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AUTHOR Tirri, Kirsi
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the main characteristics of professional morality according to Finnish secondary school teachers. Participants were 33 teachers from an urban Finnish secondary school with a heterogeneous student population. Teachers were asked to identify the most common moral dilemmas they had experienced in the teaching profession and to discuss their problem-solving strategies when dealing with the dilemmas. During the structured interviews, the participants described their subjective theories of teachers' professional ethos. Data analysis used Oser's model of teachers' ethos as the underlying taxonomy to examine the subjective theories expressed by teachers in the theoretical framework of justice, caring, truthfulness, and commitment. Results indicated that the highest percentage of teachers emphasized commitment as an indicator of teachers with a high professional ethos. The second most common dimension of teachers' ethos according to the teachers was justice. One-quarter of the teachers rated justice as an important quality. Only 12 percent of the teachers mentioned truthfulness, and 9 percent of the teachers mentioned care, as important qualities for teachers with a high professional ethos. (Contains 30 references.) (SM)

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How Finnish teachers view their professional ethos: a case study

Dr. Kirsi Tirri

Department of Teacher Education, P.O. Box 38

FIN-00014 University of Helsinki

Finland

email: ktirri@cc.Helsinki.FI

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the main characteristics of professional morality described by Finnish secondary school teachers. The characteristics of Finnish teacher education and the current trends affecting the teaching profession in Finland are discussed as contextual factors of our study. The theoretical framework for our study is Oser's model of teachers' ethos (Oser 1991). Our aim is to explore the validity of that model in the Finnish context. The sample of the study consisted of 33 teachers from an urban Finnish secondary school. The chosen school represents a school with a very heterogeneous pupil population and devoted teachers. The method used in this case study was a structured interview. In the interview, teachers were asked to describe their subjective theories of teachers' professional ethos. The data gathered from teachers were investigated in the theoretical framework of Oser's model of professional morality. Our aim was to determine those dimensions of professional morality which the Finnish teachers find the most important. In particular, the effect of teachers' background on their emphases on professional ethos was explored.

Our motivation to study teachers' professional morality rises from the current discussion and emphasis on the moral dimension of education (Oser 1994a, Jackson et al. 1993, Goodlad et al. 1990, Tom 1984). We adhere to the researchers who want to educate teachers who can be characterized by effectiveness, thoughtfulness and responsibility in their teaching (Clark 1995, Oser et. al. 1994). In this article, the main concepts related to responsible teaching - justice, care, truthfulness and commitment - are discussed with the empirical findings of teachers' own theories of them. This case study reflects the views of teachers from one particular secondary school in Finland. The study has plans to continue as an action research with the same teachers. In that future work, the teachers would participate in an ethical discourse on those dilemmas they identified earlier. The first phase of research reported here will give the necessary information regarding teachers' own ideas of professional morality. Before one can question his own theories of teachers' ethos, one needs to acknowledge them. Self-reflection can be seen as the first step in the lifelong process of becoming an effective, thoughtful and responsible teacher (Dewey 1933).

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2. Finnish Teacher Education

Today in Finland all teachers are educated at universities. During the last two decades, teacher education has gone through big changes in structure, style and content. The overall aim has been to improve the quality and status of the teaching profession. Gradually, and in addition to secondary school teacher education, different forms of teacher education have been linked to the universities. The most recent change has been the integration of pre-primary school teacher education into university education, which occurred in August 1995. In a recent international review of Finnish education policy, the initial teacher education, especially primary and pre-primary teacher education, received high evaluations (Buchberger et al. 1994, 9). A more thorough description and analysis of teacher education in Finland is presented by Sven-Erik Hansén in the national report prepared for a European evaluation conference (Hansén 1995, 3-26).

Finnish teacher education in general and the University of Helsinki Department of Teacher Education in particular have emphasized academic aspects of teacher education. Thus, research-based academic studies dominate the contents of teacher education. The aim of education is to promote pedagogically thinking teachers who can combine their theoretical knowledge with everyday work. The academic emphases can also be seen in the teachers' classroom practices. In a comparative study of teacher effectiveness (Tirri 1993), the Finnish primary school teachers evaluated themselves as most effective in promoting academic learning. This tendency manifested itself in teachers' time-on-task behavior. In the same study, American teachers emphasized their dynamic, stimulating teaching, which integrates external projects and sources into the regular teacher-centered classroom teaching (Tirri 1993).

New trends at the University of Helsinki Department of Teacher Education include establishment of a Media and Distance Education Research and Development Centre in late 1996. The Centre will enhance research in the field of media education, open learning and virtual pedagogy, but it will also organize teacher education programs for class and subject teachers as well as for adult educators. Different modes of distance education such as audiographics and video conferencing, computer conferencing, intensive face-to-face periods, and e-mail will be used. For all students in the Department of Teacher Education, the Centre will offer an opportunity to do part of their teaching practice (about 2 credits) in distance teaching (Tella 1996).

With increasing technology in teacher education, the philosophical and ethical aspects of the teaching profession should also be acknowledged. The increasing autonomy in a teacher's work, growing cultural diversity in the Finnish society and changes in the national framework curricula indicate that the amount of moral dilemmas at school is likely to increase. In teacher education, one of the main challenges is to prepare the students to identify and solve different kinds of professional dilemmas (Tirri 1996). Students should be guided to see themselves as ethical professionals and as agents of change who can make a significant contribution to the lives of their learners and to society. The challenges of teacher

education include creation of a new culture of teacher education and schools where teachers and learners collaborate with each other and the schools' stakeholders. The aim of such partnership is to improve social justice and change society through better education (Kohonen & Niemi 1996).

3. Teachers' Professional Morality

3.1 The Teachers' Ethos Model

Oser (1991) has proposed a distinction among three types of morality: normative, situational and professional. Professional morality is connected to nonmoral, functional, professional acting. As long as everything proceeds without any conflicts, the teachers do not usually need to consider the ethical standards of their acts. It is only in those situations when the normal routines of instruction are interrupted that teachers need to consider the principles for solving the existing dilemma. The types of principles teachers refer to in these conflicts define their professional responsibility, which manifests itself in professional acts.



Figure 1. Dimensions of the teachers' ethos model (Oser 1991, 202).

Teachers' professional morality can also be called their professional ethos. Oser has outlined a model for studying teachers' professional ethos (Oser 1991, 202). He argues that moral conflicts in educational settings arise when three types of moral claims cannot be met at the same time. These claims of justice, care and truthfulness are critical issues in teachers' professional decision making. Professional morality emerges in strategies of coordinating these moral dimensions in the search for an adequate solution to a problem. The differences between individuals' professional morality can be seen as differences of teachers' strategies in coordinating these dimensions. Central to his theory of professional morality is the hypothesis of qualitatively different forms of decision making strategies. Oser has identified five types of orientations in teachers' attempts to solve professional moral dilemmas.

In the **avoiding** orientation, the teacher tries to "solve" the problem by not facing it. He does not want to take any responsibility for difficult questions. Somebody other than the teacher needs to find the balance of justice, care and truthfulness. In

the **delegating** orientation, the teacher accepts the fact that he has some responsibility for dealing with the situation. The teacher does not want to make any decisions himself but delegates the decision making to somebody else (for example, the principal or the school psychologist). In the **single-handed decision making**, the teacher tries to settle the problem by taking it into his own hands. The teacher views himself as an “expert” who has the ability to solve the problem quickly and often in an authoritarian manner. The teacher does not need to justify his decisions to the other interested parties. In the **discourse I (incomplete discourse)** orientation, the teacher accepts his personal responsibility for settling the problem, and he explains how he has balanced justice, care and truthfulness in each new situation. The teacher also knows that the students are able to understand a well-reflected balance of justice, care and truthfulness. The final orientation is called **discourse II (complete discourse)**, in which the teacher acts similarly to one with a “discourse I” orientation. The teacher goes one step further; he presupposes that all students and other persons who are concerned and involved are rational human beings who are also interested in and capable of balancing justice, care and truthfulness. The teacher holds this principle even in critical or aggressive situations (Oser 1991, 191-205).

The concepts of justice, care and truthfulness Oser uses in defining the professional responsibility of teachers have also been widely used in other models and orientations of moral judgment. The teachers need to be aware of these concepts and their meaning before they can make meaningful decisions in balancing them. To further explicate these concepts, we give a brief review of the relevant research related to these concepts. In the same context, we discuss the findings of our empirical study that reflect the professional ethos viewed by Finnish secondary school teachers.

4. How Finnish Teachers View Their Professional Ethos

4.1 The Empirical Study

4.1.1 The Data Collection

We started our research on teachers’ professional ethos by interviewing all the teachers in one urban secondary school. Havukoski School is located in Vantaa, close to Helsinki. As mentioned earlier, the school has a very heterogeneous pupil population; of a total of 400 pupils, 15 per cent are foreigners. Havukoski School has the reputation of an active school, and it has been involved in many projects focusing on improvement of teaching and learning. These earlier projects include curriculum improvement, student assessment and special teaching for foreigners. The teachers are very devoted to their profession, and they made a unanimous decision to be involved in our project to study teachers’ professional morality. The project started in January 1996 with a preliminary survey. In that survey, teachers were interviewed to identify the most common moral dilemmas they had experienced in their teaching profession. We also explored teachers’ solving strategies in those dilemmas they had faced. In this article we report the findings

related to teachers' subjective theories concerning the notion of "ethos." We adopted Oser's method in which teachers are asked to complete the following statement: "A teacher has a high ethos if s/he ..." (Oser 1991).

In the first phase of our research, 33 teachers were interviewed with a structured interview. The interviews were carried out within four days by the same researcher and each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Only two teachers were not able to participate in our preliminary survey due to illness. The research project will continue in the future as an action research in which the teachers participate in ethical discourse on the moral dilemmas revealed in the preliminary survey. In this discourse, teachers will search together for better strategies to solve those difficult problems that they regularly face in their profession.

4.1.2 Data Analysis

In this article we describe and analyze the subjective theories of teachers' ethos as expressed by the teachers from this particular school in Finland. We have adapted a qualitative analysis approach and aimed at increasing understanding of teachers' ethos based on these case studies. As Shulman has argued, we are making a theoretical claim with our case study. According to him, a case is always an instance of a larger class, an example of a broader category. It implies an underlying taxonomy or typology to which a given case belongs (Shulman 1992, 17). In our case study, the underlying taxonomy is Oser's model of teachers' ethos. We have analyzed all the subjective theories expressed by teachers in the theoretical framework of justice, care, truthfulness, and commitment - the main dimensions of teachers' ethos model. All but one case could be classified into these categories. In the following section, we present the results of our case study in the context of relevant research on these main concepts which describe responsible professional behavior.

4.2 Dimensions of Teachers' Professional Ethos

4.2.1 Justice

The majority of research related to the moral domain has examined the development of moral judgment in general, based on the classical studies of Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1969). These studies represent the cognitive developmental approach in which moral behavior is considered to be largely dependent on moral judgment. Kohlberg has formulated a six-stage theory of moral judgment which he claims to be invariant and universal. The highest stage of moral development is reached when a person has become an autonomous moral agent who judges moral dilemmas based on the universal principles using deductive thinking in his judgments (Kohlberg 1976).

Kohlberg studied moral judgment and its development using the method of dilemmas. In dilemmas there is no "right" answer, but instead the presence of

conflicting needs or principles. Subjects are stimulated to reflect on motives for choosing one or another of the solutions to the dilemma. Kohlberg analyzed responses with the aim of finding specific characteristics of the stages and thereby identifying the level of reasoning of the subject. He developed a standardized system of scoring for which he provided criteria in a manual (Colby & Kohlberg 1987).

The research results show that the educational background of a person is a very important variable in predicting his level of moral reasoning. Helkama refers to a Greek study in which the moral reasoning of teachers was studied. According to this study, the teachers ranked very high in their judgments measured with Kohlberg's scale. Of almost one hundred teachers, more than a half scored on the postconventional level of stage 5 in their judgments (Helkama 1993, 65). This study result might indicate that teachers have good potential for arriving at just solutions in their judgments. However, according to the model of professional morality presented in the earlier chapter, responsible judgments in educational settings require more than justice-oriented solutions. The teachers need to balance their orientation to justice with the orientations of care and truthfulness.

In our study teachers favored justice-oriented theories for teachers' high professional ethos. Eight teachers out of thirty-three (24%) mentioned justice as the main quality for a teacher with a high professional morality. Sex distribution among these teachers who preferred justice orientation was equal. The nature of the moral dilemma they had experienced did not explain their preference on the justice approach. The teachers in this category had experienced all kinds of moral dilemmas. Age or teaching experience did not explain this orientation, either; the teachers represented all age groups and all school subjects. One interesting observation was that teachers of social and environmental studies (history, biology, geography, religious education) never mentioned the other dimensions of teachers' ethos (care or truthfulness). Sixty percent of these teachers emphasized the importance of justice in the professional morality of teachers. A common trend among all these teachers was the emphasis on the pupils' point of view. In most cases, justice was defined as equality. The teachers acknowledged the importance of being fair to all their pupils regardless of their talents, physical appearance, parents' social status etc. A teacher who had taught a lot of pupils from minority groups and sometimes had conflicts with these pupils defined her theory of a high teacher's ethos like this:

“A high professional ethos? It is as in all human relationships that you have to try to be as just as possible. It really requires a lot of thinking from the teacher to be fair. Many times your feelings would lead you in the other direction, and you need to be very active in your thinking. You have to keep in mind to always treat all your pupils equally even if you don't like them all. A teacher has to actively strive for justice” (Female, five years' teaching experience).

4.2.2 Care

In the moral orientation of care, the aspects of empathy and interpersonal relationships are central in reaching the most responsible judgment in a moral

dilemma. Many times deductive thinking only advocates the most just solution, and inductive thinking can give more insight into the special case. Gilligan has criticized deductive thinking in Kohlberg's theory and emphasizes care and the importance of maintaining interpersonal relationships in an attempt at solving moral dilemmas (Gilligan & Attanucci 1988).

Dilemmas used by Kohlberg concerned obedience, authoritarian relationships, seriousness of cheating, etc. We can assume that in real life and in the educational setting teachers face very different kinds of dilemmas from the ones formulated by Kohlberg. Oser has asked teachers about their subjective theories concerning the notion of "ethos." The teachers were asked to complete the following statement: "A teacher has a high ethos if s/he ..." The study involved 210 teachers of all ages including both females and males. The teachers gave the highest priority to caring attitudes in relation to teachers' ethos. Truthfulness and commitment were also mentioned fairly often as important aspects of teachers' professional morality. Surprisingly, justice appeared least frequently as an indication of teachers' ethos (Oser 1991, 206).

Considering Oser's study, the teachers seem to put most emphasis on care in their professional conduct. Noddings has espoused an ethical ideal of caring in teacher-student relationships. This ethical ideal requires deep empathy, engrossment, and commitment on the part of teachers. In their work, teachers must constantly nurture the ethical ideal of caring, which entails dialogue with their students. Noddings argues that ethical caring springs from deep biological and psychological structures and from the natural sympathy that we feel for each other (Noddings 1992).

In a caring relationship, one wants to do good for the other, understands him and his life situation and is ready to make an effort for the benefit of the other. The teacher cannot act or make important decisions for the student; he can only point out the student's potential for development. This kind of care that aims at empowering the student is emancipatory in nature.

The teachers in our study differed from Oser's study in their emphasis on the care orientation. According to teachers in Oser's study, care was the most dominant characteristic of a teacher with a high professional ethos. In our case study, only three teachers (9%) mentioned matters related to caring to be important aspects of a teacher's professional morality. Not surprisingly, all these teachers were female. Another interesting observation was that two of these teachers were specialized in mathematics. They both had more than ten years of teaching experience and both had experienced moral dilemmas concerning pupils' work moral. Both these teachers had also bravely applied ethical discourse approaches in the moral dilemmas they had faced. A typical feature common to both of them was their willingness to involve themselves in situations they considered to need their attention. One of them described her theory of a teacher's ethos in the following way:

"I have the responsibility to educate these children. It includes moral responsibility to care. I have to tell them the reasons why you should not behave a

certain way and what kind of consequences your actions have on others. Professional morality includes caring for all your pupils. You should not ask too much but still pay attention if somebody is absent very often and not just let it pass. You have to tell them that they are important and they need to be here at school. You also have to tell them that people think differently on many things. There is not only one way to think” (Female, more than ten years’ teaching experience).

4.2.3 Truthfulness

The importance of truthfulness in teachers’ professional morality is easy to agree upon because teachers are dealing with knowledge and truth in their professional conduct. The pursuit of truth can be seen as the fundamental aim of all education. The leading research on teachers’ professional morality has listed honesty as one of the main virtues central to successful teaching (Sockett 1993, 62-88, Clark 1990, 252-256).

Clark (1990) has defined honesty as telling the truth and acting in ways that are wholly consistent with what you know or believe to be true. The definition also involves refraining from cheating, lying, representing the work of another as your own, stealing, and other dishonest deeds. In teachers’ work, many moral dilemmas concerning students deal with telling the truth and preventing or correcting cheating (Clark 1990, 253).

There are some normative guidelines for teachers that articulate minimum acceptable professional behavior. The Representative Assembly published the Code of Ethics of the Education Profession in 1975 (Strike & Soltis 1985). The code consists of a total of sixteen should-statements that mostly deal with truthfulness. Half of the statements define the educator’s obligations to the student and the other half his commitment to the teaching profession. The code is comprehensive and makes clear the basic responsibilities of educators to students and to the profession, but it has its limits, too. The code has been criticized for its lack of offering a philosophical justification of the fundamental ethical principles embedded in it. Additionally, in real life the obligations to our students and to our colleagues might clash (Soltis 1986, 2).

In our study, truthfulness was mentioned by four teachers (12%) as an important aspect of professional morality. In most of the cases, truthfulness was mentioned as honesty practiced by the teacher. By honesty, teachers referred to the open and unpretending behavior of a teacher. Oser has also defined truthfulness as willingness to openly accept conflicts with some people (Oser 1994b). In our study, one teacher referred to this kind of situation in defining her theory of teachers’ professional ethos:

“The teacher needs to be ready to change his own attitudes in some things if necessary. On the other hand, the teacher should be brave enough to make decisions that might cause problems with some people. The most difficult thing is

if you avoid the situation and let the difficult things be the same. I think that is unmoral. You have to take the responsibility and make a decision you believe is the right one” (Female, fifteen years’ teaching experience).

4.2.4 Commitment

In our study, teachers referred most often to commitment in defining their subjective theory of teachers’ professional ethos. More than half of the teachers (52%) mentioned teachers’ commitment to the teaching profession as the most important issue in their professional morality. This trend was the same for both males and females as well as for inexperienced and experienced teachers. Teachers of different subjects shared this trend with each other. One interesting observation was that foreign language teachers emphasized commitment to the teaching profession even more than the teachers of other subjects.

In some of the interviews, this commitment was closely related to the Lutheran ethics that value work itself. In these interviews, the importance of doing a teaching job as well as possible was the main issue. Usually this emphasis was connected to pupils’ learning. The main purpose of a teacher was seen as achieving good learning results with one’s pupils. The interviewed teachers evidently valued effective teaching with good learning outcomes. The following quote is an example of a typical interview that reflected these issues:

“The teacher needs to know her subject well to be able to teach it in the way so that pupils will learn. The teacher should be able to transmit the necessary knowledge to pupils. That’s why the teacher and the pupils are at school - to learn new things. First the teacher needs to motivate the pupils and then make them learn. Then you can talk about high professional morality” (Female, more than twenty years of teaching experience).

In many interviews, subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills were mentioned as indicators of a committed teacher. Commitment shows in a teacher’s dedication to lifelong learning and growth in the profession. A committed teacher is well-prepared for classes and does not miss work even when sick!

Evidently, these teachers were themselves very committed. As mentioned earlier, they had been actively involved in developing their school with several projects in recent years. Almost seventy percent of the teachers said that teaching is their first choice and they would not want to change their profession. Approximately thirty percent of the teachers said that they could do something else than teaching but they would not want to give up teaching totally. All the teachers had also participated actively in in-service education in their own field of specialization. Furthermore, they mentioned several areas in which they would like to receive in-service education. The current emphasis on modern information technology in Finland was reflected in teachers’ desire to have more training in that area. Modern information technology was mentioned by 11 teachers (33%) as their first choice of voluntary in-service instruction. The next popular areas in in-service education were special courses in their own subjects and social relations.

5. Discussion and Future Work

The teachers in our study emphasized commitment in their subjective theories of teachers' ethos. This commitment meant effective teaching that produces good learning results in pupils. Another characteristic of a committed teacher was his desire to know his subject matter and to learn more about it. More than half of the teachers interviewed mentioned these kinds of issues as indicators of a teacher with a high professional ethos. The second common dimension of teachers' ethos in teachers' definitions was justice. According to 24% of the teachers, a just teacher who treats all his pupils in a like manner is the one with a high professional morality. Truthfulness was mentioned by 12% of the teachers as an important characteristic of a good teacher. A truthful teacher was defined as a teacher who is honest with his pupils and also has the courage to openly accept conflicts when necessary.

Surprisingly, only 9% of the teachers mentioned care as an important quality for a teacher with a high professional ethos. This finding is different from Oser's study, in which care was mentioned as the most important dimension of teachers' professional morality (Oser 1991). Possible explanations for this difference can be found in the grade level taught by the teachers and the differences in the schools that were involved. All the teachers in our study taught in an urban secondary school. In contrast, teachers in Oser's study represented all kinds of schools and grade levels. With a larger and more representative sample of teachers, we could compare the results to Oser's study in a valid way. However, we assume that Finnish elementary school teachers could have given more emphasis to caring in teachers' professional morality. An emphasis on justice can be more associated with Finnish secondary school teachers and especially those who teach pupils from minority groups.

We conclude that all the dimensions of a teachers' ethos model could also be found in the subjective theories of Finnish secondary school teachers. In this article, we have presented these theories in the context of other relevant research in this field. We have plans to continue our study with the same teachers as an action research. The teachers have acknowledged the need to increase ethical discourse in their school. In that ethical discourse, teachers will practice their argumentation skills and take part in communicative action advocated by Habermas (1984, 1990). In that process the moral dimension of teaching will be explicitly discussed.

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Signature: <i>Kirsi Tirri</i>	Printed Name/Position/Title: <i>Kirsi Tirri / Dr.</i>
Organization/Address: <i>University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 39, FIN-00014 Helsinki, Finland</i>	Telephone: <i>+358 9 1918060</i> FAX: <i>+358 9 1918078</i>
	E-Mail Address: <i>Kirsi.Tirri@helsinki.fi</i> Date: <i>10/16/1998</i>



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