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Teachers' ethos today: expectations and opinions

Summary

The type of qualification and the extent of professional practice are important elements in the appraisal of a professional. However, these categories are too narrow to characterise a particular teacher. That is why this paper presents a study on teachers' ethos carried out in 2014. It was conducted among the group of 132 teachers and 123 parents with the use of questionnaires on paper or online. The main purpose of the study was to determine if ethos is still present on the list of social requirements for teachers, and whether its perception has changed in the course of time. The results revealed high levels of familiarity with the term among the respondents as well as the gradual decline of the value of ethos in the work of teachers.

Key words: ethos, ethics in teaching profession, teacher profession, social expectations, social pattern

Introduction

The review of scientific literature revealed multiple attempts on describing the concept of ethos. Although the definitions differ, there are elements common for all of them. It is widely agreed that ethos is a distinctive trait of all social groups. The values, which comprise its core, ensure the unity of each group. Ethos is not only directly connected with the hierarchy of values which affects the sphere of human engagement in one common activity (work, family, religion, interests, etc.). It should not be exclusively identified with moral values of a particular social group. Maria Ossowska (1956) ties the definition of ethos with the issue of lifestyle According to Andrzej Siciński (1976), lifestyle

consists of specific, deliberate human behaviours. These acts are conditioned by common values and goals and serve as a tool for distinguishing individual social groups from one another.

The choice of a specific community allows to indicate particular character traits of a person and is responsible for shaping his/her biography. The reciprocity of this process explains the nature of the relationship between an individual and the social group. It also introduces another definition in which ethos is described as 'the ensemble of social heritage' (Czarnowski 1958: 12), which does not exclusively belong in the realm of the abstract. Social heritage consists of more or less specific creations that appear periodically. That includes goods related to worship, customs, law or education. Language holds an important place among them all. It is undoubtedly a tool indispensable for the existence and development of societies. It plays an important role in the formation and functioning of social groups.

Ethos is also perceived as a 'mechanism for conditioning behaviour' (Klepajczuk 1995: 8) or 'the attitude of man' (Znamierowski 1964: 86). In the light of this definition, ethos of a social group is conditioned by the emotional, cognitive and behavioural components correlated with an individual, who is a part of that group. This implies that ethos has an influence on the most relevant areas of existence of a member of the ethos group.

In his reflections, Jan Legowicz (1984) went even further, calling ethos 'a capability, an intrinsic pedagogical need, an active habit' (p. 274). His approach is far from being purely theoretical; it emphasises the great emotional involvement of a teacher. Consequently, not only does Legowicz identify ethos of his professional group with a duty, but he also perceives it as the deepest personal need.

Although the attempt to define ethos through the concept of 'personal pattern' (Meibaum 1979: 127) also includes personal values, it puts a strong emphasis on the decision-making component which is subjected to personal freedom of an individual. Personal pattern recognised by the ethos group becomes an ideal; an object of aspiration of its members. Moreover, the perception of ethos solely depends on their commitment to it. Without their support it will become nothing more than an insignificant utopian concept.

Research methodology

The aim of the presented research was to identify the opinions of teachers and parents regarding the topic of ethos and its transformation. Attitudes of respondents towards this phenomenon were also of significance for the researcher. The study was conducted in 2014 in pre-school and school facilities in Poland. The sample consists of teachers and parents of students, selected via simple random sampling. From the group of the 132 teachers in the sample, 60 per cent (79 people) are employed at primary schools, and the remaining 40 per cent (53 people) are working in pre-schools. All parents participating in the study (123 respondents) have pre-school or school-aged children. Pre-school parents comprise 43 per cent (53) of the respondents and the remaining 57 per cent (70) are parents of schoolchildren. Independent variables consist of: type of institution, role of the respondent, age and gender. The dependent variables include: the knowledge of the term and attitude of the respondents towards ethos, their opinions concerning its transformation and currency. Data was collected via questionnaires constructed by the researcher, and analysed using quantitative methods. Statistical calculations were performed using STATISTICA 10 PL software. Significance level for the research was set on a standard 5% ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Results and discussion

The questionnaire was designed to first study the level of familiarity of the term 'ethos' in order to check the respondents' knowledge of the concept. Results revealed that all of the school teachers and 96 per cent of pre-school teachers are familiar with the term. This also applies to 96 per cent of parents whose children attend school and 93 per cent of parents of pre-schoolers. Only a small percentage of parents and teachers have never heard of ethos before.

In order to check whether there is a statistically significant difference in responses correlated with the role and the type of educational institution, cross-correlation tests were performed using log-linear analysis (Table 1). The results show that the percentage of people who know the term ethos is close in each subgroup.

Table 1. Correlation of the role and type of educational institution with the perception of
term ethos – results of log-linear analysis

Independent variables	N	df	χ^2	p
Location of the role	252	1	1.82	0.177
Type of institution	252	1	1.67	0.196
Location of the role * type of institution	252	1	0.40	0.525

It could be expected for the results to vary between the age groups. One could assume that older respondents are more familiar with the term, and that many younger respondents have never encountered it before. Ethos of the teacher profession can be found in classic literature. It was a subject explored by many writers whose works were selected as compulsory readings for school. Currently, the texts for students, especially in primary school, are chosen by the teachers themselves. Selection of readings largely depends on the interests, the personal theories and the values shared by the teachers. Moreover, it seems that ethical issues are not on top of the list of interests of young people. In addition, moral dilemmas are hardly relevant elements of postmodern life-style, which is adopted not only by young people these days but also by their parents (Rutkowski 2012). Hence, it could be assumed that results in two age groups (early adulthood and middle adulthood) will vary. The study did not confirm this statement.

In the following question respondents were asked about categories related to ethos. It was a closed-ended type of question. Respondents were allowed to make a multiple selection out of three provided answers. Majority associated ethos with professional life (87 per cent of respondents) and personal life (69 per cent); leisure time was selected by 34 per cent. In general opinion, high ethical requirements are mainly imposed on professions which directly provide service to other people (doctors, teachers). These expectations concern not only the professional sphere but also the personal life of these particular social groups. In other words, a teacher or a physician can perform his work on a highly professional level only if his personal life is impeccable in the ethical aspect.

In order to check whether respondents' responses varied in correlation to their role and type of educational institution, log-linear analysis was performed. The obtained results indicate a statistically significant relationship between the location of the role and the perception of the correlation between ethos and professional life, χ^2 (1, N = 243) = 5.15; p = 0.023. The percentage of teachers

who associate the ethos with professional life (92 per cent) is significantly higher than the percentage of parents (82 per cent), as shown in Graph 1.
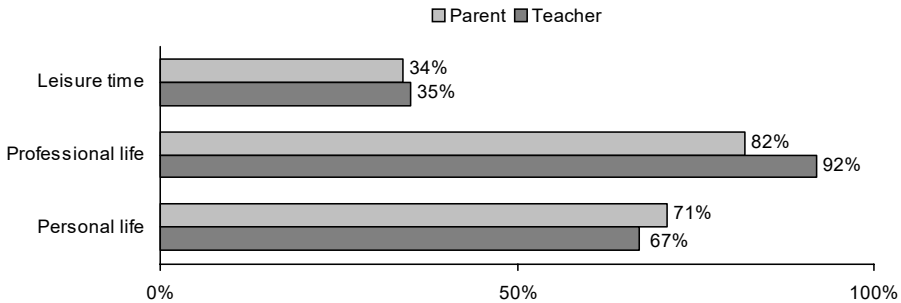
Graph 1. Distribution of answers to question about the sphere of life associated with the ethos – correlation of responses to the role of respondent

A considerably bigger number of teachers (a difference of 10 per cent) link ethos with professional life. The previously described experiences of this social group are complemented by the signals correlated with immediate social expectations. For teachers every interaction with a student or a parent is an opportunity to obtain feedback and verify the list of requirements he or she has to meet. Teaching is a profession burdened with responsibility, and what is more, teachers are inclined to create personal image that caters to public opinion.
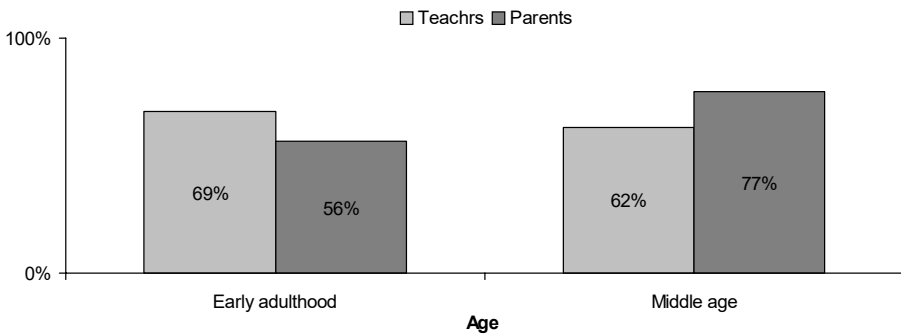
Graph 2. Correlation of ethos and personal life – distribution of responses depending on the role and age of the respondents

The result of the log-linear analysis revealed a statistically significant correlation of the social role and age with the perception of the relationship between ethos and personal life. Graph 2 illustrates the nature of the effect of this interaction. In the group of middle-aged parents, the percentage of people

who think that ethos is related to personal life (77 per cent) is higher than that of parents in their early adulthood (56 per cent), χ^2 (1, N = 118) = 5.23; p = 0.022. In the group of teachers, the difference between the two age groups is statistically insignificant, χ^2 (1, N = 125) = 0.74; p = 0.390.

The analysis suggests that older parents are more likely to associate ethos with personal life. This might stem from the fact that in the past teaching was perceived in terms of social mission. Consequently, teachers were expected to uphold moral standards both in their professional and private lives. The social requirements for teachers are evolving (Pękala 2017: 97–108), which probably influenced the results of the study in the group of younger respondents.

Afterwards, the respondents were asked about the currency of the term. Ethos is still present in the social consciousness according to 61 per cent of respondents. The remaining 39 per cent regard the term as archaic. To test whether independent variables are related to respondents' responses in a statistically significant way, the correlation tests were performed using log-linear analysis and chi-square test of independence (Table 2). The analysis did not show any statistically significant correlations. This indicates that the distribution of respondents' responses was similar in each individual subgroup.

Table 2. Tests of dependence between independent variables and the evaluation of the currency of ethos

Independent variables	N	df	χ^2	p
Location of the role	252	1	1.82	0.177
Type of institution	252	1	1.67	0.196
Location of the role * type of institution	252	1	0.40	0.525
Age	250	1	0.41	0.520
Age * location of the role	250	1	0.13	0.724
Gender	253	1	0.98	0.328

Almost all respondents, regardless of their social role, know the concept of ethos. However, only the minority (39 per cent) consider this term as up-to-date. It was expected to receive few answers that favour ethos as very important. Any conceptual category that seems to be outdated is expected to be perceived as of little significance. The research on ethos revealed entirely different results.

Ethos is perceived as very important or important (Graph 3) by the majority of the respondents (83%), independently from the social role, age and institution they represent.

☐ Unimportant   ☐ Not very important   ☐ Important   ☐ Very important

2%	15%	42%	41%

0%   100%

Percentage of respondents
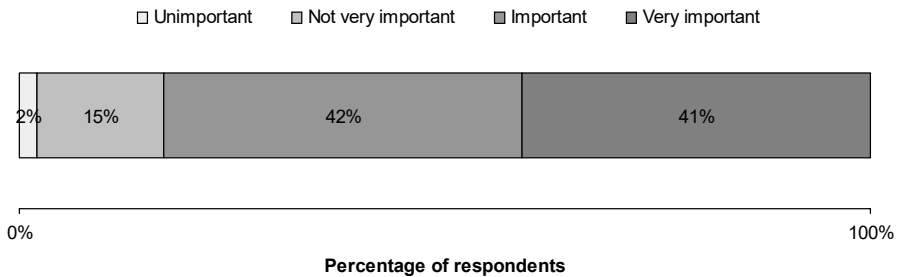
Graph 3. Importance of ethos to the teacher's profession – distribution of responses

Only 2 per cent of respondents claimed that ethos is unimportant to teachers' work; 15% of respondents said it is not very important. This analysis shows an interesting relation; respondents claimed that the conceptual category, which is outdated, is at the same time very important for them.

The differentiation in responses, discrepancy between familiarity with the term, its currency and relevance shows that, despite the ambiguous nature of respondents' opinions, ethos is a phenomenon that is still present in the public discourse. What could possibly be the source of this ambiguity? It seems that the difference in experience between people in different age groups, as well as roles they take on, can lead to the asymmetry of the responses. It is feasible that the respondents encountered the term ethos at school or at home during the interaction with adults. Their opinion and perception of the term might have evolved as they were taking on new social roles. Undoubtedly, the perception of the profession from the point of view of a student is different from the perspective of a parent. It becomes even more complex if the person works as a teacher. It might happen that there is no connection between two or three images of the same social role. These differences are not organised and the subject is not fully aware of them. With time that perception evolves. What is more, ethos is not a category that is being contemplated on the daily basis. Everyday interactions with school are hardly associated with the issue of teachers' values. It only occurs in rare situations when there is a very strong, positive or negative, experience connected with one specific teacher. The questionnaire that was part of the research might have triggered the series of reflections

that normally do not occur during everyday interactions with the educational institutions.

In order to check if there are differences in the opinions concerning the importance of ethos depending on the respondents' social role and the type of educational institution a series of Manna-Whitney's *U-tests* was carried out. In the first analysis there is a comparison of results between the group of teachers and parents. The conducted analysis showed that parents are rating the importance of ethos in teachers' work ($Mrang1 = 138.27$) higher than teachers themselves ($Mrang2 = 118.43$), $U = 6855$; $p = 0.020$. Graph 4 illustrates the distribution of the answers with separation of data by role.
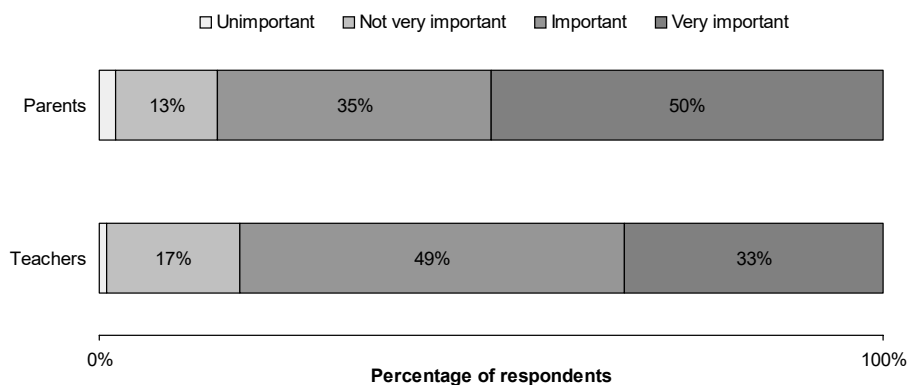

Graph 4. Importance of ethos in teacher's work in correlation to the respondent's social role

Research shows that a big number of parents consider ethos as a very important element of the teacher profession. Social expectations towards teachers are high. In spite of the fact that society nowadays mainly associates professionalism in teaching with the transfer of knowledge and skills needed for the future profession, ethics is still vital part of the perception of teacher's duties (CBOS BS/91/2007: 2).

Therefore, respondents were asked to identify elements that are, in their opinion, more important for teacher's profession than ethos. The fact that it is perceived as highly relevant does not answer the question of what are the other elements. It also gives no indication of the place of ethos in the hierarchy of respondents' priorities.

According to the representatives of each group the most important element of teacher's work is professional knowledge. This seems to be the confirmation of contemporary opinions about teacher's professionalism, and to some extent

of the social expectations mentioned before. It is expected of teachers to prepare students for the labour market mainly via transfer of professional knowledge. The same applies to methodological skills. The method of transferring knowledge is strongly connected with the efficiency of teachers' work. For every adult involved in the process of children's education it is important to achieve satisfying results, which are more and more often measured with numbers. Personality traits possessed by the teacher determine his interpersonal attractiveness and as a result influence the effectiveness of the process of teaching. Thirteen per cent of respondents claimed ethos to be the most important element of the teacher's profession. That puts it on the fourth place on the list of most relevant determinants of professionalism in teaching, which is quite a good result.
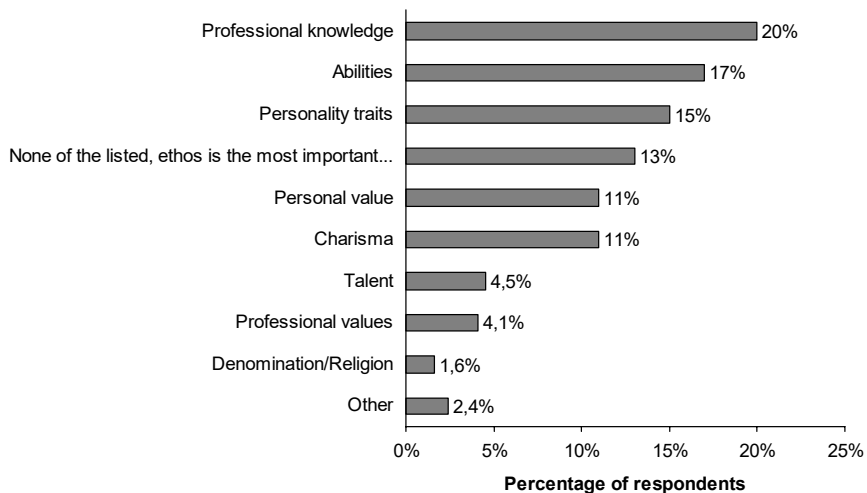
Graph 5. Elements of teachers' work which are more important than ethos – the responses of parents and teachers

Many of the respondents associate ethos with a model system of values, or with an unattainable ideal. This colloquial understanding of the term is not far from the definition found in scientific literature (Meibaum 1979; Szawiel 1982; Chrobak 1992). During the next phase respondents were asked about encountering teachers who represent the ethos of their profession. Data collected until this point, despite being important for the research, was insufficient for explaining the influence of personal experience on the opinions about ethos. It only presented the level of knowledge and attitude of the respondents towards the examined conceptual category. Data acquired in this phase confirmed credibility of previously obtained answers. As much as 81 per cent of

respondents claimed that they have met a teacher who represents teachers' ethos. That shows how adequate are the opinions of the respondents, which are the results of the personal knowledge and experience. Moreover, this outcome somehow confirms the currency of the term.

To find out whether there are any significant differences between the answers of the respondents correlated with the social role, type of educational institution, gender and age, a correlation test was performed. The analysis of the results did not show any statistically significant connections between independent variables and respondents' responses. Percentage of positive answers was close in each group.

Table 3. Correlation of independent variables and the fact of meeting a teacher
　　　　 – representative of the professional ethos

Independent variables	N	df	χ^2	p
Location of the role	249	1	1.82	0.177
Type of the institution	249	1	1.67	0.196
Location of the role * type of the institution	249	1	0.40	0.525
Age	248	1	0.24	0.621
Age * location of the role	248	1	0.04	0.842
Gender	251	1	0.19	0.663

While the results of this inquiry are optimistic for the professional image of teachers in the society, the answers to the next question are not uplifting. Respondents confirmed that there are teachers who are positive examples of ethos of their profession. However, a big number of survey participants (66%) claimed that there are not many of them these days (Graph 6).
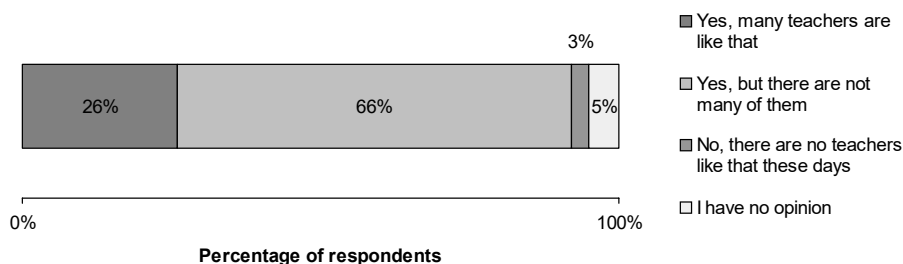
Graph 6. Distribution of answers to the question about the number of the teachers
　　　　 – representatives of professional ethos

It may seem interesting that there is a lack of variation in responses in correlation to the role, age and institution represented by the respondents. This are the results of the log-linear analysis and chi-square independence test (Table 4).

Table 4. Assessment of the number of teachers who show their professional ethos – results of cross-correlation analysis

Independent variables	N	df	χ^2	p
Location of the role	247	3	2.50	0.475
Type of the institution	247	3	2.61	0.456
Location of the role * type of the institution	247	3	1.73	0.631
Age	246	3	0.97	0.809
Age * location of the role	246	3	3.88	0.275
Gender	249	3	7.72	0.052

It seems that presently the perception of the profession is not very positive. Sixty-six per cent of the respondents claim that currently there are not many teachers who represent a model ethos of their social group. Considering that ethical competences are crucial elements of professional conduct of teachers, these results are not optimistic.

Conclusions

From the very beginning criteria used for the evaluation of professionals who provide public service were different from those used for other professions. Moreover, public debates on the situation of education are becoming more and more frequent, especially in times of political change. With the development of psychology and the understanding of the influence of personal competences on the quality of pedagogical work, there is one question that recurs again and again: What comprises a good teacher? The research introduced in this article attempts to demonstrate that ethos is an important element of the teaching profession for the respondents. It seems that adults involved in the education of young people not only perceive knowledge transfer as important element but also realise how significant is teachers' attitude for the whole process. They are familiar with the concept of ethos and consider it as an important part of

teacher's work. Many of the respondents are able to recall examples of teachers who not only teach how to live but also apply these values into their own lives. Nevertheless, the respondents stated that there is a decline in the number of professionals like that. Should these results cause pessimism in the way of thinking about modern school? The best course of action seems to be the reflection on the education of teachers. It seems that ethics is relatively unimportant subject in the curriculum of contemporary pedagogical studies. Usually courses in ethics, if there are any, are non-compulsory. It is necessary for teachers to make decisions and perform according to the system of values they are equipped with; at the same time the purpose of their profession is to pass these values on. Education of the future teachers cannot take place without in-depth personal reflection on the values; this reflection should happen under the guidance of specialists that were trained for this purpose. It should definitely take place before the beginning of the professional career.

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