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What Do We Mean When We Say "Collaboration"?

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IT'S MY TURN
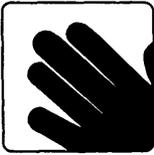
What Do We Mean When We Say "Collaboration"?

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In the first of what certainly will be many thoughtful and provocative articles to appear in this column, Witt (1990) questioned the validity of the broadly accepted mandate that "our consultative interactions be *collaborative*" (p. 367). He continued with anecdotes illustrating ineffective teaching practices and deficient teacher skills which mitigated against the desirability of a "true" collaborative approach. The title of the article articulates Witt's stated purpose: "Collaboration in School-Based Consultation: Myth in Need of Data." My purpose in this article is not to argue for or against Witt's position. Rather, I suggest that we go beyond this argument and consider a more meaningful framework to describe the manner in which these processes interact dynamically and reciprocally to promote our shared goals of educating and socializing youth. Likewise, I discuss potential implications of failing to acknowledge key aspects of collaboration within the practice of consultation.

Perhaps one of the largest problems in the school consultation literature concerns conceptual and definitional inconsistencies. Conceptual problems are illustrated by debates regarding its structure (i.e., hierarchical vs. collegial), function (i.e., "impart knowledge" vs. "facilitate shared ownership for problem resolution"), and roles (i.e., con-

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sultant as "expert" vs. "facilitator"). Definitional inconsistencies are prevalent across theoretical models, which vary on dimensions of clarity, comprehensiveness, and utility. Similar problems abound when one mentions the term "collaboration." An unfortunate omission in Witt's expose is his definition of collaboration. Given the aforementioned definitional inconsistencies in the literature, it is hard to pinpoint what specific aspects of collaboration are disavowed. He seems to consider collaboration a concrete technique used by consultants in consultative interactions.

It may be more fruitful to consider collaboration, or the "collaborative ethic" (Phillips & McCullough, 1990), as an overarching framework or philosophy for education. It can be considered a conceptual umbrella under which various models of service-delivery or technologies can be encompassed. Collaboration is not absolute; it is not a concrete product, mechanism, or technique. Rather, it is a dynamic process that enables educational personnel to access and develop new, creative alternatives. It is not an end, but a means to an end.

As a conceptual umbrella and overarching framework, collaborative efforts can take many forms and be operationalized in various ways. Consultation represents simply one form that collaboration might take, or one manner in which the construct can be operationalized. Collaboration is situation-specific; the contextual characteristics of a problem defines and determines the manner in which collaboration occurs. At times, then, it will be necessary to assume a traditional, hierarchical consultative relationship to address the presenting needs within a situation. At other times, individuals or groups of individuals may demonstrate collaboration through the mutual generation of goals, objectives, and strategies.

Witt (1990) suggested that the dictum that consultative interactions be collaborative is based on "incontrovertible empiricism" that someone "made up." According to Witt, the term implies "that teacher and consultant are co-equal professionals who each make important contributions to problem solving and who should have equal input to problem definition and plan development" (p. 367). Embedded in this argument are some logical and interpretive errors. Although I cannot argue with Witt's statement, the problem is not what is said, but what is missing. Two key aspects of collaborative relationships are misrepresented or not communicated: parity and interdependence. As his argument unfolds, Witt seems to imply that "co-equal" means "identical." Parity within a relationship, however, should be interpreted as meaning equal in decision-making status, not equal in content or process expertise. The relationship among participants should be complementary, not symbiotic. There are many occasions when an expert consultant may be necessary in a case (e.g., the case of the "three-toed sloth"). Simply

because a consultant may know more about classroom management and effective teaching research does not preclude the desirability of collaborative interactions. Information about individual students, the curriculum, and the classroom ecology is relevant and pertinent to understanding and intervening in a case. Direct observations by a consultant are one way of compiling such information, but even our own observations can be biased. In the spirit of best practices in ecological assessment, multimethod procedures (including objective teacher interviews), are critical to our success in consultation. Only if we demonstrate respect for the input and expertise of the teacher will our assessments be valid.

By definition, consultation is an interactive model of service delivery. It requires at least two participants, and endorses interdependent (as compared to independent) styles of interaction. This obvious tenet is often minimized or overlooked altogether. After all, one cannot consult without the participation of a consultee. Rather than imposing one's own agenda (a behavior we often criticize in consultees), it would behoove us to try to acknowledge and "get along with" the other individual. Like it or not, the "three-toed sloth" is a critical player in the consultation relationship. She controls to a great extent the integrity with which consultation interventions are implemented, and the ultimate outcome of the consultative process. In fact, one of the primary goals of consultation is to help consultees develop skills and competencies to solve immediate problems, generalize these skills to other situations, and prevent future problems from developing. This is precisely the type of teacher who requires consultation services the most, and is most likely to benefit. Sure, it would be nice to work only with energetic, hard-working, insightful, knowledgeable consultees. But if every teacher were all those things, consultants would soon become obsolete.

If we do not attempt to understand the consultee's conceptualization of a problem, paradigmatic way of viewing children, notions of his or her role, and attributions for child difficulties, we run the risk of ostracizing those whom we need most to fulfill our consultant role – the consultee! If consultees do not feel heard or understood, the entire consultation process may be compromised. They may "go along" with our "expert" recommendations or agree to implement Treatment X or Strategy Y, but fail to exert energy in its actual execution. Thus, the intervention may be undermined, not because of teacher characteristics, but because the consultant was insensitive to the teacher's observations and viewpoints.

Much of the literature on resistance in school-based consultation focuses on teachers as the primary culprits, and consultants as the recipients. A recent example can be extracted from Witt (1990). When describing a memorable teacher with whom he once worked, Witt

explained that "even though she expressed receptiveness to consultation, she repeatedly failed to carry out agreed upon assignments. In fact, I never saw her move from behind her desk . . . I saw her neither as teacher nor as disciplinarian, but rather as a three-toed sloth . . ." (p. 368). Although Witt described clearly the teacher's behaviors and his interpretations, we are left with no information regarding his actions or behaviors. For example, what consultation skills were put to practice in attempting to influence this teacher? What interpersonal skills were used to attempt to engage her in consultation? What behaviors were demonstrated and what messages were conveyed to possibly offend her? My point once again is that consultation relationships are bidirectional and reciprocal. With "challenging" consultees, we must tap our own interpersonal strengths and resources to engage them actively and constructively in the process. As school-based consultants, we would do well to engage in self-reflection and self-evaluation to monitor continuously our own behaviors, the reactions they elicit from others, and the impact they have on the consultation process. And we must not lose sight of the fact that our actions and reactions as consultants will have an impact on those for whom we are ultimately there to serve—the children. It is time we as consultants take responsibility for the contributions we make in sabotaging "our own" interventions!

All is not well in education. We know that many current educational practices are ineffective. When independent disciplines attempt to "fix" problems without communicating or sharing with each other, gross inefficiencies result. Interdisciplinary collaboration as a philosophy of practice or framework for service delivery can provide the appropriate mindset for improving educational services for children. But first, we must learn to respect the individual differences and unique contributions of all participants. After all, isn't that what education is all about?

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