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Collaborative Learning, Role Play and Case Study: Pedagogical Pathways to Professionalism and Ethics in School Placement

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Introduction

Teachers are moral agents. Acting professionally in *loco parentis* teachers have a legal and moral duty of care to students (DES, 2017). Moreover, they can be regarded as moral ‘role models’ (Bergen, 2006; Lumpkin, 2013). Professional codes of practice assist teachers in their moral agency (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2004; CDET, 2017; DfE, 2011; Education Council, 2017; Teaching Council, 2012; 2016; World Class Teachers, 2017). In conjunction with official codes of conduct, TE ethics programmes contribute to the development of “a moral language” and raise awareness of moral agency in teaching (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2010).

In 2014 the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) and the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) jointly developed a cross-institutional training programme entitled ‘The Ethical Teacher Programme’, designed to facilitate student teachers to reflect upon professionalism and ethics during School Placement. The programme incorporated both a study of the Teaching Council *Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers (Code)* (2012) and explorations of selected ethical ‘case studies’ in teaching, using collaborative learning (CL) and role play strategies. The ‘ethical dilemma’ approach employed mirrored literature studies (Colenerud, 1997; Husu & Tiri, 2003; Klassen, 2002). Unique to the approach, however, was the method of application of selected classical and contemporary ethical philosophies to moral dilemmas in teaching.

The programme was designed to include a one-hour introductory lecture on professionalism and ethics (from the perspectives of moral literacy and ethical theory) followed by a two-hour applied workshop. The workshop employed student-centred, active teaching and learning methods, specifically, collaborative learning, role play and case study

analysis. Six ethical philosophical principles (or ‘lenses’) were integrated into programme delivery - *teleology*, *deontology*, *virtue ethics*, *justice ethics*, *care ethics* and *relationality ethics*. These lenses were applied to real-world teaching case studies. One cohort to which this training programme is offered annually is the student teachers on the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme in NUIG. The PME cohort (2015-2016) is the focus of the present study. The study sought a critical reflection on, and evaluation of, this training programme, from a student perspective. This study is phase one of a larger on-going study.

Method

The methodological paradigm of this study was a ‘case study’, the bounded case being the NUIG PME cohort 2015-2016 (n=130). The framework was qualitative and interpretivist, focusing on student perspectives. The workshop employed the ‘Ethical Teacher Toolkit’ (see Image 1) and it integrated data gathering: data was collected at the end of the workshop by means of a student questionnaire.



Image 1: The Ethical Teacher Toolkit

The Ethical Teacher Toolkit contains a copy of the *Code*, ethical lenses cards based on the philosophical ethical lenses, case studies and active learning aids. Groups of six are established, and member given roles (leader, recorder, observer, timekeeper, etc.). First the *Code* is applied to SP and secondly Collaborative Learning and Role Play teaching strategies are used to adopt the stance of one philosophical lens and argue from that lens only

(suspending one's own moral perspective in the process). The workshop typically concludes with group feedback and discussion, but, in the case of this study, an additional research stage was added: a student-perspective questionnaire that had prior ethical approval through the School of Education, NUIG was administered at the end of the workshop. The research questionnaire was structured on the basis of a 'Strengths, Weaknesses and Suggestions' (SWS) evaluative model. Data analysis was conducted on three key questions: (1) 'Can you identify 3 things that worked well in the Ethical Teacher workshop?' (2) 'Can you identify 3 suggestions for improvement for the Ethical Teacher?' (3) 'Can you indicate 3 things you learned about ethical practice in this workshop for your future role as a teacher?' The survey response rate was 85%. A record of the dominant themes emerging from each of these three questions was captured on an Excel spreadsheet, and the frequencies were recorded. The gathered data was coded manually, using a content frequency analysis approach based on the occurrence of dominant themes and sub-themes.

Findings

Beginning with Question One - "Identify three things that worked well in 'The Ethical Teacher' workshop?" - three recurring dominant themes were in evidence: 'group work', 'case studies', and 'role play' (n=46). The enjoyment of the 'group work' occurred the most frequently (n=53). One student stated, "I was never a fan of group work but, today's tasks, changed my view". Other positive findings from the workshop were: 1) the use of lenses for different perspectives was helpful (n=11), 2) the tasks were interesting (n=14), and 3) the case study scenarios were thought provoking (n=17). One student stated that, "Very interesting activities and a good variety... there wasn't a boring moment". Another student remarked: "Looking at other students' perspectives really opened my eyes to all of the possible ways of looking at issues that may arise". Fifteen students positively commented on how relevant the tasks were for their future teaching career.

Question two, on suggestions for improvement, had significantly less feedback compared to question one. Only 55 of the students gave a suggestion for the workshop comparing to the 110 students that identified things that work well. These students stated that there were few areas to be improved on. A suggestion for improvement was to include more case study examples (n=17) "to get a better understanding of different issues that could arise within schools". Poor timekeeping relating to the CL group work was an issue identified as a weakness (n=15). One respondent commented that "too much time was given to the first

couple of tasks and not enough for the last few”. Some students stated that they would have preferred to have received more in-depth information on the *Code* (n=7). Six students commented that they had the issue of losing concentration throughout the workshop, as it was run over two consecutive hours.

Question three was: ‘Identify three things the student learned about ethical practice in this workshop for your future role as a teacher?’ This saw a significantly higher amount of feedback responses compared to question 2 (n=80). One of the most frequently recurring comments was that moral evaluation is not always about the teacher's opinion or personal view on an ethical issue (n=17). One student reflected: “you have to look at issues from more than one perspective”. Awareness of the complexity of moral decision-making was also in evidence (n=14): “(n)ot all issues in the classroom are fixed easily” and “sometimes the rules need to be bent or broken in order to achieve something for the school, students or the teacher”.

A final question was asked: “Do you have any additional comments?”. 34 of 110 students answered this question. Eight students commented on the workshop being very useful for their future teaching career. One commented that it was “... a very insightful and relevant workshop... (I am) hoping to use many of these features when I become a qualified teacher”. ‘Enjoyment’ was specified by twelve respondents. One wrote: “I enjoyed this way of learning about ethical practice, it encouraged me to think about possible real-life situations and I got to hear opinions of others”. Finally, six students found the workshop “thought provoking”.

Conclusions

This study concludes that the NUIG/GMIT TE professionalism and ethics programme is both effective and valued by the student cohort. The research participants felt that they had increased knowledge of professional codes of conduct, values and ethical principles. The case study analyses of ethical dilemmas in teaching, using different philosophical ethical lenses, was particularly effective in raising awareness of many potential ethical and professional perspectives in teaching. The learning experience was overall an enjoyable one from the perspective of its small group collaborative learning (CL) and active methods methodology. While this specific study- as a Case Study- does not seek to generalize, the *model* outlined above is easily replicable in other contexts of applied ethics, across a wide array of disciplines. (Indeed, it has been successfully applied to Business

Studies and Media Ethics students in GMIT, to date). Three recommendations arise out of this study: 1) that the programme be further developed to include a deeper examination of the *Code* and teaching case studies, 2) a followon final year workshop would focus on professional and ethical decision-making frameworks and ethical considerations during final year School Placement (SP), and 3) the workshop delivery and research study would be expanded to include undergraduate NUIG/GMIT student teachers.

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