planning discipline that can be leveraged for student-centered methods. Trusting teacher-student relationships reflect teachers' report of building strong, trusting connections with students, providing relational assets that can be preserved while pedagogical approaches are reformed. *Multi-stakeholder willingness to collaborate* shows that teachers, principals, and supervisors all express interest in improvement, creating the consensus necessary to drive reform adoption.

#### **3.2. System-Level Enablers**

System-level enablers opportunities rooted in institutional structures, resources and demonstrated outcomes; the structural conditions that create the environment for quality improvement. *National teacher professional standards* exist because Ethiopia has already established national standards and the ESDPs (VI) frameworks targeting teacher licensing, requiring only enforcement and adaptation to private schools. *Small class sizes* reflect the structural advantage that private schools maintain smaller student-to-teacher ratios, enabling individualized support and intensive mentoring if paired with appropriate training. *Better matriculation outcomes*

demonstrate that private schools achieve superior examination results compared to government schools, showing capacity for academic success that can be channeled toward deeper quality. Technology integration underway indicates that principals report active use of technology and ICT infrastructure, providing a platform for digital pedagogy training and remote monitoring. Thus, these four opportunities represent what systems and schools provide as foundational conditions for reform

#### **4. Challenges Requiring Policy Intervention**

The thirteen challenges presented below are derived from educational supervisors' interview observations and represent external, objective assessments of actual teaching practice in private schools. These challenges constitute the primary evidence base for policy intervention, as they document critical gaps between stated standards and realized practice.

##### **4.1. Pedagogical and Professional Deficits**

*Non-education graduates lack pedagogical training* reflects that many private school teachers graduated from fields outside education and have received no pedagogical preparation, creating significant gaps in teaching-learning processes, classroom management and exam preparation. *Persistent teacher-centered methods* demonstrates that most teachers rely on traditional methods, leading to student boredom, disengagement and weakened classroom management. *Low confidence in teaching complex topics* indicates that teachers express limited confidence when addressing difficult content, revealing gaps in subject-specific pedagogical knowledge that affect student mastery. These three challenges represent foundational challenges in teachers' professional preparation and instructional practices that directly compromise learning quality.

##### **4.2. Structural Instability and Professional Neglect**

*High teacher turnover from unstable contracts* occurs because teachers are hired on one-year renewable contracts rather than permanent employment, resulting in frequent attrition that hinders long-term professional development and student learning continuity. *No structured professional development* shows that professional growth is left to individual initiative or market forces, resulting in no systematic or mandated professional development for the majority of

teachers. These two challenges expose the absence of supportive system conditions that fail to sustain teachers' long-term growth and stability in the profession.

### **4.3. Accountability Failures and Student Vulnerability**

Serious misconduct documented includes cases of sexual assault, rape, prosecution of teachers, and unfair punishment of students, indicating that existing accountability mechanisms are entirely insufficient. *Performative ethics tied to commercial image* shows that ethical maintenance is tied to commercial competitiveness and institutional image; visible compliance with dress codes and punctuality; rather than genuine moral commitment or student welfare. *Weak protection of student information* indicates that confidentiality is not systematically enforced as a professional obligation, placing student privacy at risk without consistent protection practices. *No centralized misconduct database* shows that no mechanism exists to track teachers who commit serious violations, allowing offenders to move between private schools without disclosure or consequence. These four challenges expose the breakdown of moral accountability, ethical practice, and protections for student safety and privacy.

### **4.4. Oversight Breakdown and Assessment Distortion**

*Schools conceal deficiencies during inspections* reveals that current predictable inspection protocols are gamed through secret subject-hour adjustments and concealing resource deficiencies, rendering formal oversight ineffective. *Exam outcomes reflect tutoring, not deep learning* exposes that high exam performance often reflects intensive tutoring, extra sessions, and strict discipline rather than deep instructional quality or critical thinking development. *Reluctance to report true student progress* demonstrates that commercial pressures to produce positive outcomes compromise assessment integrity, as teachers feel pressure to overstate achievement rather than report honestly. These three challenges reveal the collapse of systems meant to verify, monitor, and accurately represent educational quality and student learning.

## **5. Conclusion**

The central finding of this research paper involves the systematic mismatch between internal and external assessment of professionalism. In particular, despite the high levels of professionalism and ethics claimed by the teachers themselves and their respective principals, the results of external monitoring indicate significant problems related to poor quality of pedagogy, inadequate

teaching practices, and failure to consistently apply ethics. This inconsistency can be explained through the concept of *performative professionalism*. The discussed perception practice gap is especially dangerous for educational quality because it implies that existing accountability systems are not adequate enough to properly reflect the true quality of educational services.

Hence, without special policy changes including external validation, professional development programs, and increased regulation, the problem will continue to persist. Thus, the policy suggestions included in this brief have been developed taking into account both opportunities and shortcomings of each measure. With rapid growth in private education at the secondary level in Ethiopia, a concerted and coordinated effort should be made by relevant governmental bodies, private schools, and other stakeholders such as development organizations. Providing education with a focus on both the form and content of teaching should become a top priority to ensure better learning results.

## **6. Policy Recommendations**

Based on the perception-practice gaps identified, the following policy recommendations are proposed. Each recommendation includes a description of the policy action, responsible bodies, implementation timeframe, expected outcomes, and an analysis of pros and cons to inform evidence-based decision-making.

Policy Recommendation I: Mandate Pedagogical Certification for Non-Education Graduates

This policy action requires all non-education or applied graduate teachers to complete pedagogical certification; establish audited professional development offices within schools; and tie school licensing renewal to documented training evidence. This option targets the most direct gap identified by supervisors, non-education graduates with no pedagogical preparation and the low confidence teachers report when addressing complex content. It is designed to build on, not replace, teachers' existing strong subject-matter knowledge, adding the pedagogical layer that is currently missing rather than retraining from zero. The principal trade-offs are financial. Certification requires real investment from schools and government, may meet resistance from school owners concerned about cost, and is constrained in the near term by a limited supply of qualified certified trainers, which could slow rollout if not phased deliberately. Ministry of Education (MOE, Addis Ababa Education Bureau and Private School Owners' Association are major stakeholders for the success of this policy.

#### Policy Recommendation II: Strengthen Ethical Accountability Mechanisms

It needs to establish anonymous ethics-reporting channels for teachers, students, and parents; conduct bi-annual ethics audits; create a centralized misconduct database; and mandate annual ethics training. This option responds directly to the documented cases of serious misconduct and the absence of any centralized mechanism to track offenders, the single clearest accountability gap in the evidence. A shared database would prevent known offenders from moving silently between schools, while anonymous reporting and audits begin to shift ethical conduct from a commercially-motivated, performative compliance exercise toward substantive, monitored practice. The principal trade-offs are institutional capacity; sustaining a functioning database and a regular audit cycle requires resources, together with likely resistance from administrators wary of exposure, and the need for credible privacy safeguards if the database is to be trusted and used. MoE Ethics Committee, Addis Ababa Education Bureau, Private School Owners' Association are lead stakeholders

#### Policy Recommendation III: Replace Teacher-Centered Pedagogy with Student-Centered Methods

This mandates annual classroom observation cycles led by trained supervisors; establish peer mentoring networks; and require student-centered pedagogy training for every teacher. This option targets the persistence of “chalk-and-talk” instruction documented by supervisors, and is designed to redirect, rather than discard; the structured lesson-planning discipline teachers already demonstrate, channeling it toward more participatory methods. It is likely to improve student engagement and reduce the classroom-management problems supervisors associate with disengaged, teacher-centered classrooms. The main trade-offs are time: observation cycles and mentoring are time-intensive for both teachers and supervisors, the model requires a cadre of trained pedagogical observers that does not yet fully exist, and some resistance should be expected from educators accustomed to traditional methods. Addis Ababa Education Bureau, Sub-City Education Offices and Private School Principals are major stakeholders.

**Policy Recommendation IV: Establish Independent Quality Monitoring**

Revise inspection frameworks to weight process indicators equally with outcome indicators; conduct unannounced inspections; require annual transparency reports; and create a public school-performance dashboard. This option directly counters the gaming of predictable inspection cycles and the pattern of exam results reflecting intensive tutoring rather than deep instructional quality. It also leverages the technology integration principals already report to support dashboard-style public reporting. The trade-offs are real: the approach is resource-intensive, requires sustained inspector training, and is likely to meet initial resistance from schools accustomed to predictable, lower-stakes inspection cycles. The stakeholders are MoE Quality Assurance Directorate and Addis Ababa Education Bureau.

---



---

**Policy Recommendation V: Create a Multi-Stakeholder Regulatory Council**


---

Establish a Council comprising Ministry representatives, supervisors, school owners, teacher associations and parent representatives, meeting quarterly to review compliance and recommend sanctions. The council provides the coordinating structure the other four options need in order to function as a coherent reform rather than four fragmented initiatives, and it builds directly on the multi-stakeholder willingness to collaborate those teachers, principals, and supervisors already independently expressed. Its principal trade-offs are coordination challenges and the risk of bureaucratic delay across a large group of stakeholders, and it depends on sustained political commitment to remain functional once the initial momentum of launch has passed.

### References

- Ayenalem, K. A., Abate, S. G., Ayalew, H. R., & Mengesha, J. A. (2022). Secondary school teachers code of ethics in Ethiopia: implications for policy and practice. *Heliyon*, 8(10).
- Ayenalem, K. A., Gone, M. A., Yohannes, M. E., & Lakew, K. A. (2023). Causes of teachers' professional misconduct in Ethiopian secondary schools: Implications for policy and practice. *Cogent Education*, 10(1), 2188754.
- Beaton, J. (2010). *Professionalism and the market: Teachers' experiences of performativity in Scottish schools*. University of Aberdeen Press.
- Creasy, K. L. (2015). Defining professionalism in teacher education programs. *Journal of Education & Social Policy*, 2(2), 23–30.
- Cruess, R. L., Cruess, S. R., & Steinert, Y. (2016). Amending Miller's pyramid to include professional identity formation. *Academic Medicine*, 91(2), 180-185.
- Freidson, E. (2001). *Professionalism: The third logic*. University of Chicago Press.
- Okafor, E. (2024). Professional ethics and teacher accountability in African private schools: Emerging challenges. *African Educational Research Journal*, 12(3), 215–230.
- Sockett, H. (1993). *The moral base for teacher professionalism*. Teachers College Press.
- Tadesse, T., & Melese, W. (2016). The prevailing practices and challenges of curriculum reform in Ethiopian higher education: Views and responses from within. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)*, 41(10), 87-106.
- World Bank. (2018). *Ethiopia: Education sector analysis: An update*. World Bank Publications.