ENABLING BEGINNING TEACHERS TO THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY ABOUT CLASSROOM DILEMMAS THROUGH A 24-HOUR ‘ETHICAL FORUM’

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The project discussed in this paper builds on our thinking as philosophers of education about the future of ITE in which we have been engaged over the past 3 years and which we will first summarise briefly. Our current project represents our attempt to translate our ideas and ethical ideals into practice and to realise an alternative approach to traditional ITE provision.

Recent shifts have limited the scope of university-based input into ITE, reducing time for trainee teachers to engage with broader issues surrounding and underlying education. This limit on opportunities for engagement with key relevant ideas, theory and practice impoverishes the training or learning experience of future teachers. Our hypothesis is that many new teachers, regardless of the phase in which they are training to teach, would appreciate workshops that redressed this balance and explored these ideas with a view to developing their classroom practice.

The paper reports on a 24 hour ethical forum designed to enable beginning teachers to think ethically about classroom dilemmas. The forum focuses on developing beginning teachers’ judgment of how to manage challenging behaviour, a preoccupation of many at a relatively early phase of professional development. Theoretical perspectives on and systematic ways of thinking about education at an introductory level are used, in response to frequently cited examples of complex and potentially difficult classroom situations.

We offer an alternative perspective to the psychological approach which tends to dominate the strategies promoted in more conventional teacher education provision, focusing instead on characteristically philosophical concerns with the ethics of behaviour management, thus addressing existential concerns raised for beginning teachers when dealing with challenging behaviour by their pupils, including burnout, sustaining motivation and a sense of ‘moral purpose’.

The forum’s format is a form of “philosophy for (beginning) teachers” along the dialogic lines promoted, e.g., by “philosophy for children” (P4C). A facilitator manages the dynamics of the session, modelling an effective dialogical approach to teacher education for those tutors present as well as structuring the learning of the beginning teachers. Two further philosophers of education, similarly committed to dialogical models of learning, join the discussion in the role of the “gadfly”. Using humour, their considerable experience over a lifetime in education and a rigorous background in philosophy as an academic discipline, they intervene in the discussions where appropriate to develop the arguments and enable them to become more nuanced and avoid ethical dead ends.