

Greetings from the PAA School Psychology committee and welcome to our final article in our series on consultation. In this article, Brent MacDonald, Kelly Schwartz, and Mark Snyder offer several insightful comments and practical advice for the school psychologist providing consultation and working within a collaborative model in schools. Enjoy!

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## **Collaboration in School Psychology**

School psychology is a profession that, perhaps more than most, thrives on effective consultation. In the following article, we wish to address some of the more salient components of what we view to be effective consultation and how we can best provide effective consultative services.

### **1) Components of Successful Consultation**

Navigating the complex task of entering into the private workspace of a teacher, forming an effective work relationship, and accurately identifying the needs for the classroom involves many components for a successful consultation process. Erchul and Martens (2010) put forward three significant tasks as responsibilities for the school psychologist while working with the teacher. In combination, these tasks support not only the identified issue, but also work to further the success of the consultation team and potentially reduce the effects of a crisis while enhancing the professional practice of the teacher.

The Problem Solving Task is the process of accurately identifying the reason for the consultation. Many times, personal and emotional experiences can create an effect that leads meetings into reactive, even hostile encounters. Most common approaches today utilize, at least in part, a behavioural perspective towards identifying the issue; that is, every attempt is made to quantify the target behavior and the environment so as to minimize personal bias or emotional effect on the process. In turn, the outcomes are greatest when the teacher is able to most accurately capture his or her concern in objective, actionable terms that support an effective intervention plan (Erchul et al., 2007).

This leads to The Social Influence Task. In many ways, consultation moves beyond collaboration in light of the individuals involved and depends upon the expertise of the professionals invited into the process. Influence, or power, plays a role in the way that information is collected, offered, or exchanged. *Message control* is a means of describing how much information is elicited from the teacher versus how much information is emitted or offered from the psychologist. In fact, the research indicates that, during the problem identification stage of the consultation, consultants should be attempting to elicit much more information from the teacher than they provide or offer

(Erchul et al., 2007). However, once the problem has been identified, outcomes tend to be more positive when the school psychologist takes a stronger role in the actual intervention strategy.

The Support and Development Task is an important aspect of the consultation that is both immediate and ongoing. Many issues that present for the school psychologist can come at a critical time in the school year and may hold aspects of a crisis; most teachers have been working hard to remediate their classroom issue and may finally arrive at a consultation feeling powerless, frustrated, and defeated. They must be emotionally supported and affirmed to see the light at the end of the consultation process. Concurrently, repeated successes and efforts on the part of the team working together create an opportunity for teachers. They learn new ways of looking at behaviour, discover more efficient teaching methods, or appreciate that it cannot be their job to know everything and that they have a consultation partner who will support them.

Collectively, these important tasks influence each other and shape the direction for any consultation; neglecting any one task can lead to a poorly identified problem (and poor outcomes), the optics of an intrusive consultant and lack of trust, or a teacher who is not experiencing professional growth during the consultation. The role of the school psychologist is an important one in the consultation process and is greatly influenced by not only the expertise that they offer, but by the desire to support and nurture a professional relationship with teachers.

## **2) Establishing a positive collaborative relationship**

Consultation is a social endeavour and as such, all parties need to be actively engaged in the process (Eckert, Russo, & Hier, 2014). Establishing a positive and engaging environment in which all stakeholders can participate (parents, teachers, psychologists, other professionals, and, where appropriate, the students themselves) is a critical part of effective consultation.

We need to remember our principles of social psychology to be effective consultants. Remember the fundamental attribution error (attributing the behaviour of others to dispositional factors as opposed to situational factors – i.e. if they yawn during a meeting, they are being disrespectful or is it because it's a 07:30 meeting)? What about the elaboration likelihood model (people are persuaded by central – cognitive/ logical arguments - or peripheral - mood/ perceived authority - forms of communication)? In general, people who are persuaded by the central route tend to have longer lasting and deeper beliefs than those persuaded by the peripheral route, but the peripheral route tends to be easier. A combination of the routes would likely result in the most effective change (Rucker & Petty, 2006). These, and other basic social psychology principles can – and should – be applied to the consultation role.

We would suggest that school psychologists need to avoid presenting themselves as being “experts” in consultation. Attitude and behaviour change is unlikely when a partner feels like they are being *told* what to do; rather, school psychologists should strive toward

being true collaborators who have certain pieces of the puzzle that, when connected to the pieces supplied by other stakeholders, can provide a much more clear picture. Our role should be to ensure that others are comfortable sharing their puzzle pieces and the best way to ensure that they feel comfortable is to establish a trusting and welcoming environment.

Effective consultation includes not only face-to-face interactions (although certainly, face-to-face interactions are perhaps the best modality to engage with parents and other stakeholders); written communication, including email and reports, needs to be clear and effective in engaging the reader. Jargon is the enemy of good consultation. Perhaps the most important component of good consultation, however, is having good listening skills (Ivey et al., 2010). It may seem that we are stating the obvious, but simply saying “I’m listening” can turn even a very challenging consultation into a positive experience for all parties.

### **3) School psychologists as "community facilitators"**

Effective consultation must also embrace an ecological perspective that involves engaging with other professionals – counselors, social workers, physicians, and other specialists (e.g., SLP, OT/PT) – for the purposes of community facilitation. Our diagnostic and treatment practices must look beyond the individual learner to address systemic factors that will improve school leadership and climate, home-school relationships, and even build bridges with other community resources.

Consultation that includes community facilitation is guided by the assumption that there are other meaningful and powerful resources that have equal status but different roles in the problem-solving process. The ultimate result would be that the school begins to recognize that it has the potential to solve its own problems through the power of networking with other community resources. The key to the success of this facilitator role is seeking active engagement of community participants. This can take months, if not years, to build the rapport and trust of various community professionals and resources.

As noted above, effective interpersonal communication can go a long way to building strong community networks, and this includes having an understanding of the complex political and systemic factors that are at work in the schools and communities in which we serve. This may include awareness of cultural issues pertinent to families, the historical relationship between the school and its community, and the openness of the school to allowing other professional and resources into its classrooms. School psychologists who want to facilitate community consultation need to be transparent in their efforts to engage with the community for the well-being of the students and their families.

### **Summary**

The role of the school psychologist has continued to evolve and, as is the nature of evolution, we have had to adapt our role to survive. We are increasingly called upon to

serve as consultants in the community and effective consultation has superseded some of the more traditional roles in which school psychologists have engaged. Moving toward a more collaborative, community-based approach is the anticipated role in which school psychologists will best serve their clientele in the future.

## References

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