

Teachers and Morality: The General Teaching Council of England Code of Conduct and Practice and Trainee-Teachers.

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Background

In 2009, the General Teaching Council (GTCE) for England introduced a revised Code of Conduct and Practice (CoCP, 2009) for registered teachers. Whilst this code is clearly designed to enhance professionalism, which has been described as the "predominant leitmotif for European teacher education" (Weiner, 2002) it attempts to do so by defining a series of rules and prescriptions designed to determine and homogenise the way in which practising teachers perform their role. Through exploring the moral and ethical values (explicit and implicit) of the CoCP, and through discussion of the manner in which trainee-teachers are required to sign-up to the code, it will be suggested that such codes may be usefully seen as offering the opportunity for teacher educators to introduce student teachers to notions of rights, principles, goals and the telos of teaching.

This paper will explore the background and media reaction to the revised CoCP in England and offer a critique of the eight principles to which teachers are bound by the Code. The paper is in many ways a reaction to the media mini-storm in December 2008 when the GTCE released its draft code. Almost without exception, the media honed in on the conflict between teachers' private lives and their public lives as professionals. My argument is that the media reaction that a teacher is subject to the mores of the code, even in their private lives, is symptomatic of a very widely held belief: that the rights of the private individual are preeminent. This glorification of the rights of the individual goes back to the Enlightenment, and what I propose to do is use the ethical philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre to critique this notion of the primacy of privacy. Instead, what MacIntyre proposes is a return to the notion of Aristotelian/Thomist public morality (the type actually articulated in the Code of Conduct).

I am proposing that the type of public morality, built upon objective principles, that we find in the Code of Conduct, is actually the type of morality most conducive to a progressive, vital education system. And, far from being a drag, the holding up of the teaching profession as an exemplar, is an opportunity for teachers rather than a draconian imposition from on high. However, the way in which the code is underhandedly foisted on trainees is reprehensible and in need of change.

Research Questions

This paper will argue that the GTCE Code of Conduct and Practice (CoCP) imposes an objective morality upon the teaching profession that is at odds with the contemporary cultural and political zeitgeist. Through exploring the moral and ethical values (explicit and implicit) of the CoCP, and through discussion of the manner in which trainee-teachers are required to sign-up to the code, it will be suggested that the teaching profession (alone amongst practically all professions) requires its practitioners to simultaneously inhabit two separate and mutually exclusive moral paradigms. The outcome of this moral bind, it will be claimed, is a profession characterised by inherent moral and ethical contradictions that potentially impact upon the identity of teachers-as-professionals in a negative and, perhaps, professionally paralysing fashion.

Methods

The historical and ethical philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre will be used to reveal the inherent moral tensions at play between the CoCP, practicing teachers, and the cultural and political context in which both exist. Of particular importance will be MacIntyre's definitions and applications of practice, goods, tradition, narrative, and telos. In particular this paper seeks to offer a Virtue Ethics approach to

teacher development. Instead of placing most emphasis on a set of rules and principles abstracted from the individual moral agent, virtue ethics focuses on the development of the character of the individual. In other words, it does not ask individuals to refer to a code when they are seeking to discover what they ought to do in a given situation; rather, it seeks to assist the individual in developing their character so that they become the type of person, through the habituation of deliberation and virtuous acts, who will make the virtuous decision in all situations.

Frame

The lens of MacIntyre will be used to frame and analysis the situation and it will be argued that the General Teaching Council for England's Code of Conduct and Practice for Registered Teachers is unlikely to fulfil its stated purpose, which "is to guide teachers' everyday judgements and actions and provide the GTCE with principles to use in regulating the profession" (GTCE, 2009).

We will argue that there is a fundamental ethical and philosophical tension between its intentions to guide judgement and action on one hand, and to function as a tool of regulation on the other. The outcome of this tension, we conclude, is that the document cannot satisfactorily fulfil the function it ought to fulfil in teacher education. Following some initial discussion of the role of ethics in teacher education, we will analyse the Code of Conduct in some depth in order to highlight the ethical tensions between its dual purposes, before moving on to suggest how a reformulation of the Code from a virtue ethics perspective could make it a much more useful tool in the practice of teacher education.

Research findings

This paper concludes that the outcome of the moral confusion within the Code is a profession characterised by inherent moral and ethical contradictions that potentially impact upon the identity of teachers-as-professionals in a negative and, perhaps, professionally paralysing fashion. Nevertheless, we would suggest that such contradictions offer the teacher educator an opportunity for authentic ethical deliberation on the telos of teaching and, as such, presents a powerful learning object for initial teacher education.