COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING: THE JOURNEY OF DAYTON CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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As Catholic schools continue to excel academically, some parents, teachers, and board members question the availability and advisability of effective teaching for all students. This article outlines a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of all students in Catholic schools, including students with special needs. Following a plan that calls for collaborative problem solving and an intervention assistance team, the authors provide a first-hand account of how one school successfully serves a diverse student population.

Dayton Catholic Elementary School, consolidated since 1974, is an urban kindergarten through eighth-grade school in a neighborhood of mixed public housing and multiple-family dwellings populated primarily by lower and lower-middle class African Americans. Dayton Catholic, with fewer resources than its neighboring public middle school, serves a student population of diverse learners while meeting the educational needs of three parishes. Migration of Catholics from urban parishes to suburban parishes had a major effect on the school's population. In the summer of 1995, the school had only 160 students and was in serious financial difficulty. The staff planned and implemented a project to increase enrollment and, as a result, began the 1995-96 school year with 270 students. This increased enrollment

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brought to the school a more diverse student population: students identified as educationally handicapped, students labeled "at-risk," and students with multiple learning and classroom experiences. The faculty and administration were concerned that their "typical" instruction might not meet the needs of all students, a thought not unique to Dayton Catholic.

In discussions among faculties and administrators of Catholic schools, one recurring theme is that of serving a more diverse student population. Catholic educators express a commitment to Catholic education and have a strong desire to embrace students often characterized as those with special needs or who are difficult to teach. These students are coming into the parochial schools, particularly at the elementary level, and parents are seeking a quality education for them. Dudek (1998) cites the challenge of the National Congress on Catholic Schools for the 21st Century for all Catholic school educators to open their minds and hearts to an increasingly diverse world.

In the fall of 1997, an opportunity was afforded Dayton Catholic faculty that addressed the issue of better meeting the needs of their diverse student population. A doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Dayton approached Dayton Catholic Elementary as a possible partner in her dissertation research. Margaret Frey had spent the past five years implementing a collaborative problem-solving model in public schools, and was interested in understanding why and how teachers embrace change in their instructional practice. Her proposed research would investigate strategies for effective teacher learning and factors necessary for successful implementation of a collaborative problem-solving model.

In initial discussions, the principal's first concern was the doctoral student's level of commitment to the project. The principal stated that at times when individuals had come to conduct research at her school they had gathered data and left; she did not wish to participate in that type of study. The doctoral student assured the principal that she intended to stay for a full school year, participate actively, and offer a model that could benefit teachers and students.

After several conversations with the full faculty, an agreement was made to everyone's satisfaction. The doctoral student would facilitate the training of an intervention assistance team (IAT) in the collaborative problem-solving model currently used in a State of Ohio initiative, observe in classrooms, attend every team meeting, and assist in faculty staff development programs. The team would allow audiotaping of interviews, meetings, and training sessions, and would participate in reflecting on their experience throughout the year. For the 1997-98 school year, the year of the IAT implementation, Dayton Catholic reported 243 students enrolled; 107 male, 136 female; 25 Catholics and 218 non-Catholics. All students were African American, with 79% of the children eligible for free or reduced-cost school lunches. It was

felt that successful implementation of an IAT, utilizing the collaborative problem-solving model, could increase teachers' classroom skills, offer the opportunity for increased collaboration, and replenish the personal resources necessary for effective learning and teaching.

SPECIAL STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Although the Catholic education system has prided itself on successful instruction of students, concern for successfully teaching students who fall outside its typical parameters has not always been as evident.

> The reason often cited for the high success rate among Catholic school students is that Catholic schools do not have to accept students with disabilities.... School personnel often bristled at the idea of integrating children with special needs in their classrooms. One decisive response is, "I am not a special education teacher." Other declarations include, "We're not equipped to deal with children like that" or, "We're a college prep school." (Dudek, 1998, p. viii)

Buetow (1988) offers insight into the mission of Catholic schools. He identifies the goal of "developing a man from within, freeing him from that condition which would prevent him from becoming a fully-integrated human being" (p. 90). Cottrill (1996) ties the Catholic mission of education directly to Scripture, as she states, "Our mission, as always, is to teach as Jesus taught. Scripture shows him reaching out first to the marginalized and those in special need" (p. 64). Every community includes individuals with special needs and diverse gifts.

One of the primary strengths of Catholic schools is their sense of community. Buetow (1988) states that a Catholic school community is distinguished by a spirit of charity and liberty. He goes on to describe the expression of this charity as a "sense of mutual responsibility, and of care and concern for one another" (p. 226). It would appear that Catholic schools offer an environment richly prepared for the inclusion of diverse and special learners. Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) believe that Catholic schools should provide a culture that respects the dignity of each person; teach and model the responsibility of advancing peace, justice and human welfare; and form the conscience of students toward the awareness of the states they share in common with others.

Catholic school teachers enjoy more academic and social collegiality and have more influence over school issues than their public school counterparts (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). Buetow (1988) describes Catholic school teachers as having "a lively concern for the personhood of each learner,

[they] try to establish an atmosphere of trust and openness and have a real care for the less abled and underprivileged" (p. 249). With collegial support, academic influence, and concern for the "personhood" of each student, the ability to personalize instruction and meet the needs of diverse and special needs students could be the practice of Catholic educators.

Yet, some Catholic students and their families question the availability of effective teaching for all students. Often these are the parents of students with disabilities, diverse backgrounds, and special gifts or talents—generally not typical children. Many of these Catholic parents have voiced concerns about the lack of educational services offered at their local Catholic school: "One of their children, the one with a disability, has been rejected. Sometimes they cry, sometimes they are angry" (Owen, 1997, p. 48); "As parents, we could not say, 'Take this child back, God, and send him when we have more money, or we can make adaptations'" (Kruse, 1994, p. 48); "It was out of the question to even dream that Matthew and Sean would ever be allowed to attend Catholic school" (Kruse, 1994, p. 46); "One mother said, 'Who needs a church that doesn't fulfill its teachings?'" (Owen, 1997, p. 48).

Dudek (1994) poses the question, "In serving those with special needs, will our mission of serving children and youth who are average/normal be jeopardized?" (p. 4), and her response is a resounding no. Effective instruction of any child will enhance the learning of every child. She continues by stating that "The beautiful thing about diversity is that it calls us to unite with one another. Diversity is the hallmark of our commitment to quality Catholic educational choices" (1994, p. 5). Deast-Spinetta and Collins (1992) identify the use of collaborative teams in instruction for students with learning difficulties. They state that "Catholic school administrators who wish to follow the directives of the Catholic bishops to provide high quality education for all their students need to have in place a method of working with those students who have learning problems" (p. 58).

Catholic schools value and promote community, social justice, human dignity, and a spirit of charity. Catholic teachers possess commitment and collegiality and believe in the personhood of every student. Catholic parents of diverse, disabled, atypical children desire both academic and spiritual education for their children in the classroom. Together, these factors represent an educational environment that possesses the three prerequisite skills for the utilization of the collaborative problem-solving model: community, commitment, and need.

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING MODEL

The collaborative problem-solving model, as implemented by an intervention assistance team, is basically a systematic logic for understanding student difficulty and teacher responsibility. Skills necessary for implementation of the

model are active listening, guided questioning, compassionate confrontation, data collection and evaluation, brainstorming, and a general appreciation for the challenges of the classroom.

The collaborative problem-solving process begins with a clear definition of the problem by the use of specific, measurable, and observable information. Too often the problem definition is vague, such as "the student can't read" or "the student is off task," and when asked for clarification, teachers demonstrate a defensive posture, unable to articulate the information necessary to describe the student's needs. When the problem is well defined, such as "unable to decode beginning sounds," the process can successfully move forward.

Next comes the creation of a goal that delineates the desired outcome and is driven by the problem statement. This goal must be ambitious, realistic, measurable, specific, and terminal. The desire for immediate change and significant progress can prove problematic in the creation of successful goals. In analyzing the problem, hypotheses should be considered in all the following categories: curriculum, instruction, classroom environment, home and community, and student characteristics. This is a very difficult task for teachers because the presumption often is that the student is the problem; consequently, the teacher feels relieved of the responsibility for implementing change. Blaming the learner or the learner's circumstances is not a beneficial stance to be taken. The futility created by this thinking often leads to frustration and hopelessness, rather than possibilities for change.

When the first three steps of the collaborative problem-solving model (problem definition, goal, and hypothesis) are completed successfully, discussion is held to explore intervention strategies. This exploration of strategies is truly an exploration, a hunt, a discovery process. A rush to design interventions without considered thought is seldom successful. Interventions based on specific, clearly defined, and supported statements of need, goal, and hypothesis are usually successful, if not in achievement of the desired goal, at least in the collection of additional assessment information. During the discussion of interventions, ideas should flow freely, easily, and without evaluation. The process demands thinking beyond traditional methods, services, and roles; creativity is the driving force. Prejudging whether interventions will work is a common error at this step. Evidence of "yes, but" thinking limits the possibilities for learners and teachers.

After alternatives are generated, they need to be evaluated by the following criteria: acceptability, ease of use, impact on others, naturalness versus intrusiveness, and cost- and time-effectiveness. Interventions should be viewed as a strategy or service. Selecting an intervention that can be implemented in the typical classroom increases teacher skills as well as student success. Whenever a strategy requires the removal of the student from the typical classroom and the general classroom teacher is relieved of responsi-

bility for making changes within his or her individual practice, the goal is to search for new ways to serve all students' needs.

Once an intervention has been created that best addresses the gap between the problem statement and the goal, and is related to the most relevant hypothesis, an action plan, monitoring procedure, and support system are identified and a review date is established. Effective intervention assistance teams recognize the need for ongoing support of interventions. Although one teacher implements the intervention in one classroom, it is the responsibility of all involved to understand and provide strategies for the student in all educational settings. This model is not an expert model where teachers consult with the "pros" and are then dismissed to do the job in isolation. Collaboration begins with clarifying the difficulty and continues until successful change has occurred.

THE INTERVENTION ASSISTANCE TEAM AT DAYTON CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The members of the IAT at Dayton Catholic were drawn from the faculty. Initial members were the kindergarten teacher, the eighth-grade teacher, and the K-8 science teacher. These teachers volunteered for the IAT study and throughout the year demonstrated continued commitment to the project. Additional members were the reading specialist, the speech pathologist, and the special education teacher, all of whom were provided by the public school auxiliary services. Team membership should reflect the services provided in the building. Dayton Catholic's team has no representation from the elementary grades and the team continues to seek volunteers from that level.

The level of experience among the team members at Dayton Catholic varies. The kindergarten teacher has taught 3 years, the science teacher 11, and the eighth-grade teacher 17 years. The science teacher is the only member who received a Catholic elementary education, while the other faculty IAT members were educated in public systems. All of these teachers were excited to be part of the learning experience and entered with very little understanding of the IAT process. Their initial concerns and questions about the IAT reflected their instructional experiences. The youngest team member was concerned that the others might not take her seriously because of her youth and position as a kindergarten teacher. The science teacher's background led to difficulty in understanding and instructing younger students. Significant changes in students and community at Dayton Catholic were manifested in the eighth-grade teacher's hope that her participation on the team would help her teaching as well as provide an effective resource for all teachers in the building.

FIRST YEAR

The new team's first task was to learn the skills specific to the collaborative problem-solving model. Training started during one full-day session before the school year started and continued for three sessions after the start of school. Initial training focused on the first three steps of the model and continued with data collection and analysis. During after-school sessions in early October 1997, the team practiced their skills with several simulated student concerns and presented information to the full faculty concerning the IAT process. Early meetings also focused on the procedure for the IAT: referrals, observations, team roles, and responsibilities. By the end of October, the team was reluctant but ready to accept referrals.

The IAT met every other Monday after school for approximately an hour. This was a group committed to mastering the collaborative problem-solving process, so much discussion occurred after the formal IAT meetings. The notes collected at each meeting capture the continuous struggle and growth of the team: clarifying the process, asking effective questions, expressing frustration, and sharing moments of enlightenment. Over the 1997-98 school year, the intervention assistance team conducted 13 meetings as the result of 12 teacher referrals and 1 parent referral.

Change was evident in the use of the collaborative problem-solving model. In the first IAT meetings, the team accepted vague problem definitions such as "off task," "poor self-esteem," and "negative attitude." Baseline data were often missing, and goals were overly ambitious and difficult to measure. Hypothesis development was a difficult skill in the collaborative problem-solving model for this team. At this step in the process, the team must assist the referring teachers to reflect on their instructional practice in relationship to the student's problem. In other words, are teaching methods or management style or curriculum material responsible for the student's difficulty? Asking one's peers to consider such questions honestly requires trust and the understanding that every instructional practice has its weaknesses.

Many teams participating in the state initiative report difficulty in encouraging referring teachers to look at their practice as a contributing factor in student problems. This is an extremely delicate challenge for team members. The Dayton Catholic team initially allowed the hypothesis discussion to place the blame on the student or the student's home situation rather than examining the teacher's responsibility. During the after-meeting informal discussions, team members expressed great concern about questioning other teachers' practices. They felt as if they were "stepping on toes," and had no right to scrutinize other teachers' practices.

Hypothesis development, however, greatly influences the design of intervention strategies. If the discussion places full responsibility on the learner, then strategies involving teacher change are rarely considered. During the first stages of the Dayton Catholic team's work, many interventions were

designed with the focus on student change (i.e., return homework notebook with signature, receive individual help from volunteer, move seat in the classroom, use checklist to monitor on-task behavior). Yet, as the year progressed, team members slowly began to challenge teachers to consider their responsibility in the intervention plan. "What are you doing for this child?" "How can you change instruction to intervene with this problem?" "Think about your response to his or her behavior."

By the third quarter, the Dayton Catholic team was taking on the challenge and showing improvement in several areas. Problem definitions became clearer (academic and behavioral), goals more measurable and realistic, and hypotheses developed in areas of teacher responsibilities. Intervention designs reflected responsibility of teachers and learners alike. The change was driven by increased team skills in questioning, clarification of teacher concerns, and improved data collection and analysis. Growth was also evident in their personal reflections at the end of the first year. For example, "I don't jump to conclusions about students. I don't make assumptions." "I changed my expectations of children by having a better understanding of their development." "I realize that I am responsible to make changes and am more willing and able to do so." "We are more comfortable with our weaknesses."

SECOND YEAR

During the second year, the intervention assistance team at Dayton Catholic received 24 referrals, representing eight out of nine classrooms. Two of those referrals came from parents. The addition of a parent advocate on the IAT was very beneficial. She presented the voice of parents on the team, often reminding members to stop the "teacher talk" and focus on the student's needs. Parents were always invited to the IAT meetings, but if they could not attend, she listened with their concerns in mind.

Problem definition took less time at meetings because teachers had collected better baseline data at pre-referral meetings between a team member and the referring teacher. Goals became more measurable, specific, realistic, and terminal. Hypothesis development continued to improve because team members became more confident and collectively stronger. Their focus was on the needs of the learner while they still remained considerate of the referring teachers. Intervention design was more creative in the second year, as all members became comfortable in sharing ideas. Intervention designs emphasized teacher change in classroom instruction, curricular modifications, and fewer student-centered strategies.

Also during the second year, the team was invited to participate in the ongoing state collaborative problem-solving initiative. The initiative provided several inservice opportunities where many school teams came together

for a few days, shared ideas, discussed issues, and worked on improving skills in using the collaborative problem-solving model. Participation in the initiative validated the Dayton Catholic team's struggle to learn and apply the model; allowed them to share and receive new ideas and gain different perspectives and support; and gave them the gift of time to reflect on their progress.

The old adage, "If you can teach it, you understand it," was evident on several occasions in the second year of the IAT project. Team members demonstrated their understanding of the collaborative problem-solving model for local, statewide, and national audiences. Their articulate, enthusiastic, and confident presentations were well received by teachers and administrators who struggle with similar concerns and situations. The presentations not only shared the collaborative problem-solving model, but also the personal experiences of the team members: teachers, principal, and university "coach." Following are the personal reflections of the principal and the university coach.

PRINCIPAL'S REFLECTIONS

Sometimes as the principal I get the exaggerated sense of being responsible for everything. The process of establishing the intervention assistance team and implementing the collaborative problem-solving model was a blessed relief. Here was a good idea that could potentially reap great benefits for students and teachers and I didn't have to plan, carry out, and evaluate it all by myself.

One of my more important decisions came early on in the process. For years the teachers had complained that the psychological testing we used did not give them new information and the psychologists seldom had ideas about how teachers could adapt instruction to meet the needs of the students. When I received the call from a doctoral student of an offer of services as a coach for the collaborative problem-solving model in return for our reflections for her dissertation research, I felt we might have a solution to our problems.

The process sounded a lot like a formal activity for what we had been doing informally for many years: asking teachers' advice on students. The significant differences were in the collection of data to support teachers' intuition and documentation of the intervention progress. The collaborative piece had been in place at Dayton Catholic, but the accountability piece had not. Every year we would start over with a student, since the previous teacher often had educational amnesia, not unlike forgetting labor pains. The IAT project could give us the documentation that the next teacher could access and start the year off productively with the student.

I was told at the beginning that this was a teacher-run activity and that my role should be passive. I can certainly see why. Even in my small build-

ing, when the principal speaks there is usually someone who thinks action is necessary, even when the words are just an idea in some stage of formation. Keeping my role passive has allowed team members to take on ownership and leadership for the betterment of the process and the good of the team.

I have found that in a small school supervision is more often a quick conference or an idea tossed out for consideration. Speaking as the "expert" on the latest educational fad or fancy is not productive. Learning to work with the teaching staff as a team player who might have one or two good ideas occasionally is a true boon to the principal and teachers. I can't possibly know everything, nor can I know a few things well enough to be an effective supervisor. I can, however, work with teachers to make learning better for all students.

In reviewing the first two years of the IAT project, there is no doubt that the team shared a common mission and vision. Because of this shared vision and mission, Dayton Catholic has continued to survive despite what many other faculties would consider insurmountable obstacles. Inculcated within the overall school philosophy is the belief that all children can learn and that it is the obligation of the staff to find the resources necessary to achieve that learning. Investing the time to understand student needs is a given in the entire school.

The team has done well in understanding the roles and responsibilities of the IAT process. Everyone comes to the meetings with a unique and special perspective. Even when I get off track, the team members are comfortable in bringing me back to the discussion at hand. I need that and am delighted that they have no compunction about reigning me in. Even though establishing order during meetings is sometimes contrary to our nature as a building, the team has grown most effective in staying on task, maintaining structure, and keeping aware of time.

While we haven't had any overt conflict during a team meeting, we have met with some difficulty outside of the meetings. I think that avoiding conflict is ingrained within our staff, and perhaps the profession. Most of us wouldn't think of making a strong statement or voicing an impassioned opinion in a faculty meeting. Yet the IAT members have had to deal with the undercurrent of struggling teachers. At the end of our first year, a few teachers wrote to the team and expressed concern about the lack of follow-up support for the interventions. During the second year, we made considerable effort to provide support for all interventions and teachers implementing them.

The IAT process has provided for my teachers and myself the opportunity to share and learn across the curriculum and grade levels. The collaborative problem-solving model has been used for ongoing teacher reflection and planning for students, particularly those with identified special needs. It reflects the complexity of teaching and contributes to the resources necessary

for successful student learning in the general education classroom. On a more personal note, it validates my belief that the answers are found in the collective knowledge and experience of the teachers.

COACH'S REFLECTIONS

The Dayton Catholic Elementary faculty greeted me kindly, yet with some reservation. Not wanting to be someone's "research," they were skeptical about my project. The offer I made them was one of reciprocity: I needed their cooperation and effort; they could use my expertise to learn the collaborative problem-solving model to serve their students. Establishing membership on the IAT was my first task; not to be seen as an outsider, expert, or data collector, but as a team member, a facilitator, a teacher, and a coach. Ownership of the team had to be with the teachers, as the IAT process belongs to them and is used by them.

Initially, I took a leadership position, as I trained them in the specific skills of the model and led them through several practice sessions. Quickly, that leadership shifted to the Dayton Catholic team members as the IAT project became a reality in their building. By the beginning of the second semester of the first year, the team demonstrated more confidence and required periodic encouragement from me, but not leadership. My role became one of evaluating adherence to the IAT process (was the problem defined in measurable, specific, observable terms; did the team hypothesize in all areas; was baseline information collected and analyzed; did intervention designs reflect teacher change?). I listened and reflected as team members asked clarifying questions, developed viable hypotheses, and brainstormed intervention strategies that stretched their colleagues' instructional methods.

As with most teaching, I needed to provide instruction and practice for the team, yet at the same time decrease their dependency on my "expert" knowledge. Initially, the team counted on me to ask the difficult questions and compassionately confront teachers for clear and unbiased information. They learned by observing my behavior and the response of the referring teacher. As the year went on, their voices could be heard asking those questions and dealing with sensitive issues. At first, referring teachers expressed concern about being on the "hot seat," so the team discussed how to investigate teacher concerns with respect to their frustrations. We practiced and evaluated members' active listening skills, reflective responses, and nonverbal behavior—communication skills that created an environment more conducive to self-disclosure and growth. These communication skills are the foundation of the collaborative problem-solving process, for without them, the process assumes a defensive posture, not a collaborative one.

By the second year, the IAT was functioning with minimal coaching and participation from me. I joined them in local and national presentations,

inservice in the state initiative, and several IAT meetings over the year. As a proud coach, I watched the Dayton Catholic team (teachers, principal, and parent) become confident and competent practitioners of the collaborative problem-solving model.

CONCLUSIONS

From the voices of all participants, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, it is important to encourage teachers and parents to volunteer for the implementation of the IAT. Individuals who volunteer possess the necessary energy and commitment for the successful implementation of the IAT. To inform and encourage the more reluctant teacher, the team at Dayton Catholic Elementary School established a "floating chair" position during the second year. All classroom teachers were encouraged to sign up for a meeting date to visit and participate in the collaborative problem-solving process. Those teachers who accepted the invitation expressed more interest in the IAT for their own concerns and often returned for assistance.

The method of implementation is another important factor of successful utilization of the model. Initial training and ongoing coaching must be provided by someone knowledgeable of the collaborative problem-solving model and experienced in the IAT process. The "come in and leave" method of professional development would not assist in successful learning and effective implementation of the model. These individuals must establish equal membership on the team, expecting to learn as much as they teach.

Finally, the success of the collaborative problem-solving model depends on administrative support. The principal of Dayton Catholic Elementary embraced the IAT as the standard for discussion and service of students with special needs. The intervention documentation became the database for additional decisions such as student retention consideration, inclusive instruction, special services, and requests for psychological testing. Her strong support was also demonstrated by release of team members for IAT training and regular attendance at IAT meetings by providing substitutes for end-of-year planning sessions, and by securing funds to allow the team to present at a national conference.

The collaborative problem-solving model as implemented by the intervention assistance team has enhanced the practice of teachers at Dayton Catholic Elementary School. Diversity is now viewed not as a problem but as an opportunity for teachers to reflect on and broaden their instructional skills. As teachers embraced their responsibility for their relationships with students, student success was achieved. The interventions necessary for that success were documented in a formal method, for those data describe the experience of the learner and the strategies necessary for achievement. With or without the IAT process, schools need to use methods that encourage formal

collaboration and reflection, assist teachers with instructional change, collect descriptive documentation, and provide effective educational opportunities for all students.

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