

Meaning in Life and Ethical Education

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From the educational psychology perspective, the article bridges three concepts that are important, albeit implicit, in Slovak ethical education model: meaning in life, self-transcendence, and virtue ethics. It brings empirical data to support the idea about relations between these three in educational practice. Two studies are presented: in the first study (N=354) *Ethical Education Evaluation tool* (EEE, Brestovanský *et al.* 2016) was used to explain how students view the school subject, as well as the revised version of the *Noo-Dynamics Test* (T.ND, Popielski 1991) and *Prosocial Behavior Questionnaire* (Roche and Sol 1998) to investigate how prosocial behavior and ethical education predicted meaning in life. In the second study (N=266) the *Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction* (QTI, Wubbels and Levy 1991, in Vašíčková 2015) and *Scale of Life Meaning* (SLM, Halama 2002) were added to reveal the impact of teacher's interaction with students as mediator in associations between ethical education and meaning in life. Using regression analysis, it was possible to set up a predictive model using the prosocial behavior of the students that explains 16% of the variance in meaning in life among 6th grade students ($M_{age}=11.93$), but ethical education increases the prediction to 25%. In the second study prosocial behavior explained 19% of the variance among 8th graders, and ethical education has strengthened the model only to 21%. For 9th graders the model dropped to only 5%, and neither ethical education nor teacher interpersonal behavior added additional power to the models.

1 Introduction

The problem of the meaning of life is of particular interest to philosophy and theology, but “the experience of meaning”, “the fulfillment of existence”, “the subjectively perceived meaningfulness of existence” are concepts that psychology is dealing with. There is a long tradition in psychology of exploring the meaning of human existence (Jung 1933; Adler 1958; Frankl 1982). Meaning in life appears to be a strong predictor of good subjective health and psychological well-being in adolescence (Brassai *et al.* 2010), as well as it has been linked with prosocial behavior (Van Torgeren *et al.* 2015; Brestovanský *et al.* 2016; Sádovská and Kusý 2018), life satisfaction and self-esteem (Halama and Dědová 2007), and is considered to be a part of eudaimonic well-being (Waterman *et al.* 2010). In general, it is an important positive factor in human functioning (Wong 2012; Reker and Chamberlain 2000).

Meaning in life is a multidimensional construct containing three interconnected components: *cognitive*, *motivational* and *affective*. It can be understood as cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfilment (Reker and Wong 1988). This concept is based on previous work of Viktor Emil Frankl (1982) in which he has introduced his theory. The logo-theory transcends sociological, biological and psychological reductionisms that saturate reactive arguments in explaining human experience and behavior. According to Frankl, human existence is principally characterized by three factors: spirituality, freedom and responsibility. In his dimensional ontology, he places a specifically human *noetic* dimension (Gr. *nous*, “spirit”) above the *physical* (body) and *mental* (soul) dimensions. The noetic dimension is characterized by specifically human functioning, being and becoming, as well as it’s a source of motivation and subjective-personal dynamics of existence.



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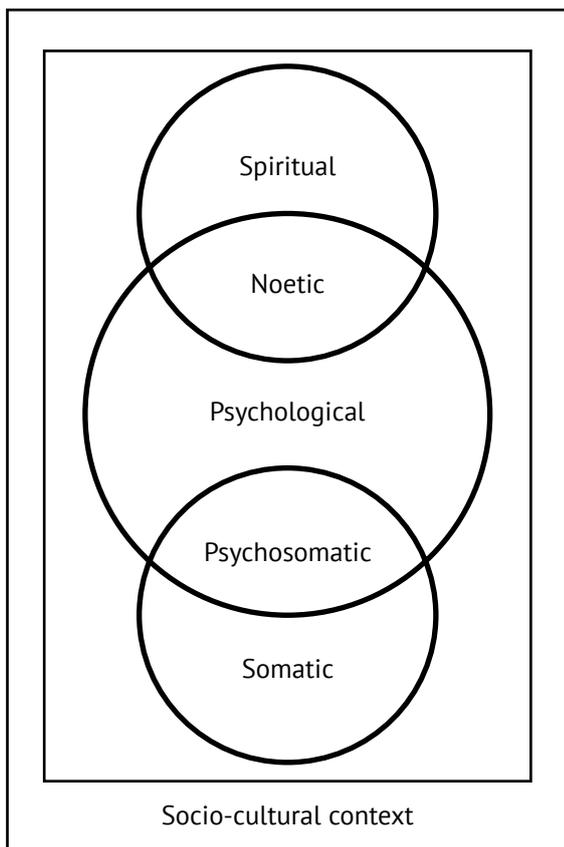


Fig. 1.
Schematic representation of human personality dimensions (Wong 1998, in Halama 2007, 91)

Noo-dynamics is then a fruitful tension between one's present state and a certain ideal, concerning the meaningfulness of his/her own life, in other words, "*between the life as it is and the life as it is supposed to be*" (Frankl, in Balcar 1995). Yet, noetic dimension encompasses not only the processes of seeking and creating the meaning of life, but also experiencing freedom in decision-making and responsibility for one's life, taking an attitude towards external issues or transcendental values. As Wong's diagram shows, the noetic dimension lies in the area of the intersection of the psychical and spiritual dimensions (see Fig. 1).

While spiritual dimension contains abilities like awareness of spiritual sphere of life, capability to communicate with God, contact with transcendent; psychological dimension implies perception, learning, reasoning, higher cognitive processes, and social processes, the main content of noetic dimension is the will to meaning, spiritual values and beliefs, moral reasoning, as well as positive attitudes in suffering. Therefore, it should be one of the most important goals of education to contribute to the development of a noetic dimension.

2 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Our research study begins with the following simple idea: *A quality meaning in life leads to an overall eudaimonic life.* Obviously, there are several (hidden) variables in this statement: the quality of the meaning in life grows with the degree to which one is capable of manifesting self-transcendent attitudes (Wong 2016), as well as virtuous actions (Hal-dane 2015).

The crucial point of the idea is that meaning in life functions not as an external stimulus to be more prosocial or virtuous, rather it is the deepest (existential) motivation and *result* of prosocial and virtuous actions. In other words, we don't need to find meaning in life to be prosocial, rather to be prosocial and virtuous are *means* of seeking the meaning in life, and even more, in terms of dialogic philosophy it's its own final fulfillment. This is near to Frankl's statement, that every life situation, even the worst and hopeless, carries the meaning that one has to discover. Even in suffering, one can find and realize meaning through the human ability of self-transcendence, the ability to transcend one's own needs, and focus on values that lie beyond it. From this point of view, meaning in life is simply a component of eudaimonia.

Therefore, the concept of *eudaimonia* can't be reduced to "subjective" or "hedonistic" well-being (Diener 1984; Kahneman *et al.* 1999), which is probably related with incorrect translation of the term into English as simply "happiness". On a common understanding, "happiness" for humans necessarily includes subjective feelings of pleasure and life satisfaction. Rather it should get back to Aristotelian concept of *flourishing* [1]. To flourish is to fulfil one's potential as a human individual. In most cases "*flourishing life will also be blessed with positive feelings, as the icing on the cake*". However, advocates of eudaimonia find both pleasure and life satisfaction too fleeting, superficial and malleable to constitute the true essence of flourishing. Flourishing constitutes an ongoing activity that comprises, most crucially, the realization of specifically human *excellences* (virtues). *Virtues*, in comparison to traits, habits or dispositions, are defined as states of character, which are acquired first through upbringing and later one's own repeated choices, coalescing into stable patterns (Kristjánsson 2015, 13–14). "*Since eudaimonia is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue*" (Aristotle, EN I.13). That means, besides others, that full-valued moral life has holistic parameters. "*Each virtue is typically seen*

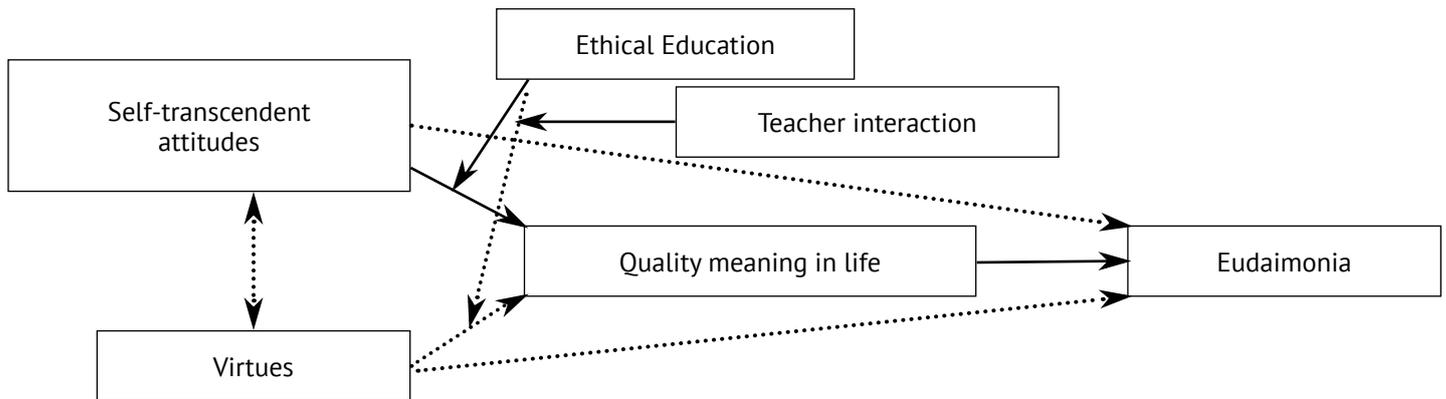


Fig. 2.
Conceptual model of the study (solid lines represent associations that were investigated in the present study)

2 Conceptual Framework of the Study

to comprise a unique set consisting of perception/recognition, emotion, desire, motivation, behavior and comportment – or style, applicable in the relevant sphere – where none of these elements can be evaluated in isolation from the others” (Arthur et al. 2017, 28).

In this context (see Fig. 2), ethical education serves as a tool to become more *self-transcending* (prosocial) and can be considered to be an application of specific approach to Aristotelian virtue ethics. It provides the character education with an emphasis on prosocial moral reasoning, prosocial behavior, and virtue development. At this point it bridges the philosophical discourse of dialogical principle (Buber; Lévinas) and meaning in life through the Frankl’s concept of self-transcendence (1988).

The subject is organized as a compulsory elective school subject in Slovak educational system: students are obliged to choose between religious and ethical education. This decision can be actualized at the beginning of the school year.

Time allocation for the subject in school curriculum is one lesson per week, every school year through elementary to low secondary studies (students from 6 to 15 years old).

The main method used in teaching ethical education is experiential method with emphasis to social interactions, dialogue, appreciating emotions, and encouraging self-reflections. The subject is meant to provide a practical formation of character, not to be the moral philosophy teaching. For Aristotle, in character education it’s more precious to know how virtue arises than to know what it is. “*With respect to moral inquiry as such, its purpose is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us*” (Arthur et al. 2017, 31). Harmonizing with virtue ethics, the subject recognizes a unique role of emotions in moral development, “*not only proper actions but also proper reactions are conducive and constitutive of eudaimonia. Emotions are central to who we are... and persons can be fully virtuous only if they are disposed to experience emotions in this medial way on a regular basis*” (Arthur et al. 2017, 29).

3 Current Studies

Based on previous conceptualization, in the 1st study we hypothesized that prosocial behavior (as a construct representing the self-transcendent attitudes) and students' evaluation of ethical education as school subject would predict higher score in noetic attitudes. In the 2nd study we've enlarged the model adding the teacher interpersonal behavior types, which we expected to increase the predicting power of the ethical education. For this second study we used a different scale for investigating the meaning in life that offers distinctions between cognitive, motivation, and affective dimensions of the meaning in life.

3.1 Method (the 1st study)

3.1.1 Participants

Participants in the sample were part of the longitudinal research project focused on investigating and development of ethical education as school subject (since 2014 so far). In the current study, we examined those adolescents who participated in the second wave of the study (N=354, 49.4% female, 69.2% urban, $M_{age} = 11.93$; $SD = 0.43$). Students were 6th graders from 18 primary schools in western Slovakia.

3.1.2 Procedure

Students were recruited through a cooperation between researchers and teachers participating in the longitudinal study. Ten teachers implemented the ethical education program with a total of 214 students. The rest of students (n=140, eight schools) was included as a control group. The battery of questionnaires was administered in classrooms by researcher. It took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Students experiencing the ethical education program achieved significantly higher score in salutogenic noo-dynamics ($t=4.123$, $p<0.001$) and significantly lower score in pathogenic noo-dynamics ($t=-3.834$, $p<0.001$).

3.1.3 Measures

Ethical Education Evaluation (EEE). A 7-item questionnaire using Likert scale was designed to get simple feedback from those who enrolled on the ethical education lessons in that particular school-year, covering basic dimensions of their experience: *cognitive* ("I think the ethical education lessons are very useful, I've learn a lot in the last year"), *affective* ("they encourage me, I am in a good mood afterwards"), *social* ("they make our team stronger") and *axiological* ("they

help me to change for the better"). Three items were negative ("the lessons are pointless, they are of no use to me"; "boring"; "frightening, I do not feel good during them"). The respondent could choose his/her answers on a scale from 1 (I disagree at all) to 4 (I agree at all). The reliability of positive items was Cronb. alpha = .702, the reliability of negative items reached Cronb. alpha = .729 (N=178).

Noo-Dynamics Test (T.N.-D.). In the first study quality meaning in life was operationalized by the noo-dynamics construct (Popielski 1991). The original test consists 100 items, which cover 36 dimensions grouped in four categories: *noetic qualities*, *noetic temporality*, *noetic activities*, and *noetic attitudes*. The questionnaire comprises two complementary parts: *noo-salutogenic items* (50), and *noo-pathology items* (50). For the revised version 36 items were selected covering two dimensions: *noetic quality* (freedom, responsibility, self-esteem, affirmation, trust and value orientation), and *noetic activity* (dialogical approach, creativity, acceptance, goodwill/kindness, promptitude for abnegation and respect for my own conscience/persuasion). E.g. the dimension "freedom" was formulated in the item "I think I can influence my destiny" (salutogenic item), or "In my life everything happens differently from my plans" (noo-pathology item). The reliability of salutogenic items was Cronb. alpha = .852, and reliability of pathologic noo-dynamics items was Cronb. alpha = .789 (N=354).

Prosocial Behaviour Scale (PROS). The questionnaire originally consists of 40 items representing ten various types of prosocial behavior in school (physical help, physical service etc.; Roche and Sol 1998). Based on factor analysis, which consistently showed one strongly loaded factor the number of items was reduced by half. E.g. the category "sharing" is represented by items like "I allow my schoolmates to use my things and toys".

3.2 Results (the 1st study)

Results of correlation analysis show that there is moderately strong positive correlation between student self-perceived prosocial behavior, peer-forms, teacher-forms, and salutogenic noo-dynamics, as well as the Ethical Education Evaluation (EEE).

Linear regression shows that prosocial behavior significantly explains 16% of salutogenic noo-dynamics: $R^2=.163$, $F(1, 340)=66.34$, $p<0.01$; $\beta=.404$. Adding EEE to the model,

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables

	1	2	3	4	5	N	M	SD
1. Saluto-N	-					354	56,88	7,734
2. Pathologic-N	-,334***	-				354	36,29	7,200
3. Self-report	,404***	-,310***	-			346	3,02	0,481
4. Peer-report	,284**	-,230***	,241***	-		313	2,78	0,715
5. Teacher-rep	,296***	-,153*	,177**	,292***	-	219	3,00	0,455
6. EEE	,365***	-,208**	,241***	,156	,184	178	20,96	3,870

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$, Pearson Correlations

the prediction increases to 25%: $R^2 = .255$, $F(2, 169) = 28.95$, $p < 0.001$. The model grows further if the gender selection is defined. For girls, the prediction of prosocial behaviour and EEE to salutogenic neo-dynamics increased to 30%: $R^2 = .325$, $F(2, 81) = 19.46$, $p < 0.001$.

3.3 Method (the 2nd study)

3.3.1 Participants

Participants in the sample were part of the same longitudinal research project described above. In this study, we examined those adolescents who participated in the third (T3) and fourth (T4) wave of the study (T3: $N = 366$, 45.9% female, 74% urban, $M_{age} = 13.75$; $SD = 0.55$; T4: $N = 290$, 42.8% female, 73.4% urban, $M_{age} = 14.63$; $SD = 0.56$). Students were 8th/9th graders from 22/20 primary schools in western Slovakia.

3.3.2 Procedure

Students were recruited through a cooperation between researchers and teachers participating in the longitudinal study. For T3: 13 teachers implemented the ethical education

program with a total of 190 students. The rest of students ($n = 176$, nine schools) was included as a control group. For T4: 11 teachers implemented the ethical education program with a total of 131 students. The rest of students ($n = 159$, nine schools) was included as a control group).

The battery of questionnaires was administered in classrooms by researcher. It took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Students experiencing the ethical education program in T3 achieved significantly higher score in motivation subscale of meaning in life scale ($t = 2.049$, $p < 0.05$) and had tendencies to achieve higher score in motivation and affective subscales of meaning in life scale in T4 ($t = 1.848$, $p = 0.066$; $t = 1.838$, $p < 0.067$).

3.3.3 Measures

Ethical Education Evaluation (EEE). 7-item questionnaire (see above).

Prosocial Behavior Scale (PROS-8). Our scale consists 4 prosocial items, and 4 aggressive behavior items, which was inspired by Caprara *et al.* (2015) who used with the same logic three items (consoling, helping, and sharing) to sufficiently

3.4 Results (the 2nd study)

cover the prosocial behavior construct, and two items for aggressive (physical and verbal) behavior. In the PROS-8 instrument, two items referred also on hidden aggression and social lack of interest: “This person defames others (he attacks other in a hidden way)”, and “This person has no interest in others at all”. There were three forms used: self-report (Cronb. alpha = .70), peer-report (.86), and teacher-report (.90). In peer-report, every student evaluated three of his/her classmates. Teacher (of ethical education) was asked to evaluate all the classroom students.

Life Meaningfulness Scale (LMS, Halama, 2002). The scale consists 18 items including three dimensions based on three-component theory of meaning (Reker and Wong 1988), e.g. cognitive dimension consists of items related to overall life orientation, understanding of life and my place in the world (e.g. “I consider my life valuable and useful”), motivational dimension of the item in terms of goals, plans, strength and perseverance in their implementation (e.g. “my life is the things I am fully engaged in”) and the affective dimension of an item related to life satisfaction, fulfillment, and negatively disgust, a sense of monotony (e.g. “I am happy with my life, even if it is sometimes difficult”). Respondents agree on items on a 5-point scale from 1 (I disagree at all) to 5 (I agree at all). The higher the overall score, the higher the level of life meaningfulness. The reliability of the test was Cronb. alpha = .739 (T3), and .765 (T4).

Teacher’s Interpersonal Behavior. The Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI, Wubbels and Levy 1991, adopted by Vašíčková 2015) allowed students to describe the teacher style of interaction. The instrument consists 48 items (half of them with negative formulation) covering eight factors: Leadership, Helping/Friendly, Understanding, Responsibility, Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Admonishing, and Strict, e.g. “He looks as though he doesn’t know what to do” (negative item for the leadership behavior factor). The reliability of the whole set of items was Cronb. alpha = .772 (T3), and .788 (T4).

As there are interesting repeatedly measured correlations between ethical education evaluation and teacher interpersonal behavior (see Table 2), this variable was assumed to strongly mediate the associations between ethical education and sense in life. Also the associations between EEE and meaning in life remain worthy to mention although the correlations are a little bit weaker comparing to previous stages of the longitudinal research (T3: T4: $r=.202$, $p<.05$). In other words, there are still remarkable differences between students who evaluate highly the ethical education, and who do not (see Table 3).

However, there are eight various types of teacher interaction as well as three dimensions of meaning in life scale. To address our research questions, we have included these types and dimensions one by one in the models for each time (T1, T2), so that 48 different models were calculated (self-reported prosocial behavior score was included). Only few of them we present at this place.

Based on data analysis for Time 1, prosocial behavior explains 19% of overall meaning of life score: $R^2=.194$, $F(1, 364)=87.84$, $p<.001$, $\beta=.441$. Adding EEE, the model increased only slightly to 21%: $R^2=.218$, $F(2, 263)=36.67$, $p<.001$. But, even teacher interpersonal behavior explains rather great amount of EEE (e.g. organizational behavior: 38%, $R^2=.384$, $F(1, 264)=164.27$, $p<.001$, $\beta=.619$), there is no growth when including teacher interpersonal behavior in the models of associations between prosocial behavior, EEE, and meaning in life: 21%, $R^2=.218$, $F(3, 262)=24.37$, $p<.001$ (for organizational behavior, in this case, but very similar for all the other types).

As expected, based on virtue ethics theory emphasizing the role of emotions in character education, from the three dimensions of meaning in life, the affective dimension shows stronger associations comparing to overall meaning in life score: 24%, $R^2=.241$, $F(2, 263)=41.83$, $p<.001$.

For Time 2, a striking finding is that explanation of the model of relations between prosocial behavior and meaning in life dropped to only 6%: $R^2=.063$, $F(1, 264)=17.70$, $p<.001$, $\beta=.251$, and adding EEE to the model doesn’t increase the explanation level, by contrast, the t-statistics slightly decreased from $p<.001$ to $p=.037$.

Table 2.
Pearson Correlations between Ethics Education Evaluation (EEE)
and teacher's interpersonal behavior in two measures (T3, T4)

	Leader-ship	Helping / friendly	Under-standing	Respon-sibility	Uncer-tain	Dissat-ified	Admon-ishing	Strict
EEE 2017	,618**	,582**	,549**	,471**	-,493**	-,548**	-,484**	-,226**
EEE 2018	,591**	,553**	,447**	,499**	-,377**	-,422**	-,351**	-,235**

N₂₀₁₇ = 307; N₂₀₁₈ = 255; **p<.001

Table 3.
The differences between students' quality of meaning in life based on
Ethical Education Evaluation in two repeated measures (T3, T4)

		2017			2018		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
MiL – general	Highest quartil in EEE	86	72,60***	7,357	64	69,28*	8,439
	Lowest quartil in EEE	70	65,00	8,761	58	65,40	9,247
MiL – cognitive	Highest quartil in EEE	99	22,97***	3,770	79	22,33*	3,689
	Lowest quartil in EEE	74	20,20	3,861	64	20,75	4,156
MiL – motivation	Highest quartil in EEE	98	23,95***	3,241	74	23,24*	3,338
	Lowest quartil in EEE	77	21,92	3,648	68	21,91	3,428
MiL – affective	Highest quartil in EEE	89	26,24***	2,369	68	24,44**	3,759
	Lowest quartil in EEE	72	22,50	3,627	66	22,45	3,993

MiL (Meaning in Life); *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; Independent Samples T-Test

4 Discussion

The goal of this study was to investigate the associations between meaning in life, the components of self-transcendence, and the ethical education school subject that is focused on their development. These components were operationalized as prosocial behavior items. In the first study we hypothesized that prosocial behavior and students' evaluation of ethical education as school subject would predict higher score in positive noetic attitudes (salutogenic noo-dynamics).

The findings of the study partially support the theoretical conceptualization of relations between self-transcendence and quality meaning in life. Results indicate that positive (salutogenic) noetic qualities significantly grow with higher prosocial tendencies, the linear regression explains 16% of the variance. Adding the students' ethical education evaluation, the equation was able to explain 25% of the variance of meaning in life. This is consistent with previous research, which advocated the role of prosocial behavior in developing the meaning in life (Klein 2016), as well as with the experiments with indirect effects when individuals primed with superhero images reported greater helping intentions relative to the control group, which, in turn, were associated with increased meaning in life (Van Tongeren *et al.* 2018). The associations are stronger in younger groups of students who are probably more sensitive to external formation of their beliefs and values, which are important building blocks of meaning in life.

5 Conclusion

The study contributes to the widening of our knowledge about the links between prosocial behavior and the development of meaning in life, and the specific function of ethical education in this process. However, the further research is needed to reveal deeper associations between ethical education and individual dimensions of meaning in life, as there are obvious insufficiencies in the school subject content and methods in terms of cognitive and motivation aspects of noetic qualities of life. To improve the impact of ethical education on meaning in life, it would be helpful to strengthen the links between self-transcending tendencies in children and their consciousness of eudaimonia. This could create the positive tension, called noo-dynamics, "*between the life as it is and the life as it is supposed to be*" (Viktor E. Frankl).

Unexpectedly, reflecting the second study, the teacher interpersonal behavior had no effects, neither direct nor indirect, on increasing the score in meaning in life scales. Yet, the correlations between teacher interpersonal behavior and ethical education evaluation were moderate to strong. At first glance, these findings may appear to be contradictory. However, from our point of view, the findings suggest growing autonomy in older adolescents. They appreciate positive teacher interaction during ethical education classes, but the development of their meaning in life is becoming more autonomous.

Finally, the drop of model explanation level to 5% in equating the relations between prosocial behavior and meaning in life in the oldest group of adolescents is another surprising discovery of the second study. The reason probably lays in general prosocial development crisis as described in previous studies, when mid-adolescent prosocial behavior tends to slightly decrease in specific types like helping and comforting (Eisenberg and Fabes 1998), as well as helping of victims of aggression may actually decline across adolescence (Lindeman, Harakka, and Keltikangas-Järvinen 1997). The process of growing the authenticity of one's beliefs and values creates at this age a kind of asymmetry between the moral system of the child and the still unfinished system of the adult.

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Notes

- [1] The term *eudaimonia* attributed to Aristotle is often translated as “happiness”, but there are suggestions for more appropriate concept of “*flourishing–happiness concordance thesis*” (Kristjánsson 2017).

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