

The Toddler That Got Away

One Center's Efforts to Work with Integrity

by Ann M. Epstein and Susan L. Wrobel

Effective classroom leadership requires integrity (Brown, 2007). In our roles (Sue as director of a campus-based child care center and Ann as coordinator of a university early childhood program), we view integrity as a core value. We constantly look for ways to help our pre-service teachers develop integrity, as well as other essential professional dispositions.

Integrity is one of many dispositions that influence teachers' behaviors:

- Integrity is the trait that keeps us from acting in ways that we might later regret (Goleman, 2002).
- Having integrity involves upholding one's values, being authentic and open about one's feelings and beliefs, and following through in one's actions.
- Integrity is what you're dedicated to, from which no one can deter you, no matter what (Brown, 2007).



Sue Wrobel, M.Ed., directs the Campus Child Care Center at the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse, a position she has held for 20 years. Each semester, Sue employs an average of 55 students. She cares deeply about every child and every family in her center.



Ann Epstein, Ph.D., is an assistant professor and coordinator of the Early Childhood Education Program at the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse. She taught preschool-age children for 15 years before turning her attention to her current pride and joy: Early childhood majors.

We defined integrity as: A firm adherence to a code of values that is consistently displayed in one's words and actions. We gained particularly valuable insights regarding integrity through an alarming event at our campus child care center and surprising findings from conversations with student teachers.

The event presented a momentary ethical dilemma that was quickly resolved when considering transparency, truth,

and honesty. In the end, we learned a great deal from the experience, made changes for the better to protect the children's safety, paid a fine to the state, retained our accreditation, and received numerous comments about integrity from both parents and from friends across our campus.

As a result of the incident, I became increasingly interested in exploring teacher dispositions, particularly,

integrity. Specifically, I was curious about my student workers' views of integrity, as well as other professional traits. I wondered how much they gained through the simple act of modeling teacher dispositions. I invited Ann to help me explore these.

Sue's Experience with An Alarming Event

One day last fall, a two year old wiggled out of the gate of our Campus Child Care Center's outdoor play area. He wandered about 30 yards from the center, where he was scooped up by one of our former parents and returned to the play area. This incident was clearly an infringement of the state licensing laws and national accreditation standards; and as center director, I knew it was my responsibility to report it to both entities.

This presented me with an ethical dilemma. After all, no one would ever know if I didn't report this. Only the former parent, the teachers who were out on the playground at the time, and I would know the real truth. We worked hard to earn and maintain NAEYC accreditation. Our program is highly regarded on campus and this regard was certain to come down a notch or two. I didn't want to face the state licensing agent and I dreaded explaining the incident to the toddler's family.

Ann's Role as Teacher Educator

As an instructor, advisor, and program coordinator, I assist students in developing their individual teaching philosophies.

At several points during our program, we ask students to declare what they stand for by specifying which values are most important to them.

Understanding students' views of integrity requires an understanding of the relationship between dispositions and high-quality teaching. Katz (1993) defines disposition as "a tendency to exhibit frequently, consciously, and voluntarily a pattern of behavior that is directed to a broad goal" (p. 1). This requires developing a conscious habit of responding to situations in certain ways. Our task, then, is mighty. As a teacher educator and a program director, we require students to develop desirable habits of mind, for example 'resourcefulness, curiosity, and persistence' rather than negative habits such as 'close-mindedness, impatience or intolerance' (Da Ros-Voseles & Moss, 2007, p. 91).

Our teacher candidates face difficult ethical situations. Sadly, they often work with care providers and teachers who are tired, frustrated, and underpaid. Students hear teachers talk disparagingly about one another and even worse, about children and families:

"That boy is so stubborn. I can't wait until he is out of my class."

"That family just doesn't care. I'm not going to even bother contacting them."

"Can you believe how dirty that girl is?"

It is my job to ensure that our beginning teachers develop strong dispositions so they are able to support all children and all families in today's challenging early childhood climate (Baum & Swick, 2008; Lee & Hemer-Patnode, 2010).

Students' Views of Integrity

We discuss teaching dispositions in most of our classes. When asked to describe integrity, students emphasized that, above

all, integrity means placing the children first. They also defined integrity as:

- Being accountable for one's actions and for what happens in the classroom — both the good and the bad.
- Always being honest with families.
- Knowing the rules and following them.
- Doing the right thing, even when no one is watching.
- Being strong in adversity.
- Being fair and just.
- Being true to one's words.
- Moving on from mistakes to make things better.
- Acting in a respectful manner with colleagues.

When gauging dispositions, students placed having integrity lower in their rankings (along with sensitivity, politeness, self-confidence, empathy, and curiosity). Their top dispositional choices were being committed, creative, caring, positive, supportive and flexible.

When asked how a teacher or administrator working in an early childhood program develops integrity, students responded that integrity is developed throughout one's life, but not necessarily learned through direct teaching. It is first gained through interactions with family and friends. Next, integrity develops through one's own experiences, particularly being involved in meaningful working relationships. Reflecting on experiences was seen as an important aspect of developing integrity.

Implications for Administrators and Teacher Educators

Leaders in the education field promote the teaching of dispositions, recognize-

ing that since dispositions are habits of thought, they can be learned and therefore, should be taught (Katz, 1993). We found that the way to develop integrity is through meaningful interactions:

- Relationships matter.
- We cannot simply model integrity. Those in leadership roles are wise to remember the importance of building strong and supportive relationships as a first step in influencing others.
- Powerful lessons come from mistakes. Integrity is influenced every time we make the right decision. It is also influenced when we make mistakes. Do we recognize that much is gained when things don't go smoothly?
- Practice and experience count. Everyone needs opportunities to put their knowledge into practice and to continue developing over time. Collaboration with teacher educators is an excellent venue for providing future educators with the hands-on experience they need to develop integrity.
- Practice and experience count even more when we provide supportive opportunities for reflection. Offering opportunities for self-reflection and for collaboration with coworkers is an essential step in developing and maintaining essential teacher dispositions. Teacher educators must encourage open, respectful discussions, no matter how difficult or uncomfortable the topic or issue may be.

Integrity: Awesome Responsibility

Our toddler escapee certainly brought opportunities for deep reflection. From the first heart-sinking moment, we embraced the difficult process of honestly acknowledging safety and supervisory concerns. We talked openly about the gravity of what happened as a center community. Students participated in

helping the staff re-build trust among center families. We believe it is safe to say they will remember not only the incident, but also how it was addressed, for a very long time.

We have the awesome responsibility of introducing new professionals to the world of early childhood care and education. This requires a deep commitment to assisting each person in building strong, steadfast professional dispositions. The day of the incident was a milestone in our journey to infuse integrity throughout our interactions. This is how we nurture the development of truly great early childhood teachers.

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