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# How Teachers and Students Feel and Understand the Ethical Dimension of the Teacher's Profession

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This article continues the issue discussed in 'The Ethical Dimension in the Teaching Profession', which was read at the seventh annual conference of CICE in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in May 2005. (Vacek, Lašek, Doležalová, 2005). The teacher's ethical influence is viewed as crucial in developing civic attitudes in pupils and students. If teachers fail to exercise a positive ethical influence in this area, it will lead to a significantly lesser impact on future adult citizens' values.

As we have already stressed in our earlier article, the ethical dimension of school education can be divided into three levels:

- An elementary level, in which ethical standards are learned and used, necessary to be capable of everyday coexistence with other people, which includes all the participants;
- An ethical level, which stems from the very basis of the pedagogical profession (this includes the responsibility to maintain and pass on the legacy of previous generations to the next generation, preparing children and young people for life in society and ensuring their optimal and harmonious individual development);
- A role-model level, in which the ethical behaviour of the teacher becomes both a model for children of how to behave in society and also one of the conditions for exercising a positive educational influence. (Vacek, Lašek, Doležalová, 2005, p. 225).

This article broadens our information on this subject through an analysis of opinions given by university students in a teacher training course.

## Research goals

We wanted to examine ethical aspects of the teaching profession, and to compare opinions on what is considered ethical and unethical, by practicing teachers and by students still training for the profession. We expected that there would be certain differences between the two groups, because of the lack of practical experience of teaching by the students. We anticipated another source of difference would be the closeness of their own experience as pupils and students. For example, we expected that the student respondents would be, on the whole, more critical and recall more numerous and varied experience of unethical behaviour than would the practicing teachers.

## Method

Respondents´ opinions were collected and compared using our own questionnaire, with a ten-item version for the professional teachers and a slightly adjusted seven-item version

for the students. The differing items mapped opinions about a professional code of ethics for teachers and practicing teachers' own experience of ethics teaching. All the results were statistically processed, and selected results are given below.

**Characteristics OF the respondents**

For the first stage of the research we interrogated 220 teacher respondents. All were educators (50 men - 22.7 %, 170 women - 77.3%).  This ratio in our sample corresponds with the proportions of women and men teaching in the Czech Republic. In this article, this sample will be referred to as Sample A of teachers. Our findings from Sample A have already been presented at the Ljubljana conference. Our new sample consisted of 200 students (44 men – 21%, 156 women – 79%), and this will be referred to as Sample B of student teachers.

**Result analysis**

The information presented in this paper has been selected from a larger analysis, because of limitations in space.

*Part I*

**How important is it that the teacher/educator influences the moral development of their pupils/students?**

**Table 1: Sample A - Teachers**

|  | 1 very important | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 not significant |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 144 | 58 | 18 | 0 | 0 |
| % | 65.4 | 26.4 | 8.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Men | 23 | 19 | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| % | 46.0 | 38.0 | 16.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Women | 121 | 39 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| % | 71.2 | 22.9 | 5.9 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

Average Values: total 1.44; men 1.70; women 1.35.

**Table 2: Sample B – Student Teachers**

|  | 1 very important | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 non-significant |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 91 | 86 | 23 | 0 | 0 |
| % | 45.5 | 43 | 11.5 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Men | 17 | 20 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| % | 40.5 | 47.6 | 11.9 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Women | 74 | 66 | 18 | 0 | 0 |
| % | 46.8 | 41.8 | 11.4 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

Average Values: total 1.66; men 1.71; women 1.64.

The difference between Sample A and Sample B: Teachers = 1.44; Students = 1.66; F = 2.77. Although both groups consider ethical education to be important, there is a

statistically significant difference here, and fewer students than teachers held this opinion. As anticipated, almost 92% of teacher respondents and 88.5% of student teachers think that developing moral behaviour standards is a very important or important part of their job. No respondent said that this was not significant.  However, more women in Sample A ranked this item 'very important' than did men, who showed less commitment (71.2% to 46%). In Sample B, the difference between the men and women is less, though the women respondents still are more numerous (46.8% as opposed to 40.5%). To conclude, the student teachers did not rank influencing ethical development in pupils as high as the practicing teachers, and this item was described 'very important' by 65.4% teachers but only 45.5% students.

**How successful do you think the educational system is in creating a positive influence on pupils´ and students´ moral development?**

Most respondents from both groups though the system were partially or half successful in this (teachers 54%; students 57.5%), and about a third of each group were critical (teachers 32.7%; students 37%) or very critical (teachers 5.0%; students 5.5%). To summarise: respondents agree that it is important educators should influence pupils' moral development, but do not think our schools are successful in this. Both women teachers and student teachers are more in favour of this statement than men.

*Part II*

Personal experiences were investigated in Part II. Respondents were asked to give actual examples of unethical behaviour they have been subjected to or witnessed. Both sample groups were then compared using quantitative and qualitative analyses.

First of all, we must point out that 81 people (36.8 %; 61 women and 20 men) out of 220 Sample A did not mention any personal experience with teacher unethical behaviour. They claim to have never encountered this kind of behaviour.  On the other hand, this might mean that these teacher respondents either felt too emotionally threatened by the issue (because of unpleasant memories or guilt connected with their *own* unethical behaviour) or they were inconsistent in considering the problem.  In Sample B, only 24 respondents (12%) did not give examples, significantly less than in Sample A. Male student teachers left 7 blank answers (15.9%) and female student teachers 17 blanks (10.9%).

The examples of unethical behaviour given in the questionnaires were coded into the following groups, each of which is given with an example or examples.

a)  **Talking pupils down, degrading them, being sarcastic**
    A: teachers:            68
    B: student teachers:   64
    *Examples:*
    'The teacher intentionally mispronounced students´ names, ridiculed us and if we didn't catch up fast enough he'd say he'd taught the same thing to a hen and a donkey and that we could hopefully manage, too.'
    'Grammar school teacher ridiculed our schoolmate because of her clothes.'

**b) Unfair evaluation or marking and bending rules**
A: teachers:　　　　26
B: student teachers:　45
*Example:*
'Grammar school - testing the same pupils in math again and again, always marked 5.' (The worst mark in Czech schools.)

**c) Aggression and corporal punishment**
A: teachers　　　　　25
B: student teachers:　28
*Example:*
'Elementary school teacher (woman) kicked us and repeatedly hit us with a ruler.'

**d) Vulgar behaviour and verbal abuse**
A: teachers:　　　　24
B: student teachers:　25
*Example:*
'Because me and two friends of mine forgot to bring a certain document to school, our teacher called us dullards.'

**e) Setting a bad personal example (alcohol consumption, drunkenness, smoking in front of pupils)**
A: teachers:　　　　22
B: student teachers:　18
*Examples:*
'One of the teachers often came to school intoxicated and the headmistress took no notice of the pupils´ and parents´ complaints. Once he even vomited in the classroom.'
'An elementary school teacher drank alcohol together with his juvenile pupils.'

**a)　Indiscretion towards –**

|  | pupils | colleagues |
|---|---|---|
| A: teachers: | 6 | 14 |
| B: student teachers: | 19 | 3 |

*Example:*
'The teacher disclosed personal information about the pupil and expressed harsh comments about the family's financial situation.'

*Part III*

The final part of this paper compares respondents' opinions on the frequency and seriousness of 23 examples of unethical behaviour. The five items with the highest and the lowest frequency of occurrence and five most serious and least serious items are listed for each group. The items which showed the most significant discrepancy between groups A and B are also listed.

**Frequency of unethical behaviour**

*In which of the following areas or situations do teachers/educators display unethical behaviour most often? Circle the number with regard to how often or how serious it is.*
Frequency: 1 never, 2 sometimes 3 often, 4 very often

**A: Teachers**
**Most Frequent**
1.  Content to simply go through the curriculum, not really teaching it
2.  Lack of innovation in working procedures
3.  Lack of punctuality
4.  Refusing further professional development
5.  Degrading, ridiculing and being sarcastic to pupils
**Least Frequent**
19.  Leading pupils into bad behaviour
20.  Corporal punishment
21.  Using pupils to meet personal needs
22.  Propagating own political or religious beliefs among pupils
23.  Not supporting or helping pupils from deprived backgrounds, minorities, etc

**B – Student teachers**
**Most Frequent**
1.  Content to simply go through the curriculum, not really teaching it
2.  Lack of punctuality
3.  Lack of innovation in working procedures
4.  Deliberate unfair evaluation and favouritism
5.  Unpredictable shifts of mood
**Least Frequent**
19.  Indiscretion towards pupils parents
20.  Using pupils to meet personal needs
21.  Corporal punishment
22.  Leading pupils into bad behaviour
23.  Sexual abuse of children

**Seriousness of unethical behaviour**
*Which of the following areas or situations are the most serious breaches of ethical behaviour?*

**A: Teachers**
**Most Serious**
1.  Sexual abuse of children
2.  Degrading, ridiculing and being sarcastic to pupils
3.  Leading pupils into bad behaviour
4.  Intentional creating stress, anxiety and fear
5.  Punishments carried out in affect
**Least Serious**
19.  Lack of innovation in working procedures
20.  Backing and supporting colleagues in situations where this is undeserved
21.  Using pupils to meet personal needs

22. Lack of punctuality
23. Refusing further professional development

**B: Student teachers**
**Most Serious**
1. Sexual abuse of children
2. Degrading, ridiculing and being sarcastic to pupils
3. Intentional creating stressful, anxiety and fear)
4. Punishments carried out in affect + Corporal punishment
5. Intentional overlooking pupils educational problems

**Least Serious**
19. Lack of punctuality
20. Indiscretions towards fellow teachers
21. Using pupils to meet personal needs
22. Setting a bad personal example
23. Propagating own political or religious beliefs among pupils

In terms of the frequency of different kinds of unethical behaviour, both groups agreed on the first three items. But while student teachers listed 'Deliberate unfair evaluation and favouritism' as fourth most frequent, teachers placed this tenth. The least frequently encountered unethical situations were very similar for both groups, but the student teachers thought that sexual abuse occurs less frequently than did the teachers, while the teachers thought that 'Not supporting or helping pupils from deprived backgrounds, minorities' was least frequent.

Both groups had similar options concerning the seriousness of these issues. The students rated three items as more serious than the teachers: corporal punishment, indiscretion and intentional overlooking pupils' educational problems; while the teachers were more concerned about leading pupils into bad behaviour.

**Statistically significant differences between the teachers and the student teachers**

*Students rated the following as occurring **more** frequently than the teachers:*
> Neglecting talented pupils
> Backing and supporting colleagues in situations where this is undeserved
> Content to simply go through the curriculum, not really teaching it
> Degrading, ridiculing and being sarcastic to pupils
> Deliberate unfair evaluation and favouritism
> Intentional creating stress, anxiety and fear
> Lack of punctuality
> Not supporting or helping pupils from deprived backgrounds, minorities, etc
> Propagating own political or religious beliefs among pupils
> Sexual abuse of children
> Unpredictable shifts of mood

*Students rated the following as being **more** serious than the teachers:*
> Deliberate unfair evaluation and favouritism
> Corporal punishment

Not supporting or helping pupils from deprived backgrounds, minorities, etc

*Teachers rated the following as being **more** serious than the students:*
Setting a bad personal example
Lack of punctuality
Leading pupils into bad behaviour
Indiscretions towards fellow teachers

Students selected many items from the list as occurring more frequently than the teachers.  The students were generally more sensitive to unfair evaluation, corporal punishment and teachers not supporting pupils from deprived backgrounds.  The teachers were more concerned by teachers setting bad examples, lack of loyalty to colleagues and lack of punctuality.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of our results enables us to make the following comparisons between the ethical expectations of teachers and student teachers:
- Students think that teachers behave in unethical ways significantly more frequently than teachers themselves;
- Some teachers tend to avoid noticing - or giving examples of - unethical behaviour examples.
- Students think that intentionally unfair evaluation is much more frequent, and is a more serious issue, than teachers think.
- Students are more sensitive to personally unethical behaviour, while teachers are more concerned about unethical behaviour between members of the teaching profession.
- Unlike the teachers, students do not necessarily think that a teacher setting a bad example is a danger to pupils' moral development.

These findings are very useful for further work, as they signpost future directions and topics in this area. Also teachers in training and teachers in practice could benefit from examining these findings.

Of course, since the respondent groups are Czech, the problems they report reflect the current situation in the Czech Republic, other countries and other school systems may find our research only partially applicable, or only within certain limits. Nevertheless, we believe that our contribution could provide inspiration for our European Union colleagues and thus help education for citizenship and integration in Europe.

**References**

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