

Ethical relationships in the teaching profession in Slovakia

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Abstract

Authors deal with theoretical and social contexts of the teaching profession as a starting point for empirical research into ethical relationships among Slovak primary and secondary school teachers. They surveyed the opinions of teachers at that level regarding their relationship with students, parents, colleagues and superiors. According to the research results, more than 80% of respondents positively rate the behaviour of teachers towards their students and parents from the viewpoint of realising ethical values, based on which they could be an ethical model for their students. The level of relationships among colleagues received a less optimistic rating. They were, however, much more critical in evaluating their superiors. Only approximately 60% of the members of school management could be an ethical model for other teachers.

Keywords: teachers; ethics; relationships; students; colleagues; parents; Slovakia

1. Introduction

Ethics of relationships is one of the main areas of every professional ethics. Relationships between teachers and students, teachers and their colleagues, as well as their relationship towards their superiors and subordinates are among key areas of professional ethics of teachers. There is a large body of literature dealing with individual aspects of the above relationships within the teaching profession (Aurin, & Maurer, 1993; Behre, Astor, & Mayer, 2001; Blain-Arcaro, Smith, Cunningham, Vaillancourt, & Rimas, 2012; Blasco, 2004; Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006; Colnerud, 1997; Daniels, Bradley, & Hays, 2007; Flannery, Wester, & Singer, 2004; Fox, & Wilson, 2009; Furlong, & Morrison, 2000; Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011; Kidron, & Fleischmann, 2006; Kokkinos, 2007; Mercieca, 2012; Morrell, 2002; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, De Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006; Osguthorpe 2008; Purugganan, Stein, Silver, & Benenson, 2000; Reichel, & Arnon, 2009; De Ruyter, & Kole, 2010; Smokowski, & Kopasz, 2005; Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007; Speaker, & Petersen, 2000; Unnever, 2005; Whitted, & Dupper, 2005).

Elizabeth Campbell's *The Ethical Teacher* (2003), and Kenneth A. Strike and Jonas F. Soltis' *Ethics of Teaching*, published in a great number of expanded and appended editions, are among the most significant publications of the past decades, dealing with the above area. Moreover, the field in question is also closely studied in works by David Carr, Gunnel Colnerud, Robert V. Bullough Jr. together with Stefinee Pinnegar, as well as other authors.

Campbell presents a highly interesting and thought-provoking conception of ethics of relationships as part of professional ethics of teacher. Unlike many other theories, this one is explicitly concerned with a philosophical-ethical approach where ethical and moral aspects are dominant. As the methodological approach, Campbell uses virtue ethics, on which she bases her reasoning and search for solutions, or answers, to individual moral problems of the teaching profession. This is in correspondence with the values for which, in her opinion, the teacher should strive in his profession,

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especially when the forming moral character and achieving the welfare of his students is concerned. The author assigns an important role in this process to an ethical teacher who differs from other teachers by his engagement, activity in the processes of his own moral development and improvement and, at the same time, engages himself in forming the moral character of his students.

The author sees one of the main areas of the moral impact of teachers in influencing students. In her view, students learn about morality by means of their experience with teachers in lessons. They are aware of teachers actually caring about them; they are able to immediately sense hypocrisy and are aware of the differences between snobbish and authentic behaviour. The moral impact on students is important with regard to what they can see and hear around them (Campbell, 2003). It is, undoubtedly, true; however, on the other hand, one should not exaggerate this influence of teachers on students, especially at the level of secondary schools and universities where adolescent or mature people are concerned and the teachers' influence is much less significant than at the level of primary schools. On the other hand, the influence of various other factors is much more prominent. Not to mention the fact that it is family and, especially, parents who have the most significant influence on the formation of young people's moral character. Anything else plays a less important, although not insignificant, role in their moral development.

With respect to the above, the author holds the opinion that, contrary to the idea of a teacher as a strict tyrant, distrustful and scornful of students, the image of an ethical teacher (i.e. a teacher at a higher level of moral development) reflects a warm and caring person. The teacher can achieve this in various ways, for instance, by talking to students not as "friends" but as with friendly human beings. Such a teacher is thorough and reliable, attentive of students' concerns and realises that kindness is not the same as weakness. Teachers' chronic fear of being considered a "soft touch" is unfounded. In reality, this is moral power rather than timidity or cowardice which presents him as caring, kind, compassionate and empathetic. The above characteristics should support the intention to be fair and, if necessary, strict as well. The author suggests that an ethical teacher can best realise the students' interests and maintain this maxim as, professionally, the most important principle; not even his personal benefit or subjective beliefs should ever overshadow his professional commitment to serve others. The author further mentions that, for all these efforts to succeed, the approach of the school administration, i.e. the school leadership and other superior school bodies, is key. Headmasters as well as superiors can, by means of the quality of their own leadership, either support and enhance such efforts or impede and even obstruct them.

Campbell suggest a relatively simple methodological approach for all those teachers who wish to achieve a higher level of ethical cognition, which can, at the same time, be sufficiently effective in the identification of ethical and moral aspects, or, possibly, issues in the teaching profession and their efficient solving. In her view, the main principles should always be identified (sincerity, honesty, kindness, etc.) that are relevant for every situation and dilemma. Next, one should listen to their conscience. Similarly, one must, in her opinion, think and predict: before the actual teaching starts, one must consider certain criteria or proceedings; determine rules for the classroom; instil discipline in students, etc.; think ahead of potential consequences which could cause ethical dilemmas. One needs to realise that the teacher does not speak and act as an independent person but rather represents the teaching profession. She holds the opinion that the knowledge of school regulations, acceptable norms, strategies and, if necessary, also legal regulations, is also part of the discussed ethical teacher's approach. All teachers should realise they are part of their profession and members of school teaching staff. In her view, the principles of justice and honesty, sincerity and integrity, kindness and care, empathy and respect towards others are the core of an ethical teacher's approach towards students.

"Within the larger school context, the ethical teacher attends to the same principles of honesty, respect, fairness, and kindness, in dealing with colleagues and administrators on behalf of the best interests of students. Strengthened by an ethical school community that does not use such principles and others such as loyalty as a

rationale for covering up moral errors, the ethical teacher has the courage, for example, to inform the principal about unfair grading policies or practices...., the ethical teacher refuses to ignore the harmful or negligent conduct of a colleague because of the effect it is seen to have on students. However, ...the ethical teacher would find ways to address dilemmas that would garner the professional support of a community of ethical teachers determined to work together for the benefit of all, including those who cause the dilemmas by their faulty conduct” (Campbell, 2003, pp. 141–142). We consider Campbell’s conception of an ethical teacher one of the best quality works, dealing with ethics of relationships within professional ethics of teacher.

According to Campbell, not even a code of ethics as such in the teaching profession is a solution to the ethical and moral problems of this profession; she holds the view that such codes rather sound like political invectives or a work contract. Still, regardless the way the codes or declaration of ethical standards grasp the nature of such principles, which define the moral dimensions of the educational process in the best way, they are, probably, insufficient as a means of professional development. Ethical behaviour and solving dilemmas is, in her view, predominantly based on ethical cognition, which can, however, hardly be pigeonholed into a code, however, codes of ethics can provide a basis for self-regulation and can help build trust towards teachers and maintaining teachers’ integrity in the public eye. Professional ethical codes are useful and necessary but not sufficient. Following a code without the realisation of ideals and values only means the external form of behaviour. Campbell claims that only when specific requirements of a code are combined with the fundamental ideals and values, and when what teachers do and why they do it is interconnected, only then will professional codes cease to be standards of professional etiquette and become solid moral expressions (Campbell, 2003).

With regard to ethics of teaching, Strike and Soltis primarily emphasise that the main thesis in the teacher’s activity should be an effort for the wellbeing and benefit of the students. They hold that “[...] teachers have a special obligation to help their students see and share the potential objectivity and rationality of ethical thinking so that we can all lead morally responsible lives together” (Strike, & Soltis, 2004, p. 5). They highlight the need for linking teachers’ expertise and education with the requirement for the students’ wellbeing and, for this reason, teachers’ autonomy is in the public interest. On the other hand, they note that the school community also has the right to be heard about issues regarding the solutions of moral problems in the teaching profession. They, similarly, mention another significant factor that comes into play in this process, i.e. representative democracy, as schools and teachers are paid from people’s taxes, which is why, as a result, they also have the right to express their opinion on such issues by means of elected representatives. At the same time, they point out that a conflict between the teacher’s obligations and responsibilities towards the students on the one hand and his superiors on the other could arise. According to Strike and Soltis, in the case of a conflict between the requirements from the superiors and the students’ interests, the teacher can opt for one of the following strategies: to conform to the requirements of his superiors; to insist on an adequate problem solution; to look for a positive solution to the situation; or to walk away (Strike, & Soltis, 2004).

In their opinion, when solving moral problems in the teaching profession, especially in connection to relationships with superiors, dialogue is an appropriate strategy, as it can be a productive aid in reinforcing the awareness of the shared interests and needs of the entire community. They hold the opinion that this strategy is much more suitable than enforcing a certain opinion or solution from a position of power without dialogue, since such an approach usually decreases the quality of mutual relationships within the teaching community and school community as a whole. “[D]ialogue about ethical issues and concepts provides the context in which the sophistication of individuals about ethical issues can be developed” (Strike, & Soltis, 2004, p. 111). Dialogue should result in an agreement or a consensus, which is a condition of ethical, or moral, decision. Dialogue should, however, also meet certain criteria in order to be considered an adequate condition of an ethical solution.

According to Strike and Soltis, dialogue should include all relevant participants of the discussion, which must be balanced, i.e. no participant can force his own opinions onto the others from a position of power, everyone should have an opportunity to sufficiently explain their viewpoint and the resulting decision should fulfil the reciprocity requirement, i.e. each disputant should project themselves into the position of the other discussion participants. A key point in such an approach to dialogue is the fact that all participants are paid respect; people are treated as ends rather than means. The authors view such discussion as advantageous in that it contributes to community building, enhances reflection and leads people into the process of ethical reasoning. All this creates a set of factors preceding a morally just decision (Strike, & Soltis, 2004). It must, however, be pointed out that, when designing this framework, or dialogue elements, they clearly drew on Jürgen Habermas' theory of communication and his discourse ethics, although, in the text, they do not mention this respective source of their reflections, regarding the requirements for dialogue as a starting point of ethical decision making.

David Carr is of the opinion that, especially in the area of ethical relationships in teaching, the teacher inevitably becomes the students' moral model, which is why he must adjust his behaviour to the requirements of the profession. He equally considers wise to require from teachers to control their expressions of irritation, laziness, and so on. In spite of the clearly personal dimension of these requirements for a certain type of character features, Carr holds that it would not be wise to refuse them, as one might rightfully presume that the parents are often interested in the personal lives and behaviour of the teachers, especially from the viewpoint of the potential influence on their children. While infidelity, homosexuality, pre-marital pregnancy are, in his view, usually overlooked (except in religious states and schools), such issues as alcoholism, drugs, sexual relationships between teachers or even students are, often, the subject of disciplinary proceedings. In Carr's view, one must regard the fact that the teacher is also an educator of young people to whom he is supposed to teach the difference between good, principled and desirable behaviour and bad, wrongful and indecent behaviour (i.e. also infidelity). The teacher's moral example is the core of the moral influence of the school on students. Carr claims that, when teachers fail as people, they also fail as teachers; and when they fail as teachers, they also fail as people, which is why it is rightful to ask for understanding and forgiveness. However, if teachers refuse to confess their failures, they also refuse to acknowledge the true nature of facts (Carr, 2000). The requirement of identification of a teacher's public, or professional, and private life can be a grave topic for discussions and polemics. Unlike Carr, we believe that a teacher should not be punished for his mistakes and vices in his private life, as long as the line threatening his ability to fulfil his work duties responsibly and at an appropriate level is not crossed.

In another of Carr's article he writes that the cultivation of positive personal relationships with students is part of high quality education process, including the effort to know their students in order for the teacher to be able to meet their individual needs (to the best of his ability). On the other hand, the author also realises that such an approach can be in conflict with the regulations that are not in favour of building similar relationships, as this concerns the students' as well as teachers' private lives, and the relationships are different from those between friends or acquaintances. The teacher, in the effort to help the student improve his results, sometime needs to know his environment better. Carr, however, points out that, in the this way, the teacher might find out things he would rather not know, which could lead to a certain form of intervention, which could compromise his trustworthiness in the eyes of the student. At this point, questions arise regarding justice and fairness, should the teacher pay a lot of attention to one student, as this might lead to an unequal treatment in comparison with others (Carr, 2005). The author favours the opinion that, in most (although not all) cases, the above approach could bring about better outcomes than an impersonal approach and relationship between the teacher and the student. Similarly to a loving parent, the teacher who forms positive relationships with his students has a much greater chance of being successful in comparison to a contradictory approach. When the relationships are good, there is a greater probability

of shared interests, which contributes to the achievement of shared goals, directed at the development and cultivation of the student's person (Carr, 2005).

As far as ethics of relationships within the teaching profession is concerned, Robert V. Bullough Jr. and Stefinee Pinnegar see the fundamentals of any relationships in family, which is, consequently, related to the quality of relationships between teachers and students. The basis for the formation of good well-founded relationships, in their view, lies in love and, following it, the striving to form the child and his future. This is related to the parents' and teachers' role in developing, in children, the ability to realise their value. Parents just like teachers can develop and cultivate this awareness by means of a smile, praise, or support for the student. All this effort should be directed at the formation of a full-value life of a young person, seeking its sense and purpose by means of other people's lives and the relationships with them. These authors claim that the relationships in a person's life play a highly significant role, as it is by means of these that people can realise who they are, what their relationship with the world is and this helps in the formation of such individuals they wish to become. These relationships help people find themselves again, should they get lost on their way. The authors state that the teacher's blessing lies in the existence of loving relationships with the students, which, in the end, reinforces professional identity, engagement in teaching and provides food for the soul (Bullough, & Pinnegar, 2009).

In the teacher's effort to increase the quality of his teaching activities, it is paramount to start with a question regarding the quality of relationships with students. Problems might occur with discipline in the classroom or a lack of the students' preparation for the lessons; what is, however, important is the level of trust and support on the part of the teacher in relationship to his students, the fact whether he provides them with enough of his time and energy, and whether he creates a sufficiently stimulating environment for their development. A teacher who loves his students has high expectations which might often be difficult to meet. On the other hand, the teacher is not responsible for a possible inadequate response on the student's part to the teacher's relationship or approach towards him. Should the student be resistant or dismissive, the teacher can hardly do anything else; otherwise, there is the danger of failure, which could lead as far as the teacher being punished. According to the authors, the teacher must also realise the danger lying in the student's effort to abuse the teacher's interest and support to manipulate him with the aim of profiting from the situation (Bullough, & Pinnegar, 2009).

Colnerud, on the topic of relationships within the teaching profession, holds the opinion that teaching cannot be compared with other professions. He points out Fenstermacher's view that the objective of the teacher's efforts is to not deepen, or, on the contrary, to lessen the difference between the teacher's and students' knowledge. Unlike other professions, teachers should not keep a distance from their students but rather strive to build good or even close relationships with the students in order to understand them better (Colnerud, 2006).

On the other hand, Colnerud realises that, apart from the differences, there are also similarities in various professions in relationships to clients, patients or students. The similarity lies in the dependency and inequality between the teacher and the student, who has not become a student voluntarily but, rather, due to obligation and is, thus, dependent on the teacher. The responsibility for this relationship lies on the teacher for whom it must be clear he is working for the benefit of other people and does not strive to use them for his own benefit. It is also important for the teacher to sufficiently realise the responsibility for the outcomes of his work; otherwise, it could cause serious negative consequences for the dependant person. Colnerud considers loyalty among teachers a serious problem, which often means that the teacher does not take the side of the student(s) whom his colleague treats unjustly, which then leads to hostility among colleagues (Colnerud, 2006).

Felicity Haynes claims that the relationship between a teacher and his students is a key in any educational process on all levels. "Teachers should seek to establish themselves and their students' confidence and trust grounded in mutual respect. They should not exploit students nor should they show undue partiality in response to them.

Honesty, integrity and a high regard for the uniqueness of each student should characterize the relationships. Because teachers hold this position of trust and confidence with respect to students, society expects of them a high standard of conduct at all times. Teachers of children should bear in mind the special relationship between parent and child and, until it is proper to treat the child as an adult, should seek the active cooperation of the parent in securing the students' welfare and development" (Haynes, 1998, p. 177).

Similarly to Haynes, Elina Harjunen also contemplates the factors influencing a teacher's pedagogical authority. She came to the conclusion that a teacher's authority results from his relationships and the ability to build trust as well as consider students human beings and exercise ethics of care and justice, which stands for the ethical essence of relationships. In her opinion, education and a teacher's activity cannot exist without the given characteristics, which, as a result, are the main factors of his pedagogical authority (Harjunen, 2009).

Apart from education, the ethical and pedagogical aspect is another fundamental dimension of the teaching profession, which primarily lies in the formation of students, among other things through relationships between teachers and students. Tiina Soini, Kirsi Pyhältö and Janne Pietarinen claim that three areas of relationships are the main precondition for a teacher's pedagogical well-being: good relationships with students, their parents and relationships within the community of teachers. In their opinion, it can also have a converse effect, i.e. a teacher's pedagogical well-being can stimulate a better approach on the part of students to studying and fulfilling their duties. They consider the social environment of the school and the relationships in the given community, including relationships with parents, a key element in the functioning of the teaching profession. Pressure on the parents' part can, in their view, negatively influence a teacher's pedagogical well-being and, as a result, also their professional performance. The above authors claim that, for teachers, a good atmosphere and mutual support among colleagues as sources of their pedagogical well-being are highly significant factors. Their research suggests that this equally applies with regard to their cooperation with parents (Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2010).

According to Archie Graham, social relationships in the school environment are scientific proof of a school's true ethos, as they reflect the level of interaction among all participating subjects. He claims that a positive school ethos can significantly influence teachers as well as students and be an important element of the school's further development in general (Graham, 2012). Ton Mooij, similarly, claims that relationships between teachers and students, including possible social discrimination, are key factors reflecting social cohesion in schools. He holds the view that in those schools with greater problems in the area of social relationships this is also manifested in the achieved educational results (Mooij, 2011). Teachers' unethical behaviour towards students, such as sexual relationships with students, drug use, acquisition and spreading of pornography, violence towards students, etc., are extreme examples. Damien Page points out that, although such grave expressions of unethical behaviour are rather rare among teachers, their impact is very serious (Page, 2014).

Based on their research carried out in Finnish kindergartens and primary schools, Jukka Husu and Kirsi Tirri point out that, many a time, conflicts between teachers and parents are part of the teaching profession, as doubts arise whether parents act in the best interest of their children regarding the conditions they provide for education and extra-curricular and home activities. The second most common conflict occurs between teachers and their colleagues. Most of the time, these conflicts concern students and misunderstandings arise, as some teachers feel others interfere inappropriately in their competence. The third form of conflict are those among teachers and the entire school community (including children and their parents) regarding the protection of children's rights, especially in deciding what is good for the children. In conclusion, Husu and Tirri stated that all teachers' moral dilemmas related to interpersonal relationships and the teachers' efforts for the good of the children. In most cases, however, these conflicts are impossible to solve and are left open (Husu, & Tirri, 2001).

From the above overview of relevant resources dealing with the issues of ethics of relationships within the teaching profession, primary theoretical formation of relationship ethics within the teaching profession could be identified, especially in the works by Campbell, Strike and Soltis, Carr, as well as Colnerud and some other authors. Aurin and Maurer state there are a lot of studies dealing with what professional teaching ethics should be like; however, in their opinion, there is a lack of research regarding actual professional teaching ethics in practice (Aurin, & Maurer, 1993). It is true one can find a great number of contributions on the issues of moral reasoning regarding teachers to be (Johnson, 2008), or the tasks and needs in their preparation (Brabeck, 1999; Willemse, Lunenberg, & and Korthagen, 2008; Pop, & Turner, 2009), ideas about the ideal teacher (Arnon, & Reichel, 2007; Anspal, Eisenschmidt, & Löfström, 2012; de Ruyter, & Kole, 2010; Osguthorpe, 2008), solving hypothetical ethical dilemmas (Ehrich, Kimber, Millwater, & Cranston, 2011), students' satisfaction with their lives (Huebner, Valois, Paxton, & Drane, 2005), student's opinions of school (Granieri, & Hooper, 1999; Keys, 2006), the content of professional teaching ethics (Campbell, 2000), and educational issues in general (Beyer, 1991; 1997); however, relatively little attention is paid to empirical research on professional ethics of teacher, which would reflect the reality of the teaching profession, especially in the most complex area of the teaching profession, i.e. the relationships teachers enter into while doing their work. Similarly, Colnerud claims that empirical research regarding the teachers' perception of ethical aspects of their profession comes to the conclusion that teachers consider actual relationships with students and the ability to react appropriately to students' needs and realise their rights one of the greatest ethical problems and, at the same time, challenges (Colnerud, 2006).

The aim of the present article is to identify real ethical and moral problems in the teaching profession in Slovakia, especially within ethics of relationships. As could be seen above from the overview of relevant literature on this topic, great attention worldwide is paid to professional ethics of teacher on the theoretical as well as empirical level (Aurin & Maurer, 1993; Campbell, 2003; Graham, 2012; Harjunen, 2009; Husu & Tirri, 2001; Mercieca, 2012; Mooij, 2011; Soini, Pyhältö & Pietarinen, 2010), while, in Slovakia, systemic research into the area in question is only at an early stage. This is why an effort has been made to, based on an empirical research study, compare and contrast the theoretical premises regarding the purpose and importance of ethics of relationships within professional ethics of teacher with the actual evaluation by teachers and students.

Ethics of social consequences as a form of satisficing non-utilitarian consequentialism (Caws, 1995; Jackson, 1991; Pettit, 1986; 1988; 1989; 1991; 1993; 1994; 1997; Sen, 1982; 1983; 1993; Slote, 1985; 1989) is the methodological basis of the research. The primary values in ethics of social consequences are humanity, human dignity and moral rights, which are developed and realised in correlation with positive social consequences, expressing the consequentialist value orientation of this theory. The above fundamental values are followed by other values, which developed in connection to positive social consequences. Secondary values in ethics of social consequences include justice, responsibility, moral duty and tolerance. Their role and purpose within this structure is given by their ability to contribute to reaching and realising moral good (Domagała, 2015; Dubiel-Zielińska, 2013; 2015; 2016; Gluchman, 2003; 2007; 2012; Kalajtzidis, 2013; Simut, 2016; Švaňa, 2015).

2. Social context of the research

Prior to 1989, teachers in Slovakia, as well as in the whole of the former Czechoslovakia (and other so-called socialist countries), were under constant political and ideological pressure on the part of public authorities, as well as the Communist Party, as they were to provide ideological and political indoctrination of children and youths. Beáta Kosová states that, at present, teachers are criticised for an inability to solve the new-age problems of their students caused by economic and social reasons as well as political decisions. On the other hand, teachers feel, on the part of the

public, government as well as their own educational representation, indifference and lack of interest in their problems (Kosová, 2006). The general state of affairs in education (work ethic, motivation, salary, educational outcomes) in Slovakia is, according to Peter Ondrejko and Marcela Verešová, worse than it was prior to November 1989. The problems, apart from other things, also lie in the continuous feminisation of education, the demanding nature of the teaching profession and demands made of teachers on the part of society (Grzybek & Bielak, 2015; Ondrejko, & Verešová, 2003).

In spite of serious socioeconomic problems related to teachers' status in Slovakia (and, equally, in all post-communist countries), there is an effort to increase the quality of teachers' work, develop teachers' personality in their expertise as well as methodology. Unlike the previous era, the personality of a humanist oriented teacher comes to the fore. According to Kosová, a teacher should be an authentic person who respects himself, knows his own value, appreciates the value of others, i.e. also children, has a healthy level of self-confidence, knows what he wants, has his own goals, is open in his experience and experiences, is able to find balance, feel, and enjoy, which enables him to appreciate the way children experience, understand and perceive their problems, view the world in a realistic and true way, acquire new experience, feelings and attitudes; systematically develops his abilities, continuously evolve and grow as a person (Kosová, 1995).

In relation to the above problems in Slovak education and the emphasis on the humanist dimension of the teaching profession and the teacher's personality, ethical and moral aspects of the teaching profession also come to the fore more and more frequently in philosophical discussions in Slovakia (Danišková 2014; Gluchman, 2014; Gluchmanová, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2012a; 2012b; 2013; Gluchmanová, & Gluchman, 2008; 2009; Lešková Blahová, 2007; Platková Olejárová, 2011; 2013). Slovak pedagogues and psychologists, however, point to the ethical and moral problems of the teaching profession in a much more intense way (Búgelová, & Baňasová, 2003; Darák, 2001; Džuka, 2010; Džuka, & Dalbert, 2007; Džuka, & Jenčová, 2005; Gajdošová, 1999/2000; Jusko, 2002; Kačmárová, 2011; Kačmárová, & Kravcová, 2011; Kasáčová, 2001; 2003; Kosová, 2006; Rychnavská, 2003; Straková, 2005; Zelina, 1994; Žilínek, 1997).

3. Empirical research

3.1 Goals

In the context of a great number of theoretical as well as practical problems related to the teaching profession in contemporary Slovakia, the authors decided to find out, by means of empirical research, how Slovak teachers evaluate the ethical dimension of their work. One of the main areas of professional ethics is relationships, and several presented research studies point to the fact that this is, within the teaching profession, one of the most sensitive, or most problematic, areas (Aurin, & Maurer, 1993; Campbell, 2003; Graham, 2012; Harjunen, 2009; Husu, & Tirri, 2001; Mercieca, 2012; Mooij, 2011; Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2010). That is why this research was aimed at examining the ethical level of interpersonal relationships, i.e. teacher-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-superior, and teacher-parent relationships.

3.2 Target group and research tool

The target group was formed of teachers from 26 primary and 28 secondary schools from the whole of Slovakia. A significant role in the process of respondent selection was played by the agreement of the schools' leaderships with the involvement of their teachers in the research. The schools differed in the number of their teaching staff, the number of students, as well as their locality. The data were gained by means of an online anonymous questionnaire included 58 closed questions regarding (apart from demographical data of the respondents) their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their job in the context of relationship ethics and the reasons for this situation. A

highly significant part of the questionnaire was formed by questions dealing with the quality of teacher-student relationships and the approach of the teacher towards the students. Similarly, in the questionnaire, the respondents could express their opinion on manifestations of discrimination in the school environment when evaluating students, and also, in how teachers treat each other, as well as the students' behaviour towards the teachers and, equally, within teacher-parent relationships. Another part of the questionnaire contained questions regarding the evaluation of school management, or, possible corruption in the school environment. The last part of the questionnaire dealt with opinions of the respondents on the level of teaching ethics at school, the awareness of its norms, the need for ethical education of teachers, etc. School managements provided access to the online questionnaire in those schools that were interested in participation in the present research.

From the total number of respondents – 326 teachers of primary and secondary schools – 282 women (86.5%) and 44 men (13.5%) took part in the study. Regarding gender ratio, the number of female employees prevailed, which reflects the general feminisation of education not only in Slovakia but also in developed countries worldwide. The Slovak education sector has been overly feminised for a long time; presumably, due to the financial assessment within the teaching profession. From the total number of respondents, 178 primary school teachers (54.8%), and 148 teachers at secondary school of various types (secondary vocational school, hotel and business academies, secondary grammar schools, 45.2%) took part in the research. The highest number of teachers work at schools situated in towns with over 50,000 inhabitants – 34.2%, while 33.2% of the respondents work in towns with 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants, 6.8% in towns with 10,000 to 20,000 inhabitants, 8.9% work in towns up to 10,000 inhabitants, while 16.9% of the teachers involved in the research teach in villages.

Regarding respondents' *age*, the most numerous group was formed of teachers aged 31–40 (28.8%), the groups of teachers aged 41–50 and 51–60 were similarly represented, 26.7% and 27% respectively. A much smaller group was formed by younger respondents, aged 21–30 (11.7%), as well as teachers approaching retirement, i.e. over 60 years of age – 5.5% and 1 respondent (0.3%) was under 20 years of age. This suggests that young people who had graduated from universities providing teacher training have rather little or no interest in working as teachers, presumably due to the financial conditions, and they try to find employment in a different, more lucrative, sector. On the other hand, it has been proven that elderly teachers, even though there are many more, have given up hoping for change, or are burnt-out, apathetic, and, thus, did not take part in the research.

With respect to the *highest completed education*, 83.4% of the total number, i.e. 271 teachers, had completed the second degree of university education. This group was followed by those respondents who had completed the first degree (11.7%). It was rather interesting to find out that 14 primary and secondary school teachers (4.3%) had completed the third degree of university education; however, 2 out of the total number (0.6%) had only completed secondary school studies with a school-leaving exam. One respondent did not state the level of his education.

In the context of *working position* in schools, 274 of the asked respondents (84.3%) stated they were regular/full-time members of their teaching staff, 15.7% were members of the school management. Regarding the length of teaching experience it was shown (as also many claims indicate) that teaching is an ageing profession, as most of them (almost three quarters) have been working as teachers for 11 to over 30 years; specifically 11–20 years (31.1%), 21–30 years (24.9%) and more than 30 years (17.5%) of teaching experience. Only one quarter is formed from the young generation, up to 5 years of professional experience (14.5%), while there is a decreasing trend in the group with teaching experience between 6–10 years (12%). It could be presumed it is caused by realising what kind of work the teaching process requires, whether they are patient and durable enough, both of which are necessary for the teaching profession. As a result, they either remain in the educational services or, having acquired such experience, they look for job opportunities elsewhere in the labour market.

3.3 Results

From research with a broader perspective, aimed at a number of ethical aspects of the teaching profession, only those questions and answers were selected that relate to relationships, which is the essence of the professional ethics of teacher. The respondents were asked the questions below and concerned *teacher-student*, *teacher-teacher* (including superior colleagues), and *teacher-parent relationships*.

3.3.1 Teacher-student relationships

The first group of questions was aimed at teacher-student relationships, since other research also suggests that this is an area where problems and misunderstandings are most likely to occur. The ethical and moral dimension of the teaching profession should primarily lie in the mutual relationship between the teacher and the student, as the teacher as a mature and responsible moral agent should approach students as morally equal beings; he should show them the respect that each human being deserves. On the other hand, he should also expect and require from students to, equally, show respect towards him, other adults, as well as towards each other. This is why the authors hold the same opinion as Campbell (2003) in that the teacher’s personal example plays a key role in the development of ethical relationships between teachers and students.

In this part of the research, questions were asked regarding opinions on the perception, or evaluation, of teacher-student relationships, i.e. to what extent, in the respondents’ (primary and secondary school teachers’) opinions, do their colleagues serve as examples of ethical behaviour and actions for their students (cf. Table 1).

Table 1. At school, most colleagues are open to the legitimate requirements and demands on the part of students in accordance with the school’s regulations

I strongly agree	91	27.9%
I mostly agree	176	54.0%
I cannot say	48	14.7%
I mostly disagree	10	3.1%
I strongly disagree	1	0.3%

A similar result was found in the next question where the aim was to prove the validity of the answers to the previous question. Almost three quarters of the respondents responded in a negative way to the following statement: *At school, most teachers do not look for ways to help students with problems connected to their studies but rather try to “palm the students off” as quickly as possible to get on with their own business*: 35.6% of teachers strongly disagreed and 38.7% mostly disagreed; while 6.1% of teachers mostly agreed and 4.6% strongly agreed.

The responses regarding *the school’s teachers’ refusal of and intolerance to manifestations of discrimination against students* were of a similar nature, as they respect and support the principles of respect, human dignity, humanity and tolerance in interpersonal relationships (cf. Table 2).

Table 2. The school’s teachers refuse to accept and do not tolerate manifestations of discrimination against students

I strongly agree	178	54.6%
I mostly agree	92	28.2%
I cannot say	23	7.1%
I mostly disagree	11	3.4%
I strongly disagree	22	6.7%

It can be observed that approximately 80% of respondents rate the ethics of student-teacher relationships positively and, on the other hand, it must be stated that one tenth of the target group holds the opinion that there are manifestations of discrimination against students present at their schools. It seems that there is a certain correlation between the opinions of a given group of teachers when the presence of discrimination at Slovak schools is concerned and a lack of interest, in the case of some teachers, in the needs of their students.

The respondents expressed similar views on the issue of *the school's teachers' decisions regarding impartial, fair and objective assessment of students, i.e. not based on friend- or kin-related preferences*. As many as 35.3% of those asked strongly agreed and 49.1% mostly agreed with the above statement. However, 16 respondents (4.9%) still expressed the opinion that, to a certain extent, bias, or unfairness, is present in the teachers' assessment of students.

Other questions were concerned with the behaviour of most schools' students toward teachers, i.e. whether they are polite and respect a teacher's decisions, which are, to a certain extent, connected to issues of discipline in school. A total of 16.9% of the respondents strongly agreed, while 35% mostly agreed with the statement that *some students act arrogantly towards the school's teachers, they insult them, and they impatiently, oftentimes impolitely, call for attention to their own person*.

The results correspond with similar findings to research carried out by Jozef Džuka in the school year 2004/2005, when it was found out that 49% of the asked teachers from a certain Slovak regional capital had experienced aggressive behaviour or actions on the part of students. In another target group of secondary vocational schools in Slovakia, 55% of respondents had similar experience (Džuka, & Jenčová, 2005; Džuka, & Dalbert, 2007). Both research studies achieved highly similar findings regarding violence towards teachers in various forms, which suggest a deteriorating nature of school discipline and the need to search for appropriate measures for this pedagogical, as well as ethical and moral problem in Slovak education.

3.3.2 Teacher-teacher relationships (including superiors)

The second area of the empirical study comprised ethical relationships within the teaching staff. The ethical and moral dimension of the teaching profession can also be observed in a considerable part of teachers' relationships and their behaviour and action towards others, be it their superiors, colleagues, other employees of the school, or even the general public. The teacher must not humiliate his colleagues in front of students, or mention, or discuss, conflicts occurring within the staff. However, teachers are also imperfect people and many of the above situations occur in teaching staffs not only in Slovakia but also in other countries worldwide (Husu, & Tirri, 2001; Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2010). Certainly, these are, on the part of teachers, misdirected actions, especially if it happens in front of their students. In such a case, teachers can in no way be examples of ethical behaviour for others, which is particularly valid in relationship towards students.

Hence, what are relationships among teachers and within teaching staffs like at present according to the findings of the research carried out? The authors asked teachers at 54 primary and secondary schools, involved in this research, how they perceive the level of relationships within their own teaching staffs (cf. Table 3).

Table 3. The school's teachers treat each other with respect and with tolerance and strive for good collegial relationships at school

I strongly agree	95	29.1%
I mostly agree	148	45.4%
I cannot say	51	15.5%
I mostly disagree	26	8%
I strongly disagree	6	1.8%

Quite similar results were found in the follow-up question which asked about *ignorance, mocking or mutual disrespect present among the school's teachers*. As many as 16.6% (54 respondents) agreed with this statement to various extents, while 73.2% of respondents (232) disagreed with such a claim to various extents. In the follow-up question, near agreement can be seen on the one hand between positive ratings of the relationship among teachers; however, on the other hand, there is an increase of almost 7% in the incidence of negative opinions on unethical expressions in the behaviour and actions of the teachers' colleagues.

Even though most respondents involved in the sociological research were regular teachers and only a relatively small part were members of school management, the authors were interested in how the teachers perceive their superiors. The research outcomes showed that the vast majority of the teachers had not experienced, or witnessed, corruption in the management hierarchy of their school (89.9% of respondents, 293); however, 11 teachers (3.3%) admitted, to various extents, they had experienced such unethical behaviour in the management of their school. Based on the research results; exploiting one's position as a member of a school's management for one's own profit seems to be a much more significant problem. Only 69.9% of respondents (228) denied, to various extents, the existence of such unethical behaviour and actions by the members of the management hierarchy of their school and 9.9% of the asked teachers (32) agreed, to various extents, with this opinion. Some teachers asked expressed their dissatisfaction with the school's leading employees using their position to "settle scores" with some teachers (12%). Even more respondents expressed their views that the school's management does not objectively assess the work outcomes of ordinary teachers (19.3%). A vast majority of teachers, however, appreciates that the leading employees at their school treat others with respect (78.8%). Based on these ratings of management members by other teachers it is not surprising that teachers have doubts with regard to the level to which members of a given school's management can be their models of ethical behaviour and actions (cf. Table 4).

Table 4. School management members are models of ethical behaviour for their subordinates.

I strongly agree	65	19.9%
I mostly agree	131	40.2%
I cannot say	84	25.8%
I mostly disagree	34	10.4%
I strongly disagree	12	3.7%

From the above research results it is clear that teachers consider relationships with their colleagues and superiors a serious ethical problem. Merely 5.9% of teachers happy with their job expressed their view that this is due to professional and competent school management. On the other hand, 13.2% of unhappy teachers ascribed their discontent to incompetent and unprofessional management of their school. It seems that a considerable volume of the total discontent in Slovak education is connected to the work of school managements, including criticism of unethical behaviour and actions of their members, which, as a result, leads to the fact that almost 40% of the respondents from Slovak primary and secondary schools do not consider the management members of their schools models of ethical behaviour and actions.

3.3.3 Teacher-parent relationships

The third researched aspect within the teaching profession is teachers' relationships with the external environment, predominantly with students' parents. The teacher should be an acceptable partner not only for parents but also other specialists (psychologists, doctors) with whom he comes in contact, in order to develop students' personalities. In the teacher-parent relationship one must realise that the parent is, morally, the teacher's equal partner in issues of a child's upbringing, which is why the

teacher should always respect this fact and approach the parents with the respect they are entitled to. On the other hand, one must also be aware that the parents, too, should respect and appreciate the teacher's views and opinions towards their child(ren), the result of which should be mutual cooperation of the teacher and the parents in the process of upbringing and education in the interest of the child's well-being.

What are teacher-parent relationships like in Slovak primary and secondary schools according to the research findings? Are these relationships better or worse than those between the teacher and the student, mainly with regard to students' behaviour? The research results seem to suggest that there is a certain analogy, or correlation in the perception of these relationships on the part of teachers towards parents and students, as, on the one hand, they rated their relationship towards parents quite positively (cf. Table 5); however, on the other hand, they have substantial reservations towards the behaviour and actions of parents towards teachers, regarding certain aggressive expressions on the part of parents.

Table 5. Mutual communication between teachers and parents is on a good level

I strongly agree	77	23.6%
I mostly agree	183	56.1%
I cannot say	46	14.1%
I mostly disagree	17	5.2%
I strongly disagree	3	0.9%

The claims regarding aggressive behaviour were rather interesting, where 41.4% of respondents strongly agreed and 35.9% mostly agreed with the statement that *the respondents had never experienced aggressive behaviour of a teacher towards a parent*, while 12% of the asked teachers admitted the existence of aggressive behaviour of teachers towards parents. Contrariwise, only 7.1% of those asked strongly agreed and 27.3% mostly agreed with the statement that they had never experienced aggressive behaviour of a parent towards a teacher, while 50.5% stated various levels of aggressive behaviour of parents towards teachers (36.8% mostly disagreed and 14.7% strongly disagreed with this statement). Highly similar results were found in the teachers' statements regarding the level of their relationships towards students and parents, as well as their perception of parents' behaviour towards teachers. A positive approach of teachers towards students and parents was found in the scope of 70–80%, while expressions of aggressive behaviour and actions on the part of students and parents were experienced by 50–52% of the asked teachers.

4. Discussions

The results of the research among Slovak teachers at primary and secondary schools confirmed the outcomes of similar research regarding the importance of a teacher's ethical person and relationships as conditions for the teacher's successful work (Aurin, & Maurer, 1993; Blasco, 2004; Campbel, 2003; Colnerud, 2006; Husu, & Tirri, 2001; Mooij, 2011; Osguthorpe, 2008; De Ruyter, & Kole, 2010).

Based on the findings, it can be stated that Slovak teachers rate their relationships with students most positively; nevertheless, on the one hand, approximately a tenth of those asked also perceived ethical problems regarding the incidence of certain manifestations of discrimination against students on the part of some teachers; still, more than 80% of respondents positively rated teacher-student relationships. Teachers consider their behaviour and actions with regard to respect, humanity, human dignity, justice, objectivity and tolerance towards students, which could also serve as an example for them, a highly significant factor within their work and professional teaching ethics. Similarly, Nirit Reichel and Sara Arnon in their research carried out among Jewish and Arab teachers in Israel found that 76% of male Arab teachers and 72% of female Arab teachers considered the ethical aspect the most important feature

of a good teacher. Jewish teachers placed teacher-student relationships on the first position of importance (57% in women and 50% in men) (Reichel, & Arnon, 2009).

On the other hand, it must be stated that Slovak teachers do not rate the behaviour and actions of students towards teachers equally positively, as more than a half of teachers stated a certain level of aggressive behaviour on the part of students towards teachers. This finding in Slovak teachers partially corresponds with a similar experience involving Dutch secondary school teachers, where, according to research carried out by Ton Mooij, 61% of respondents had experienced aggressive behaviour by students towards teachers. Verbal aggression was concerned most frequently (33%), followed by social and material aggression (11% both) (Mooij, 2011).

Slovak teachers often cite students' behaviour as a reason for their work dissatisfaction, frustration, or, even, burn-out. A teacher stated in the questionnaire that his job is frustrating "due to students' behaviour, as they realise we get paid for every single student, which is why they feel they are the masters of the situation, due to the fact our school is rather small". A female teacher claimed she was unhappy "due to the low level of students' knowledge; they are just moved up from one year to another in spite of their incapability, since the school is financed according to the number of students (which means my dissatisfaction is caused by the incompetence of the minister and most of his predecessors)". Another respondent stated a similar view, in which the reason for his dissatisfaction is "bad laws which do not allow the exclusion of rude and troublesome children from the educational process and shift the responsibility onto the parents [...]".

The claim of the above teacher regarding parents' responsibility for their children's education corresponds, to a certain extent, with the results of the present research with respect for the opinions of the teachers asked on teacher-parent relationships. A fairly significant correlation can be observed between the opinions of the teachers on, generally, positive teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships. A similar correlation was found in the teachers' opinions on the manifestations of aggressive behaviour by students and parents towards teachers. The results found and the abovementioned correlation between the aggressive behaviour of students and their parents towards teachers confirms the importance of parents as a positive or negative example, or model, in the process of bringing up their children. Based on her research among English secondary school students, Wendy Keys claimed that parents' support for and interest in their children's studies has a positive influence on their relationship towards school and their achieved results (Keys, 2006). Similar findings were achieved by Finnish authors who found that teachers perceive cooperation with parents and parents' support for their children's study outcomes as a positive source of their satisfaction (Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2010). In the questionnaire, several Slovak teachers stated that there are a great number of "socially disadvantaged students, who are not interested in studies". It could be presumed there is a connection between the parents' attitudes and those of students towards their studies and teachers, which could also result in aggressive behaviour and actions towards teachers.

As far as teacher-teacher relationships are concerned, the research results suggest an interesting finding. On the one hand, almost three quarters of teachers involved state very good relationships with their colleagues; however, on the other hand, they rated them less positively than teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships. A comparison with the outcomes of the abovementioned Finnish research was rather interesting in that the Finnish teachers involved rated equally positively the influence of teacher-student and teacher-teacher relationships on their well-being at work and, on the other hand, similarly perceived teacher-teacher and teacher-parent relationships; however, they found teacher-student relationships most stressful (Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2010). These differences might be connected to the fact that while the Slovak target group comprised primary and secondary school teachers, the Finnish target group consisted of kindergartens and primary schools, which means that slightly different age-groups of students were involved; moreover, there were different cultural contexts, which could have caused differences in the outcomes achieved in the two given research studies.

While, according to the research results, more than 80% of respondents believe that a teacher could be an ethical model for students, with regard to their superiors, or school management, only approximately 60% of the asked teachers hold this opinion, while they denied, rather categorically, that the school management takes bribes. They, however, blamed them for other faults, such as giving priority to their own interests in the process of school management or biased assessment of teachers' work. Presumably, these factors played a significant role when assessing their superiors, and a more critical view of the behaviour and actions of their superiors than their own actions might have caused the above critical evaluation of their superiors.

5. Conclusion

With regard to the presented results of research among Slovak primary and secondary school teachers it can be stated that it is in the interest of every teacher to keep ethical and moral aspects of his behaviour and actions in mind, in order to not be ashamed of his everyday work in front of his students, superiors, colleagues, and parents which should not only be beneficial for him but also for all involved individuals and the whole society. The authors are, however, aware of the fact that some parents, as well as part of the general public, consider school an "omnipotent" institution which is to remedy their pedagogical shortcomings or failures. People must realise that school is not an isolated island which is spared from external events. Children and adolescents bring domestic and other social problems, as well as the successes and shortcomings of social and political events in the country, with them. School as such and the teachers within cannot deal with educational challenges in isolation but only always in cooperation with the efforts of society (Aurin, & Maurer, 1993). The professional ethics of a teacher reflects the situation and problems of social ethics and morality, which has a direct (as well as indirect) impact on ethical relationships within the entire teaching profession and individual teaching staffs at primary, secondary schools, as well as universities.

A key role of teachers and the entire teaching profession lies in (alongside the parents and family) helping students on their journey from potential moral agents to responsible moral agents. This means, apart from other things, that they assist in children's and youths' awareness that respect towards man's person also depends, to a great extent, on their behaviour and actions. It also means that emphasising the fact that the respect of a teacher (as well as other adults) towards senior students (starting with adolescence) depends, to a certain extent, on their behaviour and actions.

Equally, the principle and value of human dignity must become the essence of mutual teacher-teacher and teacher-superior relationships. It is vital that a teacher, besides respecting himself, is able to positively perceive his colleagues; recognise their rights and not threaten them, does not harm them or use them for his own ends. In a teaching collective, mutual tolerance and understanding is highly appreciated. This is similarly valid in the relationship towards superiors, who should, apart from other things, also be concerned with providing teachers' with adequate and humane conditions to carry out their school tasks and duties as well as out-of-school work, since, if a teacher works in an environment that degrades his dignity, this could lead to a prevalence of negative social consequences in his general operation, to dissatisfaction with work and general personal frustration. A responsible leading employee should never lower himself to inhumane behaviour or actions which offend the human dignity of teachers and other pedagogical employees.

The authors strongly believe that the research results will contribute to a discussion on ethical relationships within the teaching profession in Slovakia (as well as in other post-communist countries, or, possibly, other developed countries worldwide), but, mainly, inspire the political and social elite to seriously deal with the situation in the Slovak education system and its future direction from the viewpoint of the level to which Slovak teachers can also efficiently contribute to the formation of a knowledgeable society as well as future ethics and morality of Slovak society.

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