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INSIGHTS INTO THE BOUNDARIES OF ETHICAL FREEDOM OF FUTURE PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Marina Petrova (a), Larisa Kalinina (b), Olga Gusevskaya (c)*, Inga Popova (d)

*Corresponding author

(a) Irkutsk State University, 1, Karl Marx Str., Irkutsk, Russia, mpetrova2007@rambler.ru,

(b) Irkutsk State University, 1, Karl Marx Str., Irkutsk, Russia, kalinina_larisa@inbox.ru,

(c) Irkutsk State University, 1, Karl Marx Str., Irkutsk, Russia, gusevsk58@gmail.com,

(d) Irkutsk State University, 1, Karl Marx Str., Irkutsk, Russia, ingamarkel@mail.ru

Abstract

The study specifies the concepts of professional ethics, professional responsibility, professional freedom in relation to the activity of a teacher. The paper considers the peculiarities of professional behavior of a teacher taking into account external restrictions and internal ethical regulators of an individual. The diagnostic tool was developed to study the specifics of the perception of students (future primary school teachers) concerning the boundaries of ethical freedom of a teacher in modern conditions. The study identifies the criteria for questions and tasks with regard to the need for the following competences: creativity, critical thinking, communication and cooperation: (a) awareness; b) attitude; c) evaluation; d) efficiency of position; e) communication. These criteria are adapted to the subject matter of the study. The diagnostic tasks were developed based on the above criteria: questions for questionnaire; case study reflecting a conflict situation. The tasks allow identifying the dynamics of professional position of students and are aimed at the developing situation in order to promote the progress in the development of ethical ideas of students and their universal competences. The results of diagnostic analysis of future teachers studying within *Primary Education – Additional Education* profile are described. In the course of practical testing of diagnostic tools, qualitative and quantitative dynamics of students' understanding of the significance of external and internal restrictions of ethical freedom of a teacher of primary general education was revealed.

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Keywords: Ethical freedom, pedagogical responsibility, pedagogical ethics, future teacher.



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1. Introduction

In the current social and moral situation in the society there is a need to solve the issues of moral well-being, ethics of relations, removal of moral tensions between people. Accordingly,

special moral requirements for the behavior of an individual are primarily formulated due to the need to fix specific forms of social responsibility, the expression of such relations of a person to other people, which are directly dependent on his individual decision and which are often impossible to control in any other way than through the approval of moral standards of restrictive or preventive nature. (Bicheva & Varivoda, 2016, p. 7)

This feature of professions directly dealing with a person makes it necessary to understand professional ethics, which constitutes an inextricable unity with the general theory of morality.

2. Problem Statement

Professional ethics of a teacher determines the nature of his relations with colleagues, parents, students and attitude to professional duty. The recent dynamic development of the society once again raises the question of the boundaries of ethical rules and norms and their content in modern conditions. The training of future teachers clearly implies their orientation towards ethical norms and the development of relevant competences. In order to ensure the efficiency of this process, it is necessary to understand the boundaries of ethical freedom of future primary school teachers in modern conditions.

3. Research Questions

Modern research of professional ethics reflects various lines and aspects of the considered phenomenon: scientific-theoretical and methodological bases of professional ethics of a future specialist; development of professional culture of specialists of various professional spheres; peculiarities of vocational training of students; formation of values-based attitude towards the profession of a teacher.

As Guseynov (2004) notes, a distinctive feature of professional ethics is that it “concretizes general moral requirements in relation to the specificity of a profession concerned and deals mainly with standards and rules of conduct”, in other words, considers professional behavior” (p. 149).

It is noteworthy to address the problem of professional ethics as a system of moral principles, standards and rules of conduct of a specialist, taking into account the peculiarities of a specific professional activity, which determines the attitude of a person towards his professional duty and is based on the codes of conduct that ensure the moral nature of professional relations between employees.

A scientific research inquiry concludes that professional ethics is characterized as an area of ethical knowledge, the subject of which is the feature of morality in various types of professional activity caused by moral consciousness, relationships and behavior of employees.

Pedagogical activity refers to the “ethical-oriented” sphere of professional activity establishing the practice of internal (ethical) and external (legal) regulation. Internal regulation of professional behavior is based on the principles of legality, humanity, democracy, justice, professionalism and mutual respect

(Burlyaeva & Chebanov, 2015). Following the norms of pedagogical ethics is a necessary condition of constructive interpersonal relations between all subjects of the educational process: teacher and student, student and student, teacher and parent, teacher and teacher (Mochalov, 2014). At the same time, the main ethical categories of a teacher include professional duty, responsibility, justice, tact, honor, freedom. Besides, in order to establish the correct relations between teachers and students it is necessary, first of all, to possess such qualities as respect for students, justice, desire to establish friendly relations, dignity, conscience, pedagogical authority (Borodina & Lipatov, 2018).

It is noted that professional freedom shall be combined with professional responsibility, which can be considered as a competence, which is purposefully formed (Petrova, 2017).

The external (legal) regulator of teacher's behavior is the ethical code. It can be considered as a normative and moral document specifying universal ethical principles and values, justifying the moral imperatives of the profession, the nature and characteristics of relations in the professional environment (O'Neill & Bourke, 2010). Ethical laws of the pedagogical code form the basis for moral values and ideals, moral qualities of a teacher thus defining standards of harmonious interaction between teachers and students. The practical importance of the Code of Professional Ethics is that "the stipulated clear and observed ethical norms are described as regulations and help specialists to navigate complex ethical situations, contribute to reducing the risk of possible professional errors and offences, while determining the measure of responsibility for violation of the rules and regulating their implementation" (Bicheva & Varivoda, 2016, p. 8). As a result, the Code improves the social status of a teacher and enhances his credibility.

In this regard, it is necessary to clarify the understanding of such categories as professional responsibility and freedom. In the general scientific sense, freedom is understood "on the one hand, as the range of opportunities of the society in implementing values-based orientations, desires, intentions, interests, goals of a person (objective side of freedom), on the other hand, as the ability to make decisions with the knowledge of laws of nature and society (subjective side)" (Savkin, 2015, p. 23).

Within ordinary consciousness, freedom is associated with the concept of permissiveness. However, this understanding is unacceptable for a person who is in constant interaction with the social environment, where "the compliance with a certain established image serves the criterion for its assessment" (Belobragin, 2018, p. 167).

The question of the freedom of a teacher is related to the problem of relations between the possibility of choosing the mode of action, the act in a certain situation on the basis of personal beliefs, interests, goals and understanding of responsibility for consequences, on the one hand, and the requirements and norms established in the society, defined by the legal field of the sphere of professional pedagogical work, on the other.

In the context of professional freedom, the understanding of the teacher's responsibility plays a special role. It is determined by specific characteristics of professional activity – its social importance, influence on consciousness, feelings, formation of interpersonal relations, mastering of models of behavior of a forming person. It is especially important to take into account this specificity when working with younger schoolchildren, which is caused by the authority of a teacher's personality among primary

school students. Therefore, it is necessary to determine the optimal balance between freedom of personal world view, choice of action and requirements of ethical, moral, legal norms, professional code.

In a broad public sense, responsibility is based on legal norms formalized by law, i.e. it is associated with legal responsibility. However, it is not enough to consider the responsibility of a teacher only from this perspective. We believe that on the one hand, this category, can be considered as an ethical characteristic of an individual, which shows its internal limitations based on stable priorities, world views. Such restrictions imply conscious and voluntary establishment of boundaries for actions from the point of view of forecasting the consequences of actions, anticipating the future result and addressing the feelings, world views of people. It is important for a teacher to take into account the fact that the structure of the educational environment includes not only students and parents as subjects of educational activities, but also a social environment that has a potential impact on the relations between the family and the school. On the other hand, the responsibility of a teacher constitutes a value-normative phenomenon, which implies external restrictions – “experiencing duty or obligation to some (objective-impersonal or personalized) instance with spiritual authority or punitive power” (Maximov, 2015, p. 5).

In pedagogical activity, the vector of responsibility can be defined by external restrictions (possibility of punishment for non-compliance with specified norms and requirements) and internal (sense of conviction, moral duty, self-determination in the personal sense of a certain social norm, ethics of behavior).

The responsibility as a characteristic of an individual sets a benchmark for responsible behavior. It involves conscious observance of ethical principles, moral and legal norms, “moral reflection and ethical regulation of professional behavior” (Romanenko, 2019, p. 250). We can judge about the responsibility of a person if he acts consciously, sets the limits of his actions. The main criterion of these boundaries is “the rights and freedoms of another person, because their observance requires some personal restrictions” (Rohmani et al., 2019, p. 339).

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to develop diagnostic tools and to study the specifics of students’ (future primary teachers) perceptions of the boundaries of ethical freedom of a teacher in modern conditions taking into account the possibility to identify the dynamics of change of students’ professional position and their understanding of the importance of external and internal restrictions in professional activity.

5. Research Methods

The study was carried out using a set of complementary methods. The theoretical part of the study was based on the method of analysis and comparison of modern normative documents regulating ethical education, foreign and domestic literature, which presents experience of pedagogical theory and practice of ethical consciousness. To understand and define the boundaries of ethical freedom of future teachers the experimental part included the empirical analysis to study the level of awareness of ethical norms, nature of relations and efficiency of attitudes to them, as well as the ability to explain them in the context

of pedagogical activities. The authors developed the diagnostic tools aimed at identifying the readiness of future primary school teachers for ethical regulation of professional activity.

6. Findings

To study the perceptions of future teachers about the boundaries of ethical freedom, we developed a questionnaire and a case study, which help to clarify the professional position of students. Diagnostic tasks were evolving, contributing to both progress in the development of students' ethical perceptions and their universal competences.

The developed questions and tasks were based on the following criteria: a) awareness; b) attitude; c) evaluation; d) efficiency of position; e) communication. The criteria were selected in the context of the need to develop 4Cs competences: creativity, critical thinking, communication and cooperation (Pinskaya & Mikhailova, 2019). These cognitive and socio-emotional competencies are universal, implemented in different educational and professional situations. Critical thinking manifests itself in the awareness of ethical problems, the formulation of the essence of ethical conflicts in professional activity, in the assessment of their importance, creativity and cooperation – in novelty and originality of proposed solutions in the situation of moral and ethical conflict, in the readiness to cooperate constructively with the parties to the conflict, communication – in the ability to convey their position to others.

The criteria for awareness, attitude and evaluation were studied on the basis of the analysis of responses to the questionnaire. The awareness of the essence of possible moral and ethical conflicts in professional activity, efficiency of position, as well as ability to communicate were analyzed through the case study. The case study included the following:

1. Questions and tasks to the case: Formulate the essence of moral and ethical conflict. Express your attitude towards the teacher's position; parents and participants of flash mob. What would you do if you were a teacher? How would you argue your position?

2. Description of the conflict situation: A young teacher is engaged in competitive swimming. After winning the competition, she posted her picture in a swimsuit in her social network group. Some parents considered this fact unethical and wrote a complaint to the administration. The teacher was fired. As a sign of solidarity, some teachers organized a flash mob: they posted their photos in swimwear, regardless of their own sports uniforms.

3. Information material: articles from the psychological dictionary describing the concepts of "choice", "freedom"; sample regulation on standards of professional ethics of teachers (Ministry of Education of RF, 2019). After the case was resolved, a re-questionnaire was conducted to track the dynamic pattern.

The study involved 43 students of the 4th year of study of the Pedagogical Institute of Irkutsk State University studying under the *Primary Education – Additional Education* profile.

The awareness of the importance to define the boundaries of ethical freedom in professional activity was studied by analyzing the answers to the question on the need for knowledge on professional ethics of a future teacher. Thus, 100 % of respondents replied that it is necessary to know and observe these norms. The arguments put forward by the students demonstrate their awareness of pedagogical responsibility. Most of the arguments referred to the role of a teacher in the lives of students and their

parents: a teacher is a role model for students (51 %); a teacher shall avoid harmful effects on students (7 %); a teacher shall be a role model for parents and colleagues (7 %); a teacher a role model member of society (12 %), a teacher shall support his authority (7 %); the attitude of a child towards school and society depends on the ethics of a teacher (9 %). The second most important group of arguments of respondents is related to the awareness of the establishment of harmonious interpersonal relations between all subjects of the educational process: a teacher shall build friendly relations (9 %); a teacher shall be aware of the principles of relations with children, colleagues and parents (14 %); a teacher shall avoid conflicts (7 %). Thus, already during the training period future teachers are aware of themselves as a source of changes in pedagogical reality and understand the value of knowledge of professional ethics.

To analyze the attitude to the source of restriction of ethical freedom, a dichotomy scale was proposed, including external sources of restriction on the one pole, and internal sources on the other pole (5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5). The analysis showed that 44 % of respondents consider external ethical restrictions necessary, 23 % note the importance of ethical freedom. The majority of respondents (67 %) contrast the need for norming and freedom. Students who are aware of the need only for external norming may not be sure of the ethics of certain actions in pedagogical activity, understand the risks of professional errors, do not know the norms of pedagogical ethics and are ready to observe exactly those described in the documents. The respondents who focus only on internal norming seek independence from all kinds of external regulatory factors or believe that a teacher shall initially have a sense of moral duty and responsibility for his actions. External constraints in the process of interiorization turn into internal beliefs and contribute to self-determination of a future teacher with regard to ethical norms. Only 26 % of respondents noted the importance of external restrictions and ethical freedom in the profession, thus indicating that external norming shall correlate to internal one. This indicates their professional maturity. 7 % of students were unsure and noted the zero position. This may be a consequence of both the understanding of the relations between the considered constraints and the problem of self-determination or incompetence in the substance of the issue.

The assessment of the need for restrictions or freedom was carried out on a 5-point scale. Points 4 and 5 referred to high degree of ethical freedom, 3-2 – to medium freedom and 1-0 – to low freedom. High degree of the need for restriction sources, regardless of polarity, was marked by 42 %, medium – 51 % and low – 7 % of respondents. High necessity indicators are noted mainly for external norming.

The importance of restrictions of ethical freedom for future teachers was studied on the basis of the analysis of the necessary restrictions specified by them in the professional activity of a modern teacher. A total of 38 general and specific restrictions were identified by students. The examples with generalized formulation include respect for behavior culture in society (26 %), communication culture (30 %), speech culture (42 %), decent appearance (63 %) and the absence of bad habits (35 %). A significant number of examples refer to the teacher's relations with the subjects of the educational process: maintaining subordination (7 %), being able to keep down negative emotions (23 %), controlling the use of profane language (37 %), showing respect and justice (30 %), not imposing opinions and worldview (7 %). There are certain requirements to professional ethics: competence of a teacher (5 %); inadmissibility of paid tutoring with teacher's students (2 %). Despite the many answers suggested by students, the majority of them are generally accepted, only a small number referring solely to teaching

activities. We also rarely find an indication of external ethical restrictions: legislation (7 %); school charter (5 %); school dress code (7 %). The above shows that the importance of universal standards of ethics prevails over the requirements reflecting the specificity of pedagogical activity.

Many students' options obtained through the case study make it possible to conclude on the efficiency of the position of future teachers in relation to the awareness of ethical norms and on the importance of communication in the structure of professional competence of a teacher. 100 % of respondents see the core of the analyzed conflict in the clash of views on normative actions of a teacher illustrated in the example. In assessing their attitude towards the positions of participants of the conflict situation, most students took the side of the teacher. Only 16 % replied that the teacher should not have posted the photo, closed the social account or realized the seriousness of the consequences. The remaining 86 % of respondents made arguments in support of the teacher, which substantively coincided with the answers to the fourth question of the case. The students appealed: 1) to legal grounds: teacher's actions are not prohibited by law (12 %), posting photos is not considered immoral (7 %), everyone has the right to privacy (35 %), parents do not have the right to penetrate the privacy of the teacher (7 %); 2) to positive aspects: sets an example of healthy lifestyle and self-development (47 %); 3) to the assessment of the negative impact of photos on others: is not a means of mental violence (9 %), does not affect the educational results of children (7 %); 4) to the independence of the conflict from the act of the teacher: the photo could be in the media (12 %), subscribers of personal pages are usually friends and relatives (9 %); 5) to the absence of a basis for conflict: the teacher in the photo in a closed, acceptable swimsuit (16 %), the swimsuit belongs to the wardrobe element (7 %); parents and children could meet the teacher at the beach (5 %). Most students gave a negative assessment of the parents' actions (91 %), the remaining 9 % expressed understanding of the position alongside with disagreement with their actions in the current situation. A significant number of students expressed solidarity to the flash mob participants (56 %). 16 % of respondents gave an extremely negative assessment of the teachers' actions, 28 % expressed a dual position (agree with the need to support the teacher, but against the method used). These indicators show that all future teachers are aware of the need to protect their ethical attitudes and that some of them are focused on their own interests, and that it is impossible to correctly assess the consequences of their actions.

The ability to communicate with participants in the educational process to reach a conditional agreement on common understanding of ethical restrictions was studied by analyzing the students' suggestions to the situation if they were in the teacher's place. The refusal to communicate was demonstrated by 24 % of respondents, considering it possible to resign yourself, "let the situation go", leave the sphere of education. Most future teachers (86 %) expressed a willingness to defend their rights. Of these, 9 % of respondents consider it necessary to search for documents on the wrongfulness of dismissal; file a complaint to the Department of Education – 14 %; appeal to the court for rebuttal, protection of rights – 26 %; apply for reinstatement to school administration – 12 %; apologize to parents and delete or replace the photo – 7 %. Of these, 18 % did not indicate a method to protect the teacher's rights. Students thus denote their awareness of the need for external ethical restrictions not only as a behavioral reference, but also as a means of defending their ethical position.

The alternate solutions to case studies make it possible to conclude that the majority of the fourth-year students have sufficiently high level of skills to clarify in different ways, to defend their views in the process of communication and insufficiently solid position towards the awareness of ethical norms.

The results of the re-questionnaire showed that 86 % of respondents did not change their position on the professional ethics of a teacher. Already in the first stage of the study, all respondents demonstrated an understanding of the value of knowledge in this field. The remaining students (24 %) pointed to the need to know the norms of pedagogical ethics not only by the teacher, but also by all subjects of the educational process (parents, students, administration). The results of determining the significance of external and internal ethical restrictions on the dichotomy scale have slightly changed. Nevertheless, the dynamics (by 5 %) towards the increase in the number of students for whom both groups of restrictions are important in pedagogical activity is obvious. The increase in the value of external norming was found in 5 % of respondents. The number of “unsure” students decreased by 2 %.

The list of key restrictions in the activity of a teacher was supplemented by 72 % of respondents. The proposed restrictions are based on case studies. For example, students point out that there is a need to adhere to the exemplary provision on professional ethics; to avoid potentially conflict situations that could harm honor, dignity of a teacher and the school; to show tolerance and respect for customs of the peoples of Russia and others (40 %). Many concluded on the ways of the teacher's behavior on social networks: to filter the content that the teacher posts on social networks (information shall not be immoral, cause psychological harm to others); restrict access to personal page, maintain confidentiality; create a working account (42 %).

As a result of the case study, which caused cognitive conflict, the students improved the skills of critical thinking and came to understand the idea of divergence in people's interpretation of ethical norms due to different moral attitudes. This made it possible to strengthen positive attitudes towards ethical knowledge, to come to conclusions about the need to clearly describe ethical restrictions in normative documents, to determine the understanding of the boundaries of ethical freedom and to expand the methods of ethical regulation of relations.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was achieved: the developed diagnostic tools allowed studying the specifics of perceptions of future primary teachers about the boundaries of ethical freedom of a teacher in modern conditions and identifying their dynamics.

Students are aware of the need for ethical consensus of participants in educational activities, the importance of both external (normative) and internal ethical restrictions. They demonstrate an understanding of the impossibility of unlimited ethical freedom, which potentially contains ethical conflict. During the study there was a slight shift in favor of external ethical norming of teachers' behavior.

In general, student perceptions, proposed solutions to the conflict situation, reasoning of decisions are based on universal ethical norms and less reflect the specificity of pedagogical activity. Thus, in the process of training future teachers, it is necessary to deepen the study of professional ethical knowledge and to include cases containing professional ethical tasks taking into account the level of education.

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