

0093

The General Teaching Council Code of Conduct: myth and meaning

Fiona Hallett¹, Damien Shortt¹, David Spendlove²

¹Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, United Kingdom, ²University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom

Background

The publication, in September 2009, of the revised Code of Conduct and Practice for teachers in England presents a unique opportunity to analyse a concrete expression of abstract notions of morality and ethicality. It is, perhaps, reasonable to assume that teacher education, and the development of a register of teachers deemed to be 'fit to practice', may be associated with certain values and the provision of relevant knowledge and skill to protect the well-being of learners. However, the creation of a Code of Conduct and Practice, based around eight 'principles' requires some analysis by those charged with preparing student teachers for the role to which they aspire. As such, this analysis must necessarily include an examination of the eight principles in question, which are described as "the core values of the teaching profession". This paper, written from the perspective of teacher educators, attempts to explore the implicit morality of the Code of Conduct and Practice developed, and enforced, by the General Teaching Council of England. It is argued, here, that such a Code attempts to facilitate the formulation, and realisation, of a generalisable code of ethics and establish an ideal for standards of general social behaviour.

Research Questions

We intend to discuss the ethical implications such a code of conduct entails in an attempt to examine whether:

- ethics and, more specifically, the ethics of the Code, should become a central part of teacher training.
- Aspiring teachers have the right to make an informed choice.
- It is possible for a teacher to be a GOOD teacher if they are ignorant of, or ambivalent towards, the Code's morality.

Methods

At a fairly superficial level, it could be argued that the eight principles at the core of the Code of Conduct and Practice highlight the concerns articulated by Nash (1991:163) who contested that the problem with codes of ethics is that they are often "written in the language of moral exhortation and follow general principles and are rarely practice-specific". Furthermore, Strike (2003:511) argues that a conception of the ethics of teaching suitable for the public schools of liberal democracies needs to respect two forms of pluralism; not only does it need to recognize a pluralism of comprehensive doctrines, religions, and cultures, but it also needs to respect a diversity of values. Whilst it could be argued that the principles enshrined by the Code recognise a pluralism of beliefs, religions, and cultures it could equally be argued that the very nature of the Code seeks to marginalise a diversity of values across the teaching workforce. In this regard, it is perhaps worth noting that Strike and Soltis (1998) and Carr (2000) caution against generalisations about how teachers make ethical decisions arguing that real situations or controversial issues are very complex and value-laden and that those values are usually irreconcilable and incompatible. Ergo, Carr (2000) contests that generalisable ethical models for teaching practice offer little to the development of ethical deliberation, described by Campbell (2003) as an essential precursor to informed ethical decision making. As Dewey (1933, 1944) argued, means and ends are reciprocally determined, and the salient ingredient in the reciprocity is the kind of practical judgment required in problematic situations that require deliberation. This paper intends to argue that the current Code of Conduct and Practice does little to enable such deliberation.

Frame

For the purpose of this analysis, we have elected to draw upon the structuralist method advocated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, among others, who viewed a structure as "a particular kind of model which exhibits the characteristics of a system" (1968:8). In this way, and within a context of debate around the professional ethics of teaching (Campbell 2003; Carr 2000; Dahlgren & Chiriac, 2009; Hansen 2001; Strike & Soltis 1998; Strike 2003) we aim to gain some insight into the cultural symbolism embodied by such a code. An abiding facet of Lévi-Strauss's approach relates to the analysis of myths in order to generate systems of meaning that reveal social and cultural structures; as such, Lévi-Strauss (1968) contested that the structure of a myth develops in response to a 'cultural problem'. It is our view that the 'cultural problem', in this instance, stems from a degree of confusion behind the purpose of the Code of Conduct and Practice. Indeed, the preamble to the draft of the revised CoCP (2008:03) states that the intention of the Code is to "guide everyday judgments and actions", based upon a set of eight principles of teacher professionalism. However, a significant feature of the remit of the GTC(E) relates to disciplinary matters and the appendices to the Code focus upon the legislative power of the GTCE and how the code should be interpreted in relation to disciplinary procedures. We would argue that this juxtaposition requires some analysis of the commensurability, or otherwise, of the practical wisdom of teachers' judgments and a prescribed, and enforceable, set of principles of professional ethics.

Research findings

By considering each of the principles within the Code as a separate myth, we believe that the Code, itself, consists of a series of eight myths. As each principle is explored in some detail in the Code, it was possible to search for mythemes throughout the principles; our reading of the Code has produced three distinct mythemes:

Mytheme 1 - The GTC can, and should, define a set of expected norms of teacher practice and professionalism in order to guide the everyday judgments, and actions, of teachers.

Mytheme 2 - Teachers should take responsibility for their own practice and for the practice of other teachers.

Mytheme 3 - Society should be able to trust teachers to refrain from illegal behaviour and to manage the behaviour of learners.

These mythemes represent the concepts that 'rear throughout the myth' (Levi-Strauss, 1960:353)