THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF A PROFESSIONAL ETHICS OF TEACHING

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Abstract: The author of the paper deals with teachers’ professional ethics and the current theoretical and practical implementation. She stresses the need for an ethics of teaching to be included in the theoretical and practical training of future teachers. She discusses ethics theories by Slovak and other authors and demonstrates the extent to which they are applied in practice. The author considers that an ethics of teaching should be a tool of the professional and moral practice of each teacher. The current situation in the Slovak educational system is rather unfavourable, and there is often a contradiction between the theoretical knowledge and its practical implementation in the everyday work of the teacher.

Key words: professional ethics of the teacher; theory; practice; ethical and moral issues.

Introduction

The difficulty of being a teacher lies in the fact that teachers work in unique situations in the past as well as the present (disregarding time and social or political circumstances) in comparison with other occupations whilst influencing their students through their qualities, actions and behaviour. Teaching is difficult because performing in accordance with prearranged rules (according to the best of one’s beliefs and conscience) is not enough since there are very few situations in the everyday practice of a teacher are similar. Most situations vary in essence. What is accepted on one occasion need not be on another where other individuals are contributing in similar circumstances. There are just a few professions which require our full involvement and where we need to be aware of the ethical and moral consequences that may be brought out by the teacher’s actions and behaviour.

Now, as in the past, high demands are placed on the teaching profession, but we cannot avoid the fact teachers live in a society where the representatives of the political, cultural and intellectual elites follow designated codes and represent a model to those whom they are to lead and represent. There is no point setting maximum moral demands and requirements for teachers, as high ethical and moral criteria do not hold for most members of society. This is especially true if the society is not able to appreciate them. Many people judge and consider the work of teachers. This is understandable because a teacher intervenes in the lives of students, parents and usually other relatives and society as well. The teaching profession

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is different to other professions because anybody can make judgements on it—often those who are not authorized to do so and who disregard the moral qualities of teacher and do not care about the difficulties of performing the job. The character of the teacher is revealed by an ability to “look inside” the student, an ability to put oneself in the mind of the student, in the student’s mental processes in order to solve moral issues and education problems that are almost part of the teacher’s daily work. It is important to have the knowledge to determine why students act in a certain way, what the consequences of such actions and behaviours might be, etc. If we compare teaching with other professions, we can see that the number of education-related and moral decisions teachers have to make is much greater than may be at first appear.

**The need for a professional ethics of teaching**

Nowadays, in Slovakia applied and especially professional ethics are rapidly developing as society changes dynamically, the country undergoes European integration and globalization and there is a need to integrate these often neglected areas of professional life into the present social and professional discourse (Gluchman, 2011, pp. 4-6). The same is occurring in the teaching profession, although not to the same extent as in medicine, health services, business, etc. Theoretical or philosophical ethics should be used as a resource for resolving moral problems and evaluating our actions, including the consequences of them. In the more complicated problems we encounter in the teaching profession daily, it is not as simple as taking an appropriate evaluative stance. The dynamic and changing reality often does not provide simple definitive answers or solutions. A professional teaching ethics can be seen as the giving of advice on the moral nature of issues and problems, which should lead to the creation of an ethical discourse on analyzing and clarifying the positive and negative aspects of a particular situation, with the aim of improving the individuals’ level of moral reflection or awareness of the moral requirements and demands of the teaching profession and the work of a teacher in general. Likewise, it should be about articulating the professional moral norms and assessments associated with a teacher’s behaviour and actions (Danišková, 2014, pp. 191-197).

The ethics of teaching is a relatively well-established, marginal sphere of interest within applied or professional ethics. Many authors point out that teachers are not particularly aware of the ethical and moral aspects of the teaching profession. More attention is paid to these questions abroad than in Slovakia. The most well-known theories of the ethics of teaching are the concept (or moral dilemmas) developed by Kenneth A. Strike and Jonas F. Soltis (2004), David Carr’s (2000) the morality of the teaching profession in his concept of the philosophy of education, and Elizabeth Campbell’s (1997) virtue ethics of teaching. There is no integrated concept of an ethics of teaching in Slovakia. At most, some concepts have been adopted, such as the concept of a pedagogic ethics by Jakov Samojlovič Kotiger and Vladimír Josifovič Čamler (1984), Wolfgang Brezinka’s (2002) professional morality of teachers and Janusz Homplewicz’s (2000) pedagogic ethics (or ethics of education or moral education). They differ considerably in their methods of problem solving and in quality. They also have different methodological approaches. Only some of them have sufficiently fleshed out philosophical and ethical foundations and their approaches to problem solving in the teaching
profession are based on pedagogy rather than philosophy and ethics. These concepts of the ethics of teaching (although differing in quality) could contribute to a broader discussion on the need for an ethics of teaching in Slovakia and to the search for possible approaches to solving ethical and moral issues in the teaching profession.

This article takes the ethics of social consequences as a form of non-utilitarian consequentialism as its methodological approach to the philosophical and ethical exploration of the ethical and moral aspects of the ethics of teaching (Kalajtzidis, 2013, pp. 160-170). By adopting a consequentialist approach to the ethics of teaching the focus is more on moral values (the values of humanity, human dignity and the moral law of man within the ethics of social consequences) as a means of achieving or enacting positive social consequences and ensuring these dominate rather than negative ones (Gluchmanová, 2011, pp. 65-67). Hence this ethics theory differs from deontological ethics where the primary concern is not the consequences of the actions of moral agents in the assessment of the actions. By operating in accord with humanity, human dignity and the moral laws of man, the actions should have positive social consequences, not in the sense of maximization but in man’s positive orientation to their achievement.

The current changes to the Slovak education system have given rise to many ethical and moral questions and problems that teacher have to consider and find solutions to. What do recent teacher training graduates think of these questions and problems and how do they assess whether they are ready to take up such a demanding profession? Marta Černotová points out that teacher training graduates are disappointed with their career choice, dissatisfied with their undergraduate training and the pay. Newly qualified teachers find it hard to deal with the increasing demands and resign from their school posts. The biggest problem a teacher has at work is dealing with problematic students during lessons. Answers to the questionnaire-based research showed that insufficient psycho-pedagogic competencies and poor skills led to communication difficulties with students. This reflects the fact that in Slovakia teacher training is predominantly theoretical (Černotová, 2006, p. 48). This is a clear signal that there are some negative practices in university education—the separation of theory from practice (the ability to cope with ethical and moral problems in teaching). There are many examples of teachers having good subject knowledge but not the skills to work on their relations with the students. Teachers’ effort to develop contact with the students often brings contradictory results: there are many conflicts and alienation and misunderstanding between students and teachers is on the increase. Unfortunately, the blame is usually put on the student in practice, as it’s not common to blame the teacher even when wrong. Good teaching practice should enable all staff members to check up the level of their ethical competences and abilities, the level of their influence on the educational work of the school, finding their preparedness for profession and outlining the ways of moral self-improvement. Observations of the teaching practice of university students indicate that it is the period when trainee teachers most actively develop their skills, including professional and moral-ethical attributes. All teacher trainee students find they make many mistakes during teaching practice. Many of these are down to a lack of experience. But some mistakes arise out of poor preparation by the university. One might suppose the ethics of teaching is not covered within teacher training. One of the negative aspects is that many mistakes are ethical in nature: mistakes related to teacher-student relations—a recklessness
towards more slowly developing children; subjectivity in assessing student knowledge; thoughtlessness of future decision-making regarding undisciplined students; manifestations of harsh treatment of children; mistrust in one’s own abilities, in the appropriacy with which some situations are handled; complaining about children to parents, the class teacher, other teachers. Further on, I will mention negative aspects related to relations with teachers at the schools teachers do their teaching practice: lack of respect for the experience and wisdom of older teachers; the arrogance of young trainee teachers shown in their refusal to accept advice and recommendations from other teachers; tactlessness in behaviour towards older people; gossiping about others; to satisfy the teacher, flattering the teacher to obtain a better teaching practice assessment. We are often witness to negative relations between trainees: an unwillingness to help one another; a lack of criticism of the behaviour of colleagues; negative relations with colleagues who are very active in all types of school activities. These behaviours are closely related to poor conduct and the overall student culture, where there is insufficient knowledge of the professional-ethical norms of the teacher: indiscipline, immoral feelings, and mistakes occur where students receive insufficient general and “technical” training for practice: an inability to exert self-control and function in new problematic situations.

Elizabeth Campbell conducted a research project, “The Cultivation of Ethical Knowledge in Teaching”, in which she tried to qualitatively research how and if the programs some Canadian schools offer provide experience which could help in assessing a teacher’s professional ethics and the general, moral dimensions of teaching that form part of the teacher’s work. Students—future teachers—stated that they would like to know more about the ethics of the tasks they have to perform daily. Teachers feel that more attention needs to be addressed to the daily decision-making, how to talk to children about problems, find ethical solutions and the appropriate theory a teacher can follow to establish a clear approach. But bigger problems are caused by the more serious ethical dilemmas we usually encounter (for instance, suspected child abuse). Some students stated that they had a positive attitude to teachers who are just and care about the cognitive and emotional welfare of their students; however, alarmingly they also talked of unethical class practices by teachers (supervisors) and other experienced professionals from the school environment in most cases. According to the students, it was easy to tell who applies ethical principles at work, even though it’s more difficult. Students remembered negative actions—shocking everyday practices and gossip about students and their families, illegal practices of judging, undermining school policy, neglecting students, as well as their choices of curriculum and teaching materials, contempt of colleagues and publicly embarrassing mockery of students (Campbell, 2011, pp. 81-94).

It has been confirmed that although teaching practice at university is an important experience, it does not sufficiently prepare future teachers for all the problems that will arise in their future careers in the education system, because teachers potentially face so many different situations in their teaching that it’s almost impossible to learn how to cope with them, even though, on the other hand, teachers have the chance to learn about the problem and think about it or the correct or incorrect solutions to the ethical and moral issues facing the teaching profession.

Despite the almost “trendy” use of the word ethical to many cases and contexts of professional and daily life, in the case of the teaching profession, it is used appropriately.
Many authors agree that teacher training programs often ignore the moral and ethical dimensions of education, as Campbell states and unlike in other professions, it’s rare to observe or find any formal attempt to acquaint students with the ethics of the particular profession. Besides, there is pressure on teachers to behave morally when teaching, not only out of professionalism but with the aim of being a moral role model for their students (Campbell, 2003, p. 131). It seems that a similar situation exists in other developed and democratic countries, not only in Slovakia, and this is evident in what Campbell has to say about her Canadian experience. I agree that we need to focus on ethical knowledge and moral reasoning when training future teachers.

I suppose, as does Campbell, that the personal role model performed by the teacher plays a very important role in creating the right (moral) relationship between teacher and students. We need to emphasize the need for mutual cooperation and empathy, which should improve the relationship. I think the ethics of teaching (both as a theoretical discipline and as a university course) should help teachers resolve such tasks or problems in this context. It should help students on undergraduate teacher training courses with the issues they will most frequently encounter during teaching practice as students and as teachers in the future (or as pedagogical advisers or support staff for dealing with problematic students).

**Position of the ethics of teaching within ethics**

One of the reasons the content or issue of ethics in the teaching profession has been reduced down to a few aspects is that these issues tend to be researched by teaching specialists rather than ethicists and therefore the subject content of the ethics of the teaching profession is closer to that of pedagogy, with ethics being a marginal term here. The ethical and moral aspects are interpreted inaccurately or simplified.

The ethics of the teacher or pedagogue are relatively new terms in the Slovak education system. Where ethics is related to the teaching profession, it concerns a theory located at the interface between ethics and pedagogy, since it cannot be understood as a mechanical fusion of ethics and pedagogy. This is primarily because the ethics of the teacher comes under applied or professional ethics, and these two fields of knowledge differ in emphasis, i.e. on the ethical and moral aspects on the one hand and on the pedagogical aspects on the other. There are basic differences in the way in which the research of ethics and pedagogy is defined and the theoretical research methods employed by these disciplines and the way in which they address the problem. Many of the ethical and moral problems that need solving in the field of education are growing as society continues to change and develop. Some of these are related to schools and the teaching profession and can be solved by an ethics of teaching.

An analysis of the definitions of the term suggests that many authors conflate a code of ethics for the teacher with the issue of the ethics of the teaching profession, since it includes the duties of the teacher, the relationship with the students, the school, school management, parents, etc. Anything that is normative forms part of the code of ethics, and this is or can only be one part of the ethics of the teaching profession, but ethics cannot simply be reduced to a problem that is covered by the code of ethics. Any code of ethics will tend to adopt a black and white approach or simplify a moral problem; that is its weak point, because not
even the best code of ethics (of any profession) can predict all the moral problems that occur in practice, and it can only function as a guide in routine or typical situations. This is its advantage or positive side: it is primarily to enable the reader to identify the moral scope of the problem (Kánský, 1998, pp. 94-95). However, the complexity and difficulties of the teaching profession demand that far greater attention be paid to research and to finding solutions to the ethical and moral problems, which is what such theoretical and empirical research should involve.

Thus, we can summarize that the ethics of teaching is about researching the ethical and moral aspects of teaching, that it characterizes the teacher’s position in the education system together with his/her moral beliefs, where moral and ethical beliefs are connected with professional ones. Furthermore the ethics of teaching concerns the teacher’s moral attributes, the attributes of his/her ethical and moral reasoning, decision making, behaviour and actions as well as the teacher’s abilities to predict the consequences of his/her actions on others and to take moral responsibility for his/her decisions and actions.

The ethics of teaching is about the teacher’s personal and character attributes and pedagogic-psychological competencies. These play an important role in teaching (predominantly in relations with students, colleagues, supervisors and parents, with whom the teacher comes into contact with as part of the profession). This also includes analyses of ethical and moral issues relating to the job of teacher—the ethics of teaching is about seeking solutions and offering guidance on how to solve the moral issues a teacher may face at work. Therefore the ethics of teaching includes a code of ethics for the teacher or teaching profession.

Analysis of the definitions and other terms relating to the ethics of teaching could stimulate further discussion on the ethical and moral problems of the teaching profession and contribute to the development of the ethics of teaching as a branch of professional ethics in Slovakia and elsewhere, because experts (philosophers, ethicists, pedagogues) lag behind the contemporary trends developed by the professional public across the world.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I submit that if we are concerned with educational problems in the teaching profession, we should be able to identify their ethical and moral aspects. This means that we should be guiding moral agents (including potential agents) to think and reason about why the actions and behaviours of some individuals are right or wrong, good or bad, etc. The concern is with negative practices (bullying, aggression and other violence that occurs both in school and out of school). The ethics of teaching should primarily deal with the ethical and moral issues relating to the work of teachers, their rights and duties concerning the relationship between teacher and student, colleague, supervisor (or subordinate) and society general. We cannot reduce the ethics of teaching to just some of these relationships, although the most important of them is certainly the teacher’s relationship with the students. The aim of theoretical research on the ethics of teaching and its practical applications is to solve moral problems within teaching as well as attempting to heighten the importance, place and status of the teaching profession in society. However, while teachers are not able to do this and there is a need to unite the theoretical and practical resolution of problems (including
ethical and moral ones) relating to the teaching profession, it is hard to predict how the social and economic status of teachers in our society will change fundamentally.

References


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