

# A professional ethical stance; to guide the children about right and wrong

The moral dimension of teaching is ever-present and as part of teachers' professional ethical approach, it often remains unspoken and thus elusive. In addition, the ambiguity is increased by the fact that ethics in teaching practice is perceived in many ways (Cliffe & Solvason, 2022). Perceptions of right and wrong quickly become problematic and teachers rather need to deal with ethics as a matter with lots of shades of gray (Cliffe & Solvason, 2022). Apart from the fact that ethics has many nuances, it is also unclear what the teacher's ethical responsibilities include. Studies show how teachers experience a tension between taking responsibility for the children based on knowledge goals and taking care of them morally (Jepson Wigg, 2021; Walls, 2022). Another difficulty in teachers' professional ethics is that various demands from students (Tielman et al., 2022) or parents might cause value-based tensions and external regulations might cause moral distress (Ribers, 2018). Actually, Dahl (2017) questions cooperation with parents because they sometimes undermine teachers' ability to take ethical responsibility for students.

A value-neutral teaching is challenged by the fact that teachers must guide the children to a democratic approach in practice (Castner et al., 2017) and speak for humanity (Chen et al., 2017). Teachers' embodiment of democratic approach is favoured over a neoliberal accountability (Castner et al., 2017). Thus, the teachers' moral endeavour in teaching is subject to many different interests that require taking a stand, but it is unclear how this happens. The complexity and the fact that ethics in teaching often remains a tacit knowledge and a hidden agenda (Baker-Doyle et al., 2018) for teachers' actions in ethical dilemmas (Chen et al., 2017) justifies a study aiming to contribute with more knowledge about how teachers in preschool and Elementary school perceive ethics when they encounter children in teaching. The research questions are:

1. What characterizes the teachers' ethical responsibility?
2. How is ethical responsibility expressed in teaching?

Within the research field, studies show that teachers' perceived responsibility for the children in teaching relates to expressed ethical codes in several ways. French-Lee and Dooley (2015) identified that teachers in preschool developed their moral reasoning in relation to a current ethical code through collegial discussion about ethical dilemmas. Another way of relating to codes is to depart from them when caring for the children requires it (Fenech & Lotz, 2018). Social justice is according to Fenech and Lotz (2018) the main guiding light for early childhood teachers' ethical responsibility and takes precedence over formulations in ethical codes. The attention to ethical codes in research has its origins in the importance of professional ethics as a basis for the teaching profession's status as a profession (Kuusisto & Tirri, 2021). In a Swedish context, the teachers' unions have formulated an ethical code but it is quite unknown to most teachers. The code has been criticized in research for several reasons (Cronqvist, 2020), among other things for not being based on research and conflation of concrete and abstract levels. Ethics is often related to religious beliefs and this relationship could cause teachers in a distinctly secularized country like Sweden to differ in their view of the importance of religion, but at the same time, the research field clearly shows that more knowledge about how teachers understand their ethical responsibility in meeting children in teaching is an international affair. The lack of knowledge about teachers' professional identity and actions in relation to the ethical dimension of teaching is a common international problem.

The study is phenomenological and inspired by Reflective Lifeworld Research (RLR), an epistemological approach that strives to find the essential meanings of the specific phenomenon, despite variations in the empirical data (Dahlberg et al., 2008). The meaning of the phenomenon is sought through the lived experiences of the participants. The current phenomenon is ethics and morals in the meeting with children in teaching.

#### *Participants and data collection:*

Nine teachers in preschool and Elementary school have been interviewed and recorded via zoom about their experiences of the phenomenon. One participant was male, the rest females. They were all experienced, but the number of years, age, subjects and student groups varied. During the interview, the participants talked freely about their experiences and the researcher's task was to constantly direct the conversation towards the phenomenon. Follow-up questions were used to make sure that solid explanations and examples were obtained.

#### *Analysis:*

The analysis is carried out over a long period and in several steps, as reflection, openness and "bridling" one's own preconceptions characterize the process. This means that the process is carried out based on self-awareness on the part of the researcher to ensure that the analysis is elaborated and critically reviewed in all parts. The first step is to read data several times and to mark meaningful units. It could be words, sentences or whole sections. Then, different patterns are elaborated, trying to find out what is overarching, what is subordinate and how different boundaries can be made in the pattern. The third step means to formulate an abstract essence of the phenomenon that shows how different parts of the whole relate to each other. Through all steps of the analysis, there is a constant movement between the whole and the parts. The essential meanings capture the phenomenon's "style of being" (Dahlberg, 2006, p.18) in spite of all variations. In the presentation of the results, the abstract overall picture of the studied phenomenon is supplemented with variations and concrete examples.

#### *Results:*

The essential meaning of the phenomenon of ethics and morality in the meeting with children in education is constituted by the following elements of meaning: 1. Guidance of the children 2. Relationship building 3. Safe and respectful learning environment 4. Cooperation. A more detailed description is given through the abstract overview essence of what, despite all variations, is relatively stable: The teachers' main ethical responsibility is to guide the children by offering them different perspectives, different understandings of what is right and wrong, and understandings of what responsibility means. They are guided in two ways. The first way is through discussions on various issues with them and by reprimanding them and handling conflicts between them. The second way to guide the children is through the teacher acting as a role model for them. For guidance to work, it must include relationship work and the shaping of a safe learning environment. The relationship work involves getting to know and understanding the individual child without preconceived notions and setting a limit for the private. The learning environment must be designed in a way that enable children to participate and must be characterized by clear communication and openness. Differences among the children must be acknowledged. The ethical and moral aspect of the teacher's meeting with the children is shaped in relation to the surrounding society, governing documents, guardians and colleagues. Values and attitudes expressed in the children's environment influence how they express themselves in teaching. Cooperation with both guardians and colleagues is described and sought, but can be problematic and lead to dilemmas. The teachers must manage different viewpoints within these groups.

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