Rethinking what it means to be a professional: the importance of developing and embedding authentic moral reflection opportunities in professional training

Julie Taylor
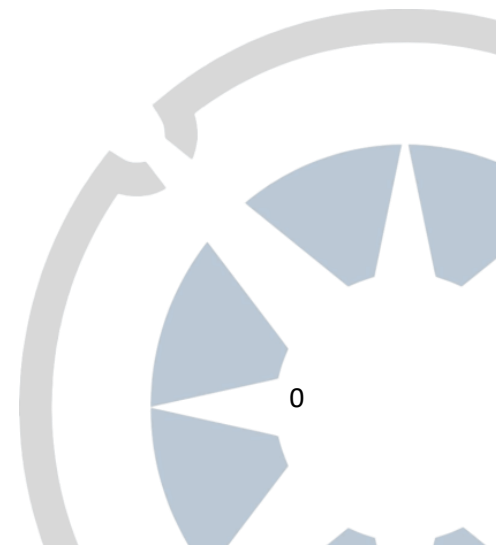
"To teach is to be embedded in a world of uncertainty and of hard choices…"

(Bullough Jr., 2011: p.27)

Whilst ethical practice is of significance to all professions, the *people professions*, which includes teaching (Bondi et al., 2011), engender additional moral expectations from the public, as professionals are relied upon to consistently demonstrate "moral probity, diligence, fairness and resolve" (Jubilee Centre, 2016: p. 2). If we adopt Blond et al.'s definition of being professional as being able to "exercise judgement based on expertise and skill" and "operate according to values and character, enabling these skills to be properly used" (2015, p.3), it becomes clear that professionalism has a moral dimension (Jos Kole, 2011). Therefore, professionals surely need to be supported to develop the moral agency and professional wisdom needed to "embody the moral nuances of the practitioner's professional world" (Campbell, 2011: p.82).

Nearly 30 years ago, Fenstermacher critically reflected on how the "rhetoric" related to teaching was "nearly devoid of talk about the moral nature of teaching, the moral duties and obligations of teachers, and the profound importance of teachers to the moral development of students" (1990, p.132) and despite a number of educational reforms that have come into fruition since, the same lack of focus on the ethical continues to apply. However, despite many teachers acknowledging the moral aspect of their role and teaching often being selected as a career choice for altruistic reasons (Arthur et al., 2015), the absence of any virtue-based content in professional education can make the embodiment of such high moral expectations difficult for teachers to achieve. Without designated time to reflect on moral matters or which virtues are of significance to their chosen field, teachers are likely to feel ill-prepared to address the complex moral dilemmas they might encounter in their careers (Sanger and Osguthorpe, 2011) and may lack an understanding of "the ethical ramifications of their own actions and their overall practice" (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011: p. 648).

This lack of ethical awareness is of particular concern when considering how the teaching profession is fraught with complexities. Unlike other professions, teaching involves "engaging with unique individuals in unique situations" (Arthur et al., 2015: p.9) and teachers are regularly required to make judgements "in the face of conflicting demands" from a variety of stakeholders (Jubilee Centre, 2016: p. 2). These "messy and imprecise problems" that teachers encounter on a day to day basis, "defy a formulaic response" (Hare, 1997: p.62), and are therefore too complex to be resolved with mere adherence to professional codes of conduct (Schwarz and Sharpe, 2011). For example, compliance with the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2013) continues to dominate Initial

Teacher Education (ITE) programmes, however these "pre-determined, rationally grounded principles" (Arthur et al., 2015: p.2), largely underpinned by deontological and utilitarian paradigms, offer little direction and guidance when student teachers are faced with practice that "requires flexible and sensitive judgement in context-variable professional circumstances" (Cooke and Carr, 2014: p. 91).

Ethical dilemmas are particularly challenging for professionals when different virtues are in conflict, as these call for the practitioner to consider the "morally problematic dimensions of professional judgement that often call for virtue-based reasons when defending particular courses of action" (Harrison and Khatoon, 2017: p.23). When attempting to resolve such a dilemma, the practitioner may feel caught between two or more courses of action and face multiple obstacles that hinder the decision as to which course should be pursued (Berlak and Berlak, 1981). When institutional pressures are at play, professionals may experience tension between the "best situated professional judgement and received convention" (Jubilee Centre, 2016: p.3), and in these instances, teachers need a considerable amount of courage and professional integrity to question or dispute unhelpful and potentially unethical institutional and societal demands.

Experience alone does not equip us with the confidence and competence to resolve multi-faceted moral dilemmas (Loughran, 2002), so the deliberate teaching of practical wisdom could be a very valuable addition to professional education programmes. Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom (phronesis) is a key aspect of virtue ethics and can be defined as "the intellectual ability to adjudicate conflicting demands in order to do the right thing at the right time" (Harrison and Khatoon, 2017: p.5). Although not all theorists would agree that it is possible to develop the ability to learn how to respond to different ethical dilemmas, based on the view that virtuous decisions are incommensurable (MacIntyre, 1984); there is evidence to suggest that phronesis can guide and adjudicate moral decision-making processes.

Whilst the Teachers' Standards do have a role to play in ensuring consistency in the expectations of professional conduct, and do stipulate that teachers should maintain "high standards of ethics and behaviour" (DfE, 2013: p. 14), however it is imperative that student teachers are supported through their training to understand what these *high standards* actually look like in practice, as teachers are often expected to "operate without specific guidance or collective wisdom as to what constitutes ethical conduct" (Strike 1990: p. 207). Making an ethical decision is challenging, particularly for novice teachers, because they are often emotion-laden and require swift responses. Where our students teachers have encountered issues with professionalism, their lack of ethical understanding and competence in moral reasoning has affected their ability to make a

"carefully reasoned ethical resolution" (Freeman, 1999: p. 32). It is important to acknowledge that the scope for one-year PGCE programmes to aim to develop phronesis is significantly hindered by stringent time restrictions, but with research showing that the facilitation of critical reflection on ethical dilemmas is one feasible approach that can have a positive impact on the development of phronesis (Freeman, 1999), this became an area to develop within my teacher education programme and also became a focus for a cross-disciplinary project with our institution's medical school. The aim of the project being to involve students in creating resources based on authentic ethical dilemmas to promote reflection and develop the students' "powers of moral and ethical reasoning and judgement" (Buzzelli and Johnston, 2002: p.18).

Research within the field of medicine also echoes that of teaching, with 90% of medical students encountering a professional dilemma during their placements (Monrouxe et al, 2015). In some cases, this may happen as soon as they enter the working environment (GMC, 2011). Medical students may experience considerable distress if they witness something troubling (Zammuner et al. 2014) so given the likelihood of both student teachers and medics encountering dilemmas, this project was viewed as a means of encouraging university colleagues and students to rethink what we mean by professionalism in both departments and to devise and implement some materials that promoted critical reflection on ethical dilemmas helping equip students to be better prepared to deal with and respond to the professional challenges in their workplaces.

The research undertaken at the start of the project led us to identify key concepts relating to the effective teaching of professionalism. These included: observation of positive role models (Passi & Johnson, 2016); active engagement from students (Quaintaice et al, 2010); discussion of authentic professional dilemmas in a safe, supportive group setting (Altirkawi, 2014) and reflection on real cases (Cruess & Cruess, 2012). These were all taken into consideration when firstly creating a pilot study to trial with student teachers. The concept was then rolled out more widely and involved students creating resources to be used with future cohorts.

To attempt to maximise the impact of the materials, it was important to select authentic real-life examples of dilemmas and to draw on research to identify an ethical model that would allow for an in-depth debriefing of the scenario. Due to its effective use with student teachers and its simplicity and adaptability to different scenarios, I opted to base my intervention on The *Systematic/Reflective Case Debriefing Method* (Freeman, 1999). This process allows for peer collaboration; learning from others to potentially develop an understanding of new concepts and ways of thinking. The original method consisted of five stages but as some of our students find it

challenging to acknowledge and comprehend opinions that differ from their own, I added an additional stage which would allow the viewpoints of stakeholders to be presented (Stage 4).

The revised model is as follows:

1. Individually scribe first reaction in response to question "What should a good teacher do?"
2. Students work as a group to identify all the stakeholders to raise awareness of all those affected by the situation.
3. Consider the issues that make the stakeholders have an interest in the situation as a means of considering multiple perspectives and developing empathy.
4. Introduce viewpoints of those involved and consider whether this affects the response to the dilemma.
5. Students to consider a range of possible solutions irrespective of how likely, acceptable or conventional they are.
6. Relate to the relevant code of ethics (Teachers' Standards) and based on the ethical deliberations that have ensued, consider what would be the most appropriate course of action for a virtuous practitioner.

The pilot study was implemented as follows:

- Relevant ethical dilemmas were identified.

- Case scenarios were prepared including interviews with practitioners who had experienced the dilemma in real life, reflecting on its personal and professional impact.

- Relevant virtue ethics theory related to the project was introduced to the participants prior to the introduction of the dilemmas. Key terms were discussed and defined that were later used in the materials.

- The students were presented with ethical dilemmas and guided by the *Systematic/Reflective Case Debriefing Method*, considered what constitutes good ethical practice through professional dialogue and critical reflection.

- A small sample of university tutors observed the process to enable them to contribute their viewpoints about the effectiveness and potential impact of the materials.

- Views from staff and students were sought through surveys and participating students were also invited to take part in a focus group.

The following two evaluation questions informed the evaluation of the intervention:

a) How were the pilot materials rated by the students and tutors?

b) What is the perceived impact on the moral development of students in future cohorts?

The study under evaluation is in its infancy, being newly created and not previously tested. When considered in line with the Evolutionary Evaluation Model (Brown-Urban et al., 2014), it currently falls within the initiation stage and is subject to significant change if it is to be up-scaled to a larger project. Therefore, when considering what was feasible and revising my research design accordingly, it was necessary for my focus to be predominantly on "implementation, participant and facilitator satisfaction" (Brown-Urban et al., 2014: p.129). My evaluation became post-only as the student teachers were only able to be released from school for a single session and were only involved in the pilot study at the end of the academic year after they had officially completed the course. Therefore, the pre/post outcome measures I had originally planned to implement were no longer valid, hence my research questions needing to focus on the *perceived impact* of the intervention.

Being such a small-scale project with limited generalisability, I realised the need to triangulate the evidence by adopting a mixed methods approach. I have therefore drawn on both qualitative and quantitative approaches and sought the viewpoints of both staff and students to enable me to cross-check my findings, thus gaining a clearer picture of the effectiveness of the pilot study (Arthur et al., 2017).

Questionnaires were completed by both students and staff participants and were selected as one of the main data collection methods due to these being a well-used method that can yield useful information about the impact of evaluative studies (Harrison and Khatoon, 2017). Due to the limited number of participants, I opted to use hard copies of surveys which were completed immediately following the students' involvement in the pilot study to ensure I had data that represented the views of all involved.

As the aim was to capture participants' opinions on this specific intervention, I was unable to use questions from a pre-existing questionnaire that had undergone external verification, so there are inevitable issues raised about the validity and reliability of the survey design. However, trialling the survey as part of a pilot was a useful means of checking its relevance and accessibility for participants and to ensure the questions were not considered to be ambiguous or leading (Braun and Clarke, 2013). As the questionnaire was completed while I was present, I was able to clarify some of the key terms that students and tutors may not have been familiar with, helping to ensure consistency of understanding.

The limited availability of staff and students meant that it was important that the survey could be completed relatively quickly, I therefore opted for a Likert-scale approach for the majority of questions. A couple of open-ended questions were also included to give participants greater ownership of their responses and to allow further elaboration (Cohen, 2018). These questions encouraged participants to consider the potential impact of the pilot materials on students in future cohorts and also to consider how the materials could be changed or developed to have a greater impact. These questions yielded some useful qualitative data which effectively supplemented the numerical data gained from the fixed-response questions.

The questions were grouped into the following sections:

i) Current provision related to professionalism

ii) The design and implementation of the pilot materials

iii) How relevant the materials are for the needs of PGCE students

iv) How effectively the materials support the development of moral reasoning skills and the understanding of professional ethical dilemmas

v) The impact the intervention could potentially have on future cohorts of PGCE students

Whilst the questionnaire did provide some open-ended responses, the qualitative data that would be gained from the analysis was still going to be minimal. Judging the time and resources available, a semi-structured focus group was deemed to be the most appropriate low-cost method for quickly gaining a more in-depth understanding of the "ideas, viewpoints, perceptions and reality constructs" of the participants (Punch and Oancea, 2014: p. 182) and to find out why the students feel the way they do (Bryman, 2016: p.502). Adopting a focus group as an additional research method would also serve to check the consistency and accuracy of the survey responses.

A focus group approach was selected as opposed to a group interview to enable me to have the flexibility to probe with additional questions if needed and respond to unanticipated responses. I was particularly interested in seeing how the group collectively made sense of some new concepts and construct meaning through interaction and discussion (Bryman, 2016). I planned how I intended to structure the dialogue and devised some key questions in advance but did not feel constrained by these, as long as I was mindful that the discussion stayed aligned with my research design.

Research highlights a number of potential issues associated with focus groups, so it was important for me to be aware that the facilitator and the participants bring their own values, opinions and beliefs which inevitably affect the "way they perform in a constrained reality" (Lesham, 2012, cited in Cohen, 2018: p. 527). Due to the homogenous nature of the focus group and knowing the students who had volunteered, there was a distinct possibility that dialogue could conclude in "groupthink" where participants feel obliged to reach a consensus of opinion, even if this is in conflict with their own views (Cohen, 2018; Robson and McCartan, 2017). It was therefore important that I shared clear expectations and encouraged all participants to be honest and open with their views at the start of the focus group.

The most significant factor that affected the data was the timing of the pilot study. Attempting to undertake this towards the end of academic year when all PGCE students had already completed the assessed element of their professional practice, meant that the volunteers were unable to apply the learning gained from the pilot materials to their classroom practice. A number of student teachers were on holiday and some were still on placement so were not able to participate in the project. It therefore proved very difficult to capture conclusive evidence of the impact, as I was unable to gather pre- and post- intervention data. As a result, the findings were more focussed on the *perceived* impact of the materials and a recognition of how the implementation of these *could* have supported their moral development in their PGCE year. The limited number of volunteers meant the pilot study only generated a small dataset that was very education-orientated, so the generalisability of the findings to other professions and the plausibility and credibility of the data generated from the pilot study needs to be carefully considered when attempting to draw conclusions.

Students with an interest in character and ethical development were more likely to volunteer for the project so this bias could affect the internal validity of the study and increase the likelihood of positive responses. In addition, as I was the sole researcher for the pilot study but also the personal tutor of the student volunteers and a colleague of the tutors involved, there was the potential for my involvement to affect participants' responses due to the "interviewer effect" (Denscombe, 2017: p.221). Social desirability bias may also unconsciously or consciously influence the volunteers' perception of what socially acceptable responses should be (Bryman, 2016).

Findings and Discussion

All questionnaire respondents strongly agreed that trainee teachers should learn about professionalism during their PGCE year and that the inclusion of materials centred on the use of ethical dilemmas would enhance the current provision. All students and tutors also strongly agreed that professionalism should be addressed on more than one occasion during the course of the year, which suggests that the current provision of a single lecture at the start of the PGCE year may not be sufficient. The focus group did feel the initial professionalism lecture had a positive impact and was a necessary element of the course at the start of the year, particularly for those students who had not previously had work experience, but all agreed that there was a need to explicitly teach ethical development at key points throughout the PGCE year.

EQ1: How were the pilot materials rated by the students and tutors?

There was very little difference between the questionnaire responses from tutors and students about the design and implementation of the materials, with the majority of the questions gaining a *strongly agree* response. This demonstrates that based on this small data set, the materials were judged to be fit for purpose and were easily accessible for both tutors and students. The only question which yielded a noticeably different response was regarding the layout of the materials where the students were more positive about the use of PowerPoint as the medium for presenting the materials compared to the tutors who all selected the neutral response.

The focus group also presented a very positive response regarding the design but thought the addition of different media files could help to sustain engagement, particularly if the materials are revisited at different points in the year. It was considered that the use of video/audio would enhance the impact of the materials, making the scenarios seem more meaningful and realistic. Other ways of presenting scenarios such as social stories, comic strips and role play activities were also suggested in the survey and focus group.

The participants' views about the relevance of the materials for the needs of PGCE students:

The findings showed that both tutors and students strongly agreed that the materials were of high relevance to PGCE students. These views were reiterated by the focus group who felt the materials would have been very relevant to their training needs, as all had encountered numerous ethical dilemmas during their professional placements. The

importance of selecting a realistic scenario was an important consideration for the group and it was suggested that key points of the year (e.g. preparation for the change of school) would be a useful stimulus for dilemmas to ensure they are meaningful so "even if the scenario hasn't or doesn't happen to you, you can still take something away from it" (Student B).

The participants' views about the effectiveness of the materials to support the development of moral reasoning skills and the understanding of professional ethical dilemmas:

Students and tutors could both see how the implementation of ethical dilemmas could serve to have a positive impact on the moral development of student teachers and how this could have a long term benefit for their future careers. The *Debriefing Method* was judged to be an effective means for addressing ethical dilemmas. The focus group were also very positive about the use of ethical dilemmas and recognised that every dilemma a teacher encounters is likely to be different. The group therefore believed it was important for student teachers to have the experience of "stepping into someone else's shoes and thinking what would I do if I was faced with this situation?" (Student C). Student C found it helpful to reflect individually on the scenario before sharing with a group, as he believed it was important for students to be aware of other people's ideas in order to acknowledge the complexities surrounding ethical dilemmas and the lack of a "clear cut response" (Student C).

The focus group found the *Debriefing Method* to be a very useful way of staggering a response to an ethical dilemma and believed it to beneficial when considering what *could* happen in a particular situation and who *could* be affected rather than focusing solely on the final outcome. Student A thought this process would be particularly helpful for students who may respond impulsively, as engagement with this systematic method "forces them to follow the process methodically and if they can develop this process within themselves, they should be able to more effectively tackle similar situations in the future" (Student A).

EQ2: What is the perceived impact on the moral development of students in future cohorts?

A number of key themes emerged in response to this question on both the questionnaire and in the focus group. Both tutors and students felt the resources provided a valuable opportunity for exploring scenarios in depth and considering ethical issues from the

perspective of different stakeholders as well as their own. Tutors all commented on how immersion with a range of dilemmas during the year could help to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a professional which in turn could help students to have a greater awareness of the "potential pitfalls" of professionalism that may potentially cause them issues on their professional placements (Tutor B).

Both groups also identified the benefits of providing opportunities for critical reflection and the need for students to consider the different possible responses to ethical dilemmas and the potential consequences of such decisions, so trainees can feel more confident with the moral element of their day to day work. The importance of feeling prepared for the ethical challenges that lie ahead in their teaching career was raised by all the students. Student A believed the materials had the potential for "preparing and arming" student teachers to deal with challenging situations, "whilst still remaining professional" and student C believed that if implemented effectively, the materials could serve to "raise the professional and ethical awareness of student teachers and provide them with the support structures, strategies and knowledge that will help them to become morally competent professionals."

The findings provided some convincing evidence to instigate change to our current provision and the evaluation of the materials has shown that the introduction of an ethical approach to professionalism has the potential to have a positive influence on the moral competence of student teachers. This is particularly pertinent for an ITE institution, as it is well documented in the literature that there is a lack of focus on developing the moral agency of teachers in teacher education, despite both pre- and in-service teachers recognising the importance of the moral facet of their role (Arthur et al., 2015). The problem is further exacerbated by the fact teachers have far less ethical and professional guidance to draw upon for support than other professions. For example, in medicine, the General Medical Council (GMC) has produced extensive materials linked to what it means to be a 'good' doctor enabling medics to easily seek support when faced with ethical issues (General Medical Council, 2014; 2018). There are no comparable materials for teachers. Therefore, if students do not receive any ethics education during their teacher training, it is hardly surprising that teachers (including our student volunteers) feel underprepared to confidently navigate their way through the imprecision and ethical complexities that face classroom practitioners when undertaking their multiple roles (Campbell, 2003).

Proposing any changes to well-established courses will always be a challenge and it has been acknowledged that ITE providers face a number of issues that can serve as a barrier to the

inclusion of character and ethical development in their programmes (Bondi et al., 2012). At my institution, a lack of time has meant that prior to this study, professionalism was historically 'covered' via a single lecture at the start of each academic year. This approach could be considered to be reducing professionalism to the mere "mastery of repertoires of technical occupational competence" (Carr, 2011: p.108). However, the findings from this pilot study challenge this conception of professionalism and instead present an alternative interpretation: one with a moral dimension where both university tutors and students recognise the relevance, the importance and the long-term benefits of students engaging with a virtue ethics model to explore a range of professional dilemmas and thus learning what it means to be truly professional. The need for regular revisiting of ethical dilemmas was stressed by all participants, enabling the scenarios to link to key points during the PGCE year to prepare the students for particularly challenging parts of the course as well as equipping them to cope with the demands of their chosen profession.

The use of ethical dilemmas in teaching has been recognised as an important means of developing ethical understanding (Campbell, 2003) and all participants responded very positively to these, acknowledging the potential impact on moral reasoning competencies. Tutors judged this approach as an effective way of enabling students to develop a deeper understanding of professionalism that goes beyond mere compliance and praised the *Debriefing Method* for prompting students to think beyond themselves, which can be challenging for some trainees. All participants considered it vitally important that student teachers learn that what is deemed as being the *best* course of action may well differ from one professional to another, recognising that all teachers are likely at some point in their career to experience a dilemma where "professional ethics intersects with personal morality" (Freeman, 1997: p.65).

Undertaking this pilot study enabled me to assess the feasibility of the project; the usefulness and potential impact of the materials and the potential logistical issues. The findings from the pilot informed and shaped the interdisciplinary aspect of the project and led to a successful Phase 2, with student teachers and medics working collaboratively to produce ethical dilemma-focused resources that are now embedded in our programmes and support the professional development of hundreds of students. The project served to be a useful platform to promote collaborative learning across the professions and empower novice professionals to gain a more informed understanding of what it truly means to be a *good* professional.

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