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Shifting Codes: Professional before their time? Trainee Teachers Alignment with the GTCE Code of Conduct and Practice

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Background

In 2009, the General Teaching Council (GTCE) for England introduced a revised Code of Conduct and Practice (2009) for registered teachers. This code has replaced the initial Professional Learning Framework (2003) and sets out the expected standards and norms of practice of registered schoolteachers in England. Interestingly, the code also applies to all trainee teachers who are provisionally registered with the GTCE and who could be liable to a charge of misconduct during their periods of teaching practice. Such a possibility provides an interesting paradox as trainee teachers are judged against a professional code of practice when they themselves are new and 'provisional' member of the teaching profession.

This would suggest that those entering their training for teaching via school based routes (such as Graduate Teacher Programme) should already possess professional standards or that those involved in delivery Initial Teacher Training (ITT) should make the awareness of professionalism for trainee teachers a priority as many trainee teachers will be entering schools very early on in their training experience. The requirement from the GTCE is that anyone commencing teacher training must be registered within 28 days after the start of their training. The only apparent concession in the COCP being a vague statement: "the provisions of the Code that relate to professional competence do not apply to trainees since they are not yet qualified." (2009, p5).

Whilst the GTCE code of conduct seeks to underpin the professional identity of teachers, it overtly characterises this through the high profile 'naming and shaming' of miscreants through the media. For many teachers this is their main point of contact with the COCP and as such, this explicit outplaying of misdemeanours and identification of those found guilty or awaiting hearing serves to reduce the COCP to a disciplinary tool. Indeed this is reinforced through the examples that are provided within the codes 'Examples of circumstances in which the GTCE has taken disciplinary action' (2009, p16). The use of such examples serves to calibrate scales of unacceptable misdemeanors whilst also serving to highlight that the COCP is not merely for 'strengthening teacher professionalism' (2009, p3) but also for policing the profession. Such were the concerns of the teaching profession to the GTCE's amendments to the COCP that several high profile petitions were featured in the media¹, emphasizing the disciplinary nature of the Code

¹Petition Against the GTC Code of Conduct <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/gtcecode/>
NUT petition <http://www.teachers.org.uk/story.php?id=4582>

Research Questions

Whilst the GTCE may seek to maintain confidence in the profession of teaching in a variety of ways it is perhaps unfortunate that this is generally perceived to be limited to the disciplinary actions taken against teachers. Given the GTCE's high profile dealings with those disciplined and the exemplification of misdemeanors within the COCP then it is understandable that the code is seen by teachers as an intrusion that 'strips them of basic human rights'².

Trainee teachers therefore occupy an interesting position in such a discussion, particularly relating to their emerging sense of professionalism as they enter teacher training and a legitimate question would be: when does a trainee teacher become a professional? As indicated previously the position of

a trainee teacher represents a paradox as trainee teachers will generally have had limited experience of working in a professional capacity and although some may have previous experience, all trainees are ultimately bound by the COCP in all ways except in relation to 'professional competence'³.

²<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/sep/02/teachers-slam-code-of-conduct>

³This was the guidance from the GTC in response to my query as to what was 'Professional Competence': Please see the information on pages 18 and 19, points 2 and 3; elements of these clearly relate to competence issues. The information on pages 18 and 19 will give you an indication of the type of conduct that teacher's could be regulated for.

Methods

In order to ascertain trainee teacher's alignment with the GTCE COCP, Q-methodology was chosen as an appropriate method. The rationale for this is that whilst traditional survey methods and ranking scales allow the participant to rank items according to likes and dislikes or agreement and disagreement, Q-Method does so in a similar way but forces the participant to sort the statements relative to each other. This forces participants to align statements into a predetermined quasi-normal distribution along an affective continuum such as "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

Frame

Within this research, it was decided to extract 39 statements from the COCP relating to examples of circumstances in which the GTCE has taken disciplinary action. If presented as a standard survey instrument there may be a temptation for the participant to align all statements in a positive way with, given that all the statements represented transgressions of the code. Therefore the intention was to use the Q-sorting task prior to a session on the GTCE code of conduct and professionalism. As such the forced sorting, whilst a difficult task, required the participants to problematize the statements by placing relative to each other through identifying which statements represented, in their opinion, 'falling seriously short of the expected standards of teachers and should lead to disciplinary action,' against them as a member of the teaching profession? The participants were a non-purposive sample of 36 trainee teachers within their first couple of weeks of their PGCE training course and were drawn from three different subject areas at one ITT institution. Once completed the "Q sorts" were then entered into PCQ software and analysed using factor analysis to look for correlations between the individual responses whilst also gaining an overall collective view. Within each of the resulting factors a "discourse," that is, a shared way of thinking about the question and providing a a unique opportunity to distinguish salient groupings within the participants, was generated.

Research findings

This paper concludes that that the worthy intentions of GTCE COCP, rather than strengthening the profession through the promotion of a collective set of values, are often nullified by a greater prominence of the disciplinary action that they undertake. However, this research has shown that within the sample of this enquiry those entering teacher training generally represent a homogenous group whose values and underlying subjectivity are consistent with both the profession and GTCE. They recognise, prioritise and align themselves with those issues that one would expect both the GTCE and profession to priorities. Given this conclusion one could tentatively suggest that the GTCE could explore promoting the professional nature of teachers using a more engaging narrative in contrast to current 'policing' narrative that justifies their existence.

Trainee teachers do however occupy a paradoxical space; they are neither professional nor unprofessional, yet they are accountable as professionals within 28 days of starting their teacher training. Within the medical profession - such a paradox is avoided by recognising the concept of a lengthy state in which the learner develops their skills and knowledge, whilst gaining the experience required in acquiring professionalism. Indeed this state is recognized through the term 'proto professional' (Hilton and Sitnik, 2005).

Trainee teacher's status within the code is unclear and whilst the code treats them as professionals their recognition as 'proto professionals' would provide an opportunity to re-conceive their developmental status and support their entry in a more overt and systematic way. Such a re-conceiving of trainees as emerging professionalism would also allow their development to be considered as formative requiring reflection and experience. Such a position can be recognised as 'phronesis' that values the development of experience and reflection and 'seeks to prepare practitioners who can use their professional wisdom in local and always unique circumstances' (Eisner, 2002 p381). Such a position would not suggest that 'proto professionals' were unprofessional but would recognise, support and value their developmental status. As such, 'phronesis' is recognized as acquired only after a prolonged period of experience (and reflection on experience) and ultimately recognizes and values the transient state of becoming a professional whilst recognizing the trainee has many of the values and virtues required to become a member of the profession.