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Moral Stress in Teaching Practice

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to study whether moral stress is a phenomenon relevant to teaching practice and which may make a significant contribution to understanding why teachers repeatedly reported feeling burdened by work. Moral stress can be caused by acting in conflict with one's own conscience, e.g. when one knows the right thing to do but institutional constraints make it difficult to act in a way that is consistent with one's morals. The method used in this study is critical incident technique focusing ethical dilemmas in teaching. The findings add a phenomenon to previous research of moral stress in other professions; moral stress can be caused not only by external regulations, but also by internal moral imperatives in conflict with one another.

Keywords: Moral stress; moral sensitivity; teacher ethics; teachers' ethical dilemmas.

Introduction

International research has been investigating the moral demands and ethical challenges of the teaching profession since the 1980s, when the occupation first began to be discussed from the professional perspective (cf. Tom, 1984; Strike & Soltis, 1985; Fenstermacher, 1990; Clark, 1990; Campbell, 1993; Hansen, 1995; Colnerud, 1997).

The interest in teachers' professional ethics is on-going; recent studies show that the ethical dimensions of teaching practice have been far from adequately studied (cf. Husu & Tirri, 2007; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). Research has, thus far, focused mainly on teachers' professional, moral and ethical duties to pupils, and has, to a lesser extent, asked questions about what happens to the teacher who is sensitive to these duties.

Background and previous research

Teaching is a task that is full of ethical conflicts and inner contradictions. Berlak and Berlak (1981) found inevitable dilemmas that teachers meet in their daily practice. They observed teachers and their choice of action and identified dilemmas, which they categorised into groups, e.g., control-dilemmas and "equal allocation of resources versus differential allocation". Berlak and Berlak concluded that it is impossible to prescribe one single correct act in all situations. Unless it is possible to find a transformative solution, a synthesis, constant contradictions like those identified by Berlak and Berlak force the teacher to assign more weight to one alternative or the other.

Studies of ethical conflicts experienced and reported by teachers have shown that conflicts between different ethical considerations are constantly present and that the teachers often act in ways that conflict with their own conscience (Colnerud, 1997, 2006; Darling-Hammond (1985) claimed that it is part and parcel of the teaching profession to be governed by political decisions that are detrimental to the pupils. "It is unethical for a teacher to conform to prescribed practices that are ultimately harmful to children. Yet that is what teachers are required to do by policies that are pedagogically inappropriate for some or all of their students" (p. 213). Jackson (1968) described this phenomenon in terms of double loyalty - concurrent loyalty to both the institution and to their pupils. Terhart (1994) wrote about the double mandate of the teaching profession; teachers must serve both their students and society, whose interests sometimes conflict. This double loyalty becomes evident in the present study of what teachers themselves describe as ethical problems in their day-to-day professional lives.

Teachers are increasingly feeling the pressure of double loyalty or double mandate in the current school reform "hype" (David & Cuban 2010) characterised by managerialism, marketization and privatization (Cribb, 2009). Alongside the direction of attention away from internal values in classrooms to policy and economy, there is an increasing juridification. Laws and definite rules exercise control over teachers in competition with their professional commitment and moral judgement. This may cause ethical dilemmas. In their research on teachers, special education teachers, and other related professions, Helton and Ray (2005) found that ethical dilemmas arise from (among other things) law, policies and administrative decisions in conflict with personal and professional ethics. Campbell (1995) found that teachers were forced by administrators to undertake actions against their professional ethics. These phenomena are likely to occur even more often as

teachers are exposed to management innovations, performance assessment systems, increased public scrutiny, external accountability and the associated bureaucracy (Day, 2002).

In various studies of teachers' perceptions of professional ethical dilemmas, researchers found that loneliness, powerlessness and difficulty in articulating the nature of an ethical problem characterized teachers' discussions of their work. Bergem (1993), like (Colnerud, 1997), noted the lack of professional language for the moral phenomena that teachers encounter. In her study of teachers' ethical dilemmas, Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) states that Israeli teachers lack the moral vocabulary to address the complexity of the moral judgements they must make. In a study of teachers' values and professional judgement, Biesta (2009) found that the value conflicts in teachers' daily practice were not articulated. With the intention to contribute to the development of teachers' ethical language Clark (1995) suggested among other actions to help teachers to name ethical pitfalls, to learn ethical concepts and theories in addition to engaging in open and trusting conversations about their own ethical shortcomings. Ehrich et al (2011) conclude in their study of ethical dilemmas in teaching, that teachers need to share dilemmas with trusted others and articulate their own personal and professional ethics, in order to minimise the negative impact of ethical dilemmas.

Thus in their day-to-day work, teachers encounter a wide variety of ethical problems, conflicts and dilemmas. The difficulty of putting into words the ethical conflicts that one experiences, and of balancing different considerations by oneself, appears to be a possible source of mental workload – morally contingent stress. Brytting, Silfverberg and deGeer

(1993) launched the concept of moral stress in Sweden in the early 1990s. However, the concept has never before been used in studies of the teaching profession.

The aim of this article is to study in what ways teachers may be affected by moral stress when facing ethical problems, conflicts and dilemmas.

Moral Stress

The teaching profession is an occupation whose practitioners commonly work under high tension and stress. Studies of teachers' stress refer to high demands, including workload, and constant change within the profession. Teachers also often lack opportunities to receive support from others. Problems in relation to colleagues are one example of poor working conditions that cause stress (Wilson, 2002). To a greater extent than male teachers, female teachers report stress-related symptoms such as difficulty sleeping due to thinking about work (Statistics Sweden, 2010).

Byrne (1999) provided a comprehensive review of research on teachers' stress and burnout, and identified a number of additional factors that lead to burnout, including role conflict and a lack of clarity concerning one's responsibilities. As in most studies of stress, the primary stressors identified are external factors such as work load and time pressure. This also becomes apparent in scales designed to measure stress in individuals, where factors that might encompass value conflicts and moral responsibility are seldom mentioned. External factors more frequently dominate, as in the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, whose 43 items offer no scope for

addressing the notion that one might become stressed by the failure to meet moral demands that are self-imposed or imposed by the profession (Doctor & Doctor, 1994). Lack of clarity regarding one's role, role conflicts and the responsibility for others may mean that stress arises when, in the professional role, one finds oneself in situations that are difficult to judge from an ethical point of view. Such factors emerge in other studies, but the moral dimensions are not explicitly mentioned (cf. Hellriegel, Slocum & Woodman, 1995). Speck (1993) asserts, however, that stress may be an indicator of value conflicts. He argues that it is necessary to formulate one's own guiding values in a way that counteracts stress and burnout. Armed with well-considered and well-founded values, one can, according to Speck (ibid.), withstand the pressure and know when it is possible to stand one's ground and when one may compromise, without becoming ill from stress.

The concept of moral stress has been used, primarily, in research regarding nurses' working conditions and the risks of stress and burnout found in that particular profession. The stress is moral because the behaviour of one person affects the well being of another (Lützen, et al., 2003). Using studies of the nursing profession as a basis for studies of the teaching profession appears to be relevant according to a study by Shapira-Lishchinsky (2010). Teachers and nurses describe ethical dilemmas, which are similar in nature, in relation to their pupils and patients, respectively.

Thus the concept and phenomenon of moral stress has been defined through empirical studies of nurses' work situation. Jameton (1984) describes the causes of moral stress: "one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action" (p. 6). It is also described as the negative feelings

that ensue when one has taken a moral decision, yet has, for various reasons, not acted on that decision (Wilkinson, 1987).

Silfverberg (1996) used the concept of moral stress in a study of a home help service. She found that moral stress manifests as “feelings of inadequacy stemming from acting in conflict with one’s conscience and convictions” (Silfverberg, 1996, p. 34). That which, according to Silfverberg’s study, constitutes a barrier to doing what one believes is morally right, is connected to lack of control over the conditions under which the work must be performed. Time pressure is another barrier. Consequently, individuals cannot put their care ambitions into practice and moral stress ensues.

Moral stress is applied to different kinds of professions by Waters et al. (1987) as organisational research. They demonstrate how managers risk ending up in moral conflicts in situations where they would like to act according to their conscience on a moral decision, but the costs that action would entail are high. In interviews, managers give examples of various strategies for dealing with such moral conflicts. One strategy is to follow the clear profit directives and rules and ignore the more vaguely worded and general ethical principles. Another strategy is to refer to the actions of others. They also redefine the problem as a matter of personal preference. We can determine that these defences are of a general nature, but they do not always liberate individuals from the pangs of conscience.

Lützen et al. (2003) found three preconditions for moral stress: (1) moral sensitivity, (2) external factors that prevent nurses from doing what is best for the patient, and (3) feeling that one has no control over the specific situation. External factors thus play a major role

in nurses' moral stress. They perceive moral stress in situations where they are aware of the ethical values that are under threat and where external factors or conflicting rules prevent them from taking the decisions and pursuing the course of action they believe is morally correct. The dilemmas in nursing are dominated by cases where the nurse believes that in order to follow the morally correct path they must break the rules (Höglund, 2003).

Moral sensitivity

Moral stress is linked to moral sensitivity (Lützen et al, 2003). Moral sensitivity is a factor that increases the risk for moral stress. A review of the concept of moral sensitivity (as applied to nurses) describes how this encompasses both a person's intuitive motivation to use their moral judgement and their capacity to take moral decisions in the best interests of the patient. Moral sensitivity manifests through an awareness of the patient's vulnerability.

Research on the moral dimensions of teaching considers issues closely related to moral sensitivity. Hansen (2001) explores the moral heart of teaching and finds moral sensibility to be a disposition that accompanies a teacher's conduct, "A person's moral sensibility plays an indirect role, although no less powerful for that fact, in whatever influence he or she might have on others" (Hansen, 2001, p. 38). The moral sensibility is cultivated and developed in attentive relationships with others. The concept of care, which Noddings (2001) has elaborated and deepened, is related to moral sensitivity and moral sensibility. To care means to be attentive and to try to be receptive to the needs of those for whom you are caring, and "the receptivity is, of course, a prelude to response" (p. 100). However,

care as a philosophical concept is not a virtue of the moral subject, it is relational in a particular way, since it does not apply only to the carer. Care demands a reciprocity in the relationship where the cared for has the same perception of the situation as the carer. Farouk (2012) has, like Hargreaves and Tucker (1991), studied teachers' experiences of guilt, which they find is a phenomenon related to moral stress. In Farouk's study primary school teachers were asked about their feelings about various emotions including guilt. They feel guilty, they report, because of letting the students down educationally or by making them feel upset. The teachers vary in feeling responsible to the situation. Some of the teachers blame themselves; others feel guilty but do not blame themselves. Teachers also vary with respect to their commitment and resilience as well as their self-efficacy (Day & Gu, 2009); this may affect the risk of moral stress.

As noted earlier, the phenomenon of moral stress has not previously been applied to the teaching profession. Nias (1999) comes close when she mentions the risk that value conflicts may constitute grounds for stress and burnout. Also Hong (2012) found that teachers who leave the profession show weaker self-efficacy and hold beliefs that may create stress and emotional burnout. Nias describes the caring nature of the profession and how this leads to value conflicts when the teacher is not in a position to act in the interests of pupils. Nias points, above all, to policy decisions such as under-financing, an emphasis on competition between schools and a focus on measuring pupils' performance as causes of stress. If one interprets what Nias says in terms of moral stress, the policies pursued often prevent teachers from doing what they believe is morally right in relation to their pupils. This puts them in a situation where their actions may place them in conflict with their conscience. Teachers who are dedicated and committed and who try to respond to students needs are those most at risk of emotional exhaustion, stress and burnout

(Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Fisher, 2011). In addition, teachers, like nurses, work within legal frameworks and regulations, which can cause “a formal or political vulnerability” (Kelchterman, 2009, p 266) – a phenomenon closely related to moral stress.

Among the moral values at stake in teachers’ ethical dilemmas is first and foremost protection of the pupils against harm (Colnerud 1997). Bayles (1989) stresses four values, upon which professional ethics rest. They are protection against harm, autonomy, equality and privacy. They all appear in teachers’ ethical conflicts and dilemmas. The main value, protection against harm, is frequently in conflict with other moral values such as collegial loyalty, pupils’ and parents’ privacy or autonomy. Furthermore, the protection against harm comes into conflict with role-specific tasks such as giving feedback and setting grades (Pope et al, 2009). The strength of the pressure on the teacher is dependent on the risk of harm. Colleagues’ or parents’ wrongdoing to one’s pupils is particularly morally demanding (Colnerud, 1997, 2006).

In summary, we can determine that, depending on the nature of the activity, external factors, such as compulsory, and sometimes conflicting, principles, contradictory values and a low degree of control are examples of forces that prevent professionals from acting according to what they believe is the right moral decision. As the moral sensitivity, reliance and self-efficacy of individuals varies, so, too, does the risk of moral stress.

Barriers to acting in accordance with one’s conscience may, in light of previous research, be assumed to exist in the teaching profession. It may be presumed that morally contingent stress is especially severe when one repeatedly faces dilemmas and is forced

to choose between two incompatible actions, where, for example, protection of the pupils against harm is one. Every day, teachers are torn between different concerns – for the pupils, for colleagues and for the school. Whichever action they choose, where there is a dilemma, they may be forced to act against their conscience.

Method

This article is a part of a wider study of teachers' ethical problems, conflicts and dilemmas that took place between 2008 and 2010. The main study was designed in order to compare its results with those of a study of teachers ethical dilemmas performed in the 1990s (Colnerud, 1997); therefore, the design and method were copies of those from the earlier study.

In order to obtain first-hand stories about how teachers perceive and handle moral challenges and ethical conflicts at work, data was collected using the critical incident technique (CIT). CIT is appropriate due to its method of asking for personal experiences. The study of instances of ethical dilemmas, conflicts and problems in other professions has been conducted with CIT and it can, thus, be judged to have been proven fit for this purpose (Pope & Vetter, 1992; Lindsay & Colley, 1995; Houston & Bettencourt, 1999, Author). The method has been in use since the 1950s and is well suited to handling incidents that appear in a discontinuous manner (for example, Travers, 1964). The research subjects, in this case, teachers, individually select which incidents to report. It is, thus, the teacher's perception and judgement that defines an ethical problem, conflict or dilemma. This is a central point of the technique, as you are looking for incidents that are not necessarily defined by politics, authority, and institutions or in laws and regulations.

The technique requests that respondents contribute their own everyday experiences which helps the teachers share concrete incidents that have raised moral questions for them.

Procedure and Participants

The technique used means that, with the exception of two background data questions, in this case, gender and type of teaching position, a single limited question concerning the subjects' own experiences of ethical problems and dilemmas is posed. The response rate to similar earlier studies concerning ethical dilemmas faced by practitioners in other professions, for example psychologists, has proven to be fairly high. To respond to a single question that is considered relevant, and being given the chance to write freely appears to be inviting. The question that the teachers in this study were asked to answer was worded in the following way:

Describe, briefly, a situation or type of situation, where you find it difficult to know the best course of action, with regard to a pupil, a parent or a colleague, from a moral or ethical perspective.

Unlimited space was provided for the answer. Some teachers gave detailed accounts of one or more relevant incidents that featured an ethical conflict or dilemma; others were more concise.

The question was handed out face-to-face by the researcher during staff meetings at three schools: a school in a medium-sized city with students from years seven to nine, a school in a suburb of a large city with students from years one to six, and a school in a medium-sized industrial town with students from years one to nine. The teachers were informed about the project, that participation was optional and that their answers were

anonymous. A total of 130 teachers were invited to participate. Seventy-five replied, giving a response rate of 58 %. The result was 110 incidents.

Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted (Silverman, 2001). The incidents were analysed in terms of ethical and other norms that were in conflict with each other. These conflicts of norms were categorised with respect to the main ethical elements as, e.g. protection against harm versus the interests of others. As a consequence of the method, the teachers not only reported that which from a moral philosophical point of view is regarded as a purely ethical conflict or dilemma, i.e. that two ethical values or norms stand in conflict with each other, even though such incidents are predominant, but they also wrote about conflicts that in a philosophical sense are not ethical. The conflicts reported can, for example, consist of a conflict between ethical norms, on the one hand, and norms of a pedagogical or social nature, on the other. They also reported on the conflict between different religious and cultural traditions as an ethical conflict, since it is troubling to them. An overview of the frequencies is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of ethical dilemmas in categories

Category	(%)
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Protect student vs. College	27
Protect student vs. Parent	21
Protect student vs. Grading	13
Student vs. Student (Fairness)	12
Protect student from social risks	11
(Privacy and confidentiality)	
Respect for various religions and traditions	9
Other	7

Findings

The teachers express their deliberations, their feelings of frustration and their ambiguity in relation to various situations in which profound moral choices arise. They encounter dilemmas, as do nurses, where external rules and institutional constraints come into conflict with their conscience. They also describe dilemmas where the conflict is *intrapersonal*, which implies that the dilemma is created when various personal values and norms conflict and teachers have to rely only on their own judgement. The values at stake in those intrapersonal dilemmas are those internalised social values that are widely shared in society such as privacy, fairness and protection from harm.

Intrapersonal dilemmas

In these cases, the conflict arises in situations where a choice must be made between different moral options, the existence of which does not involve any external guiding principles or rules. The teacher describes, for example, the internal moral imperative to

intervene, but is unsure whether the intervention is justified upon consideration of other factors. Three variants of intrapersonal dilemmas are presented here: fairness dilemmas, dilemmas concerning collegial loyalty and dilemmas concerning privacy.

Fairness dilemmas

Fairness dilemmas relate to moral stress in that there are several different principles of fairness that the teacher, the school and society as a whole must all deal with. These are equality, need and merit. At the most basic level, pupils must be able to trust that their teachers will at least try to be fair, i.e. that procedural fairness prevails; but the complexity of the classroom suggests that fairness dilemmas are omnipresent. For example, in any given lesson, at least three different principles of fairness may be mixed without the teacher or the pupils being aware of them: the equality principle, the need principle and the merit principle.

The equality principle states that equal treatment must be the order of the day. Everyone must *be treated equally*, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. This is a fundamental democratic principle. The need principle states *to each according to their needs*. This means that the teacher devotes more or less time to each pupil, more or less assistance and, perhaps, also more or less encouragement, depending upon their need. The merit principle says *to each according to their merits and effort*. The pupils merit exam results and grades to varying degrees. They are also allotted attention and sometimes privileges based on how they make themselves deserving of rewards. They may also be stripped of privileges on the grounds of having misbehaved, and thus made themselves undeserving of, for instance, participating in some attractive activity.

The teachers' narratives about their shortcomings in relation to fairness dilemmas show that among teachers these engender discontent with their own decisions and may contribute to moral stress. One teacher writes the following as an example of what she considers difficult from a moral perspective:

Allotting my time: Who should actually get my time and attention? The pupil, who is ambitious, interested, tries, struggles and has a very hard time, or the one who fights, disrupts and is unpleasant and uninterested? Of course there are reasons behind this. But in reality, I am standing there and am supposed to share my 'soul'. Whom do I choose? At whose expense? Right or wrong? Why?

The teachers express their difficulties in justifying their choice of action. They are alone with their doubts and appear to have a hard time identifying the critical points that may justify the choice of fairness principle. In this particular example, one can say that the choice is between need and need plus merit. The disruptive pupil needs help, but does not acknowledge this need. The pupil who makes an effort can be considered to have made herself deserving of the teacher's assistance. The teacher's choice is not obvious and not easy. The dilemma is inevitable in the teacher role and might be one example of the unclear *link between 'doing my job' and 'doing the right thing'* (Cribb, 2009, p.40).

A teacher can follow only one of the principles of fairness, as the principles are usually contradictory. There is no external source to indicate how priorities should be set. If the teacher cannot – even to themselves – justify their choice of fairness principle, there is a risk that moral stress will arise. Hence, when these various moral principles of fairness

are applied without conscious deliberation, teachers may find it difficult to justify their choices both to themselves and to their pupils.

Protection against harm vs collegial loyalty

Another variant of intrapersonal conflicts, frequently seen in the main study, is the moral dilemma that arises when a teacher sees a colleague treat pupils in a manner that may be regarded as harmful. This often relates to some form of mocking, harassing, or oppressive treatment. The teacher wants to intervene to protect the pupils from harm, but realises that there is great risk of other moral or social consequences. An intervention may harm the colleague who is the subject of criticism, and the colleague may be hurt emotionally, perhaps deeply so. An intervention may also pose a threat to the intervening teacher's own position. A teacher who breaches collegial loyalty risks their place in the social community (Campbell, 1993; Author)

When you see that a colleague's conduct is improper, it is hard to know where to turn. It feels terrible. It feels like sometimes you have to protect pupils.

The teacher's internal morals exhort them to protect pupils from poor treatment in school. Other internal moral and social norms protect the colleagues or the teachers themselves.

When I strongly suspect that a colleague is doing wrong by the students in this way. How do I deal with this? How much energy do I have for this? Will I be alone in acting?

The defining characteristic of these dilemmas is that they are erased within the teacher and handled by the individual and are, therefore, intrapersonal. The moral imperative to intervene to protect pupils arises from within the teacher, as does the justification for, instead, protecting themselves or their colleague. Since there is a serious risk of harm for the pupils, which is the morally most demanding value, the dilemma is one of the most severe examples.

Intrapersonal dilemmas, where the teacher's own moral norms conflict and the responsibility for the choice of action is seen as entirely the teacher's own, may be significant contributors to moral stress. Allowing pupils to be subjected to harmful treatment and failing to protect pupils puts teachers in conflict with their personal and professional morals. Intervening against a colleague entails substantial risk of harm to the collegial loyalty and community, a community that is sorely needed by both the teacher and the colleague as made clear in the comments above of the teacher who reflects about her efficacy and the risk for being left alone. Intervention thus conflicts with other moral imperatives.

Considering the high frequency of dilemmas of this type, we can assume that they are conflicts of conscience that are both numerous and recurring. These are not usually isolated incidents, but, instead, involve a colleague's persistent conduct in their encounters with pupils. Consequently, it is not easy to dismiss feelings of guilt about not intervening. Reminders of the teacher's moral responsibility for the pupils' situation crop up time and again.

The Boundaries of personal Privacy

This variant applies to the dilemma that arises when the teacher wants to intervene in pupils' or parents' private lives in order to protect a pupil from what the teacher perceives as a risk of harm or, at any rate, a situation that is less than optimal for the pupil's development and well-being. This may relate to, for instance, the demands parents place on their child being either too high or too low. The teacher would like to give good advice to the parents, but also believes that to do so may violate their right to privacy.

When you have a pupil with a parent whom I personally think often behaves inappropriately towards their child, it can be hard to strike a balance between maintaining a decent relationship with the parent and making the child as happy as possible. The child's well-being is my primary concern, of course, but where is the boundary? Maintaining a good relationship with the parents is also important. I sometimes feel frustrated in this type of situation.

Here, protection against harm is in conflict with the respect of privacy. The degree of frustration and pressure on the teacher, and consequently the risk for moral stress, is lower than in the cases where colleagues are involved. If there were any signs of abuse, as in previous research (Colnerud, 1997,2006), the moral demand and the conflict would have been stronger.

The right to privacy is also at stake in a case where a pupil has ended up running with a bad crowd. The teacher asks himself whether it is morally justifiable to intervene.

Protecting the pupil against possible harm is weighed up against the pupil's right to personal privacy.

Issues relating to pupils' free time and what friends they socialise with: As a teacher, I might think it is inappropriate for one pupil to socialise with another pupil. I think it impairs school attendance, the pupil's conduct and their development. Do I have the right to intervene? Is it my duty? I think this is a moral dilemma.

There is no principle or rule to help the teacher weigh the two options against one another, or which says that one value, protection from possible harm, is superior to the other, the right to personal privacy. It is left to the teacher to decide.

External moral and legal rules and institutional constraints

In this study, there are two clear examples of ethical dilemmas where external rules prevent the teacher from acting according to their conscience. The first is connected to the grading system, the other to the rules of confidentiality. We must bear in mind that the question to which these teachers gave their answers was limited to moral conflicts in relation to students, parents or colleagues. There are most likely a number of institutional constraints causing stress and also moral stress that are not visible in this particular study. For example, the effects of the reform hype were not paid attention to at the time of the data-collection in this study. Furthermore, it is not certain that teachers define their troubles with policy decisions as ethical dilemmas.

The grading system

One variant applies to the conflict between meeting pupils' needs for feedback and encouragement and the principles of fairness applicable to grading. Teachers describe how they praise and encourage pupils' efforts only to be, subsequently, forced to award the pupil a low grade when their performance, nevertheless, falls short of the required standard. Even though the pupil has put in maximum effort, the teacher is obliged to comply with the predetermined grading guidelines. In these cases, teachers describe feeling guilty about having possibly, through their well-intended encouragement, given the pupil expectations of a higher grade.

The duality of the grading system: On the one hand, you are supposed to meet pupils on their level, develop their knowledge and skills from that point. I am supposed to see the pupil as a unique individual and so on. I buy into that completely. On the other hand, all pupils are supposed to be assessed and grades awarded based on the same template. An impossible combination! I feel like a hypocrite when I praise pupils and give them positive feedback, when there is progress in their knowledge, when I know that this will still not be sufficient for them to achieve a passing grade. How am I supposed to, first, motivate and enthuse the pupils when I then knock them back down again with a failing grade?

The hallmark of this type of moral conflict, which may contribute to moral stress, is that the teacher must allow external principles, in this case, grading rules, to override their own moral compass. Teachers have a duty to act in a particular way despite their moral doubts. They cannot be held responsible for having made the wrong decision because they have acted in line with external principles. However, this does not protect the teacher from suffering from a guilty conscience.

Rules of Confidentiality

One example of legislation presenting a barrier to teachers acting in line with their moral choice is when the parents of a pupil in their class contact the teacher and ask for information and the teacher's opinion of a pupil other than their own child. In some cases, the parents want to know what actions the teacher and the school are taking to reduce a pupil's disruptive behaviour. They want to protect their own child. In other cases, they are concerned that the pupil in question is at risk and needs help. Regardless of the underlying reason for the parents' interest, the teacher has a legal duty to maintain confidentiality with respect to personal and private information that may cause harm if disclosed to unauthorised persons. The problem for the teacher is that this silence may damage the trust of other parents. The teacher must protect the pupil who has such serious problems that other parents are concerned. At the same time, it is important to protect other pupils from disruption and to convince their parents that the teacher is doing everything possible even though the teacher is not at liberty to tell them what measures have been taken. One teacher writes:

A parent brings up a situation with me about another child in the class. .../...

The parents who contact me are upset about the situation. As a teacher, I have the same information as the parents who contact me, plus I know more about, for instance, the home circumstances of the affected child. I cannot share that additional information with the parents who contact me, and it is precisely that information that explains quite a lot to me about what is happening. .../... So, the problem is that a child's behaviour in school may be due to things the school knows about, but I cannot explain that to other pupils' parents. If I could, they would have understood that it is actually not the school and not I, the teacher, who have not done enough.

The teacher would like to be able to reassure the worried parents, but cannot, as this would require disclosing information that by law must be kept confidential.

Discussion

The teaching profession is riddled with moral dilemmas that teachers are left to resolve, usually on their own. In some respects, teaching practice resembles that of other professions that are characterized as caring professions. The research on those professions, including nurses, indicates that these professionals are subjected to moral stress when legislation, other guiding principles and institutional constraints prevent them from pursuing the right course of action (Lützen et al., 2003). Although nurses, thus far, are more bound by rules than teachers, we can confirm that such dilemmas also arise in teaching practice. The grading system is one such example, where, external principles

are in conflict with teachers' desire to serve the wellbeing of students. Teachers' choice of action is controlled from the outside and a conflict of conscience may arise.

In Silfverberg's (1999) study of a home help service, she found that moral stress arose when the individual could not control the conditions under which the work should be performed. The moral stress was also related to time pressures and situations where staff could not put their care ambitions into practice. Similarities to teaching practice can also be confirmed in these respects. The effects of time pressure and feelings of inadequacy are primarily manifested in the narratives on the fairness problem. The conditions of teaching practice are controlled from the outside and prevent the teacher from doing what they themselves consider morally preferable. In this case, as in previous research, to give all pupils the time they need. If the teacher had unlimited time, the requirement to prioritise would be reduced. The choice of fairness principle would, however, still be the teacher's personal moral decision.

In this study of teachers' ethical dilemmas, several similarities to the other professions mentioned, concerning the risks of moral stress emerge. However, in this study an additional variant is demonstrated that drives the question of the causes of moral stress one stage further: *internal moral imperatives that conflict with other internal moral imperatives*. In these cases, teachers are answerable only to themselves for their moral choices. There is reason to believe that these dilemmas entail the greatest risk of moral stress particularly when pupils need protection from harm. The reason for this is that teachers cannot appease their guilty consciences by referring to an external principle or external circumstances. Consequently, this study widens the concept of workload. It is not only the number of students, the number of lessons or the number of tasks that causes

stress; it is also the weight of unresolved dilemmas which manifest as frustration, ambiguity and a guilty conscience that adds moral stress onto the stress of the workload.

It is unlikely that all teachers run the same risk of moral stress. As in the case of nurses, moral sensitivity is a critical risk factor for being susceptible to moral stress. Moral sensitivity, the intuitive motivation to use one's moral judgment to take moral decisions in the best interests of pupils, varies from teacher to teacher as do their commitment, resilience and self-efficacy (Day & Gu, 2009). This is evident in the fact that so many teachers describe colleagues who treat pupils inappropriately. It may seem reasonable to conclude that teachers who are morally sensitive place higher moral demands on themselves and are at the greatest risk of having the compunction to act and thus being subjected to moral stress. However, this study has its limitation since the method used did not allow any information about the teachers' varying commitment and resilience. In this context, we should reiterate that more female teachers have difficulty sleeping, due to thoughts about work, than their male colleagues. As Nias (1999) and Hong (2012) caution, there is a significant risk that some of them will be unable to continue working as teachers. This may, however, engender myriad questions about the school system's or the profession's approach to combating moral stress, supporting morally sensitive teachers or relieving teachers of responsibility for moral choices that teachers usually face alone. The solution cannot be to inure teachers to the pangs of their sensitive consciences or to relieve them of their responsibility. It should be the school's moral obligation to the pupils to support teachers' courage to act according to their conscience, not only to avoid moral stress but also to act with regard to pupils' vulnerability and needs.

Conclusions

The professional ethical dilemmas of teachers may cause moral stress particularly when the main values associated with protecting pupils from harm are at stake. Moral sensitivity may increase the risk of moral stress and teachers should, therefore, be given opportunities for relief in the face of ethical dilemmas.

Access to a moral vocabulary and appropriate professional language is necessary in order to articulate the ethical arguments and exercise moral judgement in the best interest of pupils. Intrapersonal conflicts may be particularly stressful when moral choices are one's own and there are no external rules to rely on; however, external rules are also a source of other ethical dilemmas and moral stress. Further research should focus on the issue by asking teachers about situations in which they do not follow their conscience.

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Table 1. Distribution of ethical dilemmas in categories

Category	(%)
Protect student vs. College	27
Protect student vs. Parent	21
Protect student vs. Grading	13
Student vs. Student (Fairness)	12
Protect student from social risks (Privacy and confidentiality)	11
Respect for various religions and traditions	9
Other	7