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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses teachers' moral mistakes, using data from 59 teacher interviews, 26 teacher written responses, and 98 ninth grade student written responses. Teachers and students described incidents in their schools that made them reflect on the moral nature of the situation. The most common moral dilemmas in schools related to teacher behavior, particularly misuse of authority. Usually, these conflicts centered on punishing or grading students and sensitive matters students had shared in confidence with teachers. Students also identified teacher behaviors that reflected neglectful and biased attitudes toward students. Both groups believed that schools used teachers' autonomous decision making to solve moral dilemmas. The lesson learned was that teachers should be guided to reflect on their role and authority in solving conflicts with students. Another dilemma was that teachers failed to protect students in conflicts involving colleagues. The lesson learned was that teachers needed training to handle collegial conflicts that hurt their students. Some of the conflicts reported in the study concerned dilemmas when a teacher had to stand against the whole community to protect the rights of a student. The lesson learned was that teacher education should promote communicative action and moral discourse. (Contains 14 references and 3 tables.) (SM)

What can we learn from teachers' moral mistakes?

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1. Pedagogically thinking teachers and moral mistakes

The teaching profession is moral in nature and teachers face many moral dilemmas every day in their work (Socket, 1993, Tirri, 1999). Even the most professional and morally virtuous teacher makes some moral mistakes in his/her career. The positive way to look at those mistakes is to ask: what can we learn from those mistakes and how can we share this knowledge with future teachers? Our research data with both elementary and secondary school teachers indicate that teachers share common features in their pedagogical thinking and teaching practice (Kansanen, Tirri, Meri, Krokfors, Husu & Jyrhämä, 2000). We have identified these collective features in teachers' thinking to be field-invariant epistemological standards guiding their practical knowledge (Tirri, Husu & Kansanen, 1999). According to our findings, teachers combine intuitive reasoning with more rational justifications in their teaching practice. The sense of vocation provides teachers with a sense of personal identity and fulfilment. Teachers cannot separate their own moral character and the professional self from each other. The stance of teachers' moral character function as a moral approach in teachers' reasoning, guiding their ways of interacting with pupils and giving them hope for the future. The professional approach in teachers' reasoning includes rules and principles guiding teachers' pedagogical practice and decision-making. We have identified these rules and principles as the stance of teachers' professional character in their practical knowing. The findings of our study indicate that teaching can be seen as both a vocation with a deep personal commitment and a profession with clear rational principles. In a search for effective teaching, both sides of practice should be acknowledged and brought together.

Regardless of the subject matter or grade-level taught, teachers face common moral challenges in relation to their students, parents and colleagues. Sometimes teachers succeed to balance their personal interests and habits with their professional role and authority. However, in real life, teachers' personal preferences can override their professional role and lead them into moral mistakes. Furthermore, teachers may misuse their authority in two fundamental ways. It is generally assumed that there are two basic kinds of authority, epistemic and deontic (Bochenski, 1974). It is desirable that a person with the authority to give orders (deontic authority) is also knowledgeable in the field of question (epistemic authority). Teachers need deontic authority to control the classroom situation and to maintain order. In addition, teachers need to be epistemic authorities. They ought to master the subject matter and the pedagogical knowledge needed for teaching. Furthermore, it has been suggested that these two forms of authority are closely connected, in that the legitimation of the deontic authority in education must at least partly be based on knowledge (Neiman, 1986).

This paper discusses teachers' moral mistakes in schools as identified by early education and secondary school teachers and students. The data includes 59 teacher interviews, 26 teacher written responses and 98 written responses from ninth-grade students. Both teachers and students were asked to describe an incident in their school that made them to reflect on the moral nature of the situation. The results of these studies are reported in various articles (Tirri, 1999; Tirri, Husu & Kansanen, 1999; Tirri & Puolimatka, 2000; Husu & Tirri, 2000; Tirri, 2001; Tirri & Husu, 2001). In this paper, we analyze the

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earlier findings of our study by collecting together those case studies that reflect on the moral lessons learned from the mistakes. The lessons learned by teachers are discussed and some recommendations for the future teachers are presented based on both teachers' and students' experiences.

2. Teachers common moral mistakes

2.1 Teachers misuse their authority with their students

The most common moral dilemmas in schools identified by both teachers and students concerned matters related to teachers' behavior. All these dilemmas involved questions concerning teachers' practice of using authority. Usually, these conflicts dealt with punishing or grading pupils and sensitive matters, which pupils had confided to them. In addition to punishing, grading and sensitive matters, the students identified teachers' behavior that reflected neglectful and biased attitudes toward students. The teachers had also used impolite language and raised their voice in speaking to students. The themes and distributions of moral dilemmas identified by teachers and students concerning matters related to teachers' work can be seen in Table 1.

| Moral Dilemmas in Teachers' Behavior | Teachers N=21 | Students N=51 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Grading | 2 | 3 |
| Punishing | 7 | 9 |
| Confidentiality | 2 | 3 |
| Sensitive issues | 3 | 0 |
| Colleague | 5 | 0 |
| Teaching criticism | 2 | 0 |
| Impolite language | 0 | 13 |
| Neglecting students | 0 | 6 |
| Biased attitude | 0 | 17 |

Table 1. Moral Dilemmas in Teachers' Behavior Identified by Teachers (N=21) and Students (N=51) (Tirri & Puolimatka, 2000)

According to both teachers and students, the most common way to solve moral dilemmas in schools was teachers' single-handed decision-making (Tirri, 1999). In this orientation, the teacher views himself/herself as an authority and expert who can solve the complex situation in a fast and effective way (Oser, 1991). However, as the empirical evidence indicates, teachers in Finnish schools tend to have an inadequate conception of teacher authority and, consequently, fail to exercise their authority consistently on the basis of explicit rules. They often end up misusing their authority position and resort to manipulative tactics. Punishing was one of the main moral dilemmas in teachers' behavior as identified by both teachers and students (see Table 1), which shows the failure of the school to function on the basis of

open authority and explicit rules. The following quotes taken from teachers' interviews and students essays illustrate teachers' behavior in these cases and allow us to reflect on the nature of teacher authority in this context.

Punishing: students' perspective

"One boy from our class had been absent from school, and he had forgotten to bring a note from his home to school in which his parents would explain the reason for his absence. The teacher was very angry with the boy because he had left his note at home. She shouted: "You're a jerk!" The boy tried to defend himself but the teacher continued her lecture and asked the other students' opinion of this boy: "Don't you think that I can call a person a jerk if he/she forgets the same thing again and again?" The other students took the side of the boy, but they didn't say anything. The episode closed like that, and I think the teacher went too far. She could have admonished the boy a little but not this way!" (Ninth- grade boy)

As the case described by the student illustrates, the teacher had been unable to use her deontic authority properly in order to secure the orderly behavior of student. Therefore, the teacher had used impolite language to control the behavior of a particular student who had forgotten his note as an expression of frustration for her evident lack of authority. It is understandable that students viewed the teacher's behavior as cruel and unjust. The student who identified this dilemma argued that the teacher misused her authority in this case.

Punishing: teachers' perspective

In one case, a male teacher had thrown a pupil out of a classroom in a violent way. This particular pupil did not belong to the group the teacher was teaching, and he was continuously disturbing the lesson. First, the teacher had asked the pupil in a friendly way to leave, but he did not obey the teacher. In fact, the pupil started to make fun of the teacher, who became very angry at this behavior. The teacher got so angry that he grabbed the pupil and carried him out of the classroom. During this episode, the teacher had shoved the pupil against the wall a couple of times and made some unfriendly comments. In an interview, the teacher reflected on this episode in the following way:

"It was a situation that made me think about my behavior afterwards. I thought I went too far and I did wrong. You should never go that far in your behavior. However, I was so angry that I could not help myself. I think nothing else would have worked in this situation. It was such a spontaneous act in that situation." (Male, eight years of teaching experience)

This case illustrates a conflict in which the teacher had asked the student to leave the classroom because of his constant misbehavior. The student had refused to obey the teacher, who lost his patience with the student and threw him out. As the teacher argues, he had gone too far by practicing his deontic authority. The teacher justified his behavior by arguing that "nothing else would have worked." In this case, the general lack of consistent teacher authority forces the teacher to resort to violence to get things under control. We can identify a gender related behavior pattern in this case. The male teacher was more inclined to give physical than verbal punishment. As the following incident demonstrates, female teachers tend to misuse their authority in verbal ways.

Impolite language: students' perspective

“One teacher does not think what she says. Sometimes in the lesson she has implied that some of us are “losers” or “just ordinary guys” and the other ones in our class are better people. She has also said that some of the boys in our class can only become engineers because they didn’t figure out a topic for their essay or presentation” (Ninth- grade girl)

This case illustrates a case in which the teacher uses her authority in a very twisted way. Evidently, the teacher does not have the epistemic or/and deontic basis for her authority and she needs to influence the students in an indirect way. Teachers' impolite use of language was a very dominating moral dilemma identified by students (see Table 1). This tendency can be at least partly explained by the lack of real teacher authority. If the teacher does not have the intended educational influence on his/her students, he/she can start to use manipulative means in order to accomplish his/ her ends. The problem of impolite language was one of the moral dilemmas identified by both teachers and students (see Table 1.) This trend can again be explained by the lack of authority and clear rules in the school community. According to our empirical results, impolite use of language has become an everyday practice by both students and teachers in Finnish schools.

Moral lesson learned: Teachers should be guided to reflect on their role and authority in solving everyday conflicts with students.

2.2 Teachers fail to protect their students in the conflicts involving colleagues

Collegial conflicts are shown to be the most difficult ones to resolve. In our study with elementary teachers, several conflicts were reported in which a colleague had behaved in a cruel way towards a child (Tirri & Husu, 2001; Husu & Tirri, 2000)). The cruel behavior had manifested itself in hurtful use of language or purposeful actions to humiliate the child in front of others. Other conflicts with colleagues involved questions of power and hierarchy. The following quote from an essay demonstrates a typical conflict between a teacher and a colleague:

Written report

“This is a conflict that doesn’t seem to find a solution. My colleague uses psychological power on the children. She embarrasses them by asking intimate questions about their family problems -- for example, about their parents’ fights. She also manipulates and blackmails the children. I discussed this problem with her, and after that discussion she started to criticize everything I am doing. She has, for example, made complaints about my work to my supervisor and spread gossip about my life to the parents. I told my supervisor my perspective on the story, and she had a discussion with my colleague. We were counseled three times but the counseling did not solve our conflict. I had to transfer to another team in the same kindergarten. My colleague continues her cruel behavior with the children, and the other teachers who work with her are afraid to confront her. They are worried they would lose their job. Maybe I should have asked for more help from the whole community to solve this problem. This problem is not solved; I only made it visible.”

Here the conflict deals with the professional morality of a colleague “*my colleague uses psychological power on the children.*” The teacher tried to discuss the problem with her colleague without any

improvement. On the contrary, the colleague was offended by her comments and started to criticize the teacher in everything she did. Furthermore, the colleague complained about her work to their supervisor to get even with her. As a result, counseling discussions were arranged without any improvement in the basic problem. In this conflict, the teacher had cared about the children by taking the risk and confronting her colleague. This responsible act had not led to any improvements; in fact, her action forced her to transfer to another team. The teacher evaluated the results in the following way: *"This problem is not solved; I only made it visible."*

This case is very much in accord with earlier research on ethical dilemmas in teaching. According to earlier studies, conflicts involving colleagues are the most difficult ones to solve. Usually, they remain unsolved (Campbell, 1996; Colnerud, 1997; Tirri, 1999). Colnerud identified conflicts between protecting pupils and the social norm of loyalty to colleagues as the most striking ethical conflict in teaching. In her study, norms of collegial loyalty kept teachers from defending pupils against colleagues (Colnerud, 1997, pp. 632-633).

| PARTIES | DILEMMA | ACTION | EVALUATION/RESULTS |
|------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| teacher-pupils | professional morality | consultation | no improvement |
| teacher-teacher | responsibility at work | consultation | more difficulties |
| teacher-pupil | teacher behavior | confront the issue | more difficulties |
| teacher-pupil | teacher behavior | confront the issue | no improvement |
| teacher-teachers | confidential matters | confront the issue | open case |
| teacher-teacher | personal problems | consultation | transfer to another kindergarten |
| teacher-teacher | supervision | consult the third-party | no improvement |
| teacher-child | teacher behavior | confront the issue | transfer to another school |

Table 2. The main themes summarized from collegial cases of the inter-institutional conflicts (Tirri & Husu, 2001)

As Table 2 demonstrates, all the collegial conflicts remained unsolved or a child instead of the adults involved got punished. Sometimes the conflict was so severe that the only solution was a transfer to another school or kindergarten to avoid the colleague. However, teachers had cared about the children by identifying problems in their colleagues' professional morality and behavior. Most of the time, they had practiced their professional responsibility by consulting third parties and discussing these conflicts with their colleagues. However, many times teachers had failed in their responsibilities to act in these complex situations. Avoidance of professional responsibility had caused regret in teachers and sometimes made them transfer to another institution (see Table 2).

Moral lesson learned: Teachers should be encouraged and trained to deal with collegial conflicts that hurt their students

2.3 Teachers fail in moral discourse in their schools

Some of the conflicts reported in our study concerned dilemmas between a teacher and the whole community (Tirri & Husu, 2001). These dilemmas included cases in which the teacher had to stand against the whole school community in order to protect the rights of her/his pupil. These conflicts dealt with the educational arrangements of a pupil. The teacher wanted to keep the pupil in her own classroom and fought against his transfer to a special education class. In this case, the teacher felt that she knew the child best and she needed to fight for his best interest. Other issues dealt with the educational philosophy of the community, which can be very different from the one advocated by a single teacher. The following quote demonstrates a typical conflict between a teacher and the whole community:

Written report

"I started my new work in the kindergarten. They told me that their philosophy is to be as child-centered as possible. Very soon I noticed that this child-centered approach was a laissez-faire approach to education. Many parents had noticed the same thing, and some of them had complained about it. My colleagues in this kindergarten called their approach a constructive way of learning and accused me being a behaviorist. I started to pay attention to the eating habits of the children, and I demanded some kind of behavior at the lunch table. The children were confused because earlier they had been allowed to do whatever they wished. The conflict I experienced in this situation was related to my own philosophy of education and the ultimate freedom given to the children in this kindergarten. I believe children need some guidelines and rules to learn to be citizens. My problem was whether I should adapt to their freedom or follow my own educational ideas. Many parents supported my ideas of making some rules for the children. The dilemma is still unsolved. The children behave in a different way with different teachers. There are now guidelines that the whole community should follow. I find this situation very difficult. I am trying to start discussions with my colleagues. I think the main issue concerns who is responsible for the children. For me the answer is not to avoid that responsibility."

This case illustrates well a moral dilemma in a community that involves teachers, children and parents. The moral dilemma involves questions about the ethos of the kindergarten: *"They told me that their philosophy is to be as child-centered as possible."* However, the teacher finds the educational philosophy of the kindergarten to be more close to *"laissez-faire approach to education."* There was a lack of discourse about the means and the ends of education. Teachers, parents and children had a different perspective on what is good for the children. The teacher had brought some rules with her to this culture without any guidelines: *"I started to pay attention to the eating habits of the children, and I demanded some kind of behavior at the lunch table"*. Caring for children meant some clear rules and principles for this teacher, and she took responsible action by implementing different practices. However, the case remains open: *"The dilemma is still unsolved. The children behave in a different way with different teachers."* The evaluation of this case reveals the lack of moral discourse in this community. The teacher who identified this ethical dilemma showed the moral virtue of justice by asking for fairness in the application of rules and norms. In the school community, it is impossible to be a just teacher without any norms and rules. Open discussion is needed to establish some guidelines for

organizational morality. In this moral discourse, the questions of children's needs and teachers' virtues should be addressed.

| PARTIES | DILEMMA | ACTION | EVALUATION/RESULTS |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| teacher(s)-school community | appropriate rules of practice | test different practices | open case |
| principal-subgroups in kindergarten | pupils' equal opportunities | test different practices | open case |
| teacher-school community | a particular pupil | consultation | teacher takes the side of a pupil against the community |
| teacher-school community | a disturbed pupil | consultation | failure, teacher transferred to another school |
| school's local culture-multicultural pupils | religious beliefs | making compromises | case settled |
| principal-foreign teaching assistant | authority | discussion | case settled |
| teacher-pupils | anger in pupils | calming pupils | case settled |
| teacher-pupils | pupils well-being in conflicts | discussion | case-specific solutions |

Table 3. The main themes summarized from cultural cases of the inter-institutional conflicts (Tirri & Husu, 2001).

Other cultural conflicts included ethical dilemmas concerning multicultural children and a foreign teaching assistant. Both these cases were settled by discussing the conflicts and making compromises (see Table 3). In the earlier studies of moral dilemmas with minority groups, compromises have been shown to be the best solutions to these problems (Tirri, 1999). Sometimes teachers cared about particular pupils who had problems with anger and violence. In these cases, teachers had demonstrated their professional responsibility by seeking consultation and providing personal assistance to these pupils. As Table 3 demonstrates, inter-institutional conflicts have many voices, and discussion of different practices is one of the key elements in the search for responsible actions. In open cases, many times the responsibility to continue the dialogue is the only hope for a better future in the community.

Moral lesson learned: Teacher education should promote communicative action with moral discourse. This moral discourse should continue in school settings

3. Concluding remarks

Our research results with both elementary and secondary school teachers indicate that teachers make some common moral mistakes in their professional behavior. These moral mistakes include misuse of their authority, teachers' failure to protect the students in the conflicts involving colleagues and the failure to practice moral discourse in the school community. We have reflected these mistakes by giving some concrete cases of typical situations experienced by teachers or students. Furthermore, we have identified three lessons learned from these teachers' mistakes. The first moral lesson learned directs us to guide teachers to reflect on their role and the nature of their authority in more detail. Concerning our findings, teachers need to establish some clear rules and practices in the school community in order to gain more deontic authority with their students. The second moral lesson learned directs the teacher educators to train the pre-service teachers to deal with collegial conflicts in a more effective ways. The current practices indicate that in most of the conflicts with colleagues the teachers fail to protect their students. The third lesson learned concerns communicative action and moral discourse in schools. Evidently, the teachers lack skills to practice moral discourse with their colleagues, parents and other members of the community. Teacher education should provide enough skills for the future teachers to practice this kind of discourse and the willingness to continue it in the school settings. This discourse should include negative incidents in teaching and learning that could be used as moral lessons in the continuing effort to build just communities and democratic citizenship in schools.

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