Myths and Misunderstandings About Professional Collaboration

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WHEN I THINK OF COLLABORATION, THE FIRST word that comes to mind is ubiquitous. The promise of collaboration has apparently permeated every dimension of society. Communications companies advertise their services by proclaiming in the newspaper in 3-inch-high letters that they offer the tools to make collaboration a reality. One high-technology firm touts the ways it can assist clients to realize global goals by showing a stylized half-mask cantering across the television screen to the strains of The William Tell Overture. The mask is soon joined by a like-styled feather, and a narrator delivers the simple message. “Even the Lone Ranger had a partner.” The professional literature in medicine, mental health, and social services is replete with books and articles on the topic (e.g., Gavin et al., 1998; Stroul, 1996; Sullivan, 1998). Perhaps Bennis and Biederman (1997) best captured the extent to which collaboration has commanded attention at the turn of the millenium when they asserted that the truly significant inventions of the 20th century, including modern aviation technology, personal computers, and even feature-length animated films, were all produced by collaborative efforts occurring in work environments that not only respected such initiatives, but fostered an ethic of sharing.

Even a cursory look at current trends and issues in education and special education illustrates that these disciplines also embrace collaboration. Middle school models are premised on creating opportunities for instructional collaboration among teachers. Collaboration is exhorted as a critical knowledge and skill area for school leadership personnel, especially principals. It is extolled as a means for conducting staff development, working with families, addressing student behavior, and responding to reform initiatives. In addition, virtually every treatise on inclusive practices, whether conceptual, anecdotal, qualitative, or quantitative, concludes that inclusion’s success in large part relies on collaboration among staff members and with parents and others, and that failures can typically be traced to shortcomings in the collaborative dimension of the services to students.

One can easily be left with the impression that the discussion of collaboration should be nearing its end—that its application is assured, its use is widespread, and we can move ahead to grapple with some of the many other complex issues we face. But what do we really know about collaboration? Looking past the enthusiastic rhetoric, much of what passes for collaboration in schools appears to be guided more by popular belief than by careful inquiry. What follows are four prevalent myths and misunderstandings that, unless challenged and directly addressed, have the potential to derail current and future efforts to build collaboration as a powerful tool schools can use to achieve their goals.

EVERYONE IS DOING IT

The word collaboration is used indiscriminately in school settings. It seems that every school mission statement mentions collaboration, that every group that meets is called a collaborative team, that every classroom in which two educators are responsible for instruction is called collaborative. Collaboration is claimed across audiences (e.g., parents, paraprofessionals, volunteers, student teachers), across activities (e.g., conferencing, teaming, assessing), and across settings (e.g., school–university partnerships, school–business partnerships, school–agency partnerships). But merely saying the word is not necessarily the same as carrying out the action. Collabor-
ration requires commitment on the part of each individual to a shared goal, demands careful attention to communication skills, and obliges participants to maintain parity throughout their interactions. Collaboration does not occur because of administrative mandate, peer pressure, or political correctness. Nor does it occur by proclamation. It must arise out of an understanding of its potential and pitfalls, and as a system-level standard it can be sustained only through professionals’ deliberate use of appropriate knowledge and skills. These conditions simply are not present every time professionals meet, nor is this a realistic expectation.

I hasten to add that much collaboration does occur in schools. Some of it is formal and explicitly fostered, as in the case of interprofessional teams trained directly in both working with each other as well as carrying out their tasks. Alternatively, some of the richest school collaboration is informal, promoted by professionals’ concerns for their students and grown through trial and error. In fact, the latter type of collaboration often provides valuable insights to guide the former type. But many of the activities that professionals do in groups are directive (a leader defines the goal, and members volunteer for or are assigned to tasks) or informative (the group meets in order to report findings), or follow some other approach that is not collaborative.

The point is that calling nearly every shared effort in schools collaborative, whether it is or not, diminishes the value of the concept, dilutes professionals’ understanding of what it requires, and fosters a false belief that there’s not much to collaborating. Not surprisingly, that belief can perpetuate poor practice and disappointing outcomes. Let’s quit implicitly defining the word collaboration as any activity involving more than one person, and reserve it for situations in which it is appropriate.

**More Is Better**

Perhaps the tendency in schools to call so many professional interactions collaborative occurs because of the belief that if a little collaboration is good, more of it must be better. And yet, just stepping back from the issue for a moment should lead to the recognition that if collaboration is an approach to work tasks based on sophisticated knowledge and skills and requiring extraordinary time and effort to sustain, then professionals, given their many competing responsibilities, would have a limited capacity to participate in collaborative endeavors. Just like cotton candy and hot dogs at a state fair, speed on interstate highways, and the professional and personal obligations we all take on, some is good, but more is not necessarily better.

Some evidence of this misunderstanding and the distress it causes comes from the universal lament among educators about lack of time to work together. Special education teachers who try to collaborate with their colleagues to provide services in four, five, or even more classrooms find that they can barely keep straight where they are headed next, much less the strategies for fostering collaboration approaches for implementing instructional interventions, and individual student needs. Speech–language therapists ask how they can possibly attend and contribute meaningfully to the dozens of interdisciplinary team meetings on their schedules without seriously curtailing the direct services they deliver to students. Suggesting to school staff members that one way to explore an issue or wrestle with critical questions is to read on the pertinent topic and then share with colleagues at a brown-bag lunch or after-school session leads to rolling eyes and exasperated stares at the impracticality of such an idea.

As schools move to increase their “sharedness,” there is a pressing need to set priorities about what is worth collaboration. Clearly those priorities should place student and family needs first, followed by systemic growth and change. They should eliminate group interactions when they are not truly essential. In addition, time should be allocated for those priorities. By acknowledging the time demands of collaboration, it becomes a legitimate professional responsibility and moves away from being an invisible but pressing expectation. Finally, along with priorities and time allocation, the matter of accountability has to be explored. Collaboration is a vehicle for achieving shared goals and as such, it is reasonable to expect that time devoted to collaboration should lead to results that can be documented. How much time is enough time to collaborate? Is it being used wisely? What outcomes can be expected after certain periods of collaboration? All these are questions we should be examining.

**It’s About Feeling Good and Liking Others**

The concept of collaboration as discussed in school settings seems to carry with it an air that borders on being Barneyesque. That is, if all parties feel good at the conclusion of a collaborative activity and like each other because of their shared work, that outcome in and of itself made the collaboration worth the effort.

Although participant positive feelings are a frequent and pleasant by-product of collaboration, they are not its primary goal. Instead, collaboration is the conduit through which professionals can ensure that students receive the most effective educational services to which they are entitled. It is worrisome that so much writing about school collaboration focuses on professionals’ satisfaction with working together and so little on what they actually did during their interactions that collectively made the activity collaborative and what was accomplished as a result of those actions. If one educator could have completed the job as well or better alone, then collaboration was not worth its cost in terms of professional time, even though those participating enjoyed the experience.

Successful collaboration is not about “like”; it is about respect. It has intrinsic value to the extent that professionals who have high regard for and better understand one another are more likely to take the risks involved in working together.
When schools are trying to build a culture of collaboration, exercises designed just so that staff members experience it and discuss their reactions are appropriate. But in the day-to-day business of educating students, collaboration does not stand alone; it is a means to an end.

**IT COMES NATURALLY**

When working in schools, I’m always struck by the contradictions in professionals’ comments when they discuss collaboration. They may remark on how difficult collaboration is, how little attention was paid to collaboration in their professional preparation, and how few staff development opportunities are offered related to it. At the same time, when we discuss communication skills, strategies for responding to difficult situations, or shared problem solving, they often assure me that they already know all about those topics. However, when asked to demonstrate their collaboration knowledge and skills in simulations and role plays, they frequently flounder.

Some of the contradictions in professionals’ perceptions and actions undoubtedly can be attributed to the problem already discussed—that is, the lack of a precise and technical understanding of what collaboration is and how it can be achieved. Some professionals are equating conversation with collaboration. But I think the issue is greater than that. First, a subtext in considering school collaboration is that people who care about children and who work on their behalf should have the knowledge and skills to interact effectively with others, an educator’s application of a Robert Fulghum philosophy. This assumption is often invalid. Why would educators have particular skills in interacting with adults, when most of their preparation focused on interactions with children? A corollary to this assumption seems to be that collaboration is sort of like the ability to carry a tune: Either you can or you can’t, and you can get better if you can, but there isn’t much to be done if you can’t.

An even trickier part of the conversation concerns the need for and use of skills. I have observed that professionals get away with using relatively poor interaction skills in many of their collaborative efforts. This occurs because they are working with individuals they know well, who know what was meant, who don’t take offense, and who overlook interaction gaffes. But a dilemma occurs when an interaction is adversarial, or the participants do not know each other well. In those situations a high level of skill is needed. Unfortunately, if exemplary skills have not been practiced in the safety of relatively sheltered interactions, they are not likely to suddenly emerge when they are critical to the outcome of a difficult situation. Often, professionals’ confidence in their ability to collaborate is based on experiences in the former, comfortable interactions, rather than the latter, more difficult ones.

Even in schools where staff members are directly learning to collaborate, hallway conversations often include worried whispers about one person who dominates, premeetings at which some individuals make decisions so that they can present a public united front to others, and under-the-table agendas that constrain the decisions being made. These are symptoms of the need for staff development. We can’t expect much from collaboration if professionals lack the skills to use it when it might matter most. We can’t assume that interacting effectively with students requires the same skills as interacting well with adults. Just as professionals receive initial and then ongoing preparation in their discipline-specific areas of expertise, so they should be prepared for collaboration. Although some professionals have intuitive collaboration skills, it is an error to assume that the skills should be naturally present; they must be carefully taught and nurtured.

**CONCLUSION**

The topic of professional collaboration has been in the social services literature since the early 1900s and in the business literature for just slightly less time than that. It has existed, albeit sometimes quietly, in the field of special education and general education at least since the 1960s. In reviewing materials from those earlier times, it is striking how much more we say about the topic, but how little we have grown in our understanding of it and how similar the questions and issues remain.

No indicators hint that interest in collaboration is on the wane. To the contrary, the increased complexity of educating students with special needs, the deluge of new information being produced and disseminated about teaching and learning, and the ongoing school reform efforts suggest that for professionals to manage their jobs, collaboration will continue to be a necessity. The study of collaboration must keep pace with the increasing demand for its practice.

It is time to push through to a new plateau in terms of a scholarly understanding of collaboration and its implementation. First, we need to recognize collaborative undertakings as a dichotomy: The interpersonal style is distinct from the activities in which it occurs. Careful study is needed of the style as an entity in its own right. For example, investigations of inclusive practices should be conducted by examining the physical location of students, the support received, and the quality of instruction separately from the matter of how the professionals and parents work together to accomplish their goals. This distinction between the task at hand and the interpersonal approach used to address it would further the knowledge base on collaboration, and it should lead to principles for collaborative practice that are independent of the activity in which the collaboration is occurring. Second, we should observe individuals who collaborate in order to compare their results to those of professionals not collaborating. In this way, we can more precisely identify critical components of collaborative behavior and work to understand the types of school activities that are best accomplished through collaboration. distinguish-

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ing them from those that are satisfactorily undertaken without it. For example, studies of co-teaching are needed in which effective teachers’ classroom actions are described and their impact on student academic and behavior outcomes are measured. The questions that beg for answers include these: When is collaborating through co-teaching worth the effort? How much is enough? How much of this type of collaboration can a single teacher reasonably be expected to do? What is the minimum amount of time needed to effectively plan for co-teaching? Similar questions could be asked and the need for answers made for school teaming and other platforms for school collaboration.

In schools, collaboration should become a topic for study and staff development that is addressed as regularly as are approaches for teaching language arts, classroom discipline, and drug and alcohol awareness. Only by fostering skill refinement and promoting a dialogue that brings professionals together to explore how their unique perspectives can contribute to the creation of better educational services can the extraordinary synergy of collaboration be realized. In addition, the pragmatic and logistical issues that arise in collaborative schools should be articulated and addressed. The problems that occur in arranging shared planning time, coordinating schedules, and preventing overlapping services are solvable and deserve priority treatment.

Whether collaboration has merit is not really the issue. The question is how to raise the standard for collaborative practice in schools to a new, higher level. Unfortunately, some professionals today are weary of the challenge of developing collaborative practices at the very time we are just ready in education to begin a second generation of attention to the topic. As education professionals, we must renew our commitment to being students of collaboration in order to prepare ourselves to face the complexities and uncertainties of the future of our field. No single one of us can do it alone.

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