

Charge to the Ethics Project Working Group

August 29, 2008

Overview of the TEI Ethics Project

The goal of the Teacher Education Initiative (TEI) is to build a teacher education program focused on practice. Too often, teacher education in the United States falls short of preparing teachers for the work of teaching. Instead, it often consists more of *discussion* about teaching and schools and leaves to “experience” the actual work of learning to teach. We aim to break that pattern, and to build a program that helps student teachers learn to *do* the complex relational, psychological, social, and intellectual work of teaching, not just talk about doing it.

Primary responsibility for the redesign of our curriculum rests with the TEI Curriculum Group, a small committee of faculty members who are working to articulate a set of “high-leverage” practices in teaching and to identify the knowledge and orientations that underlie and enable those practices. Members of this group will ultimately propose a new, practice-focused curriculum for learning teaching. As part of this work, we hope to develop a set of ethical “imperatives” for teaching that will run firmly through our new program. We want our graduates to know that they have a moral responsibility to use the tools we teach them well. However, we need help to articulate these principles and to create instructional activities that will help our students internalize them. No standard, professionally agreed-upon set of ethical principles for teaching exists, and perhaps as a result, there is little precedent for preparing student teachers to attend to the ethical demands of their work.

The purpose of the TEI Ethics Project is to assist the Curriculum Group in developing a teacher education curriculum that will attend to the moral and ethical imperatives of teaching. We have three related goals for this work: (1) to identify, analyze, and clarify issues of professional ethics and professional role in the practice of teaching and connect them to notions of social justice, equity, and diversity in education; (2) to begin to articulate the specific notions of professional role and responsibilities on which we should focus in teacher education; and (3) to develop instructional activities and materials to teach about professional ethics to novice teachers.

At the core of our thinking about this are two primary convictions: First, that all teachers should have a strong sense of moral imperative to teach every child, and to redress pervasive educational inequities. Second, that becoming a teacher involves shifting the locus of one’s role orientation from the personal to the professional. Although *teaching* is a universal human activity—as parents “teach” their children, for example—*being a teacher* is to be a member of a practice community within which “teaching” does not mean the ordinary, common sense of “teaching” as showing or helping. It is instead specialized and professional in form and nature. Decisions about what to do are not appropriately rooted in personal preferences or experiences, but are instead based on professionally-justified knowledge and moral imperatives of the role. Our new program should help student teachers develop such an orientation, to see themselves as members of a profession with norms and standards for practice that supplant individual or private judgment.

Our dilemma is this: Although there are many things that we want student teachers to *know* about the ethical demands of the teaching profession, we want our program to prepare students to *enact* ethical teaching practice. Teacher education has typically addressed these issues by focusing on student teachers’ beliefs about inequity in American society and their knowledge about its relation to schooling—such knowledge is frequently referred to as “foundational”. Our goal, on the other hand, is less to take aim at students’ knowledge and beliefs and more to build students’ understanding of their professional role and their skills at enacting equitable practice. We want our graduates to have a strong sense of moral imperative to teach every child, and to have not only the will to act on that imperative but the skills to do so. We would also want them

to know the difference between terms such as “diversity”, “equity”, “social justice”, and “equality”. Ultimately, however, our goal is for them to be not only more precise in their thinking but more skillful in their work. In short, though we can imagine how we could take advantage of work in philosophy to build the program that we have in mind, we also want to maintain our focus on practice.

The Ethics Project will have two main components: a “working group”, the members of which will be responsible for investigating ethical issues in teaching, conceptualizing a set of provisional ethical “imperatives” for our new curriculum, and beginning to design instructional activities that will help us prepare teachers who can enact ethical practice; and a whole-school seminar series that will bring to campus presenter-teachers who can help us with this work. The project is supported by a grant from the Ethics and Public Life Center at the University of Michigan and by the Teacher Education Initiative.

Provisional Set of Ethical Imperatives

As a first step in building this strand of our new program, we have drafted the provisional set of ethical “imperatives” in teaching that follows. We have also made a first attempt to articulate in somewhat greater detail what we mean by several of our nominations.

A provisional set of ethical imperatives in teaching:

1. Caring about and being relentlessly committed to the success of every student regardless of whether you like them, what race they are, where they come from
2. Respecting and tolerating diversity and difference
3. Believing in the capacity of human learning, in the individual’s potential for learning
4. Ensuring equitable access to learning in one’s own classroom
5. Enacting a professional demeanor
6. Internalizing responsibility for obstacles and working relentlessly to ensure equitable access to learning

More detail:

4. Ensuring equitable access to learning in one’s own classroom

- From a repertoire of instructional practices, choose select and skillfully use those best instructional practices
- Attend to and design for diversity in students’ experiences in ways that enable their success
 - Use contexts sensitively
 - Choose examples, representatives, and topics sensitively
 - Make grouping decisions with attention to equity
- Expect and enable high-level academic work
 - Set and elaborate ambitious goals; invest students and other stakeholders in working toward them
 - Scaffold students’ learning
- Manage external constraints on children’s learning
 - Manage interface with home sensitively (e.g. homework)

5. Enacting a professional demeanor

- Support students' individual personal/academic development, including their formation of personal opinions, outlooks, and personality
- Refrain from expressing personal opinions where it is unnecessary; support students and parents in pursuing their own goals (always attending to students' need for opportunities to define themselves independently from their parents and family)
- Treat students, parents and care-givers, and co-workers with respect and sensitivity
- Enact a professionally appropriate persona in the classroom (e.g. don't be impatient, etc.)

6. Internalizing responsibility for obstacles and work relentlessly to ensure equitable access to learning

- Plan instruction carefully, study and respond to student work carefully, constantly assess student progress, adjust instruction accordingly (the point here being that working hard at teaching is a moral imperative)
- Work to improve one's own practice over time
 - Solicit observation and feedback, observe others, seek other help and resources
- Provide extra help and resources to struggling students
 - Tutoring, after-school help, find homework support, etc.
- Advocate for students' academic and personal needs at the district level and beyond
- Think strategically about obstacles to student success and ways to overcome them
- Work with and enlist support from school and local community

Charge to the Working Group

This group has two primary tasks:

(1) **By early winter 2009:** Building on the existing list, draft a complete set of provisional ethical imperatives of the work of teaching, including, for each item on the list, a rationale, description, and examples; present this list to the TEI Curriculum Group and to the broader School community for feedback; and revise the list accordingly.

(2) **By spring 2009:** Make recommendations to the Curriculum Group about how we might teach our students to enact the ethical practice implied by the list of imperatives.

The group will meet routinely during the 2008-2009 academic year (up to twice per month, for two hours each time). Specific activities of group members will likely include the following:

- Investigating how other fields of professional education approach this issue and what ethical codes look like in other fields;
- Reading relevant literature;
- Meeting with seminar series speakers and other visitors that the group chooses to invite to campus;
- Investigating ethical issues that arise in the classrooms in which our current student teachers work;
- Surveying and conducting focus groups with members of the SOE community to gather baseline and post-project data about our relevant current practices
- Meeting at least twice with the TEI Curriculum Group in order to coordinate efforts and present draft work.