

Collaborative Consultation: A Change Process in Education

Within education, there is a critical need for collaborative planning and action. This is particularly so in special education where integration is a primary aim. Collaborative consultation, in order to be successful, must be a staff initiated process.

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Collaborative consultation is a term used to describe the process of school staff working together to effectively educate all children, regardless of any limitation the child may present, in the least restrictive environment. It carries with it the simple truth that during the compulsory attendance years in education, children are entitled to learn the basic skills necessary in life. The educational system was created for this purpose and that is what the educational system is expected to deliver. Like every other service organization in our society, the educational system is expected to make any adjustments necessary in the pursuit of its stated goal.

CHANGE DOES NOT COME EASILY

It is difficult to make changes in the education field. Kreitner (1986), in his text on management, cites four major constraints which affect the ability of public sector organizations to change in the same way that privately owned organizations change. Kreitner (1986, p. 29) lists those restraints as follows:

CONSTRAINTS ON CHANGE IN EDUCATION

1. **Legislated Purposes:** In sharp contrast to private businesses, which can pursue any legal and potentially profitable purpose they desire, government agencies are told what to do by law-making bodies. This seriously limits their options. Government managers often must stand and face society's typically vague and often contradictory expectations for performance.

2. **No Competition:** Public sector organizations do not have to pass the test of the competitive marketplace.
3. **Weak Incentive Systems:** Unlike private business, where an impressive array of incentives ranging from cash bonuses to exotic vacations can be used to motivate performance, public sector managers have few "carrots" to dangle in front of their employees.
4. **Organizational Inflexibility:** Public sector managers are constantly challenged to find ways to foster creativity and innovation in spite of an overriding emphasis on predictability and uniformity.

Change does not come easily. Predictably, change in a school system is a many-faceted problem. Uniformity becomes less and less viable as the answer to growing problems. Society establishes the criteria of what an "educated" person should be. Society changes its collective mind frequently leaving the school organizations responsible for creating this "educated" person, in a state of turmoil.

Suggested changes often must be made without extended funding, additional personnel, or additional resources of any kind. Independent fund raising by individual schools is closely monitored. Schools are expected to operate within the monies they have been allocated.

High quality education is expensive. Educating children who present multiple problems in learning and management is more expensive than educating the responsive, able learner. The school system is left to ponder on how to produce excellence in an increasingly complex society. If we are to promote change of any kind in school service programs, we must understand why change is called for and how change will improve services for children. We must state our case well.

IMPACT OF SOCIETAL CHANGE ON EDUCATION

Hodgkinson (1985) conducted an impressive demographic study of education from kindergarten through graduate school levels. The study, entitled "All One System", deals with changes in society in the United States and the impact those changes will have on the educational system. Among the changes noted are: more children entering school from poverty households; more children entering school from single-parent households; more children from diverse minority backgrounds; a

smaller percentage of children who have had pre-school preparation; a larger number of children who were premature babies and who will have more learning difficulties in school; more children whose parents were not married (now 12 out of every 100 births); more "latch-key" children and children from blended families as a result of the remarriage of one original parent, more children from teen-age mothers; fewer white, middle-class suburban children; more children with working mothers; and a decline in the level of retention to high school graduation in virtually all states.

Society lacks adequate health care facilities to deal with "crack babies", drug addicted youths, child abuse, poor nutrition and life-threatening chronic diseases of children. It is not difficult to understand why schools are struggling for better methods to help educate this very difficult population of children.... a population frequently estimated as the bottom third of the child population.

THE CRITICAL NEED FOR COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

Agencies set up in the community sector to deal with various problems in this child population lead separate lives. Each agency, consumed with its responsibility for dealing with a particular problem, remains self-contained. There are many inter-agency meetings but little true collaboration. While agencies cannot be faulted for lack of effort, it is clear that more could be accomplished if agencies, concerned with the needs of children, would collaborate more frequently. True collaborative efforts between schools and outside agencies are still the exception, even when they are dealing with the same population. Little information is exchanged. Few constructive ideas are transported from one to another. Duplication of services, often resulting in total confusion, is rampant.

Within education itself, there is a critical need for collaborative planning and action. The classroom is a very isolated workplace. The teacher goes in to the classroom and shuts the door. Few teachers come to observe... or to help. Evaluation is not consistent. Few questions are asked of teachers concerning their operation in the classroom. If the teacher is excellent, the instruction will be excellent and children will prosper. If the teacher is a very inadequate teacher, instruction will be weak. Children may indeed be wasting their time and the time of children is valuable.

The accepted situation of isolated teachers may have been successful in the past, but it is not successful today. One teacher isolated in a classroom with a very diverse population of students cannot hope to solve educational problems without assis-

tance. The teacher must have strong links and open communication with other teachers, with supportive resource personnel and with the administration. That pattern must be planned, nurtured and improved consistently. Collaboration in education today is not seen as a luxury. Collaboration born of necessity, has come of age!

SPECIAL EDUCATION, INTEGRATION AND COLLABORATION

Special Educators have also been separated out. The most difficult and challenging problems have been directed into special education. That is logical, but what is not logical is that once the child was taken into special education, the special educator worked alone. The special educator, often housed in a separate, off the beaten path location, often functioned without the academic and social support other teachers enjoyed.

A bit of background information may be necessary for those readers who are not familiar with U.S. special education services. In 1975 Public Law 94-142 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act) was passed at the Federal level in the United States. That law spelled out and continues to spell out, the educational rights of handicapped children in the United States. It is also used as a pattern for legislation in other countries. This act mandated the following:

1. Zero exclusion within the educational setting.
2. Appropriate educational programming for all handicapped children.
3. Placement of all children in the "least restrictive environment".
4. Assurance of extensive identification procedures.
5. Maintenance of individual educational plans (IEP) for all handicapped children.

Compliance is mandatory. Where blatant non-compliance was proven, through established monitoring systems, funding for programs was withheld. The intent of the law was very clear. The exact requirements of the law continue to be defined through testing in the courts. Lawsuits centre around: 1. What does handicapped really mean? 2. What is considered to be the "least restrictive environment?" 3. Are the identification methods biased in any regard? 4. What does an "appropriate education" really require?

These questions still remain current questions in the field of Special Education. Many of the answers seem to lie in the consideration of the needs of each child as a

unique individual. The constant testing of the law has had a major impact on the placement of large numbers of children needing special help. There is increasing reluctance to place children in special education classes. The regular classroom is seen as the "least restrictive" environment for children, and greater efforts are being made to keep students in that environment.

While the special educator has been trained in evaluation, curriculum modification, behavioural management, individualized programming and a variety of teaching methods, the regular classroom teacher has not had the advantage of that training. If the classroom teacher is expected to serve all children in the classroom there must be easy access to the skills of the special educator. This is true even when the child presenting special problems may not be a candidate for special education services.

By working with the special educator, the classroom teacher will have access to knowledge and materials which can be used to strengthen the regular classroom. This classroom, increasingly called upon to expand, will be able to serve better that lower third of the population coming to school with less preparation, less stability, fewer support systems, and more learning and management problems.

COLLABORATIVE CONSULTATION AS A STAFF PROCESS

Collaborative consultation may be a new term to many of us. Consultation is a familiar term. We are all familiar with the past use of consultation in education. Outside experts were brought in to address problems arising in some areas of education. The consultant arrived, studied the situation, sometimes observed and interviewed teachers, evaluated the problems, proposed a solution, wrote a report, and departed. Once the consultant vanished, old habits and patterns once again surfaced and solidified. We were back to where we started - just poorer, not wiser!

Time has taught us that plans initiated by staff, formulated by staff, implemented by staff, and evaluated by staff stand a far better chance of survival. Collaborative consultation is a staff process. The process described below is one of collaborative consultation between the regular classroom teacher and the special educator. It is called the process of "pre-referral" and is designed to work more effectively with difficult youngsters in the classroom in an effort to keep the child with his peers.

STAGES OF THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

There is no one expert in this process. One teacher does not supervise the other. It

is a pooling of knowledge and experience on behalf of a child. Consultation has always had four stages: 1. The stage of Entry and Contracting. 2. The stage of Problem Identification and Analysis. 3. The stage of Intervention and Implementation. 4. The stage of Evaluation and Termination.

This pre-referral collaborative process is also based on those four stages and operates as follows:

Stage 1 Entry and Contracting

Classroom teachers have always searched out methods, materials and managing strategies to help children who are not responding in the regular classroom. In this first stage, the classroom teacher, having exhausted all attempts to help the child, contacts the special educator as an additional resource. The classroom teacher and the special educator discuss the problem, the effects of the problem upon the class, what has already been attempted etc. If it seems advisable for these teachers to work together in improving the child's performance, the dimensions of the collaboration are formulated.

Stage 2 Problem Identification and Analysis

This is a critical stage and a difficult one. The emphasis is upon collecting extensive information on the child. Gaps in information concerning the child's health, background, level of function, strengths, limitations and interests are considered. If additional testing is necessary, it is arranged. The teacher may request that the special educator come into the classroom and observe and/or work with the child in an effort to collect more complete information. All the information is analyzed and the problems are identified. Priority of problems to be worked on is established.

Stage 3 Intervention or Implementation

Once the analysis is complete, a plan for effective intervention is developed. Data collecting procedures are a critical aspect of this stage. Decisions as to the method, time, and pattern of intervention are finalized and the plan is put into action.

Stage 4 Evaluation and Termination

Evaluation based on accurate data collection is essential to any planned intervention process. It is an accurate guideline for determining that next program step. If, in

stage IV the child is progressing satisfactorily and no further problems are evolving, the special educator will now terminate the collaborative consultation arrangement. If the child shows no progress, another plan may be developed. If the problems which evolve are very severe, the child may then be referred to special education services on a part-time or full-time basis.

CONTINUITY OF THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

The decision to place a child in special education is a serious decision. All efforts to help the child in the regular classroom must first be exhausted. All efforts must also be on record. The procedures for determining eligibility for full or part-time special education services are well defined. The rights of the child and the parent are closely guarded.

Unlike former types of consultation, the members of this collaborate effort do not disappear. The special educator is still available to the classroom teacher. The continued presence of both members of the collaborative team is a safeguard for the children as well as a source of support for the teachers involved.

TRAINING FOR COLLABORATION

This question is frequently asked: "Does the collaborative consultation model require special training on the part of staff?" As educators we can learn a lesson from business organizations in the area of skills necessary for collaborative efforts. Business organizations, profit orientated, do not just assume that their employees - at every level from line worker to top executive - are skilled in areas of communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, decision making and evaluation procedures. Workshops designed to develop and improve those important organizational skills are an ongoing requirement for business organizations. School systems should do no less! Teachers are managers and need sound managerial skills and methods.

COLLABORATION FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

Hodgkinson (1989 pp. 1-2) published a follow-up report on educational problems entitled, "The Same Clients". The emphasis in this report is on the need for schools and agencies to collaborate in the effort to educate children. He stated,

While it is useful for educators at various levels to communicate, it is no longer enough for the urgent problems we face. Service organizations must begin to see their interdependence across functional lines... Educa-

tors at all levels need to begin to become familiar with other service providers at their level, as they are serving the same children and families as clients. It is painfully clear that a hungry, sick or homeless child is by definition a poor learner, yet schools usually have no linkage to health or housing organizations outside those run by the schools themselves..... At a time when service organizations are increasingly strapped financially, this kind of interactive organization holds promise for much more effective and humane delivery of a variety of services to clients who are the sole reason for the bureaucracy's existence in the first place. It can be done.

Collaborative consultation between special education and regular education is an important first step. Collaborative efforts with other agencies responsible for helping children lie ahead. Collaboration between agencies is now required by many funding agencies. If education is to command its rightful position in society, we will need to work together consistently and more effectively. We will keep working together until every child, regardless of limitations, has an equal opportunity to learn and every classroom is equipped to meet his/her needs. Educators are like that!

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