Ethics Advisory Bulletin

A BRIEF GUIDE TO TEACHING PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN A GRADUATE PREPARATION PROGRAM

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Background

In order to engage in effective practices and serve as an advocate for students and their families, school psychologists must demonstrate knowledge of professional ethics and law governing the provision of their services, as well as commitment to acting in the spirit of these ethical and legal requirements. Graduate educators in school psychology programs are charged with the critical task of teaching professional ethics to future school psychologists and ensuring that graduates have a solid foundation for engaging in competent, ethical practice before entering the field.

A core competency for school psychology practitioners is performing professional responsibilities in a manner consistent with the NASP *Principles for Professional Ethics* (*PPE*, 2010a). The central and foundational position ascribed to competence in professional ethics is underscored in influential documents pertaining to school psychology training and practice. The NASP (2010b) *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (also referred to as the NASP Practice Model) emphasizes ethical, legal, and professional practice as a major foundation for effective service delivery. In addition, the NASP (2010c) *Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists* require that knowledge and skills in "Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice" be 1 of 10 domains that a graduate program must adequately address in its curriculum. Both NASP-approved and APA-accredited programs are required to demonstrate that graduate students attain competence in professional standards and ethics.

Addressing Ethics in a Graduate Program Curriculum

Graduate preparation in professional ethics must be integrated across the curriculum and should not be relegated to only one course. The incorporation of the teaching of professional ethics into a school psychology graduate program requires consideration of two fundamental issues:

1. Where and when will this content be addressed?

2. How will instruction be provided so that any acquired ethical *knowledge* is translated into the performance of ethical *behavior* once graduates enter the field?

In other words, what are considered best practices for teaching ethics?

Teaching Professional Ethics Across the Curriculum

Teaching professional ethics should begin early and continue systematically throughout a school psychology graduate program. While it is recommended that a foundational course, or part of a course, provide substantial coverage of ethical, legal, and professional issues early in graduate training (Williams, Sinko, & Epifanio, 2010), graduate preparation in ethical practice should be integrated throughout the program. Research suggests that multilevel ethics training provided over the course of a graduate preparation program offers distinct advantages over a more concentrated approach. For example, Dailor and Jacob (2011) found that school psychology practitioners who received multilevel university training in ethics (i.e., a combination of formal coursework, instruction in multiple courses, and ethics instruction during practicum/internship) felt better prepared to deal with difficult ethical issues, including addressing the unethical conduct of a colleague. In addition, individuals who obtained multilevel training reported that they were more likely to utilize a systematic problem-solving strategy when determining how to resolve an ethical dilemma.

Early in graduate study, some programs may consider requiring "a single flagship course" (Williams et al., 2010, p.116) almost solely dedicated to discussion of the ethical and legal mandates of the profession. Other graduate programs choose instead to devote a significant portion of an introductory course in school psychology to coverage of ethical codes (e.g., NASP's 2010 *Principles for Professional Ethics*, APA's 2002 *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*) and major provisions of law pertinent to practice in the schools.

Ethical issues also should be examined across multiple graduate courses representing different domains of school psychology practice (e.g., assessment, consultation, counseling), because each of these specialty areas can give rise to unique ethical challenges (Armistead, Williams, & Jacob, 2011; Jacob, Decker, & Hartshorne, 2011; Tryon, 2000). Continued discussion and modeling of ethical behavior is especially important during field experiences, such as practica and internships (Tryon, 2001). Faculty members and field supervisors will need to support practicum students and interns as they encounter and negotiate real-world ethical dilemmas (Handelsman, Gottlieb, & Knapp, 2005; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008).

The table on the following page offers a few examples of suggested ethical topics and applicable NASP *Principles for Professional Ethics* (PPE) standards that could be introduced in courses commonly required for a degree in school psychology. These examples should not be considered exhaustive and should be supplemented by additional ethical issues and detailed case illustrations developed by the professor. In addition, all courses should include explicit instruction in techniques of ethical decision-making, as explained later in this brief, and they should provide graduate students with systematic opportunities to acquire competence in effective decision making.

Recommended Pedagogical Methods for Teaching Ethics

Competency in professional ethics depends upon graduate students' preparedness and willingness to uphold ethical principles, even in the face of troublesome ethical dilemmas. To become effective school psychology practitioners, graduates of school psychology programs need more than familiarity with ethical codes and laws; they need to master skills that facilitate ethical reasoning and the execution of ethically principled behaviors in challenging situations (Tryon, 2000). Graduate preparation that accomplishes these ends is consistent with Kitchener's (1986) four goals for training in ethics: (a) sensitize students to professional ethical issues, (b) improve students' reasoning skills and

Course(s)	Examples of Topics Related to Ethical Practice	Examples of Relevant NASP PPE Standards
Introductory Ethics Course; Introduction to School Psychology	• Advocacy responsibilities and protecting the rights of students and parents under the law • Consideration of the potential positive and negative consequences of applying a disability label • Developing awareness of one's personal beliefs and ways in which these convictions may conflict with the dictates of professional ethics	• Standards I.3.3, III.2.3, IV.1.2, and IV.2.1 • Standard II.3.1 • Standards III.4.2 and IV.3.1
Assessment	• Privacy considerations and appropriate/inappropriate information to include in a psychological report • Importance of promoting parents' access to educational records, while simultaneously maintaining test security • Selecting and administering technically adequate instruments for use with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds	• Standard I.2.7 • Standards II.4.4, II.5.1, and II.5.3 • Standards II.3.2 and II.3.5
Consultation	• Confidential nature of communications between school psychologists and teachers; threats to consultation relationships posed by requests to breach confidentiality • Cooperating with other psychologists and professionals from other disciplines for the purpose of coordinating services • Avoidance of multiple relationships with a client's family that might interfere with professional effectiveness and judgment	• Standard I.2.3 • Standards II.4.5, III.3.1, and III.3.2 • Standards III.4.2 and III.4.4
Counseling	• Addressing confidentiality and its limits with minor students • Clarifying what constitutes privileged communication within the context of a school psychologist–client relationship (e.g., handling the disclosure of criminal acts) • Balancing students' right to self-refer with parents' right to refuse the provision of counseling services	• Standards I.2.3, I.2.4, and I.2.6 • Standard I.2.2 • Standard I.1.2
Psychopathology; School-Based Interventions	• Selection of interventions that are empirically based and educating parents who are considering pursuing discredited "treatments" • Demonstrating respect for cultural norms, values, and beliefs when designing interventions and providing referrals • The role of students' assent in the selection and planning of interventions	• Standards II.3.9 and II.3.10 • Standards I.3.2 and II.1.2 • Standards I.1.4 and II.3.11

Course(s)	Examples of Topics Related to Ethical Practice	Examples of Relevant NASP PPE Standards
Multicultural Issues or Diversity in the Schools	• Competencies involved in working with diverse populations and recognizing ways to improve service delivery to underserved groups • Unique privacy concerns of members of the LGBTQ community • Establishing a school climate that is safe and welcoming to all individuals	• Standards I.3.2 and II.1.2 • Standard I.2.6 • Standards I.3.1 and I.3.3
Crisis Prevention/ Intervention	• Providing psychological assistance in emergency situations without parental consent and delaying discussion of the boundaries of confidentiality • Parents' right to refuse their children's participation in screenings for mental health problems • Duty to protect students from foreseeable harm, whether to the self or others	• Standards I.1.2 and I.2.3 • Standard I.1.1 • Standards IV.1.1, IV.1.2, and IV.2.1
Research and Program Evaluation	• Unique issues involved in conducting research with minors, consent and assent protocols, the process of obtaining approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) • Removing identifying client information in presentations and publications • Making data available for review when concerns arise regarding the veracity/accuracy of reported findings	• Standard IV.5.2 • Standard IV.5.3 • Standard IV.5.5
Practicum; Internship	• Resisting administrative pressure to engage in unethical behavior • Addressing the unethical conduct of a colleague • Recognition of the limits of one's training and understanding when referrals to specialists are necessary	• Standards III.2.3 and III.2.4 • Standards IV.3.2, IV.3.3, and IV.3.4 • Standard II.1.1

ability to think critically about ethical issues, (c) help students achieve a sense of moral responsibility and the fortitude to behave in an ethical manner, and (d) assist students with the development of a tolerance for ethical ambiguity.

Handelsman, Gottlieb, and Knapp (2005) liken the formation of a coherent professional ethical identity to the process of acculturation, whereby graduate students integrate their own personal values and beliefs with newly acquired ethical teachings. Students become socialized into professional ethical practice by building off their own ethical heritage to develop a more mature and nuanced sense of self, that adjusts to the ethical demands of the profession. The creation of this new professional identity may be accomplished by graduate faculty members through the use of various pedagogical techniques and exercises that encourage self-reflection, critical thinking, and behavioral practice of skills.

Several authors (e.g., Armistead, Williams, & Jacob, 2011; Bashe, Anderson, Handelsman, & Klevansky, 2007; Williams, Sinko, & Epifanio, 2010) have suggested best practices for incorporating teaching of ethics into graduate training, with the goal of helping students forge a sophisticated professional identity that is committed to ethical practice. Recommended strategies include the following:

- Prior to immersion in ethical coursework, provide graduate students with opportunities to participate in "ethics rounds," an activity that requires them to discuss how they worked to resolve personally experienced ethical dilemmas prior to formal training in professional ethics. This technique is useful in revealing candidates' "personal ethics of origin—from family, religion, friendships, and so on" (Bashe, Anderson, Handelsman, & Klevansky, 2007, p. 65). Moreover, self-assessment exercises, in which students indicate how they would handle ethical challenges, can be assigned before and after introduction to professional ethical principles. This instructional tool serves to highlight students' progressive ethical acculturation over the course of the semester.
- Early in their training, instruct students in a systematic problem-solving model that structures the process of resolving ethically challenging situations. Use of a methodical, multistep procedure during deliberations encourages the rendering of decisions rooted in critical–evaluative thinking, logic, and rationality. Moreover, judgments arrived at following the application of a thoughtful and reasoned approach are more likely to withstand the scrutiny of others. A problem-solving model presented in Armistead, Williams, and Jacob (2011) is a good example of a structured decision-making approach. It includes the following seven steps:
  1. Describe the problem situation.
  2. Define the potential ethical–legal issues involved.
  3. Consult available ethical and legal guidelines.
  4. Confer with supervisors and colleagues.
  5. Evaluate the rights, responsibilities, and welfare of all affected parties.
  6. Consider alternative solutions and the likely consequences of each.
  7. Select a course of action and assume responsibility for this decision.
- McNamara (2008) proposed additional factors to be considered during deliberations, such as the likelihood that one would recommend this same course of action to a colleague and whether or not one is comfortable with the decision being made public.
- Introduce real-life scenarios or case studies, and have students role-play how to handle them using an ethical problem-solving model. For this activity, it is best to select situations that capture the complexities of ethical decision making (e.g., dilemmas involving competing ethical standards, conflicting interests of multiple parties, or ambiguous or vague principles). This activity can be included in earlier courses in a graduate program. In addition, course-specific examples (e.g., assessment, consultation, counseling) can be developed for use throughout a graduate program. A useful resource that offers a wealth of realistic case illustrations is *Professional Ethics for School Psychologists: A Problem-Solving Model Casebook* (Armistead, Williams, & Jacob, 2011).
- Consider having students practice confronting ethical issues viewed as most troublesome by school psychologist practitioners. These could include dilemmas surrounding confidentiality, child custody cases, administrative pressure to engage in unethical conduct, and ethical transgressions committed by colleagues (see Jacob-Timm, 1999; Tryon, 2000, 2001). Providing opportunities to explore and rehearse effective strategies for resolving ethical challenges is especially important during practicum and internship, as this may be the first time students are exposed directly to real-life dilemmas in service delivery settings.

- Encourage practicum students and interns to reflect on ethical situations they have personally encountered during their field placements. Students can be instructed to keep an ethical diary, in which they write about their ethical experiences and demonstrate the application of a problem-solving model to the decision-making process. Requiring an ethics journal during practicum and internship is a good way to facilitate discussions with field supervisors about ethical issues and concerns.
- Encourage students to examine their own heritage, values, and belief systems and how these personal views and experiences are compatible with—or conflict with—professional ethical principles. This exercise, called "ethics autobiographies," can be used by graduate students to document the ethical acculturation process by highlighting how their professional identity evolves with continued exposure to training in professional ethics.
- Employ strengths and weaknesses exercises with graduate students to facilitate self-exploration of their personal attributes, skills, beliefs, motivations, and behaviors that have the potential to shape ethical practice as school psychologists. Students are encouraged to engage in more complex self-assessment by reflecting on ways in which their perceived assets (e.g., empathy, compassion) might actually serve to interfere with ethical practice (e.g., result in boundary violations or dual relationships). Assign reflection or problem-solving papers over the course of the semester to obtain students' reactions to ethical issues raised in readings and class discussions.
- Form a mock "ethics adjudication committee" with rotating student membership. This activity can be an engaging and creative method for simulating student dialogue and debate. Fellow graduate students observe while committee members stage complaint hearings about school psychologists accused of various ethical transgressions. After this simulation is concluded, students participate in detailed discussions of the ethical issues involved, appropriateness of the committee's rulings, any assigned penalties, etc.

By incorporating these and similar strategies into their instruction, graduate educators can encourage deeper, more critical contemplation of ethical issues, rather than promoting robotic and reflexive endorsement of laws and codes. School psychologists are likely to strive for excellence in their professional responsibilities when they enter the field equipped with critical thinking skills and a commitment to upholding the spirit of the profession's ethical codes.

Nevertheless, Bashe, Anderson, Handelsman, and Klevansky (2007) caution that "ethics training is not over when a degree or license is granted" (p. 61). Credentialing bodies are placing increased emphasis on keeping abreast of best practice recommendations in ethical school psychological practice. There is now a 3-hour ethical practice and legal regulation of school psychology continuing professional development (CPD) requirement for renewal of the Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) credential, and some states require that a portion of CPD activities address professional ethics. Ethical guidelines will continue to change in order to address contemporary professional challenges. School psychology practitioners must be prepared to integrate these developments into their ever-evolving professional identities by recognizing the value of lifelong learning and participation in continued education.

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