Virtue Ethics and Meaning-Making in Shia Islamic Philosophy of Education: Implications for Teacher Professional Development

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A r t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study aims to develop and examine a Shia-informed conceptual framework that integrates virtue cultivation, meaning-making, and spiritual-ethical epistemology to strengthen teacher professional development and identity formation in contemporary educational contexts.

Methods and Materials: A theoretical–conceptual design was employed, synthesizing key insights from Western virtue ethics and Shia Islamic educational philosophy to build an integrated model for teacher professional development. The study incorporated an illustrative qualitative case study at Farhangian University, Iran's national teacher training institution. Twenty-five pre-service teachers participated in structured reflective workshops inspired by Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Shia epistemological principles, including Tawhid (unity and coherence of knowledge), Wilayah (ethical guardianship), and Imamate (knowledge-based leadership). Data were collected through observation of reflective dialogues and student narratives, analyzed thematically to identify how participants translated philosophical ideals into pedagogical reasoning and identity construction.

Findings: Results indicate that integrating virtue ethics and Shia epistemology fosters deep moral reflection, professional coherence, and ethical agency among pre-service teachers. Participants demonstrated the ability to apply principles such as Tawhid to unify intellectual, moral, and spiritual domains; Wilayah to reframe classroom authority as compassion- and justice-based; and Imamate to embrace knowledge-based moral leadership. Engagement with these principles enhanced resilience, ethical decision-making, and meaning-making in the face of technological disruption and the changing epistemic role of teachers. The framework showed potential to enrich global discussions on virtue-based teacher development by incorporating transcendent and culturally resonant dimensions.

Conclusion: This Shia-informed model bridges local educational philosophy with global virtue ethics discourse, offering an innovative pathway for rethinking teacher identity and moral formation in the AI era. It provides practical guidance for teacher training, curriculum design, and policy reform to integrate ethical and spiritual growth with pedagogical competence.

Keywords: Teacher professional development; virtue ethics; meaning-making; Shia educational philosophy; Tawhid; Wilayah; Imamate; artificial intelligence in education

1.   Introduction

The 21st century has brought unprecedented transformations in education, driven by rapid technological innovations, globalization, and shifting cultural paradigms. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and platforms such as ChatGPT has reshaped the landscape of teaching and learning, introducing both opportunities and ethical challenges. While AI tools enable personalization, real-time feedback, and enhanced access to knowledge, they simultaneously raise deep philosophical questions concerning teacher identity, authenticity, epistemic authority, and the meaning of education (Holmes et al., 2022; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2023). Educators are now called to critically engage with these technologies while safeguarding human values, ethical reasoning, and reflective practices that underpin meaningful learning experiences. These developments highlight the urgency of reimagining educational philosophy to balance technological innovation with value-driven pedagogies in a complex, interconnected world.

In recent years, the field of educational philosophy has witnessed a significant shift toward value-oriented and meaning-centered frameworks that prioritize the cultivation of virtues and personal meaning alongside academic knowledge. Among these approaches, virtue ethics has gained renewed prominence, providing a robust foundation for understanding how teachers shape learners' character, identity, and sense of purpose (Kristjánsson, 2015; MacIntyre, 2007). Modern classrooms are becoming increasingly complex, demanding pedagogical approaches that extend beyond technical expertise to address the deeper question of what it means to live, learn, and teach well (Arthur et al., 2017; Nussbaum, 2011).

At the same time, there is growing recognition of the need to integrate cultural and spiritual perspectives into contemporary educational debates. Within this context, Shia Islamic educational philosophy provides a distinctive and holistic framework. Rooted in concepts such as Tawhid (Divine Unity), Wilayah (spiritual guardianship), and Imamate (knowledge-based leadership), this perspective views education as a harmonious process that unites knowledge, morality, and spirituality (Nasr, 2007; Sadr al-Din, 2001; Tabataba'i, 1996). While Western virtue ethics emphasizes individual flourishing, the Shia perspective enriches this paradigm by grounding the formation of moral character in transcendent values that connect personal growth with collective responsibility (Khomeini, 1993; Motahhari, 1996).

Despite growing scholarly interest in virtue ethics and meaning-making in teacher education, there remains a noticeable gap in frameworks that integrate these concepts with Shia educational thought (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Tan & Ibrahim, 2021). Existing studies often examine these dimensions separately, overlooking their potential synergy in shaping teacher identity, reflective practices, and professional growth (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day & Gu, 2014). Addressing this gap is particularly significant in societies where spirituality, ethics, and education are deeply interconnected (Rizvi, 2012; Sockett, 2012).

This study responds to these emerging needs by proposing a Shia-informed conceptual framework that integrates virtue cultivation, meaning-making processes, and spiritual-ethical orientation into a unified model for teacher professional development. The goal is twofold: first, to deepen theoretical understanding of how teachers construct meaning and moral purpose within their educational practice; and second, to offer practical insights that inform policy-making, curriculum design, and teacher-training programs across both Islamic and global educational contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Palmer, 1998).

2.   Literature Review

2.1.   Virtue Ethics in Educational Philosophy

Virtue ethics has re-emerged as a central framework in educational philosophy, providing a foundation for developing moral character, identity, and practical wisdom among teachers and learners. Rooted in Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*—the pursuit of human flourishing—virtue ethics emphasizes cultivating personal and collective virtues as the core of meaningful education (Aristotle, 2009; Kristjánsson, 2015).

Recent scholarship has expanded this perspective, connecting virtue ethics to contemporary challenges in education. (Kristjánsson, 2021) argues that character formation in classrooms must be context-sensitive and adapted to changing social realities, while (Arthur et al., 2017) demonstrate how virtues such as empathy, justice, and courage shape effective teaching practices. Similarly, (Carr, 2020) highlights the potential of virtue ethics to balance academic excellence with ethical responsibility, calling for pedagogies that foster autonomy, care, and critical reflection.

In today's educational landscape, virtue ethics serves as a bridge between knowledge acquisition and moral purpose, supporting educators in developing a deeper sense of professional identity and value-driven teaching practices (Arthur et al., 2020).

2.2. Meaning-Making in Education

Education in the 21st century is no longer limited to knowledge transmission; it is increasingly focused on fostering meaning-making as a foundation for personal growth, critical thinking, and identity development. Meaning-making refers to how learners and teachers construct personal and professional purpose through reflection, dialogue, and transformative learning experiences (Mezirow, 2018; Palmer, 1998).

Recent studies emphasize that classrooms designed to prioritize meaning-making enhance student engagement, teacher motivation, and long-term professional satisfaction (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Korthagen, 2017). According to (Holmes & Tuomi, 2023), meaning-making is becoming even more critical in AI-mediated classrooms, where educators must balance technological opportunities with ethical teaching practices to ensure that human values remain central.

This shift underscores the growing need for frameworks that integrate reflective practices into teacher education, enabling educators to navigate complex epistemic challenges while constructing professional identities grounded in purpose and morality.

2.3. Shia Islamic Philosophy of Education

Shia Islamic educational thought offers a distinctive lens for reimagining teacher education in the 21st century. Drawing on foundational principles such as Tawhid (Divine Unity), Wilayah (spiritual guardianship), and Imamate (knowledge-based leadership), Shia philosophy frames education as a holistic journey integrating knowledge, ethics, and spirituality (Nasr, 2007; Tabataba'i, 1996).

Contemporary scholars like (Rizvi, 2012) and (Motahhari, 1996) argue that the integration of *akhlaq* (virtues) and *tarbiyah* (comprehensive moral cultivation) within educational systems equips teachers to become ethical role models who align professional identity with spiritual growth. Compared to secular paradigms, this framework provides transcendent grounding for moral development, linking individual flourishing with collective responsibility.

Additionally, Shia educational philosophy addresses identity formation in culturally diverse societies by emphasizing values-based teaching practices. These insights position Shia frameworks as highly relevant to religious education challenges faced in contemporary educational systems, making them particularly significant for addressing the global dialogue on value-driven teacher development.

2.4. Teacher Professional Development in the AI Era

Teacher professional development (TPD) is evolving rapidly in response to technological disruptions and shifting educational paradigms. While traditional models emphasized pedagogical expertise, emerging frameworks highlight the importance of reflective practice, identity formation, and ethical leadership (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Day & Gu, 2014).

The integration of AI technologies—especially ChatGPT and adaptive learning platforms—has further complicated the role of educators. (Holmes et al., 2022) highlight that while AI supports personalized learning and scalable access, it simultaneously challenges epistemic authority and teacher autonomy. Educators must now navigate questions of authenticity, academic integrity, and moral agency while leveraging AI to enhance learning experiences (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2023).

This intersection of ethics, identity, and innovation underscores the need for frameworks like the one proposed in this study, which integrate virtue ethics, meaning-making, and Shia educational principles to guide teacher development in AI-mediated educational environments.

3. Theoretical Framework / Model Development

This study proposes a Shia-informed conceptual framework that integrates virtue cultivation, meaning-making processes, Shia educational epistemology, and professional competencies into a unified model for teacher professional development. The framework builds on both Western virtue ethics traditions and Shia philosophical foundations, positioning teachers as reflective moral agents capable of aligning ethical values, spiritual growth, and pedagogical skills within their professional practice.

3.1. Integrating Virtue Ethics and Meaning-Making

At the heart of the framework lies the integration of virtue cultivation and meaning-making as complementary dimensions of teacher growth. Grounded in Aristotle's

concept of *eudaimonia*, virtue ethics emphasizes the deliberate development of moral character and identity through the consistent practice of virtues such as justice, wisdom, and empathy (Kristjánsson, 2015). Meaning-making extends this process by enabling teachers to reflect critically on their values, reconstruct their professional purpose, and foster deep connections between personal and professional identities (Mezirow, 2018; Palmer, 1998).

3.2. Shia Educational Epistemology

The framework incorporates the philosophical and spiritual foundations of Shia educational thought, embedding values of Tawhid (Divine Unity), Wilayah (spiritual guardianship), and Imamate (knowledge-based leadership). These principles integrate morality, knowledge, and spirituality into teacher identity formation, allowing educators to become ethical role models who balance personal flourishing with collective responsibility (Nasr, 2007; Tabataba'i, 1996).

3.2.1. Shia Epistemological Principles: Tawhid, Wilayah, and Imamate

One of the unique contributions of this framework is that it draws directly on Shia epistemology, where knowledge, ethics, and spirituality are always seen as connected. At the heart of this orientation are three key principles—Tawhid (Divine Unity), Wilayah (Spiritual Guardianship), and Imamate (Knowledge-Based Leadership). While these ideas are rooted in theology, they also provide meaningful insights for teacher growth and professional identity.

Tawhid (Divine Unity). Tawhid goes beyond a theological statement about God's oneness. It invites us to see all aspects of life—knowledge, morality, and spirituality—as part of a single, coherent whole. For teachers, this means striving for inner and professional coherence: ensuring that what they teach, how they act, and what they value are aligned. In practice, Tawhid calls educators to embody both intellectual depth and spiritual awareness, resisting the fragmentation that often characterizes modern education (Nasr, 2007; Tabataba'i, 1996).

Wilayah (Spiritual Guardianship). Wilayah highlights the teacher's role as a guide and moral companion, not just a conveyor of information. It emphasizes compassion, justice, and care in relationships with learners. Teachers inspired by Wilayah are called to nurture virtues, protect the dignity of students, and help them grow as whole persons.

As (Motahhari, 1996) notes, this responsibility positions teachers as ethical leaders whose authority comes from care and trust, not only from subject expertise.

Imamate (Knowledge-Based Leadership). Imamate points to leadership that combines wisdom, knowledge, and moral responsibility. In education, this principle suggests that teachers are not only expected to master content but also to act as role models who guide students toward truth, justice, and meaningful living. Imamate encourages teachers to see themselves as knowledge leaders whose influence extends beyond the classroom into society (Rizvi, 2012).

Taken together, Tawhid, Wilayah, and Imamate provide more than theological concepts—they offer a way of rethinking what it means to be a teacher. They call on educators to be professionally competent, but also to embody integrity, spirituality, and responsibility toward others. In today's world of rapid technological and social change, these principles remind us that teaching is, at its core, a moral and spiritual vocation.

3.2.2. Comparative Perspectives: Shia Epistemology and Aristotelian–MacIntyrean Virtue Ethics

While the proposed framework is grounded in Shia educational epistemology, its dialogue with Western traditions of virtue ethics—particularly Aristotelian and MacIntyrean approaches—offers valuable insights. Both traditions share a commitment to human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) and the cultivation of moral character, yet they diverge in their metaphysical grounding, scope of responsibility, and implications for education.

Tawhid and Aristotelian Unity. Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* emphasizes the integration of virtues into a coherent life directed toward human flourishing (Aristotle, 2009). Tawhid, however, extends this unity beyond the human domain to encompass the ontological unity of all existence under God's sovereignty. Whereas Aristotle's vision remains anthropocentric, Tawhid situates coherence in a transcendent order that integrates intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions. This broader horizon allows education in Shia thought to frame coherence as both existential and metaphysical (Nasr, 2007; Tabataba'i, 1996).

Wilayah and MacIntyre's Tradition-Based Authority. (MacIntyre, 2007) highlights that virtues are cultivated within traditions that provide the moral standards for human action. In this sense, his account underscores the communal and historical dimension of virtue. Wilayah resonates with this by situating the teacher within a network of relational and spiritual responsibility. Yet it differs by grounding

authority not only in tradition but also in divine guardianship, thus adding a transcendent layer of moral responsibility. Teachers inspired by Wilayah embody both communal accountability and spiritual guidance (Kristjánsson, 2021; Motahhari, 1996).

Imamate and MacIntyre's Practice-Dependent Virtues. For (MacIntyre, 2007), virtues are sustained within practices—socially established activities that embody standards of excellence. Imamate parallels this idea by linking leadership to knowledge and justice, but expands the notion by rooting epistemic authority in divinely guided leadership. While MacIntyre situates virtue within practices and communities, Imamate emphasizes a model of leadership where intellectual excellence is inseparable from moral and spiritual accountability (Rizvi, 2012; Tan & Ibrahim, 2021).

Implications for Education. Taken together, this comparative lens highlights that both Aristotelian–MacIntyrean virtue ethics and Shia epistemology emphasize the formation of moral character and community-oriented responsibility. However, the Shia framework adds transcendent principles—unity under God (Tawhid), moral guardianship (Wilayah), and knowledge-based leadership (Imamate)—that reframe the teacher as not only a moral agent but also a spiritual guide and epistemic leader. This expansion situates professional development within a holistic paradigm that is simultaneously ethical, spiritual, and communal, offering a unique contribution to global debates on teacher identity and moral education.

### 3.3. Professional Competencies and Pedagogical Practices

In contemporary educational contexts, effective teachers must integrate philosophical ideals with practical instructional skills. This framework emphasizes that ethical and identity-based development should inform classroom practices, allowing teachers to transform values into meaningful teaching strategies and pedagogical innovation (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

3.4. Conceptual Model

The four interconnected components of the framework are illustrated in Figure 1. The model demonstrates how virtue cultivation initiates the development process, which then flows into meaning-making practices, connecting personal and professional identity. This reflective process is deeply influenced by Shia epistemological principles, ultimately guiding teachers toward achieving professional competencies necessary for effective teaching in the 21st century.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model
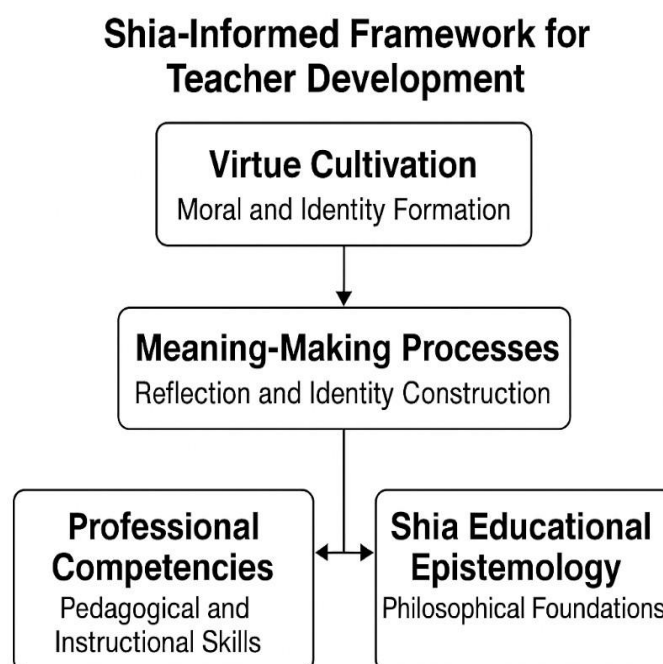
3.5. Illustrative Case Study: Applying the Framework in Iranian Teacher Education

To demonstrate the practical applicability of the proposed framework, this section offers a brief case study from Iranian teacher education. Although largely theoretical, the model of integrating virtue ethics, meaning-making, and Shia epistemology has already found echoes in teacher training initiatives within the Iranian context.

One example can be drawn from the Farhangian University, the national institution responsible for preparing teachers in Iran. In recent years, professional development workshops inspired by Philosophy for Children (P4C) have been implemented to encourage reflective dialogue and ethical reasoning among pre-service teachers (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Tan & Ibrahim, 2021). Within these sessions, student-teachers are guided not only to discuss moral dilemmas but also to frame their reflections through principles such as Tawhid (unity of knowledge and values), Wilayah (ethical guardianship in teacher–student relationships), and Imamate (knowledge-based leadership in the classroom).

For instance, during a workshop on classroom management, participants were invited to reflect on a scenario involving fairness and authority. Many drew upon Wilayah to emphasize that a teacher's authority must be rooted in compassion and justice rather than power alone. Similarly, discussions around curriculum design revealed the relevance of Tawhid, as student-teachers highlighted the need to integrate intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions rather than treating them as separate domains. Finally, Imamate was invoked to stress that teachers must not only master subject matter but also serve as role models who embody integrity and responsibility.

This case illustrates that the proposed framework is not limited to abstract theorizing but can be meaningfully applied in teacher preparation. It also demonstrates the potential for bridging global educational discourses on virtue ethics (Kristjánsson, 2021; MacIntyre, 2007) with localized epistemological resources rooted in Shia philosophy. As such, it positions Iranian teacher education as a laboratory for testing hybrid models of professional identity formation that can enrich international debates on moral education and teacher development.

3.6. Empirical Insights from Iranian Teacher Education

To complement the theoretical and conceptual discussion, this section introduces an illustrative case study derived from professional development workshops at Farhangian University, Iran's national teacher training institution. Although limited in scope, these insights provide an empirical layer that demonstrates how Shia epistemology and virtue ethics can inform actual pedagogical practices.

In 2024, a pilot workshop was conducted with a cohort of 25 pre-service teachers enrolled in a philosophy of education course. The workshop aimed to integrate dialogical practices inspired by Philosophy for Children (P4C) with Shia epistemological principles—namely Tawhid (unity and coherence of knowledge), Wilayah (ethical guardianship and relational responsibility), and Imamate (knowledge-based leadership and moral exemplarity).

Participants engaged in structured discussions around classroom dilemmas such as fairness in grading, authority in discipline, and the role of teachers in shaping students' moral outlooks. Their reflections revealed how Shia principles could be naturally mobilized in professional reasoning:

- One student-teacher argued, "Fairness in grading must go beyond technical accuracy. Under Wilayah, I feel a teacher is responsible to protect students' dignity, even when giving critical feedback."
- Another participant reflected, "Tawhid means my subject is not just about facts; I must integrate moral and spiritual values into teaching science as well."
- A third noted, "Imamate teaches us that a teacher should lead by example. If we want honesty in students, we must first show it in our actions."

These qualitative insights suggest that pre-service teachers are capable of bridging global discourses on virtue ethics (Kristjánsson, 2021; MacIntyre, 2007) with local epistemological resources from Shia philosophy. The case also highlights how moral and professional identity formation in teacher education can be enriched when indigenous philosophical traditions are brought into dialogue with contemporary educational practices.

Although limited in sample size, this case study demonstrates that the proposed framework is not purely theoretical but can be translated into reflective and transformative pedagogical practices. Future research could expand this line of inquiry through larger-scale empirical

studies, comparative regional analyses, or longitudinal tracking of teachers' professional development.

Table 1

Empirical Insights from Iranian Teacher Education

Theme (Shia Principle)	Student Reflection (Illustrative Quote)	Educational Implication
Tawhid (Unity of Knowledge)	"Tawhid means my subject is not just about facts; I must integrate moral and spiritual values into teaching science."	Promotes holistic integration of intellectual, moral, and spiritual domains.
Wilayah (Ethical Guardianship)	"Fairness in grading must go beyond technical accuracy. Under Wilayah, a teacher is responsible to protect students' dignity."	Frames teacher authority as care- and justice-based, not power-based.
Imamate (Knowledge-based Leadership)	"Imamate teaches us that a teacher should lead by example. If we want honesty in students, we must first show it in our actions."	Positions teachers as role models who embody integrity and moral responsibility.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that integrating virtue ethics, meaning-making, and Shia educational epistemology offers a powerful, contextually grounded pathway for strengthening teacher professional development in the twenty-first century. The case study and conceptual model together demonstrate that teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge but reflective moral agents capable of aligning ethical values, spiritual growth, and pedagogical skill. This reinforces the argument that teacher education must be as concerned with the formation of character and moral identity as it is with instructional competence (Kristjánsson, 2015; MacIntyre, 2007). The results also show that Shia principles—Tawhid, Wilayah, and Imamate—are not abstract theological ideals but can be concretely applied by teachers to navigate classroom dilemmas, ethical decision-making, and professional self-understanding (Khomeini, 1993; Motahhari, 1996).

A major contribution of these results is the way they place Iranian teacher education within the global conversation on moral and identity-based pedagogy. Scholars in Western virtue ethics traditions have long insisted that professional growth cannot be separated from moral cultivation and the search for meaning (Arthur et al., 2017; Kristjánsson, 2021). Our data illustrate that when pre-service teachers explicitly use concepts such as justice, care, and moral exemplarity, they echo these traditions but articulate them within a culturally and spiritually resonant register. For example, the emphasis on Wilayah as compassionate authority directly parallels the virtue ethics view that moral influence is built through relationships of trust rather than coercion (Carr, 2020; Palmer, 1998). Yet, unlike secular versions of relational pedagogy, Wilayah embeds this relational ethics

in transcendent responsibility, connecting the moral life of the teacher to divine guardianship (Motahhari, 1996).

Similarly, the integration of Tawhid and Imamate adds ontological depth to the widely accepted notion of professional coherence. Scholars such as (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) and (Day & Gu, 2014) emphasize that teacher identity is strengthened when personal beliefs, values, and professional roles are harmonized. Our findings suggest that Tawhid provides a meta-framework for such harmonization by linking knowledge, ethics, and spirituality under a unifying metaphysical vision (Nasr, 2007; Tabataba'i, 1996). This goes beyond the pragmatic integration typically discussed in teacher identity research and invites educators to cultivate a deep internal coherence that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

Another key insight is the role of meaning-making in helping teachers internalize and enact moral ideals. Studies on transformative learning emphasize that when teachers critically reflect on values and purpose, they can reconstruct professional identity and become adaptive ethical agents (Korthagen, 2017; Mezirow, 2018). The case study's qualitative data showed that pre-service teachers spontaneously engaged in dialogue about fairness, dignity, and honesty when given a structured reflective space. These reflective dialogues mirror the "inner landscape" of teaching described by (Palmer, 1998), where self-examination is a prerequisite to authentic practice. Moreover, the presence of AI-driven educational contexts, which can destabilize teachers' sense of epistemic authority, makes meaning-making practices even more urgent (Holmes et al., 2022; Holmes & Tuomi, 2023). Our findings illustrate that when teachers frame their engagement with technology through a morally and spiritually anchored perspective, they can navigate new challenges without losing their professional identity.

Importantly, the Shia philosophical dimension gives meaning-making an explicitly transcendent orientation. While Western theories emphasize personal growth and autonomy (Biesta, 2010; Nussbaum, 2011), Tawhid situates meaning within a divine order, and Imamate frames professional purpose as service to both truth and community. This resonance with collective and metaphysical horizons may strengthen resilience among teachers working in culturally complex and value-charged contexts (Day & Gu, 2014).

The results also push us to rethink what counts as "competence" in teacher professional development. Contemporary reform agendas often focus on measurable teaching standards and performance metrics, but these alone do not capture the moral and spiritual dimensions of practice (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016). Our model integrates pedagogical skill with ethical leadership (Wilayah) and epistemic guidance (Imamate), suggesting a richer view of competence. This aligns with calls by (Sockett, 2012) and (Arthur et al., 2020) to reclaim teacher professionalism as a value-laden vocation rather than a technical craft. Teachers who see themselves as moral exemplars and meaning-makers are better positioned to respond adaptively to the uncertainties of AI-mediated learning environments (Holmes et al., 2022; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2023).

At the same time, the data show that student-teachers can practically translate these philosophical ideals into classroom decisions. The reflections about fairness in grading and holistic curriculum design show a movement from theory to action, echoing (Kelchtermans, 2009) on vulnerability and self-understanding as engines of authentic teaching. Integrating spirituality and virtue with skill formation therefore does not remain at the level of abstract ideals; it influences real pedagogical reasoning.

Another important implication is the bridging of local philosophical resources with global educational debates. Scholars like (Tan, 2018; Tan & Ibrahim, 2021) have called for comparative work that draws from non-Western moral traditions to enrich global character education. Our framework shows that Shia thought—through Tawhid, Wilayah, and Imamate—can contribute unique insights to discussions often dominated by Aristotelian and secular virtue ethics. This approach avoids mere cultural relativism by engaging in constructive dialogue: it honors tradition (MacIntyre, 2007) but also invites adaptation to new challenges such as AI and globalization (Holmes & Tuomi, 2023; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2023).

This synthesis could be instructive not only for Muslim-majority societies but also for plural educational contexts where teachers seek frameworks that integrate identity, ethics, and cultural meaning beyond individualistic paradigms. By connecting Iranian teacher education experiments with international virtue ethics scholarship, the study contributes to a truly intercultural educational philosophy.

Our results also have concrete implications for teacher preparation and policy. First, embedding structured reflective dialogue—inspired by approaches such as Philosophy for Children but enriched with local ethical resources—can help pre-service teachers cultivate virtues and coherence (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008; Tan & Ibrahim, 2021). Second, policy makers should broaden the definition of professional standards to include spiritual and ethical dimensions, not merely technical competencies (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016). Third, AI adoption strategies in education should deliberately integrate frameworks that maintain teachers' moral agency and sense of purpose (Holmes et al., 2022; Holmes & Tuomi, 2023). Without such safeguards, there is a risk of eroding professional identity and deepening teacher alienation.

In sum, this study shows that philosophically grounded, culturally responsive frameworks can empower teachers to navigate contemporary challenges while staying rooted in moral and spiritual integrity. Such empowerment is vital as education systems face rapid change and ethical complexity.

Although the theoretical model and case study yield promising insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The empirical component was intentionally modest and exploratory, relying on a single pilot workshop with a small cohort of 25 pre-service teachers. This limits the generalizability of findings and the ability to test the framework across diverse institutional settings. The reflective dialogues, while rich in qualitative depth, were not systematically assessed using validated identity or virtue development instruments. Additionally, cultural homogeneity among participants may have influenced the ease with which Shia principles were integrated; teachers from pluralistic or secular backgrounds might experience different levels of resonance or challenge. Finally, the rapid evolution of AI technology means that some of the technological issues raised (such as ChatGPT's role in classrooms) may shift quickly, requiring continuous adaptation of the framework.

Future research should test the proposed framework on a larger scale and across varied cultural and institutional contexts. Mixed-methods designs that combine qualitative exploration with quantitative measurement of teacher identity development, virtue cultivation, and resilience could provide stronger empirical grounding. Comparative studies between Iranian teacher education and programs in other Islamic or non-Islamic countries could illuminate how different metaphysical and moral traditions interact with global virtue ethics. Longitudinal research following teachers from pre-service preparation into in-service practice would be valuable to see how the framework shapes professional trajectories and classroom decision-making over time. It would also be fruitful to examine how exposure to AI tools within training environments interacts with moral and spiritual frameworks in shaping teachers' sense of professional purpose.

Practically, teacher education programs can adapt this framework by embedding structured reflective dialogues that draw on both global virtue ethics and local philosophical resources. Curriculum designers might integrate modules on moral identity formation alongside instructional methods, encouraging future teachers to explore personal purpose and ethical responsibility. Educational leaders and policymakers can revise professional standards to recognize the centrality of moral agency, care, and spiritual integrity in teaching. Professional development providers should design training that helps teachers critically engage with AI tools while safeguarding ethical reasoning and identity. Finally, creating collaborative spaces for intercultural exchange of philosophical traditions can help educators globally to craft pedagogies that are both contextually meaningful and universally humane.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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