
Gem from the Archive

Editor's Note: We are pleased to present another "gem" from the archive of The Educational Therapist. For this issue, former editor Deborah Fencer has retrieved "Enhancing Collaboration in Educational Therapy: A Conflict Resolution Approach," first published in 1998.

Enhancing Collaboration in Educational Therapy: A Conflict Resolution Approach

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Educational therapists frequently find themselves in the middle of complex relationships. Clients, families, schools, school systems, teachers, and other professionals all have unique valid points of view. In order to work effectively, the educational therapist needs to recognize and cooperatively manage these sometimes conflicting interests. An awareness of conflict resolution techniques for diffusing and reframing potential disputes can be useful in any field, but this is especially true in one where collaboration is so key.

Such collaboration is the foundation of effective work with families. A caring, non-blaming attitude toward the family, which recognizes them as a key resource, along with the sharing of information, responsibility, and power, are among the most cited components of effective family-professional relationships. A reciprocal, supportive relationship, with joint decision-making and problem-solving is often described; collaboration that "responds to the actual needs of the family rather than to preconceived notions of what is needed" is emphasized (DeChillo, Koren, & Schultze, 1994, p. 574). Few educational therapists would disagree, but the task may be even more complicated than it seems.

As our school population becomes increasingly diverse, cultural differences in communication styles, expectations, and values further complicate the already difficult task of building strong collaborative relationships when a child is having difficulty learning. Awareness of the competing cultures and attitudes as well as the diverse needs and interests buried within a conflict can be a vital element in creating a collaboration that works.

The field of conflict resolution addresses the causes of conflict and seeks to manage destructively competitive relationships. Conflict resolution techniques are regularly applied in international peace-work, business negotiations, and alternative dispute resolution at the community level. The goal is always to limit the destructive consequences of negative relationships and to build positive long-term relationships.

The core principles of conflict resolution can be arranged in two categories: rational and relational. The *rational* approach (a) focuses on the specific interests of the participants rather than bottom-line positions or hidden agendas, and (b) engages the interested parties in specific, but nonbinding, joint problem

solving. The *relational* approach (a) addresses intercultural or interprofessional miscommunication, and (b) recognizes identity-based needs and focuses on the development of compatible professional relationships. Both are applicable to the work of an educational therapist.

RATIONAL ISSUES: POSITIONS, INTERESTS, AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Sue has worked with Ethan for eight months and is fully aware of his attentional problems, but she feels they are the typical concomitants of severe dyslexia in a bright, frustrated eight-year-old. She notes that when he is engaged in non-academic or social activities, he is patient, cooperative, and vigilant. His teacher, however, sees his behavior as "classically ADHD" and wants him on medication; the psychotherapist his family has been seeing is inclined to agree. Ethan and his parents are caught in the middle of professional disagreement.

Personal stories of conflict among professionals are not uncommon in educational therapy. Conflicting diagnoses or priorities for intervention with learning disabled students, often based on differing professional perspectives, can create thoroughly non-collaborative situations, confusing and sometimes immobilizing families.

Attending to competing goals and points of view among professionals is crucial if a student's needs are to be met, and it requires a deft approach to keep contrasting views from escalating into conflict. The rational, issues-oriented perspective in managing conflicts tells us to focus on underlying interests and needs, especially those held in common, and to engage in cooperative problem-solving.

Focus on Interests, Not Positions.

Don't get stuck digging into positions; focus instead on real needs and potentially mutual interests. The importance of emphasizing interests and needs during negotiation is central to the technique of "principled bargaining" as popularized by Fisher and Ury in *Getting to Yes* (1986). In their view, narrowly held positions can stifle the emergence of potential solutions, while focusing on genuine interests or underlying needs may reveal mutually beneficial options. Principled bargaining techniques would try to uncover the real needs of the child in common terms independent of diagnostic positions.

In the example of Sue and Ethan, above, if the issue is defined as "medication or no medication," competing professionals must defend their positions. If, on the other hand, the issue is reframed to focus on the needs each of the participants sees, collaborative problem-solving becomes possible.

Engage in Joint Problem Solving.

Mutually addressing specific problems can reveal new approaches. Principled negotiators are essentially problem solvers. A joint problem-solving session brings disputants together for low-profile idea generation, without asking for commitments to be made. It is easier to let go of one's "turf" in a non-binding brainstorm, and common ground can be created. The overt acknowledgement that decisions are not the goal of such a dialog session helps to create a safe environment for diverse opinions to be heard, and conflict can generate energy for creativity rather than force participants back to their ideological corners. An informal and relaxed environment, as well, can be very helpful in promoting the authentic interpersonal communication that will eventually lead to agreement. A natural technique for parent conferencing, joint problem-solving can occur whenever time and space are provided for the honest expression of concerns.

RELATIONAL ISSUES: CULTURE, COMMUNICATION, AND IDENTITY

Rosita's mother, Anna, is from El Salvador. In the IEP meeting, she sits while the professionals describe her daughter's disabilities and the ways in which the resource program would help her. Rosita has been in special classes since kindergarten, but as a fourth grader she still cannot read. Although she does not express it, Anna feels that the principal does not like her daughter and really wants Rosita out of the school. The interpreter translates the words of the meeting, but Anna never comprehends the real meaning of the complex discussions.

"More frequently than we may realize, cultural factors insert themselves into family-professional collaboration, calling professionals to attend to culturally different styles of relating and the quality of the relationships themselves."

Sometimes skillful management of issues is not sufficient for unlocking adversity. More frequently than we may realize, cultural factors insert themselves into family-professional collaboration, calling professionals to attend to culturally different styles of relating and the quality of the relationships themselves. In spite of our good intentions, unless we have an understanding of differing cultural contexts, families may feel blamed or "agree" to actions they do not understand or feel are necessary.

Educators report that they spend more time with families from cultural backgrounds different from their own, and yet such families often feel unheard, or judged, and can be reluctant to share information (DeGangi, Wietlisbach, & Poisson, 1994). An educational therapist who is aware of cultural differences and is willing to take the time to understand the needs and expectations of this particular family has the unique opportunity to bridge this estrangement.

Recognize Intercultural and Interprofessional Communication Issues.

What is said in a negotiation is not necessarily what is heard across the table. In order to hear what is actually being said, we must try to understand the cultural or professional norms of our partners in negotiation or collaboration.

We all have cultural filters that impact our ability to communicate—to understand and be understood. This is true between participants in international conflict, and it is also true between professions, families, and even genders. These differences manifest in a variety of ways, such as differing styles of seeking feedback, sharing information, or indicating agreement or disagreement. The values we hold also act as filters, causing us to emphasize or minimize points of view that reflect or contradict the goals and needs that seem self-evident to us.

The cutting edge of the conflict resolution field in the 1990s is the exploration of the many dimensions of cultural difference that can impact conflict. Styles of doing business, even sense of time, can vary with cultural context. “Low context” cultures, many North American and European cultures for example, tend to value individualism and verbal precision, while in “high context” cultures, such as many in the Middle East or Asia, the tendency is for the group (especially the extended family) to be valued first and for nonverbal cues to take on greater significance (Hall, 1976).

Miscommunication often occurs if one participant in a discussion comes from a more individualistic culture and the other from one more collectivist. The first may prefer to focus on objective, analytic issues while, for the second, cultural, social, and emotional issues may take precedence. It is easy to see that this type of cross-cultural miscommunication may have been a factor in the example of Anna, Rosita’s mother. The focused, “substantive” discussion of the educational professionals did not touch Anna’s overwhelming sense that her daughter was being rejected; the words were translated, but the subtext and values of either side were never addressed. In such a situation, conscious use of differing communication styles, blending or alternating between goal or process orientation, may be needed (Ting-Toomey, 1997).

Awareness of, and sensitivity to, the cultural context within which collaborative partners are working is important on all levels. Several years ago, President George H. W. Bush and Lee Iacocca led an overtly aggressive and demonstrative delegation of business leaders to Japan with the agenda of opening the Japanese market to more United States automobile sales. The trip was a disaster. In a culture where saving face is strongly linked to identity and open conflict is an embarrassment, little collaboration or effective negotiation was possible for this group committed to the direct, forceful style of North American business. Although the results might be more localized, planning for the needs of a twelve-year-old with attentional problems could founder on the same shoals.

Professionals have their own cultures as well, and the barriers created by professional language and values may be destructive if they are not named and addressed. An educationally trained learning specialist may not consider the role of visual stress or fatigue in a child’s reading difficulties; the optometrist who diagnoses these problems may not sufficiently value the need for remedial instruction. Schools sometimes fight the suggestions that learning-disabled students use compensatory accommodations such as calculators, tape recorders, or extended time on tests. In the institutional culture of the school, these accommodations may be seen as “unfair advantages” arranged by pushy parents; teachers may worry about “lowering standards.” Learning about the norms of a “foreign” profession, and creating open discussion about interprofessional communication, can lead to a deeper understanding of one’s own professional stance and provide the basis for truly effective collaboration.

Address Identity-Based Needs and Build Positive Relationships.

Linda and her ex-husband continually war over their teenage daughter’s placement in a superb, and costly, special school. Linda is an alcoholic and defends against real and imagined blame for her daughter’s problems, fighting school personnel and the educational therapist. Yet when she is sober, she longs for solutions to her daughter’s problems.

When someone’s identity, be it personal, parental, or professional, is challenged, the resulting conflict can be seen as “identity-based,” with rooted needs that cannot really be compromised (Rothman, 1997). Those who fear seeing themselves as bad parents, although perhaps desperate for help, may enter into denial, resisting the diagnoses and recommendations of the professionals who could assist. Sometimes the resistance is direct; at other times inaction is blamed on economics, logistics, or other external issues. Linda’s reactions, compounded by her struggles with alcohol, may be extreme, but they are not unusual.

School-based special education sometimes threatens the professional identity of teachers. Gable, Arllen and Cook (1993) cite numerous examples in the professional literature of teacher resistance to collaboration. Teachers are very often invested in the success of their students. They may fear that they will be held responsible for the progress of children they do not know how to teach, or that they will be asked to compromise their work with other students to accommodate those with learning differences. They may fear “failing” with the child and the blow to professional identity such a “failure” entails; better to pass the child on to someone who “knows what to do.”

Acting out of the low self-esteem school failure can create, students themselves may cause conflicts. In special education classrooms, students may learn to mitigate the blows to their own identities by ably criticizing each other’s most vulnerable points. Verbal attacks may escalate to fistfights. They may decide that it is less painful to avoid challenge than to risk failure, withdrawing to a safer internal world or attempting to impress their classmates with their defiance or wit.

Sensitivity to these issues of identity can be a powerful tool, allowing the professional to tactfully address unstated fears. Should joint problem-solving based on mutual interests be employed, an awareness of the vulnerability participants bring to the table may allow the educational therapist to avoid destructive pitfalls. One of the key ideas of principled negotiation is "Be hard on the problem instead of the people." Awareness of the identity issues involved and conscious focus away from the people and personalities involved and onto the problem at hand can be a powerful set of tools for developing collaboration.

In as personally sensitive a field as educational therapy, relationships may play a more central role than our professional culture recognizes. This may be especially true for clients who, culturally or personally, are predisposed to see a foundation of interpersonal communication and relationship as essential to meaningful connection. Failure to attend to the personal dimension of collaborative relationships may stall progress with many clients; with some it can destroy the possibility of progress. Reeve and Hallahan (1994) found that open communication in an equitable, compatible relationship is key to collaborative consultation. Yet they cite frequent teacher concerns about "difficulties in developing cooperative working relationships." For the work of an educator, relationship is key, it seems, but not easy. This is particularly true in an increasingly multicultural society, where colleagues and clients may place different values on the personal aspects of professional relationships.

In sum, the ideas and techniques of conflict resolution can be useful tools for building collaboration and partnership in educational therapy. Negotiating with an eye to the hidden interests behind positions, the needs all involved can acknowledge, and the cultural context each participant brings can unbind disagreements before they are cemented. Culturally sensitive relationships that respect identity-based needs are the firm foundation of truly client-centered interventions.

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