

Ethical Dilemma Reflection Paper

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Situational Parameters

In this New Jersey elementary school, there are grades preschool to fifth grade, with general education teachers, special education teachers, school nurse, math and reading specialists, specials teachers, a principal, secretaries, occupational and physical therapists, and a child study team. The child study team is composed of a school psychologist (SP), a school social worker (SSW), a speech-language pathologist (SLP), and a learning disabilities teacher-consultant (LDT-C). To be a part of the child study team, it is a district rule for each member to case manage at least one grade. In this school, the school psychologist case manages preschool through second grade (four grades), the school social worker case manages third grade (one grade) and about half of the 504 cases, and the LDT-C case manages fourth and fifth grade (two grades). The SLP provides services for all grade levels. In each child study team (typically, one per school), there is also a child study team leader. This person's responsibilities are to coordinate and oversee the programs of the child study team. In this school, the child study team leader is the school psychologist. All members of the child study team (respond) to the same person- the Director of Special Education and Related Services. If there was ever something that was not going according to the prescribed responsibilities, this would be the person to turn to to straighten it out.

Definition of Ethical Issue

The ethical issue at hand is that the school social worker does not complete their work in a timely manner, and the school psychologist picks up the slack. The root cause of this seems to be that the school social worker gets overwhelmed easily over paperwork and various tasks that's

required of a case manager, and often does not show up to work without explanation. The school psychologist sees this struggle and helps take the majority of their load. Additionally, it is likely the school psychologist wants the work to be done in a timely manner since they are also the child study team leader for the school. It is hard to determine if this has become a case of learned helplessness- where the school social worker has discovered that if they do not get the work done correctly or quickly enough, the school psychologist will take over and complete it for them. It has become so ingrained that the school social worker does not know how to perform various tasks that a case manager should know, such as filling out an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), how to navigate *LinkIt!* (the district's data website), or staying in compliance with established deadlines as required by the New Jersey Administrative Code for Special Education.

The school social worker has had this job for over twenty years, and the school psychologist has had their job for over thirty years. It would be assumed that for this school social worker to remain in their job, they would need to be competent in these critical areas and if they weren't, someone would notice. I believe that this certain scenario has gone on for a long time- before this year, both the school psychologist and the previous LDT-C both took on the school social worker's caseload so as to have the work done quickly and accurately. In that scenario, it would be more dispersed across the two professionals, and not impact them as strongly as it would if only one person was taking on this additional caseload.

In my experience, I have seen the school psychologist working odd hours, including early mornings and late nights. Oftentimes, the school psychologist sets aside time to complete the work of the school social worker, which is time that could have been spent focused on their own caseload. This time spent doing the school social worker's caseload could have been spent doing more classroom observations, checking in more with students and their teachers on their

caseload, spending more time thoroughly writing reports, and doing research on how to best support their own caseload. I truly believe that if the school psychologist did not take on the caseload of the school social worker, they would not need to work odd hours during the morning and night, rather, they would likely be able to work during their contracted hours.

An additional fold to this ethical dilemma is that the school psychologist is not taking or receiving credit for the work that should have been completed by the school social worker, thus, it appears that the school social worker is capable of completing their work in a timely manner. This is simply not the case, and perhaps a large part of how no one has noticed this dilemma occurring. It is also possible that various people within the district do notice it happening, but since the school psychologist does not want the credit, it is easier to turn a blind eye and allow the work to continue coming in correctly and completed on time. Since the school social worker seems competent in all areas of their job, they continue to receive more cases for their caseload, which means the school psychologist is now putting more on their own plate as well. Another way this has gone unnoticed is that the school psychologist will use the school social worker's computer to input information into IEPs or *LinkIt!*, so as to seem like the school social worker is the one completing the work, and they have the computer trail to show for it.

Ethical Guideline Review

Ethical guidelines set in place by the National Association of School Psychology (NASP) provide a unified set of national standards that guide graduate education, credentialing, professional practice and services, and ethical behavior of school psychologists (NASP, 2020). In this ethical dilemma, two specific guiding principles under the same broad theme of Professional Competence and Responsibility are affected include Guiding Principle II.1 Competence, and

Guiding Principle II.2 Accepting Responsibility for Actions. The Guiding Principle II.1

Competence is more corresponding to the school social worker in this case, as it refers to the idea that school professionals engage only in practices in which they are qualified and competent. In various areas, it is clear that the school social worker is not competent. They clearly struggle and either cannot learn it, or have never tried to learn it, presumably because they knew the school psychologist would pick up their slack for them.

With reference to both the school social worker and school psychologist involvement in this ongoing ethical dilemma, the ethical standards of Standard II.1.2 Personal Problems and Standard II.2.1 Accuracy of Documents are affected. Standard II.1.2 Personal Problems has to do with not allowing one's personal problems to get in the way of any work-related activity, as it would interfere with professional effectiveness. If there were any personal problems to arise, they should ask for assistance so as not to compromise their professional effectiveness. The school social worker does not partake in this ethical guideline, and oftentimes allows personal problems to bleed over into professional practice, creating a disservice to the students and staff they should be servicing. Next, Guiding Principle II.2 Accepting Responsibility for Actions revolves around the idea that school psychologists should accept responsibility for their professional work, monitor the effectiveness of their services, and work to correct ineffective recommendations. The school psychologist in this case does not take responsibility for their own work, and worse, the school social worker takes the credit instead. Furthermore, Standard II.2.1 Accuracy of Documents details how all written documents should be reviewed for accuracy, and only signing them when correct. The school social worker does not follow this ethical code, as it was never their work to take credit for to begin with, but they take the credit regardless, and the school psychologist allows it.

Rights, Responsibilities, and Welfare of Affected Parties

The people affected by this ethical dilemma are a wide variety- from the school social worker and psychologist to the students, teachers, and parents on both caseloads. The school social worker will never need to learn how to do anything if this relationship continues- they know that if they do not get it done, the school psychologist will do it for them. The school psychologist will be affected by this situation, as they are spread so thin across not only their large PK-2 case load, but also by adding the school social worker's caseload. In doing so, the school psychologist would likely become burnt out, and can no longer service this large population of students. In addition, it is likely that the students on both the school psychologist's and school social worker's caseload will not receive as much support as they would have gotten, and likely require, compared to if they were evenly distributed between both the professionals, rather than the school psychologist managing both caseloads behind closed doors. The school psychologist is great at their job, but at the end of the day the attention that can be given by one person cannot truly compare to that of two people. In addition to the students not receiving as much time and attention as they could and should be, the teachers and parents of said students also are not being given the same level of support from one person as could be given from two. Not to mention, when the school psychologist fills out the majority of the forms that should be done by the school social worker, the school social worker is more in the dark about their own caseload and will not be able to have the general knowledge about the students on their caseload at the ready if the parents ask them questions, if the teachers need support, or if something is brought up at a meeting. In which case, the school social worker would likely not be able to give this important student information readily and would look rather unprofessional.

Alternative Solutions and their Consequences

Alternative solutions to the ethical dilemma presented are as follows: creating a deadlines spreadsheet, random check-in's with the school social worker's and school psychologist's supervisor, creating a blanket "work in progress" statement, and the school social worker facing disciplinary consequences for consistently failing to complete work on time and accurately.

The first possible solution I would set in motion would be to create a deadlines spreadsheet as soon as a new case comes in. For instance, it could have headings such as "type of assessment," "name of examiner," and "expected due date" as a way to streamline the process and also set expectations from the start of when everything needs to be done. If those deadlines are too tight for some members of the child study team, they are able to bring that up and compromise with the case manager leading the case. With this, the hope would be that with a clear understanding of what is due when by whom, there is little to forget or get lost in translation and it would be easier for all involved to have this information.

The next course of action I would take is having the supervisor of the school social worker and school psychologist do random check-in's to ensure that all is running smoothly, all professionals are on task and only doing their assigned caseload, and if they need to discuss anything they would have the time to do so. The consequences of this would hopefully be that the supervisor notices any discrepancies in who is managing which caseload, and they correct that before this ethical dilemma gets any bigger than it already is. If it is a skill issue and the school social worker is unable to complete the task at hand, they should either consider hiring someone else to help them or to replace them.

Following the check-in's, if a report was not completed by the required deadline, it is also possible to use a blanket statement such as "(Name of SSW)'s report pending," which would

allow all other completed reports to be submitted and each person not suffering from the poor choices of one member of the team. There wouldn't be much of a consequence for the school social worker, more so just slight public shame for not having what was necessary finished at the time it was needed.

Lastly, if the school social worker continued to not finish their work in a timely and accurate manner, I believe some disciplinary action taking place would potentially be beneficial to the dilemma and truly highlight how large of a problem this has become. With interdisciplinary action, it is likely that the school social worker will understand more about the roles and responsibilities and how important it is to do what you are assigned to do.

The Decision to Accept Responsibility for the Action

Due to my current status as a school psychology intern, I am not in a position to give suggestions to the school psychologist or the school social worker, nor am I at liberty to pass this information along to their supervisor. Given this limited ability, nothing will be monitored because it was not something in my range of abilities. If I were in a career where I was more established, I certainly would speak up if I saw these occurrences. I do believe that someone should be aiding this ethical dilemma, it just needs to be someone higher up than I.

References

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (2020). *Standards and Policies*.

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). THE PROFESSIONAL
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