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EXPLORING READING SPECIALISTS' COLLABORATIVE INTERACTIONS WITH SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Educational specialists are increasingly challenged to expand their roles and collaborate with other professionals to meet learned society guidelines and respond to inclusion mandates. This semi-structured interview study explores the experiences, problems and suggestions of a group of reading specialists and their interactions with school psychologists. Results indicate a need to address practical issues of scheduling and proximity to facilitate collaboration as well as a need to increase knowledge of interpersonal communication skills and others' professional roles. Implications for schools, universities and further research are presented.

For well over a decade, schools have been challenged to meet the needs of an increasing community of diverse learners. Launched in the 1990's, collaboration represents a high profile reform effort to help schools better cope with expectations for improved learning outcomes of children. While to some a trendy buzz word, effective collaboration can transform traditional educational classrooms into productive, continuous improvement environments. With more learning needs appearing in the regular classroom, schools are being called upon to harness their resources in more constructive ways. One such way beck-

ons a problem solving approach, whereby multidisciplinary teams assemble to identify problems, design and implement interventions, and monitor learning outcomes. A critical dimension to this type of model is the degree of integration between multidisciplinary ideas, perspectives, and discipline-based knowledge that enhances learning.

In the primary grades, reading concerns dominate the list of problems presented to these intervention assistance teams. However, the effectiveness of such teams largely depends on members' expertise, personal characteristics, and professional

collaboration skills. Too frequently, the intervention assistance teams vary in composition, with the referring teacher often appearing as the only constant. This is primarily attributed to staff availability and/or administrative preferences. The extent to which the educational specialists confer or maintain contact outside the structured IAT process is questionable. At best, specialists have a time-limited, peripheral role to play whose paths occasionally cross. With increased instructional and management demands on regular classroom teachers and a need for teachers to transition to a more student-centered curriculum, supporting and collaborative services are essential (Reisberg & Wolf, 1986).

Reading specialists possess unique knowledge and skills to work effectively within a collaborative framework with teachers, parents, and specialists. Embracing a collaborative model represents a way for reading specialists to meet the broader reading needs of the entire school population. With knowledge of learning and reading processes, the reading specialist is in an ideal position to complement teachers' and other specialists' knowledge of instructional practices and learning correlates.

Similarly, school psychologists, with their specialized training as mental health professionals possess knowledge of children's emotional, social, and cognitive functioning which when applied in a collaborative context, can professionally triangulate information to improve pedagogical practices and student outcomes.

Reading specialists and school psychologists are required by their respective learned societies to adopt a collaborative

role to support students' learning and well being. Established by NASP as a professional practice guideline and criterion for credentialing (National Association of School Psychologists, 2000), school psychologists are expected to use a decision-making process in collaboration with other team members. These decision-making skills are intended to facilitate communication and collaboration with students and school personnel, community professionals, agencies, and families. The school psychologist can work in conjunction with other educational personnel as a psychoeducational specialist in problem solving, advising, curriculum planning, and programming for children within both regular and special education (Kratochwill, et al., 1991). Reading specialists too must meet the standard of working cooperatively and collaboratively with other professionals in planning programs for diverse learners (International Reading Association, 1998).

As both these professional specialists move on a parallel course toward more collaborative models of functioning in an era of increasing student and teacher need, it seem intuitively reasonable to posit the benefits of more consistent, structured collaborative interactions that accentuate the overlapping and unique skills of each. Reasons for this collaboration include the need to:

1. de-compartmentalize specialized knowledge, to foster triangulation and integration of knowledge
2. strengthen assessment and intervention efforts in the area of reading
3. build a triadic relationship that fosters continuous, pedagogical

improvement and supports regular educators' intervention efforts

4. strengthen prevention efforts in the primary grades
5. encourage reflection of professional practices in the schools
6. coordinate diagnostic assessments for the purpose of obtaining better integrated and more comprehensive data
7. co-facilitate progress monitoring of reading disabled children
8. meet standards set forth by professional accrediting societies
9. co-design and coordinate interventions

It has become important to understand and strengthen collaborative relationships beyond the regular educator – specialist dyad to respond to a growing number of children remaining in the regular classroom. Different and overlapping areas of expertise brought together for the common goal of strengthening instructional practices makes sense in lieu of the highly visible dilemma faced by regular educators feeling underprepared and inadequately supported to accommodate a more diverse community of learners. Shared expertise among specialists can contribute to a supportive, more effective scaffolding for regular educators struggling to handle increased variability in the classroom.

However, the literature offers little insight into specialist collaborations as part of an expanding indirect service delivery model. Studies and position papers more often address the redefinition of roles for specialists in relation to their interactions with regular classroom teachers. For

example, Jaeger (1996) presents a collaborative role for reading specialists inclusive of curriculum development, problem solving, assessment, and home-school liaison services to support the regular educator. McAloon (1993) similarly discusses a model whereby the reading specialist works collaboratively with teachers to better serve the needs of disabled students remaining in regular education. Tarwater and Schidt (1989) have described the implementation of a comprehensive integrated services consultant model with a focus on a collaborative problem solving approach. This model, however, primarily addresses a consultation role for special education staff.

Increasingly, school psychologists are moving toward a consultation-based service delivery model as they depart from the traditional refer-test-place paradigm (Graden, Zins, & Curtis, 1988). Reading specialists are encouraged by professional standards (International Reading Association, 1998) and scholars (McAloon, 1993; Jaeger, 1996; Henwood, 1999/2000) to actively contribute toward a collaborative educational culture.

The present study sought to broaden this perspective by exploring the collaborative interactions of these two highly valued educational resource personnel, reading specialists and school psychologists. In particular, we were interested in examining the extent to which these two groups of professionals have expanded the parameters of their consultation roles to work together in a triadic relationship with teachers. Perceptions of professional roles, specialist collaborations, the nature of the collaboration process, and barriers were

investigated.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the professional collaborations between reading specialists and school psychologists, interview data were collected. Seven graduate students enrolled in the internship course of their post-masters, school psychology training program interviewed a reading specialist at one of their assigned elementary school. In preparation for these interviews, the graduate students received specific training how to conduct the interviews. Each student was provided with a structured interview guide (Appendix A) to elicit the desired information. By using this highly structured guide, examiner error was minimized. Verbatim responses were required to minimize in-process inferences or omission of data. A total of 11 interviews were conducted, representing six school districts in the greater Cleveland metropolitan area (seven urban schools, four suburban schools). The structured interview ranged in length from 30 to 60 minutes and included questions regarding the types and content of collaborations, collaboration barriers, and suggestions for improvement. These responses were content analyzed.

FINDINGS

The information gained from the semi-structured interviews with the 11 reading specialists can be organized around the key topics of background information, professional responsibilities, collaborative experiences in general and collaborative experiences with school psychologists.

Background information about the reading specialists revealed that they were all

full-time employees and all female. Most (9) had course work or degrees beyond the bachelor's, typically in reading, and were certified in reading. All were experienced educators, but many were relatively new to their current positions. Five reported serving in their present position for less than five years. Seven of the reading specialists worked in large urban school districts while four were with suburban public schools.

The professional responsibilities of the reading specialists required most (7) to work in one elementary school building, while the others taught or supervised in more than one building. One reading specialist reported supervisory responsibilities for 61 buildings! Typically they served either 40-50 students, if providing small group tutoring, or more than 70 students, if providing large group instruction or supervision.

All the reading specialists reported some general types of collaborative experiences. They mostly occurred with classroom teachers or with principals. Weekly occurrences were most frequently cited (4), but many said collaborative encounters were less frequent. Most (9) of the reading specialists said "inclusion" had **not** had much impact on their role or their interactions with other professionals.

The focus of this study was the specific interactions of reading specialists and school psychologists. The reading specialists did report some collaborative experiences with school psychologists. The nature of these collaborations centered on testing information (7), team meetings (5), or sharing concerns about students (4). Reading specialists seemed most aware of the testing aspect of the school psycholo-

gist's job, with eight naming it as the school psychologist's primary role. The most frequently named reasons why these reading specialists consulted with school psychologists were for test results and information about the child's home life (6) and sharing ideas (5). When asked to describe a recent collaboration with a school psychologist, the most frequent type of response (6) focused on providing information about a child. Interestingly, most (9) reported that recent "inclusion" mandates had not changed the way they interacted with school psychologists, although Intervention Assistance Teaming (IAT) or Intervention-Based Assessment (IBA) team meetings were mentioned by a few respondents in answers to several of the questions.

Seven of the eight reading specialists who identified factors which inhibited interactions with school psychologists, named scheduling or time as the problem. Six reading specialists expressed an interest in more interactions with school psychologists, with sharing information and ideas (5) as the most desired topic. To improve the professional relationship between reading specialist and school psychologist, more time together was the most frequent (5) suggestion. To facilitate professional interactions, in general, good personal relationships (4) and knowledge or training (3) were the most frequent responses.

IMPLICATIONS

This study was intended to be practical in nature and focus thinking on what can be done to foster professional collaboration. To that end, the implications suggest action steps for schools, universities and

scholars. Some of these ideas are quite simple and straightforward and are already being done or could easily be implemented. Other ideas are more complex and would require more energy and favorable circumstances to implement. We believe that all, however, are worthy of consideration to address this important desired end.

For Schools

The interview findings indicated that a number of reading specialists encountered practical workplace barriers to smooth collaborative relationships. These barriers, of time or space could be easily remedied. Schools could adjust schedules to allow for common planning/free time and closer office proximity to increase the likelihood that key educational specialists would find it convenient to meet. It would also be possible to target some in-service education sessions on collaboration, inclusion and other relevant topics to address the perceived need for more knowledge and training. Such sessions could de-compartmentalize specialized knowledge and encourage shared expertise models.

For Universities

It has often been said that pre-service education is not well connected with the "real world" and some of those accusations are probably true. Teaching about collaboration is not the same as modeling it for students. It may take some creativity and risk-taking to overcome tradition and turf battles, but joint training programs and shared experiences between different programs or departments would be a more authentic way to promote collaborative practices for the new professionals. The

degree to which the different specialty programs or departments can merge may be limited, somewhat, by accreditation standards, but collaborative experiences or assignments would be a good start. An example of a simulation experience that taught various pre-service specialists to be efficient problem-solvers and better Intervention Assistance Teaming (IAT) members, was reported by Korinek and McLaughlin (1996). Even if pre-service programs are not yet to the point where they might initiate such a joint experience, each program could do more work on teaching communications and interpersonal skills and teach more, in class and in field placements, about the roles of other professionals they will encounter in schools. These suggestions, too, address the expressed need for more knowledge and training and the importance of good relationships to meaningful collaborations.

For Further Research

This study was an exploratory survey of some experiences and perceptions of professional collaboration. As such, it raises more questions than it answers and presents important topics of study. Further research might also address possible limitations of this study such as a non-random sample of participants and its connection with a single university.

Rather than sampling across school districts and interviewing a cross-section of specialists, it would be interesting to conduct ethnographic research to include in-depth interviews and observations of a small number of specialists. It might also be interesting to conduct a more traditional

experimental study to see the effects of in-service or pre-service education on improving collaborative interactions.

To best meet the goals of inclusion mandates, to address the needs of all students and to improve the quality of teachers' professional lives, collaboration is a most important component. Learning more about how it is now occurring, what inhibits it and ways to support and improve it is a complex, yet important task, and one worth pursuing.

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