

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development: A Closer Look at Accountability

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"In a free society, all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty, all are responsible."

~ Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972)
Address, Town Hall, New York City, 1966

Introduction

As Heschel (Random House, 1999) would suggest, the responsibility of producing, supporting, engaging in and reflecting on professional development is shared by multiple constituents within the field of education. There are a myriad of educational professionals that demonstrate the ethics of care and critique, particularly with respect to their role in the profession, and there are others, as the quote reflects, that avoid the proverbial "looking at oneself in the mirror." Yet, the question remains, in spite of this divide, is there true accountability in education today?

Background

Josephson (2002) defines the ethical pillar of responsibility as, "...being accountable for what we do and who we are. It also means recognizing that our actions matter and we are morally on the hook for the consequences" (p. 11). As educational professionals, administrators or teachers, actions matter chiefly to students, and secondarily to parents and the greater community, as vested partners with students. All decisions that affect educators will ultimately affect students. Conversely, all professional decisions made by educators with respect to their profession will affect students. It is through both lens that accountability must be assessed.

Consider the following scenario: A school site is a few days from the onset of a new school year, and is short one full-time teacher. Faced with already overcrowded classrooms due to a large student population increase, and a severe shortage of applicants, the district has no choice but to hire back a teacher once again that has been teaching full-time at the school for three years. As a probationary teacher during this time, she received a preliminary credential from an accredited teacher preparation program and has passed the subject matter competency tests in her relevant discipline. However, throughout her credential program her professors expressed concern about her ability to engage students through successful teaching practices. Additionally, while she participated in the district's teacher induction program and fulfilled the requirements for a professional credential, her district mentors likewise expressed concern with her ability to deliver the curriculum effectively, although they felt she developed adequately in other areas. Nevertheless, the school feels that they have been backed into a corner, and determines that their only viable option is to "put a warm body in the classroom" before the start of school. Consequently, the teacher is hired back once again. Per the district's negotiated contract, this teacher will begin her third year of work while holding an active credential, thus she becomes tenured. From both administrator and teacher perspectives, how are ethical considerations being addressed?

Discussion

Each responsible individual, according to Josephson (2002) "considers the likely consequences of his behavior and associations" (p.12). Therefore, the hiring administrator would weigh the outcomes of non-reelection of this teacher. Looking solely at the increase in the student-teacher ratio, the results could include: insufficient classroom space, larger class sizes, less contact and instructional minutes on a per pupil basis, increased stress and workload for other department teachers, and substantial parent complaints. By rehiring this teacher, outcomes as a result of a decrease in student-teacher ratio could include: reduction in class size across the department, increased individual student contacts and instructional minutes, less total students per teacher, and less overall parent complaints. Applying the principle of Utilitarianism, hiring back the teacher would provide the least harm to the greatest number (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, 2003). Assuming that all students are equals, however, this decision mocks the principles of justice or fairness, and although it may support the "common good" for *most* students, it would clearly deviate from providing what John Rawls defined as, "general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage" (Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, 2003, p.2).

With respect to the legality of the rehire, legislation including the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, California's SB 2042, and the California Standards for the Teaching Profession has attempted to eradicate the nebulous pathways into and through the profession of education, that often result in this type of scenario. Looking at the case above, one can navigate the legal minimums that were upheld by a variety of gatekeepers along the way. Namely, the accrediting institution ensured that the teacher met the minimum standard of NCLB, which provides that all teachers must be "highly qualified" in their subject matter (US Department of Education, 2001). This status can be achieved via several independent pathways; in this case, it involved passing a commission adopted subject-matter examination, while holding an undergraduate degree and fulfilling the requirements of a teacher preparation program (CTC, English Subject Matter Advisory Panel, 2003). It is worth noting, however, that demonstrated content knowledge and mastery (ie. the legal minimum in this situation) does *not always* directly equate to a person being highly qualified, nor does it necessarily foster effective teaching. Further complicating this issue, the accrediting institution can claim that it operated following Josephson's (2002) pillar of fairness, since it awarded the credential based on the criteria set forth by the state, and with impartiality to the particular opinions of individual professors working within the program.

In an attempt to move beyond the minimum legal standard and into the ethics of care and critique, California's SB 2042 provides districts the ability to nurture, and support the professional development of their teachers throughout the teacher induction period. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing outlined one of the ethical purposes of this legislation in its general principles for program quality and effectiveness as follows: "...the preparation of educators to teach...cannot be the exclusive responsibility of professional preparation programs in schools of education" (CTC, English Subject Matter Advisory Panel, 2003, p.3). Thus, the district, by this principle, functions as a gatekeeper to the profession and shares the responsibility of maintaining professional growth in its educators. The sponsors of a professional teacher induction program will recommend teachers for a professional credential when they have satisfactorily met all of the program's requirements (CTC, English Subject Matter Advisory Panel, 2003). In essence, the district is "double-checking" and if necessary, correcting, the preparation already provided by the accrediting institution. Looking at the intentions of SB 2042, as outlined here, the ethic of accountability seems to be recognized and shared by both accrediting institutions and individual school districts, at and beyond the legal minimum.

Returning to the question then, are administrators and teachers acting with ethical considerations in mind?

In the scenario above, they may not be.

Conclusions

The individual teacher neglects the ethical pillar of responsibility, particularly with respect to Josephson's (2002) "pursuit of excellence" (p.12). Regardless of what the accrediting institution, district or school site provided as evidence of highly qualified teaching, Jamentz (2002) and Marzano (2003) suggest the top priorities for teacher performance include grasping expectations for student performance and continually exploring teaching strategies and skills as cornerstones of professionalism. The California Standards for the Teaching Profession further clarify that paramount to developing as a professional educator is the methodology of individual reflection on teaching practices (CTC & CDE, 1997), none of which is evidenced in this scenario. Ethical and responsible teachers would not require notification from the district or accrediting institution that their teaching was substandard; they would have garnered this information from personal reflection long before.

Furthermore, with respect to the district, while ethical theory can be interpreted to support its actions and decisions, often these considerations are overlooked in favor of decisions that react to economic, social and political pressures. In the next ten years, over 2.2 million new teachers will be needed in our nation's schools (US Department of Education, 2001). Coupled with the staggering statistic that 15% of first-year teachers leave the profession and 50% of teachers leave the profession within six years (US Department of Education, 2001), evidence from the CTC suggests that the factor driving the decision to implement political initiatives such as SB 2042 is "...concern about the high level of attrition among beginning teachers and...[improving] the conditions in which new teachers work" (CTC, English Subject Matter Advisory Panel, 2003, p.3). Sometimes the benefits to having "a warm body in the room" simply outweigh the struggle to maintain ethical standards. The unfortunate reality may be that just as a district cannot compel an individual to adopt the ethic of responsibility, the state cannot compel true ethical responsibility upon a district. Yet economic pressures should not supersede ethical duties. Thus, in order for school administrators to find answers to the dilemmas surrounding teacher preparation, they must look both within teachers and themselves, for as Herschel points out, we may not all be guilty, but we all *must* be held accountable.

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