

Gatekeeper or Nurturer: Maintaining Accountability While Encouraging Growth in Field Experiences

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Abstract

Is the role of teacher educators that of nurturers or gatekeepers? We sometimes struggle to reach a balance between advocating for our students and gatekeeping for our profession. We wrestle with the notion of dispositions and how to assess them. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education expects that schools of education will assess pre-service teacher dispositions based on observable behavior in the classroom. One challenge for schools of education is to develop a mechanism that will serve in a multitude of cases to render decisions, based on observable behavior, regarding students' performance and continued participation in the teacher preparation program. This article will provide a brief overview of how one university established a process for helping students who face difficult issues of inadequate performance in the field. We present a brief look at the path that brought our department to the development of a Professional Standards Committee. Then, three case studies of struggling teacher candidates will illuminate the process for readers.

Who are we, as teacher educators, to say that a student should not be a teacher? Who am I to say that teaching is not a person's "calling?" We are, after all, the profession who advocates for everyone, who teaches our students to never stop trying to reach every student. The answer to these questions is: we are the professional gatekeepers, as well as nurturers, whose job it is, not only to contribute to the professional preparation of teachers but also to keep incompetent or ill-suited people out of the classroom. We struggle with a balance between advocating for our students and gatekeeping for our profession. We struggle with the notion of dispositions and how to assess them. Even while we recognize the importance of bringing oneself into the classroom (Palmer, 1998), we struggle with the need to hold teacher candidates to the high standards of social expectations (Darling-Hammond, 2001). How can we balance these diverse issues?

This article will provide a brief overview of why we engage in this area of professional practice and will show how one university has attempted to establish a process for helping students who are facing these issues. In order to understand where the university is now, we will present a brief look at the path that brought us here as a department. Then, three case studies of struggling teacher candidates will illuminate the process for readers.

The Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges of Teacher Education identifies moral and ethical dimensions of the learning community as one of the standards of excellence for teacher education (AILACTE, nd). AILACTE institutions are encouraged to provide opportunities for and to set policies and standards assuring that teacher candidates develop the needed moral and ethical dimensions required of our profession. This supports the identification and development of dispositions. Colleges and schools of education have wrestled with the notion of assessing dispositions. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education expects that schools of education will *not* attempt to assess dispositions based on pre-service teacher attitudes but will instead focus on observable behavior in the classroom. This tangible guideline of “observable behavior” is the fulcrum that keeps us in balance and the tool that empowers us to do the right thing, which is sometimes removing students from our programs. One challenge for schools of education is to develop a mechanism that will prevent the burden of that decision from resting on a single person’s judgment.

Each of us as teacher educators has supervised that student in final internship who causes us to question, “How did this person get this far?” Each of us has coached that high maintenance intern or pre-intern who, in spite of our best efforts and enormous energy, just seems incapable of adapting, improving, and growing into the profession. Many of us have had to remove students from field placements based on unprofessional or even unethical behavior. The dilemma in each of these cases is how to fairly make a determination about a student’s future. One university has developed a mechanism that serves in a multitude of cases to render decisions, based on observable behavior regarding a student’s performance and possible continued participation in the teacher preparation program. This mechanism is a Professional Standards Committee.

Before addressing what we are doing now at this university, we are going to take a brief look at the previous practices that brought us here. In the early 2000s, this university had a very flexible, unblocked approach. Students completed two formal practicum experiences that had separate forms for midterm and final evaluations. Additional field experiences prior to final internship were limited in supervision and mentoring. At this time, there were changes to administration and faculty along with changes to state rules regulating education programs. Additionally, the institution was moving toward an infusion of its core values in the curriculum across departments.

In response to these forces for change, the department made several decisions regarding our approach to education. First, we moved to a blocked schedule of classes to ensure scaffolding of knowledge, practical experience, and skills. This had the added benefit of creating a cohort approach, in which students developed closer relationships with each other that led to greater emotional support among students. Secondly, we increased the number of formal field experiences to three, including one in each block of study. At this time we also revised supervision forms to align midterm and final evaluations. Lastly, we increased coordination of supervision. This change in philosophy led to an early intervention model, with an informal support team consisting of the university faculty, intern coordinator, and cooperating teachers. Our teacher candidates now benefited from a double-monitoring system put in place through alignment between faculty providing supervision and faculty teaching the methods courses connected to the placement. However, as time went by we realized there was a need for a more formal process. A Professional Standards Committee was developed to facilitate the process of addressing concerns and issues regarding student performance. The entire department enthusiastically agreed.

The purpose of the Professional Standards Committee is to address issues concerning inadequate, unprofessional or unethical performance by students in an education program. The committee is made up of Ad hoc members as necessitated by each individual case. The chair is the only standing member. Other members usually include 1) faculty member(s) from the program and/or courses involved in a particular case; 2) the Field Experiences Coordinator (when field experiences are involved); 3) the university supervisor (when field experiences are involved). A case may be referred to the Standards committee by a university supervisor, professor, cooperating teacher, or another student. Cases of a less serious nature undergo an informal process. Cases of a serious nature require a formal process.

Cases involving student with disabilities add an additional dimension to the process. The ADA states that the intern must be otherwise qualified for the position. In addition, the intern must be able to perform the essential functions of the position either with or without accommodations. In an effort to be proactive, individuals that identify themselves as disabled meet with the Director of Disability Services and the Intern Coordinator to determine what, if any, accommodations will be needed. If cases are taken to the Professional Standards Committee that involved interns with documented disabilities, the Director of Disability Services will serve on the ad hoc committee.

Informal Process

If a student demonstrates inadequate performance in professional or ethical behavior, the case is referred to the Standards Committee Chairperson who determines whether the case is of a serious nature. Less serious issues may be addressed with the student by the chair and a faculty member and/or university supervisor involved. The steps in such an informal case include:

- Reporting of the issue
- Gathering evidence
- Meeting informally with the student to discuss the issue(s)
- Rendering a decision and course of action
- Documenting the meeting and the decision(s) reached

Case Study 1: Sally's Poor Professional Judgment

An example of such an informal case involves student, Sally Smith. Sally was a practicum student at East Anderson Elementary School where her son attended third grade. Her son was involved in an altercation with another boy and ended up being reprimanded by the teacher and principal. Sally believed her son was unfairly treated and wanted to “get to the bottom” of the story. She took it upon herself to question students after school regarding “what really happened” with this altercation. Later, she approached the mother of the other boy at a local retail store and, reportedly, in a loud and emotional voice, suggested that the other mother's son was at fault and Sally's son was treated unfairly. Sally was, “after all, a teacher in training, and knew about how to handle such things,” and in her estimation, the situation hadn't been handled well. The other mother reported the incident to the principal who called the university and asked that the student never be placed in her school again. Clearly this student crossed the lines of professional behavior when she blurred the boundaries between her role as a parent and the professional behaviors of an educator. The fact that a principal requests that a pre-service teacher never be placed in her school again is a serious situation and dictates that the lack of professional judgment on the part of the student must be addressed.

The phone call from the principal began the informal process. The internship coordinator (who in this university is also the Standards Committee Chair) received the phone call and contacted the university supervisor to discuss the student's previous performance and behavior in the field placement. No previous issues had ever come up, and her teaching performance and professional behaviors until this point had been successful. It was determined that the best course of action was to meet with the student to discuss the serious ramifications of her behavior in this case. The student did not realize how her behavior was perceived, nor did she realize that her son's attendance at the same school where she was assigned for her field experience complicated her perceptions of herself as a parent and as a pre-service teacher and blurred her professional judgment and understanding of her responsibilities. She was made aware of these important issues and admonished to be vigilant regarding separating her personal and professional opinions and behaviors. She was receptive to the dialogue, acknowledged the mistake, and expressed a genuine determination to make the necessary changes. The meeting was documented, and Sally was allowed to continue in the program.

The success of this process is evidenced in the student's changed behavior in her subsequent field placements presumably as a result of her being made aware of the inappropriateness of her behavior and the subsequent ramifications. During the process, she demonstrated personal and professional compunction and a desire to overcome her past mistake. She developed and maintained a professional attitude and stature in her subsequent practicum. Two semesters later, she completed her final internship with stellar ratings and a job offer at the school where she interned. In this case, the Standards Committee served not so much as a gatekeeper, but as a mechanism for growth for the student.

Sally was formally faced with a professional mistake that could have had serious ramifications, particularly if the behavior continued. She made the necessary adjustments not only in her outward behavior but in her inward perception of herself as a professional educator.

Formal Process

If a student's inadequate performance persists or is of a serious nature, as determined by a professor, the university supervisor, or a cooperating teacher, a formal process of review will take place and will include the following steps:

- The case is referred to the Standards Committee.
- The student is notified of the issue(s) to be addressed by the Committee and is provided a packet explaining the process and requiring the student to write a statement addressing the issues. The statement must 1) outline the events which led to the case being referred to the Standards Committee; 2) address the professional performance standards or articles in the Code of Ethics which are violated in the case; 3) explain what steps the student has taken or plans to take to rectify the inadequacies in his/her performance; and 4) explain whether there were any extenuating or ameliorating circumstances involved in the student's case.

Once the packet is received by the committee chair, copies are made for committee members, and a date is set for the case to be reviewed within two weeks of reception of the materials. The student is notified of the date and is informed that he or she may bring someone with them to the review. This person may be someone such as a professor, a peer, or even the education student's parent. The formal process is designed to give the student every opportunity to be heard, to clarify circumstances, and to address the issues that have been referred. It is designed to be a fair and humane process, so that once the committee has heard all the facts and perspectives in a case, the members can render a decision that they can feel confident is fair to the student and responsible to the profession. The strength of the committee rests on this one facet. Often times, when several people involved in a case are gathered to discuss it, and when people can ask questions and retell the story in the presence of the parties involved, additional information comes forward that clarifies, changes, or confirms a perspective.

When the committee renders a decision, they have several options at their disposal. They may recommend that 1) the student be permitted to repeat an unsuccessful field experience, 2) the student be permitted to repeat an unsuccessful field experience but with specified conditions and/or completion of a Professional Development Plan, 3) the student not be permitted to repeat a field experience *until* specified conditions are met and proof of demonstration of these conditions being met is submitted, 4) the student be removed from the education program, 5) the case be turned over to the Department of Student Affairs.

Case Study 2: Carrie's Volatile Temper

Carrie was a first semester junior. After the first day of her practicum placement, her cooperating teacher called the field experiences office with concerns about the student's temperament. She seemed judgmental of the school and its administration based on previous experiences that her nephew had had there. She was very vocal and negative during the three hours of her first day. Carrie was removed from this placement and counseled about her unprofessional behavior before being placed at another school. Several professors noticed Carrie's judgmental and negative comments in class. She frequently blamed students for their behaviors and focused on the authoritative responsibilities of the teacher. During the 7th week of her first semester in the program, a principal of a local middle school called the Internship Coordinator to express grave concerns about Carrie. While substitute teaching at his school that day, Carrie engaged in a power struggle with several students in a particularly challenging class. After swearing at the students, Carrie buzzed down to the office and said they had better send somebody down to her class before she "killed somebody." Carrie was so angry and out of control that the principal relieved her of her substituting duties for the rest of the day and stated that he would not have her back in his school. The principal pulled individual students from the class and questioned them to make sure that their stories of what took place were independent and consistent. At this point the university was contacted. While she was not on the university's clock as a practicum student during the incident, the principal knew she was a university student because she inappropriately chose to wear her university pre-service teacher ID badge that day.

The internship coordinator, who is the Standards Committee chair, contacted the student and explained that her case would be addressed by the Standards Committee and she would need to fill out the required paperwork and submit her statement. Once the student submitted the necessary paperwork, a meeting was set for within two weeks, and copies of the materials, including subsequent e-mails from the principal and assistant principal clarifying the incidents of that day, were provided to all committee members. During the meeting, the student contradicted herself as well as the stories of both the principal and assistant principal. She saw her behavior as precipitated by the students not the result of her personal choices. She showed little compunction except that it jeopardized her continuation in the program and voiced that she would have to be more careful in controlling herself next time. The committee had serious concerns about Carrie's ability to change her perspective, attitude, and concomitant behaviors. Clearly she didn't seem to have the disposition to be an effective teacher. Fortunately, her "observable behavior", including the fact that she misrepresented herself and the university that day by wearing her university pre-intern ID badge, made it easy for the committee to reach a decision based on concrete evidence. The committee decided to remove the student from the program. This decision was based on the student violating the State's Professional Code of Ethics and preprofessional standards, and the university's accepted, defined dispositions. The committee served as a gatekeeper for the profession in this case, and no one doubted that the committee had done the right thing and had served the profession well.

Not all standards issues that go through a formal review result in a student's removal from the program. In fact, one of the strengths of the Professional Standards Committee is that it provides for the opportunity for a second chance but with a high level of accountability. This allows for some students the additional support, monitoring, and time needed to effectively develop the skills and behaviors necessary for success. Jessica demonstrates just such a case.

Case Study 3: Jessica's Communication Conundrum

Five weeks into her final internship, Jessica was asked by her principal to leave. She evidenced significant inadequacies in her ability to communicate positively and productively with her colleagues. Jessica was a second career student who cared very deeply about being a teacher. She took herself and her commitment to teaching very seriously – some would say too seriously. She was very successful in her college classes, and during her internship, she demonstrated excellent planning and instructional skills. Three weeks into her internship, she made several comments seemingly critical of her cooperating teacher and the school. During a practice session for the state standardized test, the intern made a comment about the teachers "teaching to the test." Although the cooperating teacher tried to explain the process and reasons for what they were doing, Jessica "would not let it go" and "kept on going until the teachers felt their ethics were being questioned." According to the principal, this spread throughout the school. A week or so later, while the cooperating teacher was instructing the students, Jessica interrupted her and said, "that's wrong." The cooperating teacher disagreed and tried to brush it off and continue, but again, Jessica "would not let it go." The cooperating teacher voiced her frustrations to the principal who called the university. The principal said she believed the intern "loves children and will become a wonderful teacher, but needs some coaching." At the request of the principal, she was removed from the placement.

The case was referred to the Standards Committee. The committee met with the student for more than two hours. It was clear that the student was puzzled by and unaware of her communication inadequacies and responsibilities. She did not understand how what she said created ill feelings between her cooperating teacher, herself and other teachers in the school. She earnestly believed she was appropriately asking questions and seeking information, not challenging people. Her perspective on communication was completely one-sided focusing on what *she* needed, what *she* wanted to find out, or what *she* was trying to communicate to others. She seemed unable to consider her audience or how they might receive or *perceive* her communication. Indeed, she needed significant coaching. Her university supervisor and her faculty advisor agreed to work with her on her communication skills before her next internship. She would take an incomplete for the semester and would be allowed to undertake another final internship the following semester, with certain stipulations. 1) Jessica was required to repeat the Code of Ethics training with its focus on the importance of professional and judicious communications between colleagues. 2) Jessica would meet with her faculty advisor who would help her debrief the discussion and findings during the Standards Committee meeting regarding her communication weaknesses.

The professor would help her explore the communication issues that precipitated her removal from the internship and discuss ways to address those issues. 3) During the next final internship, Jessica would be required to maintain a weekly journal that would record not only the usual reflections on her teaching experiences, but also would specifically focus on her communication skills between her and her colleagues, including her cooperating teacher. 4) Jessica would be required to meet with her cooperating teacher once a week at a designated, regular time to discuss feedback and planning, and in particular, communication.

This Standards review was a painful, yet enlightening experience for Jessica. She learned much about herself as a teacher and was given the opportunity to address and improve a significant weakness in her professional skills. Perhaps the greatest strength of the Standards Committee process is this very element – the opportunity for students to be confronted with their own mistakes and weakness and to be held accountable for them. Faculty members work together to assist the student and provide the necessary support to facilitate growth and success.

Gatekeepers or Nurturers? We can, in fact, be both. Through a process that holds students accountable, supports them and, when necessary, removes them from the program, we as teacher educators, maintain high standards for our students and our profession.

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