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RESEARCH TO PRACTICE NETWORK

Collaborative Practice to Support the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Schools

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A Parent's Story…

Honestly I'm a little bitter and biased toward the team approach. I live in a small town with a high level of FAS/FASD, with a lack of professionals due to budget as well as geographic reasons, and my daughter is on the other level of the spectrum - she was identified in need due to being gifted.

It took a year for the school psychologist to have two free days to perform testing to get her formally identified as gifted - and this is because I called the office of the Minister of Education - if I wouldn't have pushed she might still be waiting 3 years later. The psychologist took 3 months to submit the report and identified her as in need for self-study higher education, to be challenged, and to be given a laptop from the school board to take an advanced math and writing course through the government.

After the report was received it took six months to gather everyone for the meeting (i.e., teacher, past teacher who came out even though she was retired, me, the school psychologist, the principal, who had changed in the past year, and

resource teacher). The meeting was rescheduled four times.

Finally we got together for a ten-minute meeting - the principal was called away for an emergency. An Individual Education Plan was thrown together to the need to be challenged. The resource teacher, who she had never spoken to before this meeting, never talked to her again, and none of the points on her IEP were followed up on. She never got the board laptop, and the new teacher had no time to give her challenging work/extra work. Nothing was ever done.

The team approach can work, but I honestly think in some cases there is no need for it. I've taken it into my own hands because for us, in our community, the team approach failed horrendously. No one took responsibility for her IEP. It wasn't done in a timely manner. The meeting was impossible to schedule. The geographics of professionals in the region wasn't feasible. The division is understaffed. And the psychologist pretty much disappeared. The IEP wasn't put into her permanent record, and as she was Gifted and not in "traditional need", her needs were not a priority. The new teacher was overworked and didn't have the time or motivation to put into the IEP. Her previous teacher, who initiated this whole process, had retired and nothing worked out for us (K. Smith, personal communication, July 15, 2009).

Introduction

'Collaboration'. As Marilyn Friend (2000), a leading expert on collaboration and inclusive education wrote nearly ten years ago, "Everyone is doing it." (p. 130). 'Collaboration' is certainly claimed by everyone, including business, health, social services, and education and is widely evidenced in their respective policy and procedures documents. For example, the British Columbia Ministry of Education's document, Special Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines (2009) reveals 60 occurrences of variations of the word collaboration including 'collaborate', 'collaboration', and 'collaborative'. Indeed, The Federation of Community Social Services (2009) speaks of collaboration in its mission:

> To provide opportunities for support, information exchange, service consultation and collaboration between member agencies in the field of community and social services.

"We're collaborating." "We're planning a collaborative program." "We need to work on this collaboratively." These words slip so easily out of our mouths in our daily practice and interactions. At first glance it appears that everyone is collaborating. But, are we? What does it really mean to collaborate?

As a special educator working in both the education and health sectors for over 25 years, preparing this article provides me with an opportunity to pause in my work, to reflect on the collaborative nature of what I do, and to think critically about what it means to collaborate. I write from within the classroom – any classroom at any level with the common element that they all experience a diverse range of students with particular characteristics and needs, whether those needs are social, emotional, cognitive, physical, behaviour, sensory, health or invariably combinations of each. For many of these students a multi-disciplinary team approach is requisite to understanding and adequately addressing their needs. Professionals must work together with parents and caregivers to ensure that student needs are fully understood and optimally met. Collaboration is central to what we do.

This article is written not so much as a recipe for how to collaborate, although I have included some important strategies concerning communication. Rather it is written as a reminder of the meaning, intent and significance of collaboration in our work with children and youth. We must understand collaboration in order to collaborate. This is a primary step in giving it priority. The fundamental principles of collaboration provide clues as to why our work sometimes 'fails' or goes awry as illustrated through the parent's story that prefaced this article.

What is Collaboration?

A 'textbook' definition of collaboration that is often used defines collaboration as follows:

> "A style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal" (Friend & Cook, 2007, p. 7).

Collaboration, therefore, is somewhat nebulous. It is not the act of teaming or problem solving or making decisions. These are the activities of our practice.

However, just because we engage in these activities it cannot be said that we are collaborating. Collaboration describes the manner in which or how these activities are undertaken. It is the approach or style of interacting while we are working together. Unpacking this definition of collaboration reveals several important qualities that are important to understanding its nature:

Collaboration is voluntary. This means that people cannot be made to collaborate because the policies say that they will collaborate. People choose, that is, they decide to collaborate. **Am I choosing to collaborate in this situation?**

Collaboration requires parity among people who are working together. What is meant by 'parity'? Parity implies equal value for contributions, as well as equal power in making decisions. Parents often feel that their voices are not heard and acted upon or that they have no say in decisions that are made. Teachers may feel a lack of parity, as well, when they defer to the 'expert' on the team whom they perceive knows more about the child or situation. We need to keep in mind that each member on a student's team holds particular expertise. The classroom teacher knows the curriculum and instructional environment and the student in the classroom context. Parents know their child's developmental history and experiences, as well as dispositions and interests. A therapist has expertise in a particular aspect of that child's development whether it is speech, physical, or behaviour. The point is that each team member's expertise is vast, significant, and entirely necessary in order to understand and effectively address the student's needs. If we understand this to be true, then it is also true that each member holds equal power in making decisions. **Do I value equally the contributions of each team member? Am I providing team members with opportunities to make decisions? Are decisions being made on the basis of all information and with utmost focus on the student?**

Collaboration is based on mutual goals. Those who collaborate must share at least one goal. While differences in team member opinions on how to achieve that one goal as well as the other goals often arise, having at least one shared goal is fundamental to ensuring a commitment to its achievement. Remember, if there is a strong commitment to collaboration, differences will be resolved. **Do I believe in, am I committed to at least one student goal? Do I acknowledge that the other goals are important? How am I showing my commitment to resolving differences among team members?**

Collaboration depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision-making. This does not mean that the responsibilities will necessarily be equal. Team member expertise and feasibility issues often

dictate task assignment. However, the responsibility for participating and making decisions are shared among team members, nonetheless. Equal participation in the decisions that are made is implicit in collaboration. **Am I responsible for the decisions that are made for this student? How am I demonstrating my responsibility for the decisions that are made?**

Collaboration involves sharing resources. This element is closely related to parity. Resources are products of expertise. Resources can mean many things including time, availability, knowledge, access to others, and funds. When resources are scarce, as they often are, team members need to extend themselves even further. In this way, collaboration has the potential to strengthen inter-relationships bringing valuable resources to bear on it. **What resources do I bring? How am I sharing my resources within the team?**

Collaboration means shared accountability for outcomes. Team members who are engaged in collaborative practice share the outcomes of such practice whether the outcomes are a planned meeting, a needed assessment, a student learning activity, or a student's achievement. Team members share the outcomes. **Am I accountable for the outcomes? How am I demonstrating my accountability?**

These qualities that are inherent in authentic collaboration concern the interpersonal relations between people who work together. Mutuszny, Banda, & Coleman (2007) remind us that the "development of human relationships is not a one-step process" (p. 25). Nor does collaboration occur naturally. Collaboration takes time and attention to develop – time that is essential to build trust in and respect for team members. Indeed, trust and respect are the most vital elements for barrier-free partnerships in working with parents, in particular (Wheeler & Richey, 2005).

Including Parents

The movement to child- and family-centered approaches in our work underscores a belief in and commitment to the value and necessity of parent participation and decision-making as essential to the outcomes of our work. A comprehensive review of the literature in the field of paediatric rehabilitation, a field that demands multi-disciplinary collaboration, reveals five salient features of collaboration (Nijhuis, Reinders-Messelink, de Blecourt, Olijve, Groothoff, & Nakken, 2007). They include: communication, decision-making, organization, goal setting, and

team process. Parental involvement was found to be inherent in or closely linked to each of these key features, to such an extent, that the authors recommend explicating parental involvement as a separate, sixth feature of collaboration. It is clear from the literature, as well as our daily practice that parental involvement is a critical component of collaboration. Attending to what parents have to say and engaging them in the education of their child can pay dividends. In education, engaged parents have been associated with improved grades, increased test scores, school engagement, reduced behaviour challenges, and lower dropout rates (Esler, Godber, & Christenson, 2002).

Yet, I have special concern for the parents on our teams. This concern arises from considerable experience working with parents on teams, listening to parents like Karen whose story prefaced this article, and concern that is validated further by the research literature. A disparity of power and authority often undermines collaboration between parents and professionals (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

Involving parents in collaborative practice is not always an easy task; but it is essential if we are to realize the goals of our practice. How can we ensure that parents are active collaborative members of our teams? Communication lies at the heart of collaborative relationship building. I will spend the remainder of this article focusing on communicating with parents to support collaborative relations.

Role of Communication

Communication – what we say, how we say it, and when we say it – holds particular currency in developing collaborative relationships. Communication is a vehicle for building trust and respect, necessary ingredients of effective collaborative partnerships among team members, and particularly with parents. How can we establish effective communication with parents? Davern (2004) asserts that when it comes to partnerships with families, no amount or type of involvement is best. However, a lack of strategies for communication can lead to and exacerbate conflict (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Adhering to a few fundamental rules will go a long way to ensuring that we carefully consider and place high value on parents as collaborative partners, an important message in itself. Consider the following key strategies stemming from the research literature:

Establish communication with parents early and maintain that connection on an ongoing basis (Mutuszny, Banda, and Coleman, 2007). Provide opportunities for parent input at the beginning, throughout, and at the end of interactions whether they are one-on-one or small group interactions or larger, more formal meetings.

Ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions elicit or invite parent involvement. They signal a willingness to listen to parents and demonstrate respect, two important elements of building successful partnerships (Soodak & Erwin, 1995). For example, ask parents how they would prefer to communicate (e.g., writing, e-mail, telephone, in person), how often, as well as their priority for the topic of communication (Davern, 2004). At the same time, realize when it is more appropriate, and effective to pick up the telephone or meet with a parent in person. Get into the habit of asking, 'What do you think?'

Actively listen to what parents have to say. Ask for clarification, elaboration and specific examples to help you fully understand their communications and experiences (Sebald & Luckner, 2007).

Present verbal and written information that is useful and accessible to parents. This demonstrates that you understand parents' perspective and the home environment, which is especially key when it comes to recommendations for home support. Consider the reading level of written material and avoid jargon or discipline-specific terminology that parents may be unfamiliar with and that will act as barriers to communication. Use of jargon and a lack of collaborative spirit, lead to parental feelings of being an outsider (Davern, 2004). Remember to ensure parents are prepared ahead of meetings by providing documentation that will be discussed and reviewing it with them, as well as discussing their expectations and participation.

Practice redundancy in communication. Make no assumptions about parent views and what is working. Be pro-active in providing frequent information in a variety of formats knowing that not just one way will serve all parents at all times. Consider newsletters that include parent write-in advice sections, open houses with activities that support parents, interactive websites, parent liaison who brings questions and suggestions from parents to organizations and meetings, and periodic, brief surveys. These are all ways of recognizing the value of parent input and ensuring that their voices are being heard and their needs are being met (Epstein, 2002).

Ask parents what's working for them with respect to communication, as well as support for their child and what needs to be improved.

Some Final Thoughts…

Ultimately, "common sense and ordinary human decency are at the heart of positive partnerships between families and professionals serving children with disabilities" (Blue-Banning, et al, 2004, p. 181). Communicating effectively with parents builds the trust and respect that are requisite for and emerge from collaboration. Trust and respect are the rewards of collaboration – rewards which, when experienced, increase the value we place on collaboration, and the perseverance we are likely to expend ensuring collaborative practice.

We know that collaboration does not come readily in our work. As Marilyn Friend remarked during an interview "Collaboration is a sum of subtleties and thus more difficult to build support for and give attention to" (as cited in Brownell and Walther-Thomas, 2002, p. 224). A "sum of subtleties". It's worth repeating those words. Each of the qualities of collaboration described in this article is indeed subtle, and easily missed. While we readily bring discipline-specific expertise to our practice, much of the most important work that we do, especially with parents, is a human endeavour.

Am I Collaborating?

Collaboration is voluntary.

Am I choosing to collaborate in this situation?

Collaboration requires parity among people who are working together.

Do I value equally the contributions of each team member?
Am I providing team members with opportunities to make decisions?
Are decisions being made on the basis of all information and with utmost focus on the student?

Collaboration is based on mutual goals.

Do I believe in, am I committed to at least one student goal?
Do I acknowledge that the other goals are important?
How am I showing my commitment to resolving differences among team members?

Collaboration depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision-making.

Am I responsible for the decisions that are made for this student?
How am I demonstrating my responsibility for the decisions that are made?

Collaboration involves sharing resources.

What resources do I bring to the team?
How am I sharing my resources with the team?

Collaboration means shared accountability for outcomes.

Am I accountable for the outcomes?
How am I demonstrating my accountability?

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