TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL ETHICS THROUGH STUDENTS' EYES: ARE THERE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS?

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Abstract

Teachers' professional ethics played an essential role in shaping respectful, supportive and fair learning environments. This study examined the extent to which teachers' self-perceptions of their professional ethical conduct corresponded with students' perceptions in primary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia.
The research was based on data collected from 694 respondents, including 108 teachers and 586 students from six primary schools. A quantitative, descriptive-comparative approach was applied through questionnaires completed by teachers and students. The analysis focused on three dimensions of professional ethics: teachers as ethical role models, respect for children's rights, and adherence to professional ethical standards.
The findings revealed both convergence and substantial differences between the two groups. Regarding teachers' role as ethical models, 93.5% of teachers expressed agreement or strong agreement, compared with 57.8% of students. In contrast, perceptions were remarkably similar concerning the respect and promotion of children's rights (82.4% among teachers and 83.4% among students) and adherence to the ethical code (80.6% and 80.7%, respectively).
These findings indicated that teachers' self-assessments did not always correspond with students' perceptions, particularly regarding teachers' role modelling. At the same time, the considerable agreement in other ethical dimensions suggested shared perceptions of certain professional standards.
The study highlighted the importance of incorporating students' perspectives into the evaluation of teachers' professional conduct and the development of an ethical school culture.

Keywords**:** professional ethics; teachers' perceptions; students' perceptions; ethical role models; primary education.

1. Introduction

Professional ethics represents an important component of teachers' professional identity and educational responsibility. Beyond the transmission of knowledge, teachers are expected to demonstrate fairness, respect, responsibility and integrity in their everyday interactions with students. Their professional conduct influences not only the quality of teaching but also the classroom climate, students' sense of security and the development of positive interpersonal relationships.
In contemporary education, the ethical dimension of teaching is particularly important because schools are expected to provide inclusive, democratic and child-centred learning environments. Respect for children's rights, equal treatment and protection from discrimination are fundamental principles that should guide teachers' decisions and behaviour.
Nevertheless, the implementation of ethical principles cannot be assessed exclusively through teachers' understanding of their professional responsibilities. Students, as direct participants in the educational process, experience teachers' behaviour on a daily basis and can provide an important perspective on how ethical principles are reflected in practice.
The purpose of this study is to examine and compare teachers' and students' perceptions of professional ethics in primary education. Particular attention is given to the teacher as an ethical role model, respect for children's rights and professional ethical principles. By examining the perspectives of both groups, the study seeks to identify areas of agreement and potential differences that may contribute to improving teachers' professional practice.

2. Theoretical approach to the research problem

Professional ethics in teaching encompasses the values, principles and standards that guide teachers' professional behaviour and relationships with students. It involves responsibility, fairness, respect, honesty, professional integrity and commitment to students' educational and personal development.

An essential aspect of professional ethics is the teacher's role as an ethical role model. Students do not acquire values exclusively through formal instruction; they also develop them by observing teachers' everyday behaviour, decisions and interactions. Consequently, consistency between the ethical principles teachers promote and their actual conduct is fundamental to establishing trust and respect in the classroom.

Another central dimension is the recognition and protection of children's rights. Teachers are responsible for ensuring equal opportunities, respecting students' dignity, considering individual differences and creating an environment in which every child feels accepted and protected. These responsibilities are closely connected with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Professional ethical principles and codes provide guidance for teachers in situations involving professional responsibilities, relationships and decision-making. However, the existence of ethical standards does not automatically guarantee their consistent implementation. Their practical value depends on teachers' awareness, professional commitment and everyday conduct.

An important consideration is the relationship between teachers' self-perceptions and students' perceptions. Teachers may evaluate their professional behaviour according to their knowledge of ethical standards and professional responsibilities, whereas students evaluate it through their direct experiences. Comparing these perspectives can therefore reveal areas in which professional intentions and students' experiences correspond or differ.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research Aim and Design: The aim of this study is to examine and compare teachers' and students' perceptions of teachers' professional ethics in primary schools in North Macedonia. More specifically, the study seeks to identify the degree of correspondence between teachers' self-assessments and students' evaluations regarding the implementation of ethical principles in school practice.

The research is based on a quantitative approach and employs a descriptive-comparative research design. This approach enables the analysis of the attitudes and perceptions of the two groups of participants, as well as the identification of similarities and differences between them.

In accordance with the defined aim, the study focuses on three main dimensions of teachers' professional ethics:

Dimension I – *Children's Rights*. Respect for students' dignity, equality, individuality, non-discrimination and protection.

Dimension II – *The Teacher as an Ethical Role Model*. Teachers' personal conduct, fairness, professional integrity, respect and educational influence.

Dimension III – *Compliance with the Code of Ethics*. Awareness, implementation and responsibility for upholding ethical standards in the school environment.

3.2. Research Sample: A total of 694 participants were included in the study, comprising 108 teachers and 586 students (classes VI-IX) from six primary schools in North Macedonia.

The sample includes two categories of participants, allowing professional ethics to be examined from two different perspectives: teachers' perspectives and students' experiences of everyday school relationships.
The inclusion of participants from six schools provides perceptions from different school settings and establishes a basis for the comparative analysis of the findings.

3.3. Research Instruments and Data Collection Procedure: Structured questionnaires were used for data collection, with separate instruments designed for the two categories of participants: teachers and students. The questionnaires contained statements related to the perception and assessment of professional ethics in the school environment.
The statements were organized according to the three research dimensions: respect for children's rights, the teacher as an ethical role model, and the implementation of professional codes of ethics. Responses were recorded using the rating scales provided in the respective questionnaires.
The collected data were organized and processed using SPSS software, enabling the systematic presentation of the results and the comparison of perceptions between the two groups.

3.4. Data Processing and Analysis: Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies and percentages, in order to present the distribution of participants' responses.
To compare teachers' and students' perceptions, positive, negative and intermediate responses were examined across the respective dimensions of professional ethics. The results were organized into comparative tables to identify similarities and differences between the two categories of participants.
This analytical approach enables the identification of major trends in perceptions of professional ethics and provides a basis for interpreting the findings in relation to the research aim.

4. Analysis of the obtained research results

To present the obtained research results more effectively, we have used tables and charts.
Dimension I – *Children's Rights*. Respect for students' dignity, equality, individuality, non-discrimination and protection.

Table No.1: Teachers at the school where I work respect and promote children's rights.

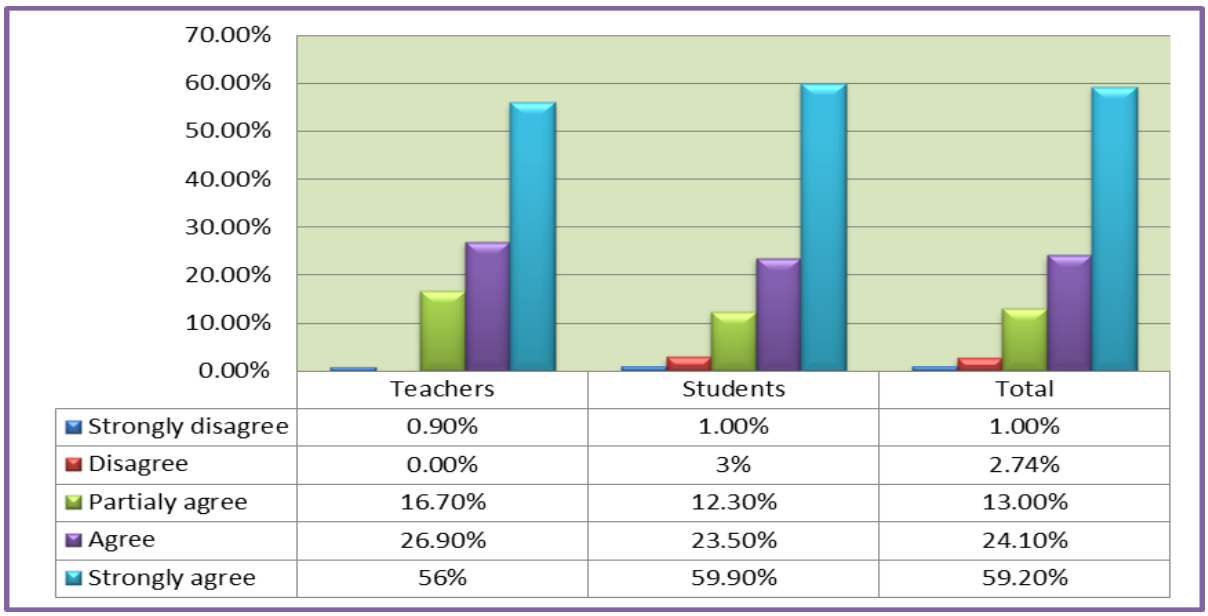
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	1	.9	.9	.9
	Partially agree	18	16.7	16.7	17.6
	Agree	29	26.9	26.9	44.4
	Strongly agree	60	55.6	55.6	100.0
	Total	108	100.0	100.0	

The results in Table No. 1 show that the majority of teachers (82.5%) express a positive assessment of respect for and promotion of children's rights in their schools. Of these, 55.6% *strongly agree* and 26.9% *agree* with the statement. Meanwhile, 16.7% express *partial agreement*, while only 0.9% *strongly disagree*. These findings indicate that teachers generally perceive respect for children's rights as an important and established aspect of their professional practice.

Table No. 2: Teachers at the school where I study respect and promote children's rights.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	6	1.0	1.0	1.0
	Disagree	19	3.2	3.2	4.3
	Partially agree	72	12.3	12.3	16.6
	Agree	138	23.5	23.5	40.1
	Strongly agree	351	59.9	59.9	100.0
	Total	586	100.0	100.0	

The results in Table No. 2 show that the majority of students (83.4%) express a positive assessment of respect for and promotion of children's rights at their school. Of these, 59.9% *strongly agree* and 23.5% agree with the statement. Meanwhile, 12.3% express *partial agreement*, while 4.2% express *disagreement* or *strong disagreement*. These findings indicate that students generally perceive respect for children's rights as an important aspect of their school environment.



	Teachers	Students	Total
Strongly disagree	0.90%	1.00%	1.00%
Disagree	0.00%	3%	2.74%
Partialy agree	16.70%	12.30%	13.00%
Agree	26.90%	23.50%	24.10%
Strongly agree	56%	59.90%	59.20%

Figure 1: Teachers' and Students' Attitudes towards the Statement that Teachers in Their School Respect and Promote Children's Rights

The comparative analysis of teachers' and students' perceptions regarding teachers' respect for and promotion of children's rights reveals a high degree of similarity between the two groups. The results indicate that 56% of teachers and 59.9% of students strongly agree with the statement, while 26.9% of teachers and 23.5% of students agree.

Regarding partial agreement, this response was selected by 16.7% of teachers and 12.3% of students. In contrast, disagreement is relatively low among both groups. Specifically, 0.9% of teachers and 1% of students strongly disagree, while none of the teachers and 3% of students disagree with the statement.

The cumulative percentage of positive responses (agree and strongly agree) amounts to 82.9% among teachers and 83.4% among students, indicating a very similar level of positive perception between the two groups. However, students demonstrate a slightly higher level of strong agreement (59.9%) compared to teachers (56%). Conversely, teachers show a somewhat higher proportion of partial agreement (16.7%) than students (12.3%). Furthermore, the

percentage of disagreement is slightly higher among students (4%) than among teachers (0.9%).
Based on these findings, it can be concluded that teachers' and students' perceptions are largely consistent regarding the respect and promotion of children's rights in the school environment. The slightly higher level of strong agreement among students suggests that they generally perceive their teachers' commitment to children's rights very positively. Overall, the results reflect a favourable assessment of teachers' role in respecting and promoting children's rights, while also indicating the importance of maintaining and further strengthening these ethical practices in everyday school life.
Dimension II – *The Teacher as an Ethical Role Model*. Teachers' personal conduct, fairness, professional integrity, respect and educational influence.

Table No. 3: The teacher as an ethical role model from whom students adopt attitudes and values.

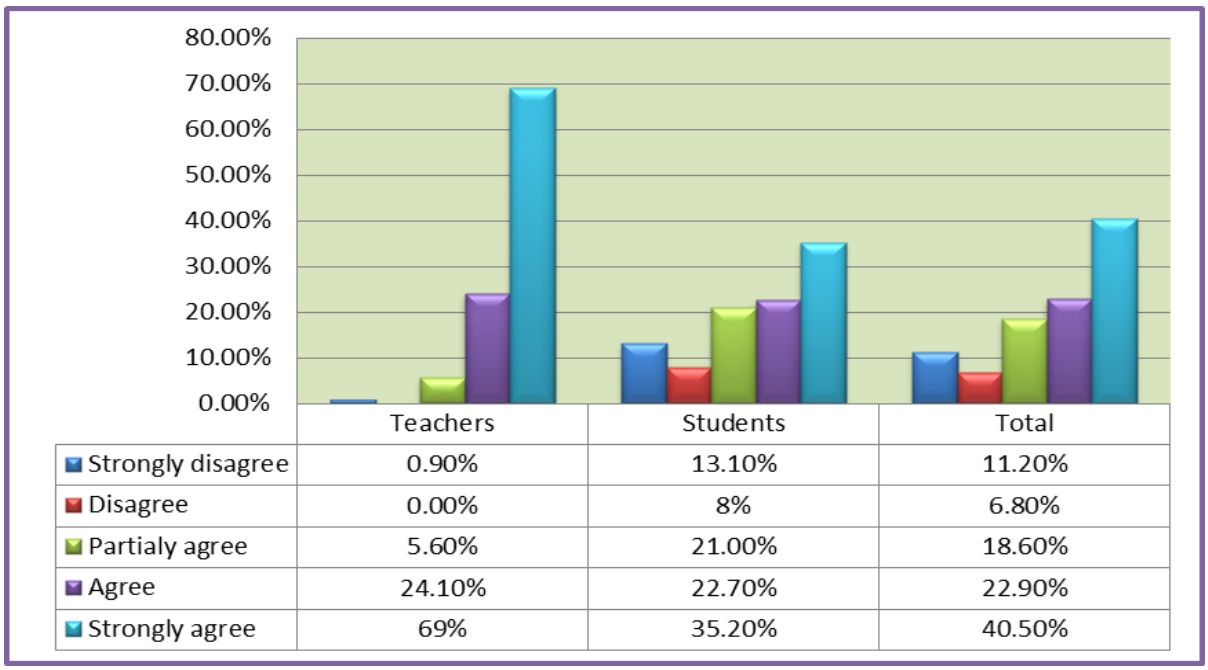
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	.9	.9	.9
	Partially agree	6	5.6	5.6	6.5
	Agree	26	24.1	24.1	30.6
	Strongly agree	75	69.4	69.4	100.0
	Total	108	100.0	100.0	

The results in Table No. 3 show that the majority of teachers (93.5%) express a positive assessment of the teacher's role as an ethical model from whom students adopt attitudes and values. Of these, 69.4% *strongly agree* and 24.1% *agree* with the statement. Meanwhile, 5.6% express *partial agreement*, while only 0.9% *disagree*. These findings indicate that teachers strongly recognize their role in shaping students' attitudes and values through their ethical conduct.

Table No. 4: I look up to the actions and behavior of my teachers.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	77	13.1	13.1	13.1
	Disagree	47	8.0	8.0	21.2
	Partially agree	123	21.0	21.0	42.2
	Agree	133	22.7	22.7	64.8
	Strongly agree	206	35.2	35.2	100.0
	Total	586	100.0	100.0	

The results regarding the statement: "I look up to the actions and behaviour of my teachers" are presented in Table No. 4. The findings show that 35.2% students *strongly agree* and 22.7% *agree* with the statement. A neutral attitude is expressed by 21% students , while 8% *disagree* and 13.1% *strongly disagree*. These results indicate that the majority of students 57.9% look up to their teachers' actions and behaviour, recognizing them as models of conduct.



	Teachers	Students	Total
Strongly disagree	0.90%	13.10%	11.20%
Disagree	0.00%	8%	6.80%
Partialy agree	5.60%	21.00%	18.60%
Agree	24.10%	22.70%	22.90%
Strongly agree	69%	35.20%	40.50%

Figure 2: Teachers' and Students' Attitudes towards the Statement that Teachers Serve as Ethical Role Models from Whom Students Adopt Attitudes and Values, and the Statement that Students Look Up to Their Teachers' Actions and Behaviour

The comparative analysis of teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the role of teachers as ethical role models, from whom students adopt attitudes and values, and students' tendency to look up to their teachers' actions and behaviour, reveals notable differences between the two groups.

The results indicate that 69% of teachers strongly agree with the statement, while 24.1% agree and 5.6% partially agree. In contrast, among students, 35.2% strongly agree, 22.7% agree and 21% partially agree. Furthermore, 13.1% of students strongly disagree and 8% disagree with the statement, whereas the corresponding percentages among teachers are 0.9% and 0%, respectively.

The cumulative percentage of positive responses (agree and strongly agree) amounts to 93.1% among teachers, compared to 57.9% among students. Conversely, the cumulative percentage of negative responses (disagree and strongly disagree) is only 0.9% among teachers, whereas among students it reaches 21.1%. These differences reveal a considerably more positive assessment among teachers than among students regarding the teacher's role as an ethical model.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that teachers evaluate their role as ethical role models considerably more positively than students perceive and experience it. While the vast majority of teachers believe that their actions and behaviour serve as examples from which students adopt attitudes and values, students express a more diverse range of opinions, including a notable proportion of disagreement. This difference in perceptions highlights the importance of greater consistency between teachers' understanding of their ethical responsibility and students' actual experiences in the school environment. Therefore, teachers should place greater emphasis on demonstrating ethical values through their everyday conduct, professional relationships and interactions with students.

Dimension III – *Compliance with the Code of Ethics*. Awareness, implementation and responsibility for upholding ethical standards in the school environment.

Table No. 5: Teachers at the school where I work respect the rules prescribed by the code of ethics.

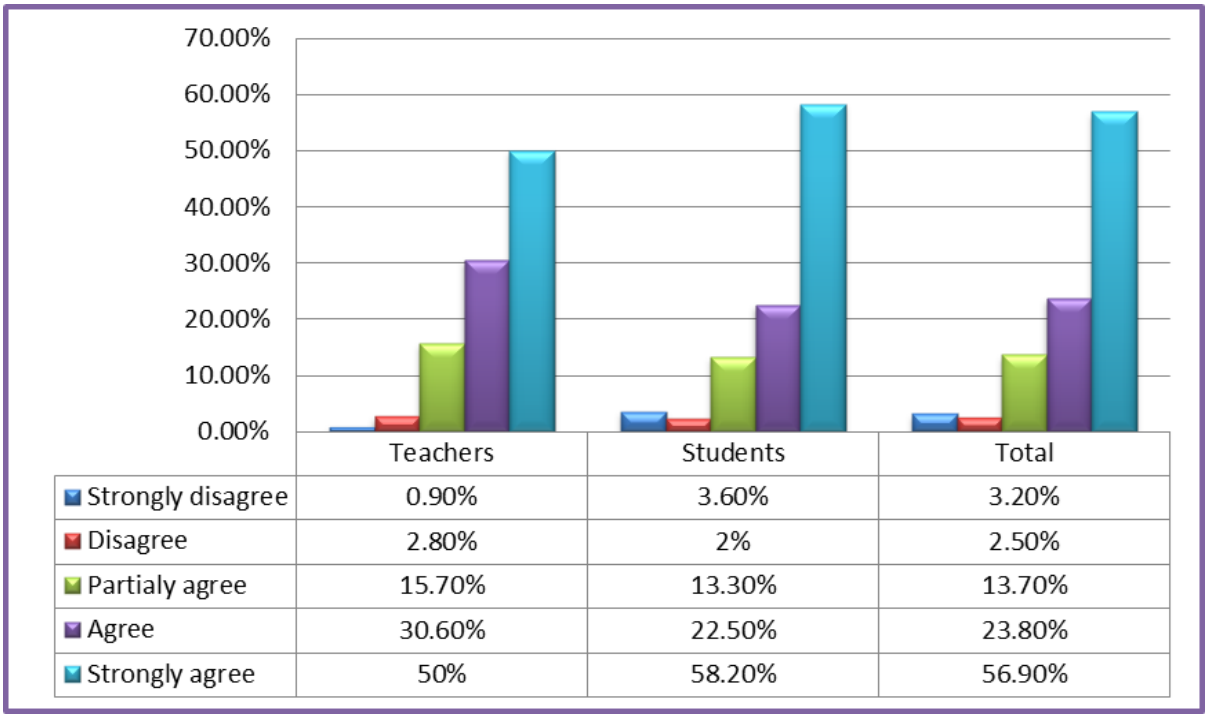
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	1	.9	.9	.9
	Disagree	3	2.8	2.8	3.7
	Partially agree	17	15.7	15.7	19.4
	Agree	33	30.6	30.6	50.0
	Strongly agree	54	50.0	50.0	100.0
	Total	108	100.0	100.0	

The results regarding the statement: "Teachers at the school where I work respect the rules prescribed by the Code of Ethics" are presented in Table No. 5. The findings show that 50% of teachers *strongly agree* and 30.6% *agree* with the statement. A neutral attitude is expressed by 15.7%, while 2.8% *disagree* and 0.9% *strongly disagree*. These results indicate that the majority of teachers (80.6%) believe that teachers in their school respect the rules prescribed by the Code of Ethics.

Table No. 6: Teachers at the school where I study respect the rules prescribed by the code of ethics.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	21	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Disagree	14	2.4	2.4	6.0
	Partially agree	78	13.3	13.3	19.3
	Agree	132	22.5	22.5	41.8
	Strongly agree	341	58.2	58.2	100.0
	Total	586	100.0	100.0	

The results regarding the statement: "Teachers at the school where I study respect the rules prescribed by the Code of Ethics" are presented in Table No. 6. The findings show that 58.2% of students *strongly agree* and 22.5% *agree* with the statement. A neutral attitude is expressed by 13.3%, while 2.4% *disagree* and 3.6% *strongly disagree*. These results indicate that the majority of students 80.7% believe that teachers at their school respect the rules prescribed by the Code of Ethics.



	Teachers	Students	Total
Strongly disagree	0.90%	3.60%	3.20%
Disagree	2.80%	2%	2.50%
Partialy agree	15.70%	13.30%	13.70%
Agree	30.60%	22.50%	23.80%
Strongly agree	50%	58.20%	56.90%

Figure 3: Presents the obtained results from the comparison of teachers' and students' perceptions regarding teachers' compliance with the rules prescribed by the Code of Ethics in their school.

The comparative analysis of teachers' and students' perceptions regarding teachers' compliance with the rules prescribed by the Code of Ethics reveals a predominantly positive assessment among both groups, although certain differences can be observed in the intensity of their agreement.

The results indicate that 50% of teachers strongly agree with the statement, while 30.6% agree and 15.7% partially agree. Among students, 58.2% strongly agree, 22.5% agree and 13.3% partially agree. Regarding disagreement, 0.9% of teachers and 3.6% of students strongly disagree, while 2.8% of teachers and 2% of students disagree with the statement.

The cumulative percentage of positive responses (agree and strongly agree) amounts to 80.6% among teachers and 80.7% among students, indicating an almost identical overall level of positive perception. However, students demonstrate a higher level of strong agreement (58.2%) compared to teachers (50%), whereas teachers show a higher proportion of agreement (30.6%) and partial agreement (15.7%) than students (22.5% and 13.3%, respectively). The cumulative percentage of negative responses (disagree and strongly disagree) is 3.7% among teachers and 5.6% among students.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that teachers' and students' perceptions are largely consistent regarding teachers' compliance with the rules prescribed by the Code of Ethics. The almost identical cumulative percentages of positive responses suggest a considerable degree of agreement between the two groups. Nevertheless, the higher proportion of students who strongly agree indicates that students tend to express a more emphatic positive assessment of teachers' adherence to ethical rules. Overall, these findings reflect a favourable perception of the implementation of ethical standards in the school environment and highlight the importance of consistently maintaining professional ethical conduct.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that both teachers and students generally express positive perceptions regarding the implementation of professional ethics in the school environment, particularly in relation to respecting children's rights and complying with the rules prescribed by the Code of Ethics. However, the comparative analysis also reveals certain differences between teachers' self-assessments and students' perceptions.

The most notable difference concerns the teacher's role as an ethical model. While teachers overwhelmingly consider themselves role models whose behaviour influences students' attitudes and values, students express more varied opinions regarding this aspect. This finding highlights the importance of ensuring consistency between teachers' understanding of their ethical responsibilities and students' everyday experiences.

Overall, the study emphasizes that professional ethics should not be understood merely as a set of prescribed rules, but as a continuous commitment reflected in teachers' behaviour, communication and relationships with students. Strengthening ethical awareness, self-reflection and responsible professional conduct remains essential for creating a safe, respectful and supportive school environment.

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