

A Funny Thing Happened at the Internship Today: A Reflection on Ethical Dilemmas, Decision-Making, and Consequences of a Questionable Field Work Situation

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Ethical dilemmas in field work often challenge field work supervisors to engage students in a process of learning and reflection. This narrative presents the flip side of that supervision experience as a field work instructor re-tells the story of her own ethical dilemma and decision-making, and explores the consequences of that decision on her field placement, her student's learning, and her professional relationships.

Introduction

Ethical dilemmas are a common experience in professional practice and subsequently in field work placements. These dilemmas need not be approached with trepidation. To the contrary, a deliberative examination of them can be a profound learning experience for students.

One of my faculty responsibilities is to supervise numerous internships and field placements in two programs in a school of social work. The programs are not accredited social work programs, but they concentrate on youth work, a field of study that shares history and philosophy with the social work profession. Additionally, I hold graduate degrees in social work and am professionally affiliated as a social worker.

Both of our programs require a field work experience prior to graduation; field work supervision is an essential component of that experience. In fulfilling my duties, I have had the opportunity to engage many ethical situations with my students, often broadening the scope of traditional professional ethics to the recognition of the ethical dimensions in all aspects of our practice (Banks, 2008a).

This past year, I had the pleasure of supervising a graduate field placement that, in part, included the student's participation in an evaluation I was conducting for a critical youth media project at a

local high school. As part of her learning experience, the student proposed to refine her skills in evaluation and to develop a better understanding of youth development and education within the context of critical media education.

Over the course of the semester, the field experience was relatively uneventful. The project progressed as expected, the student was diligent and reflective, and we were fast approaching completion of the field experience. As is typical for my evaluation projects and supervision, I visited the site frequently, became acquainted with participants and site staff, and provided guidance on the occasional supervision question or reference to academic literature. That was, until a sudden unexpected situation occurred.

As I prepared to leave from a seemingly inconsequential site visit near the tail end of the evaluation, I was approached by a group of students at the school. This didn't seem unusual to me. I am often approached by students at field visits and evaluation sites. I am a member of the local community. I was a youth work practitioner prior to my appointment as a professor. I know many relatives and friends of young people in the community. I attend high school sports games and various community gatherings. In other words, I frequently work on projects where my professional and personal identities overlap. I am comfortable negotiating these multiple identities. In fact, I think they have made me a better evaluator and field

supervisor. On this day, however, I was faced with an ethical dilemma that I didn't quite expect.

The Dilemma

Through their tears, shaking hands, and broken voices, I began to piece together the multitude of stories I was hearing. The voices were overlapping; there was an investigation at the school involving the possibility that the students had earned credits from incorrectly licensed teachers. Furthermore, most of the students would "lose credits" setting them back months, if not years, from graduation.

The students told me they had attempted to seek clarification and asked for legal representation and resources for advocacy. They alleged that administrative staff had declined and heavily-handedly advised teachers and school staff that it was NOT their role to provide students with these resources. They did not know where else to obtain assistance so they reached out to me.

The students felt their complaints had fallen on deaf ears. Some were contemplating quitting school altogether, and they were desperate for someone to help them. I was hesitant to believe their claims. Surely, I thought, "there must be an explanation, a simple misunderstanding...." At my very core, I believed the students deserved an opportunity to have their concerns heard regarding such a life-altering decision and I couldn't imagine administration refusing this basic right. I reassured them that I would respond and asked them to give me a little time to investigate the situation.

I went home and contemplated what I knew to this point. Despite multiple attempts, school administrators hadn't responded to my inquiries for quite some time now. Initially, I had thought nothing of it; there was a new administrator and she appeared extremely busy. The evaluation project was going along smoothly, the teacher was always hard working, and the school staff pleasantly greeted me with each visit. The evaluation project was nearing completion; I hardly wanted to rock the boat.

I reached out to familiar staff to gather more information. They were reluctant; some outright refused to discuss the issue with me. There was an unstated and uneasy feeling present in each

interaction. It quickly became apparent that I could not guarantee that legal and advocacy resources would be provided unless I delivered them myself. This seemed like a couple of simple referrals and yet it also left me with a dilemma. I began pondering many questions: If I respond to the students' request, what was the potential impact on my evaluation project and on my student's field placement? If students were being silenced and I did nothing, was I complicit in these actions? Did I have an ethical and professional obligation to assist them in obtaining the resources they requested?

The Decision-making Process

I am a firm believer that we cannot and should not pursue rule-bound or exact social work practice, most especially when dealing with ethical dilemmas. Banks (2008a) urges us to consider new approaches to social work ethics, which "pay attention to the situated nature of values and conduct" (p. 1245). Like Husband (1995), I share skepticism about the "universality and objectivity of ethical frameworks." My professional experience has led me more toward an ethics of uncertainty: "a fluid approach, tailored to specific circumstances; an approach to ethics that is firmly linked with politics; and an ethics of empowerment" (Banks, 2008b, p. 2).

This approach to ethics has allowed me to craft my social work practice in both place and time, and to draw upon the wisdom of my experience and those I work with. I believe it is vital for social workers to explore contexts, think critically, examine the evidence and their own assumptions deeply, and negotiate an ethical decision in consultation with colleagues who ascribe to similar values. In other words, "reading, thinking, and talking about ethics can make a difference" (Reamer, 1990, p. x).

As I often do when negotiating a particularly difficult practice decision, I consulted the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. (I also frequently consult the Youth Work Code of Ethics created by the Australian Youth Coalition but for the purposes of this article, I will focus here on the social work profession and its code.) I did not use this code to determine a specified course of action but to begin an internal conversation about the values of my profession and the possibilities for ethical practice within it. I also

began discussions with colleagues about the situation. I furthermore discussed the possible consequences of my decision and my ethical obligations with my student. I insured her that completion of her field placement would not be jeopardized.

The Decision

After much consideration, I decided I was bound to provide the resources requested, regardless of the potential consequences to me or my evaluation project. Below, I explicate my decisions using the core values and principles of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2011; Kirst-Ashman, 2009).

I am a social worker; I value service to those in need and to address social problems. In this situation, I could NOT guarantee that these resources would be provided by someone else. Because “social workers elevate service to others above self-interest” (NASW, Value of Service, 2011), I determined that I could not prioritize my evaluation project and my desire to not “rock the boat” above the needs of the students.

I am a social worker; I value social justice and have a responsibility to promote the self-determination of the individual. “Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people” (NASW, Value of Social Justice, 2011). Further, “social workers respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals” (NASW, 2011). I determined that the students had a right to access requested information and resources in order to defend themselves and their positions.

I am a social worker; my professional actions must reflect my value of integrity. “Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated” (NASW, Value of Integrity, 2011). I determined that it was my duty to promote ethical practice at my evaluation and field placement sites as well as to reflect positively upon my own institution and profession. The social work profession seeks to “enhance human well-being and

help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (NASW, 2011).

The Consequences?

As is apparent in this narrative, I chose to provide assistance, which included referrals to a legal-aid office, a local congressional office, and two community activists interested in educational justice issues. The referrals proved beneficial to the students in countless ways. These benefits provided reassurance to me in the days that followed; reassurance that was needed because this was a decision that came with multiple consequences despite my attempt to make an ethical decision.

First and foremost, the evaluation project and I became a target for the administrator, who was not pleased with my decision to provide referrals to resources or (I assume) the additional resistance or legal actions that could follow. When I confirmed to the administrator that I had provided the referrals, I was asked to leave the evaluation site. My evaluation project was temporarily halted less than 24 hours later. The situation escalated and was eventually resolved, but my institution and I had to devote significant time, energy, and resources to the defense of the evaluation project and my decision.

In addition to the direct consequences, this was an all-around uncomfortable and nerve-wracking experience for a junior faculty member. Whether justified or not, I felt like other faculty members would judge my ability to properly manage an evaluation site and I worried whether or not my situation impacted their own research collaborations. I needed to reevaluate my ability to collaborate with the evaluation project site despite having an intense interest in and commitment to that small community. All of this had potentially serious implications for me.

The students also faced consequences that can be tied to my decision. They were intimidated and pushed to the margins as a result of their legal and political actions. Already strained relations soured even further. Some students felt uncomfortable; some felt pushed out and chose to leave the school. The students were determined; they may have eventually reached out and obtained these resources

from another person, but ultimately I was the actor who put the wheels in motion and thus I felt indirectly responsible for their intimidation.

On the flip side, there were also many positive consequences of this decision. I have received encouragement, friendship, and support (albeit quiet at times) from within my institution and the evaluation project site. My student reports having a frustrating, yet amazing, field experience that provided for unique and profound ethical learning. Moreover, some of the staff at the evaluation project site have subsequently reached out to say they found their working conditions unbearable. They report benefiting vicariously from the empowerment of the students. Students received the resources they requested, and students reported that some (although not all) of their credits were restored following their resistance.

In addition to providing positive benefits, my decision also contributed to negative consequences. I was left to choose between the worst of two evils: do I support the repression of these young people or do I expose them to possible repercussions resulting from their empowerment? Regardless of, and because of, these outcomes and consequences, I find value in the experience despite its troubling aspects and contradictions (Weinberg, 2008). The processes of discussion, consultation, and negotiation have provided me with a roadmap to continued and 'situated' ethical practice (Banks, 2008b); one that I intend to carry with me in my future practice.

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