

Are we ready for a new code of conduct?

Cynicism and despair

I've been a teacher for little over a year and yet, already I greet every mention of a new government initiative or new piece of guidance for teachers with a sigh of despair and a heavy dose of cynicism. So, please forgive me for my less than enthusiastic reaction to the General Teaching Council for England's invitation to comment on their draft code of conduct for teachers. Perhaps my need for forgiveness is even greater as I have been managing a project for The Stapleford Centre that helps Christian teachers make links between ethics and teaching – this might make you think I should be an enthusiastic supporter of a code of conduct. As well as being less than enthusiastic about the GTCE's initiative I am also inclined to question the ability of my fellow teachers to provide a reasonable response.

It's not the level of intelligence of teachers that makes me doubt our ability to respond to a request to critique the GTCE's code of conduct, it's more the way the concern for beliefs, values and ethics that many of us have regarding many areas of life, get squeezed out.

Beliefs, values and ethics

I recently completed a course of teacher training where the mantra of 'reflection, reflection, reflection' was programmed into my brain. No doubt those attempting to instil this important dogma actually believed in the value of reflection. Indeed, evaluation of my attempts to teach *did* provide the basis for the development of my skills. However, the reality, during my training year, was that knowledge needed to be acquired and practical skills needed to be developed. This allowed little space to truly reflect on the task of teaching and to explore answers to any but a fairly narrow range of questions. Consequently, teachers are capable

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(hopefully) of satisfactorily teaching 9B period five on Friday afternoon using the techniques that are currently designated most effective, and they can do so in a way that takes account of UK Government regulations. However, while able to tick the right boxes relating to the techniques of teaching, many do this with little awareness of the philosophy of it all, or of whether what they do is consistent with their own beliefs, values and ethics.

I believe current priorities have the potential to dehumanise both pupils and teachers

It could be argued that teacher training is able to give only a foundation on which to build a more reflective and critical approach. However, once qualified, I have found there to be fewer, rather than more, opportunities to reflect on the 'bigger' questions about teaching.

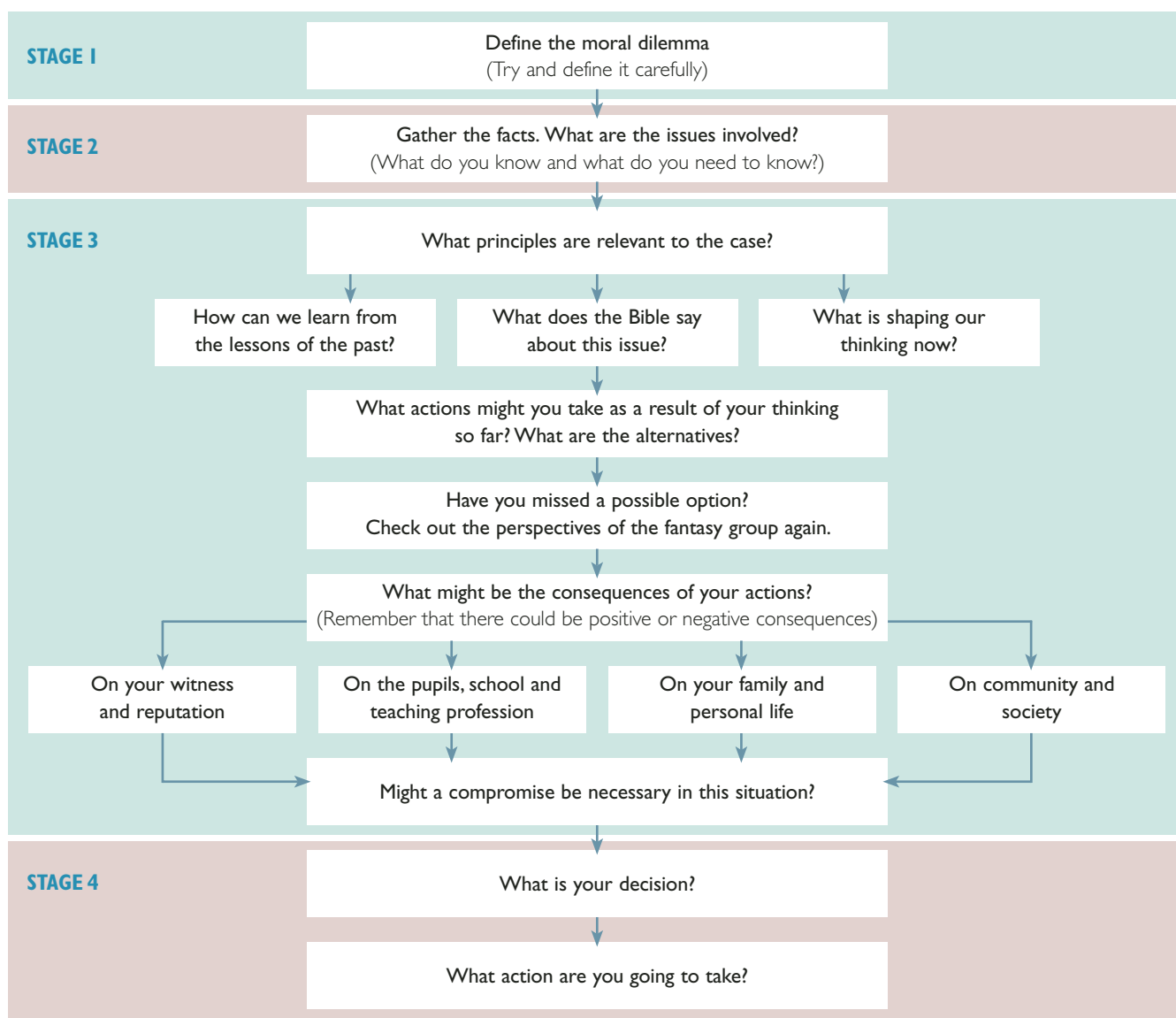
Inconvenient truths

The simple truth is that the day-to-day pressures of teaching, eg workload and results orientated success criteria (be it exam grades or the implementation of yet another new strategy), conspire to discourage a culture of reflection. When it comes to teacher priorities, the mantra of 'reflection, reflection, reflection' that I was taught on my teacher training course is drowned out by 'results, results, results'.

Perhaps this doesn't prevent children being effectively educated (if educational 'effectiveness' is measured by the number of pupils able to jump through particular hoops at designated times). But I believe current priorities have the potential to dehumanise both pupils and teachers, as pupils are treated as raw materials requiring the mechanistic input of teacher-technicians who pull the levers and press the buttons they are told to in order to produce desired outcomes.

Making room for God

Certainly, one would hope that, as Christians, we might be able to hear God saying something



of value about the critical job of educating our nation's children.

However, after quizzing many Christian teachers in the early years of their careers about what educational issues they think God might have something to say about, I am not confident. My questions have tended to illicit blank and confused faces as their owners have sought an answer from the dark recesses of their brains. A good proportion did this in vain, the rest fared a little better, able to mention something about being unsure how to confront issues of personal morality that were raised in PSHE. But surely God is concerned about everything that happens in our schools and not only what happens in our pupils' bedrooms.

So, what are some of the issues teachers face that we should be reflecting on, and how do we begin to address them? Teachers face ethical decisions and the ethical consequence of other people's decisions daily. Questions like:

- How should resources be allocated between pupils?
- Should one person's behaviour be allowed to spoil someone else's education and what can be done about it?
- To what extent can I communicate my personal views on a subject?
- How do I deal with a difficult colleague?
- Do I perform an assessment if, in my judgement, over-testing is harming pupils' education?
- When does a heavy workload become too much?
- Are academies a good thing?
- Is the curriculum biased in favour of girls or boys?
- Do church schools encourage class based segregation?

CREATe groups

When many of the ethical dilemmas we face in teaching don't have simple biblical answers it can be even more difficult to adequately address them. Many of the teachers I have spoken to feel neither church nor their professional training has equipped them to do this. This is precisely why organisations like ACT, ACT Scotland, ACTW, NIACT and The Stapleford Centre have something valuable to offer.

The Stapleford Centre has been helping Christian teachers in their first five years of teaching to identify and grapple with matters of ethics in CREATe (Christian Reflection on Ethics and Teaching) groups. These groups meet monthly, often over a meal, and encourage group members to reflect and discuss issues or challenges they are facing in their schools. The aim is to help them face the immediate situation and to do so in a way that allows them to engage their faith at a deeper level. Group members have been enthusiastic about being able to step back from the treadmill of teaching and to come to more Christian responses to the issues and challenges they face at work.

The CREATe groups follow an action learning process which allows members to work together to find answers and solutions. To guide group members in this process, we use the framework (see chart, page 7), which can easily be adopted by others who are looking to develop their decision-making processes.

CREATe groups follow an action learning process

Information

Steven Spriggs was the Stapleford Centre's Christian Faith and Education Practice Project Manager until April 2009. Steven continues to lead two CREATe groups. He is also Head of RE at the Coventry Blue Coat CofE School and Music College.

If you are interested in being part of, or leading, a CREATe group, please contact Steven's successor, Ruth Donnelly at:

The Stapleford Centre
The Old Lace Mill
Frederick Road
Stapleford
Nottingham
NG9 8FN

T: 0115 9396270
E: rdonnelly@stapleford-centre.org
W: www.stapleford-centre.org

For information on the GTCE's code of conduct go to the www.gtce.org.uk website. The consultation period ended on 27 February 2009 and results are due to be published in the autumn.

Christian discipleship

While inevitably making the process of reflecting on ethical issues easier, following a framework similar to that above, is different to an attempt to create a code of conduct. The main difference is that the thinking framework encourages true reflection rather than creating another list of things to do or indeed, not to do. If the government is seeking to create a profession of people able to reflect then surely the GTCE should be aiming to encourage such a process rather than prescribing outcomes. If we are to take our Christian discipleship seriously, then we need to be equipped and able to respond to any situation, rather than limiting our interest to a narrow list of prescribed subjects.

■ Steven Spriggs



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