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# The ethical dimension in the teaching profession

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## Introduction

Before the Velvet Revolution of 1989, there was no true ethical dimension in the teaching profession in the Czech Republic. The effectiveness of schools in influencing their pupils' and students' character development is determined by many factors: the personality of the teacher or teachers is, undoubtedly, one of the keys. The ethical dimension of school education can be divided into three levels:

- the elementary level, where ethical standards are learned and used in order to allow everyday coexistence with all others;
- the ethical level, arising from the very basis of the pedagogical profession – the responsibility to look the young, and to hand down the legacy of past generations, preparing children and young people for life in society and ensuring optimum and harmonious individual development; and
- the role-model level, in which the ethical behaviour of the teacher is both a model for children to behave in society and a condition for positive educational influence.

These levels are distinct as a theoretical model, but in reality they are intertwined. The ethical dimension is present through all three levels. It can be seen not only as an aim and a means of education, but also as one of the conditions under all the other dimensions of the educational process should function.

This research seeks to draw attention to the ethical aspects of the teaching profession, to find whether and how teachers perceive this aspect of their work, if they put it into practice and how they evaluate it. Our hypothesis is that if ethical considerations are given due respect by schools if teachers are professionally sensitive towards unethical behaviour, then schools will better meet the difficult but unavoidable duty of supporting young people's moral development.

## Research goals

In order to look into the ethical side of the teaching profession, and in the absence of data on which to build presumptions, we concentrated on teachers' own descriptions of the teaching profession. It is widely agreed that the moral education of young people is crucial. This ethical task is the function of teachers and educators. Therefore their opinions and attitudes should indicate how well the educational institutions can accomplish this: we wanted to hear from teachers on their views of the importance of ethical issues, what they considered unethical, and how they evaluate their own personal and institutional influences in the area.

## Method

We devised a questionnaire of ten items, and statistically analysed the findings. We focused on how much significance teachers give to influencing their pupils' moral development, what the process looks like in schools, and how successful they feel to be

in it. We asked respondents to consider a teachers' code of ethics, and to give examples of teachers' unethical behaviour based on their personal experience. The second part of the questionnaire offered a list of 23 situations of unethical behaviour, which respondents ranked according to frequency and seriousness. The final part of the questionnaire was about perceptions of the attention given by their educational institution to the ethical dimension of teaching profession.

We had answers from 220 respondents. All were educators (50 men: 22.7%, 170 women: 77.3 %). This disproportion reflects the numbers of female and male teachers in the Czech Republic.

### **Result analysis**

#### **► How important is it for the teacher to influence the moral development of pupils?**

As we had assumed, almost 92% of respondents thought this important or very important. None thought it unimportant. There was no statistically significant difference between the responses of men and women.

#### **► How successful is our educational system in positively influencing pupils' moral development?**

Most said that it was partially successful (almost 54%), and more than a third were critical (32.7%) or very critical (5.0%) of the system. To summarise, schools should influence pupils' moral development but are not exactly successful in doing this. Women were more supportive of the system than men ( $F=4.42$  na 5% hl.).

#### **► How successful are you in positively influencing your pupils?**

39 % of women and 26 % of men think they succeed in having a positive influence on their pupils ( $F=60.0$  na 5% hl.). Half thought they were partially successful, and 12% felt they were partially or completely unsuccessful. Men were more self-critical than women.

### ***Code of Ethics and the Teaching Profession***

#### **► Should there should be a professional code of ethics for teachers?**

Almost 80% of respondents would welcome such a code, women (81.2%) rather more so than men (70%). There was no statistically significant difference between men and women or between teachers with longer and shorter teaching experience.

#### **► If you agreed, give at least three examples that should be included in the code**

Men: 4 of the 35 respondents (11%) did not give any suggestions.

Women: 24 of 138 respondents (17%) did not give any suggestions.

Analysis of the suggestions gives the following material for the code, ranked by frequency of suggestion:

- a) Rules to prescribe and control relationships – mostly teacher/student relationships, but also teacher/teacher relationships and, to a lesser extent, teacher/parent relationships [57 respondents].

- b) General professional rules and principles covering common issues in the educational process, attitudes towards one's work, general behaviour and keeping to pedagogical rules [43 respondents].
- c) Desirable characteristics for educators, commonly maintaining high moral principles, being tolerant, being able to admit to mistakes, being responsible, making sacrifices, having a sense of fair play, being empathetic [32 respondents].
- d) Both men and women strongly supported codifying correct behaviour towards pupils, including approaching and respecting students as partners and as individuals, respecting pupils' dignity [29 respondents].
- e) Teachers should exercise discretion towards pupils and not spread negative information about pupils [22 respondents].
- f) A substantial group wished to codify teachers' behaviour: to set a personal example (through a dress code, and verbal performance), to display good manners and communicate with pupils, parents and colleagues in an appropriate professional way. Women should be sensitive in their dress: one woman said '...so that the youngsters wouldn't be more interested in the teacher's provocative clothes than in what they are learning'. Personal conduct in public was also mentioned [19 respondents].
- g) Willingness (even duty) to undertake further education or training, in practice, lifelong compulsory education, and subject study [18 respondents].
- h) Men called for an objective and clearly defined disciplinary scale, and for explicit attitudes towards corporal and other punishments [7 men]. Women suggested fairness and transparency in evaluating pupils, unbiased and honest behaviour and teachers not bullying [9 women].
- i) Only women would include disciplinary actions and penalties, and ban corporal punishment and psychological pressures, would exclude alcohol and smoking from school, and guarantee children against sexual abuse [12 people].

Specific suggestions included not taking additional jobs in very commercial posts or immoral work, banning political and religious proselytising, not being racist, not having a Communist past, and creating greater respect for teachers in society.

Analysing this qualitative data is difficult because the groupings above overlap. Several respondents offered the logical suggestion of looking for models from other professions' ethical codes (such as medicine).

► **If you disagree with having a code of ethics, please give reasons for this**

Six men and twelve women opposed the idea of an ethical code: one comment was 'In this profession, moral behaviour should be automatic. Only people with high moral integrity should teach and therefore there is no need for a code'. Others were more sceptical: 'No written code of ethics will help if the teacher repeatedly behaves in a non-ethical way'. This group agreed that a teaching code of ethics would be useless.

What should such a code look like? It is clear that most educators would prefer the code to be a written and mandatory document, defining the rules and principles for all types of relationship in the educational process. The demand for more general rules comes second

to this. The third set of requirements covers desirable qualities for a teacher, followed by child-protective rules (voiced almost only by women).

***On the unethical behaviour of teachers***

► **Which of the following areas most commonly lead to unethical behaviour?**

(Frequency: 1 never; 2 sometimes; 3 often; 4 very often)

Seriousness: 1 not serious; 2 less serious; 3 serious; 4 very serious

The five *most frequently* mentioned situations:

1. just going through the learning material and not really teaching it (or putting it into practice)
2. lack of innovation in one's working practices
3. lack of punctuality
4. refusing further education and training
5. degrading, ridiculing or being ironic to pupils

The five *least frequently* mentioned situations:

1. being unsupportive and unhelpful towards most needy pupils (excluded, minorities, etc.)
2. propagating own political or religious beliefs to pupils
3. misusing pupils for personal needs
4. corporal punishment
5. leading pupils into wrong behaviour

The five *most serious* mentioned situations:

1. sexual abuse of children
2. degrading, ridiculing or being ironic to pupils
3. leading pupils into wrong behaviour
4. intentional developing stress (creating anxiety and fear)
5. effecting punishment

The five *least serious* mentioned situations:

1. lack of innovation in one's working practices
2. false solidarity with colleagues (backing colleagues when challenging them would be right)
3. misusing pupils for personal needs
4. lack of punctuality
5. refusing further education and training

There are statistically significant differences between men and women: women are more critical and they see the situations generally more serious.

***Factor analysis of examples of unethical behaviour, ranked by frequency and seriousness***

(Factor analysis with Varimax rotation, values above |0,30|; items ordered in each factor according to loading.)

**Factor 1** (*low personal moral profile, biased and antisocial individual, very egotistic, with low threshold of self-control and in a post allowing for abuse*)

indiscretion towards pupils' parents

indiscretion towards the pupil (passing information about the pupil to a third person)

sexual abuse

corporal punishment

indiscretion to fellow teachers

misusing pupils for own needs (asking favours, shopping, etc.)

being unsupportive and unhelpful towards most needy pupils (excluded, minorities, etc.)

bad personal example (setting standards and failing to keep them, punishing pupils for not keeping them)

leading pupils into wrong behaviour

false solidarity with colleagues (backing colleagues when challenging them would be right)

**Factor 2** (*lazy and ignorant individual not interested in the job, dealing with problems through aggressive outbursts and aggression substitutes*)

lack of innovation in one's working practices

refusing further education and training

just going through the learning material and not really teaching it (or putting it into practice)

lack of punctuality

intentionally overlooking educational problems

effecting punishment

**Factor 3** (*poor relationship with pupils as individuals, abusing power*)

unpersistent, wilful alteration of rules

degrading, ridiculing or being ironic to pupils

intentional developing stress (creating anxiety and fear)

intentionally unfair evaluation of pupils (favouritism)

**Factor 4** (*arrogance and egotism, antisocial personality, no interest in pupils*)

being unsupportive and unhelpful towards most needy pupils (excluded, minorities, etc.)

propagating own political or religious beliefs to pupils

not supporting talented pupils

***The ethical dimension of the teaching profession in schools and childcare institutions***

▶ **How much attention does your educational institution pay to the ethical dimension of the teaching profession?**

47% of respondents say that their institution is very concerned: women are more confident of this than men (51% to 34%). Almost a fifth of respondents (19%) were critical or very critical.

The reasons why schools are thought to neglect the ethical dimension are the indifference and apathy of school boards, who are without a will to act. Teachers are also hesitant to devote time to this, partly because they have no real interest, and partly because it takes too much time and effort. They sometimes feel their role with their pupils to be more as leader and judge. But the most frequently given reason was lack of time and too many other duties.

▶ **If you are implementing an ethical dimension in your teaching, please state how.**

This question was not answered by 54 respondents, 125 replied. Their responses indicate that there were two views of the term 'ethical dimension of the teaching profession':

a) teacher-centred: dealing with teachers' ethical behaviour

b) student-centred: dealing with pupil or students' ethical behaviour

Both of these could be sub-divided into two further levels:

a) *personal* (activities in terms of their own ethical behaviour and relationship with students)

b) *institutional* (activities at the school level)

Typical statements concerning the personal level included:

Self-education is important. Everybody is an equal partner with me. I try to help other people. Personal example is important and I try not to neglect my own development.

My approach towards pupils is important, as is being objective, fair, and emphatic. I try to evaluate each pupil according to their individual abilities.

Typical statements concerning the institutional level included:

Clear rules and demands from the school authorities that are checked and initiate feedback (such as discussions with colleagues).

Cooperation and coordination with fellow teachers in dealing with crises; regular and open communication between junior and senior members of the staff; stressing a good relationship between teachers and pupils. Continuous development of interpersonal relationships in school.

Most respondents' views are summarised in the statement 'We pay attention to this, but only from time to time and without regularity. Sometimes we discuss situations about ethical risks at school meetings, and sometimes we attend special workshops'.

### **Conclusion**

Our research shows that ethics of the teaching profession are an issue perceived as crucial by teachers: they feel that it is important, and has not been given sufficient attention. This may be why many agree that a professional teaching code is needed. Analysis of their personal experiences of unethical behaviour shows the most frequent examples concern various forms of degrading pupils, from slight bullying to openly aggressive and vulgar abuse.

It is important that our teachers think ethical profession rules are important, and this undoubtedly reflects the wider social context. A major problem is that the school environment should help the ethical development of the younger generation, but the current situation is unsystematic, partial, and an individual-based approach. What is required is a more elaborate and systematic approach, and a professional approach to the development of students' ethical understanding.

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