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ABSTRACT

Recent changes in schools have caused changes in the consultation roles for school psychologists. Action research serves as a guide for an expanded school psychology consultation role. Although action research has been used in various fields, including teacher development and education, adult education, and agriculture, it has seldom been applied in school consultation models familiar to school psychologists. Action research serves as a useful guide for individual consultation with teachers as well as for collaborative work aimed at school change. A literature review is included on school consultation and action research. It presents the proposed use of action research in consultation and discusses its application in school settings. (Contains 69 references.) (Author/JDM)

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Action Research as a Guide to Consultation and School Change

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Abstract

School consultation is increasingly important in the role of school psychologists, and has been the subject of much research. Recent changes in schools demand expanded consultation roles for school psychologists. Action research serves as a guide for an expanded school psychology consultation role. Although action research has been used in various fields, including teacher development and education, adult education, and agriculture; it has seldom been applied in school consultation models familiar to school psychologists. Action research serves as a useful guide for individual consultation with teachers as well as for collaborative work aimed at school change. This paper reviews the literature on school consultation and action research, presents the authors' proposed use of action research in consultation, and finally discusses its application in school settings. (125 words)

Action Research as a Guide to Consultation and School Change

Because of increasingly complex skill demands for school psychologists, the role (Kerwin, 1995; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000; Zins & Murphy, 1996) and training (Knoff, Curtis, & Bastche, 1997; Swerdlik & French, 2000) of school psychologists has been scrutinized. As the discipline of school psychology responds to the demand for new roles, the place of consultation is likely to become more prominent (Bradley-Johnson & Dean, 2000; Furlong, Morrison, & Pavelski, 2000).

Bradley-Johnson and Dean (2000) point out that school psychologists have been expected to serve in both practical and researcher roles in school settings. While the dual role is the expectation, many job demands often preclude research in the field. With consultation becoming increasingly important, grounding practice in research is imperative. Phillips (1999) aptly points out the difficulties of applying research to practice, arguing that where research can guide practice, it is sometimes difficult to fit research findings to unique practice applications. Some suggest a need to reconsider how the professional-psychologist (dual-role) model ideals themselves can be applied in practice (Nastasi, Varjas, Sarker, & Jayasena, 1998; Stoner & Green, 1992). In a realistic sense, many psychologists lack the time to conduct formal research in their daily work. In addition, many have not been trained in applied research methodologies that could serve to improve consultation and other services.

Action research models provide a way to address these difficulties. As both an applied research method and a tool for change, action research allows practitioners to evaluate the quality of consultation services within a practical problem-solving model. Action research helps create a cooperative atmosphere in schools to the benefit of

students, teachers, and parents. Because of its direct link between application and practice, social validity, and collaborative nature, action research may contribute much to school consultation.

In this paper, we present the use of action research as a guide to consultation for school psychologists. We provide a brief overview of consultation models and current issues in consultation as a frame for the importance of action research. We then describe action research in some detail, and present a model—the participatory action research model (PAR)—as an inclusive and comprehensive guide to consultation in the schools. Finally, we illustrate the use of action research in consultation and school change by demonstrating goodness-of-fit with several applied examples.

Part I: Consultation in School Psychology

Current models of consultation

While not the primary focus of this paper, a short review of consultation models and issues will serve to situate the action research model later discussed. For a more thorough discussion of consultation issues and models, there is much to choose from (e.g. Erchel & Martens, 1997; Gutkin & Curtis, 1999; Ingraham, 2000; Watson & Robinson, 1996).

Behavioral consultation. Behavioral consultation and its numerous variants have been popular and well researched (e.g. Erchel, Covington, Hughes, & Meyers, 1995). In general, behavioral models of consultation involve a systematic problem-solving process, clearly defined goals, and the use of behavioral analysis to design interventions (Erchul & Martens, 1997).

Watson and Robinson (1996) developed a model for direct behavioral consultation. Although similar to earlier behavioral models, direct behavioral consultation allows the consultant to take a more active role in teaching consultees the skills they need in order to reach consultation goals. In this model, consultees practice while receiving feedback from the consultant. Wilkinson's (1998) case study of school-based behavioral consultation is an example of behavioral consultation. In the study, school psychologists implemented the scientist-practitioner model, using direct observation and a behavioral checklist (The Teacher's Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist, [TRF]. Achenbach, 1991).

A body of research has investigated the application of behavioral consultation. Sheridan and Kratochwill (1992) point out the utility of simultaneous rather than parallel consultation with parents and teachers. Conjoint Behavioral Consultation (CBC) is a variant of behavioral consultation that encourages a partnership approach to consultation, (Sheridan, Kratochwill, & Bergen, 1996). In the CBC model, consultation participants represent both the home and school of the child, and work together for the common good of the child. The CBC model has recently been evaluated as a possible consultation model with applications to diverse populations (Sheridan, 2000).

Problem-solving consultation. Problem-solving consultation (e.g. Ikeda, Tilly, Stumme, Volmer, & Allison, 1996) a type of behavioral consultation, is also frequently used in school settings. Problem-solving models view persuasion as an important communication skill in consultation and an aid to relationship building during consultation (O'Keefe & Medway, 1997). A problem-solving model is that proposed by Gutkin & Curtis (1990), which incorporates the steps of the problem-solving model into a

more comprehensive, context-sensitive format. This model, ecological consultation, draws on ecological theory (Apter & Conoley, 1984), and calls for viewing a child as part of a complex system and one in which interventions may need to be systemic.

Peer consultation. There are several models utilizing peer consultation, such as the Structured Peer Consultation Model for School Counselors (SPCM-SC) by Benshoff and Paisley (1996), peer consultation groups for school counselors (Logan, 1997), and peer support groups (Zins & Murphy, 1996). In peer consultation models, groups of peers work together using behavioral problem-solving skills. Logan (1997) argues the benefits of peer consultation groups as a way to provide effective supervision and feedback for consultants. Peer consultation groups provide: “(a) case consultation; (b) solution-focused problem solving; (c) peer support; (d) constructive feedback without concern for evaluation or necessity for change unless the members choose not to do so; and (e) access to needed materials and resources,” (p. 4). One of the greatest benefits of peer consultation is on-going feedback from peers to improve consultation skills.

Collaborative consultation. Collaborative models have recently been of interest in school psychology. (Erchul, 1999; Gutkin, 1999a; and Gutkin, 1999b; Rosenfield & Gravois, 1999). “Collaborative consultation is an interactive process that enables groups of people with diverse experience to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems,” (Idol, Nevin, and Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1995, p. 347). In collaborative consultation, members contribute to the consultation process by sharing their unique knowledge, skills, and experience. The model values collaborators’ interpersonal growth and development through the problem-solving process. In general, collaborative

consultation models require that collaborators have professional expertise, interpersonal skills, and value the group process (Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb (1995).

Elective and cooperative consultation models. Over time, the duties of school psychologists have become more complex, requiring more frequent collaboration with other school and community professionals. Erchul and Martens (1997) emphasize the need for integrative consultation models. Several examples of the more comprehensive models follow.

Schensul (1998) brings anthropological notions into school psychology consultation roles. She introduces psychological, ecological, and social action (action research) models for community-based prevention programming with young urban people, demonstrating how school psychologists consult in community settings. An additional illustration of collaborative consultation is the model presented by Power, Atkins, Osborne, and Blum (1994), involving consultation services for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The Power et al. model stresses increased consultation, intervention, and collaboration with the community, utilizing out-of-school resources. In a similar vein, Haynes and Comer (1996) point out that the successful ingredient for school reform and improvement is the integration of team resources in school-related settings, including school principals, teachers, staff, parents, and community professionals. Reeder, Maccow, Shaw, Swerdlik, Horton, and Foster (1997) underscore the existence of multiple roles in comprehensive consultation, including, “team players, coordinators, and consultants,” (p. 618). O’Keefe and Medway (1997) state that “[consultation] techniques all are characterized by various degrees of

collaboration, communication, and problem-solving between the school psychology consultant and school-based consultee,” (p. 174).

In all approaches to consultation, the development of cooperation is thematic. While expert-driven models support viewing all participants as members of the team, an egalitarian attitude is heavily emphasized in cooperative models. Thus, some measure of team work is common to all models. In reviewing the consultation literature, it is fair to summarize that the following are necessary skills for school psychologists: 1) interpersonal and relationship building skills; 2) a collaborative perspective for coordinating parent, school, and community resources; and 3) research/planning skills to maximize consultation quality.

Current Issues in Consultation

Current issues in consultation reflect the struggle school psychologists have in applying research to practice (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). Phillips (1999) provides an insightful overview of this problem. As Phillips points out, practitioners often do not conduct research themselves, and are often hesitant to consult existing research. Reasons for these practitioner behaviors include lack of time, a belief that research does not fit the unique context in which it could be applied, and in some cases, limited training in conducting or interpreting research. If this disconnect between practice and research exists, as Phillips suggests, the role of practitioner as expert is called into question. It is just this role that has been the focus of one current debate in the consultation literature.

Collaborative vs. “expert” consultation models. In recent years, research and debate about consultation have centered on the concept of “collaboration” in consultation (Gutkin, 1999a; Gutkin, 1999b; and Erchul, 1999). Much of the debate has concerned

whether or not collaborative models are more efficacious than expert-driven models. Gutkin (1999a) points out that the dichotomy between collaborative and expert-driven models may be a false dichotomy, and then provides alternative interpretations of research that have minimized the predominance of expert-driven consultation in practice. He suggests that collaborative models do not rule out interactions in which the consultant has a more expert role.

A feature of the collaboration debate involves the definition of “collaboration” itself (Gutkin, 1999a, 1999b; and Erchul, 1999). Erchul suggests that an operational definition for the term is lacking and that until such a definition is agreed upon by researchers in the field, it will be difficult to reach an agreement on the meaning of consultation research that features collaboration. Gutkin (1999b) agrees that a scientific operational definition would aid the research process, but warns that in the struggle to operationalize “consultation”, the commonplace definitions of the term will be lost. He suggests that it is the commonplace, everyday definitions of constructs under which most practitioners work.

Legal and cultural influences on consultation. Changes in policies and laws require comparable changes in consultation roles. For example, inclusive education requires intensive team planning and collaborative problem solving. Recent reauthorization of IDEA legislation (P.L. 105-17; U.S. Congress, 1997) has formally expanded the role of the school psychologist from that of direct evaluation and consultation to that of a collaborative consultant. The school psychologist is now called on to work with a team of people to evaluate, plan, and monitor behavioral interventions for students with special needs (Habel, & Bernard, 1999).

School safety, a growing concern in many schools, requires that school psychologists work with teams representing a variety of school and community professionals (Furlong, Morrison, & Pavelski, 2000; Knoff, 2000). Writers in educational reform, (e.g. Apple, 1996; Goodlad, 1990) cite the need for broad-based groups of people to work together at the local level to make much-needed and meaningful changes in schools. Finally, as schools and communities reflect national trends toward cultural pluralism, traditional role behaviors for school professionals must also change (Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1996). Multicultural and cross cultural consultation present new challenges for school psychologists (Ingraham, 2000).

Clearly consultation has become more challenging. In the sections that follow, we show how action research, in particular participatory action research (PAR), can guide the more dynamic and complex consultation roles school psychologists are now called upon to take. We show that traditional consultation skills can be subsumed within the rubric of the model, and that the call for collaboration found in current consultation research is answered by the action research approach.

Part III. Action Research as a Consultation Guide

There are numerous variants of action research (see Noffke, 1997 for a thorough review of the action research concept), including participatory research (Whyte, 1991), co-operative inquiry (Reason, 1994), action science (Argyris & Schön, 1989); and action learning (Bruce & Russell, 1992). This article focuses on participatory action research (PAR) models (Reason, 1994; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Although all models of action research link research to practice in order to promote change, PAR includes several features which encourage non-biased collaboration and the professional

development of those involved in the research process. In this section, we provide a basic description of action research, giving particular attention to PAR. Its application to consultation is then explored.

A Description of Action Research.

Action research is an umbrella term that covers many varied models. All approaches view action research as a method of applied research that emphasizes direct application of knowledge to practical problems. Furthermore, action research is equally process and outcome focused. Important to the process is maximal group participation aimed at improving the practice of all participants. Kember & McKay (1996) present seven common characteristics of action research: 1) its concern with social practice; 2) its participatory nature; 3) the participants' choice of the research focus; 4) the aim for improvement of practice; 5) its cyclical process; 6) the involvement of systematic inquiry; and 7) its reflective nature (summarized from p. 532). To conduct action research, "it is necessary to identify the problem in an organization, to master professional research skills, and to give feedback about the results to the organization" (Takeda, Gaddis, & Marchel, 1999, p. 299).

Assumptions of Participatory Action Research.

Argyris and Schön (1991) define PAR as "a form of action research that involves practitioners as both subjects and co-researchers: (p.86). Whyte (1991) mentions that PAR is "a strategy in which professional social researchers go beyond treating members of the organization studies as gatekeepers and passive information in order to involve some of them as *active* participants in the research process" (p. 5). In doing PAR, nine principles are important: "1) identification of the individual in a collective project; 2)

changing and studying discourse, practice, and social organization; 3) changing the culture of working groups, institutions, and society; 4) doing action and reflection; 5) unifying the intellectual and practical project; 6) producing knowledge; 7) engaging the politics of research action; 8) utilizing methodological resources; and 9) creating the theory of the work,” (McTaggart, 1991, pp. 172-179).

Three elements stand out as fundamental to PAR: 1) group participation; 2) the development of collaborative knowledge; and 3) reflection. Group participation is a basic assumption of participatory action research. All members of a group are viewed as equal stakeholders, (albeit, as we point out later, each may have different strengths to offer the group). Within the group structure, PAR places great importance on the element of collaborative participation. Complex problems call for creative solutions. PAR holds that intellectual creativity occurs through collaborative relationships within groups (Marshall & Reason, 1993). In addition to collaborative creativity, reflection is an equally important element in PAR (Takeda, Gaddis, & Marchel, 1999). Reflection is the process through which participants understand the way their own biases and assumptions shape their ideas and actions (Marchel & Gaddis, 1998) and through which they apply what is learned to enhance professional skills. The concept of reflection in action research is closely related to the concept of “critical reflection” (Brookfield, 1998; Mezirow, 1998), and “reflective practice” (e.g., Peters, 1991). Benefits of the reflective process are the stimulation of creativity in thinking for practice and research (Reason, 1994) and the professional improvement of participants.

The three elements of group participation, developing collaborative knowledge, and reflection are interrelated. Each influences and is in turn influenced by the other.

When applied to school consultation, each element contributes to the success of the action research process. The following section discusses the application of the PAR model to school consultation.

Action Research in Schools.

Action research is familiar to many teachers (and is a growing trend), since it is a model often used in teacher development and program improvement (Noffke, 1995; Noffke, 1997; Fueyo & Neves, 1995; Meyer, Park, Grenoto-Scheyer, et al, 1998; Zech et al, 2000). School counselors have also used action research to improve service delivery (Gillies, 1993) and as a model for professional development (Ponte, 1995). Action research uses intuitively sensible steps similar to many problem-solving consultation models.

The steps of action research. Although there is some variability, most action research models employ similar steps. In reviewing many models, (Kember & McKay, 1996; Marshal & Reason, 1993; Ponte, 1995; Sagor, 1992; Reason & Heron, 1995) the steps used can be summarized as: 1) problem exploration; 2) planning; 3) action; and 4) review and readjust. As action researchers move through the cycles of the process, there is some shifting to previous steps. For example, at the planning stage, it may become apparent that the problem has not been adequately defined or understood and there is a return to the “problem exploration” step. Often, several cycles of exploration, planning, action and review are completed as more is learned from participation in the action research process.

Of importance in understanding the value of the model to consultation in schools is the recognition that consultation may involve numerous participants, and may lead to

group action on shared problems discovered during consultation. Action research places the consultation act within a complex system. Because action research encourages the study of the situated nature of problems, the need to work with broader elements of the system may become apparent. Consultation then extends outward, including more shareholders and begins to involve systemic changes. With each repetition of the cycle, what has been learned in earlier cycles is incorporated into the change process. This may mean that the problem is redefined, that new participants are invited into the process, that actions are modified, or that the process can now end if goals are met. The system is flexible, fitting the needs of complex and evolving situations.

While there has been some development of methods for multicultural consultation (Ingraham, 2000; Sheridan, 2000), it is difficult to learn skills specific to all cultures and ethnic groups. Also, it is likely that even those from similar ethnic groups have different worldviews and cultures, particularly if the broader view of culture is taken (Fish, 2000). The emphasis on reflective dialogue in PAR encourages consultants to use questions, critical thinking, and observations to understand the culture, worldview, and perceptions of the other in a method similar to that described by Nastasi, Varjas, Bernstein, and Jayasena (2000). The PAR model moves beyond merely focusing on the other, however, to recognize that the assumptions and biases of the self (the consultant) must also be scrutinized.

Below, the steps of PAR are elaborated in some detail, followed by a discussion of their use of in school consultation.

Step I: Problem exploration. At the problem-identification stage, all parties engaged in the consultation process present what they know about a problem. Formal and

informal methods of data collection are used to gain more information. Beyond that, action research demands scrutiny of the attitudes and beliefs all parties bring to the situation. Peters (1991) shows how group members can use questions during the group process to encourage mutual critical thinking and the exploration of biases and assumptions that might otherwise interfere with helpful problem solving.

Examples of reflective questioning at the exploration stage are: Is a particular behavior viewed as appropriate in one culture, but not in another? Does a teacher view the child in a negative way based on previous difficult experiences with the child? What beliefs do participants have about the school or classroom culture that may influence problem identification? Does the past experience of the consultant limit the range of possibilities explored as the problem is investigated? Are all the stakeholders represented during the exploration stage?

Step II: Planning. Planning may include long-term goal setting or may result in a series of short-term plans followed by actions and review. The planning stage includes designing methods for monitoring progress during action. Important at the planning stage is the ongoing exploration of ways personal, cultural, and institutional factors may influence the planning process. Viewing the problem broadly may suggest an alternate course of action or the need for the participation of other stakeholders as collaborators. All group members are encouraged to participate. During planning, participants using the PAR model question the implications proposed plans have for all stakeholders. Planners continue to use self-questioning to understand ways their own viewpoint might color what plans are developed. Plans allow for the input of all participants, although there may

be an agreement at this point that those with more skills in relevant areas take leading roles.

Step III: Action. Once planning is completed, the action phase begins. Action research is particularly well suited for situations in which participants act together to solve a problem, or in which all have some responsibility for actions. Group members with specific expertise take on different roles in interventions. Complex and community-wide problems benefit from the collaborative design of action research. As action is taken, further problem exploration or planning may be necessary. Research methods to monitor the impact of planned actions are implemented at this stage.

Step IV: Review and adjust. The cyclical nature of action research requires that the results of actions are studied and outcome information is shared among all participants. Review of progress is a collaborative activity, and results are judged not only in terms of their success in meeting goals, but also in terms of their effects on all participants. The review step may lead to further discussion of the problem, additional or modified plans, and another action cycle. Research, both formal and informal, informs further cycles of problem definition, planning, and action. Furthermore, by reflective evaluation of consultation, the methods of consultation themselves are scrutinized for goodness-of-fit, as recently advocated by Henning-Stout and Meyers (2000).

Using action research in consultation.

We think of consultation broadly --- as including a wide variety of activities for school psychologists. Within this inclusive definition of consultation, school psychologists consult with individual teachers regarding student and classroom needs, but they also serve as participants in groups of people working together for school change.

Indeed, as pointed out by Sheridan & Gutkin, (2000), it is often impossible to make meaningful changes in the lives of children without making changes in the systems that surround them. Using action research, school change becomes interwoven with traditional consultation. In many cases, what begins as a more traditional consultation case broadens, involving other school, family, and community members in an action-research process aimed at more encompassing school changes. The school psychologist, frequently in the role of having contact with many teachers and school environments, can often be the one who recognizes the need for expanded actions. Action research guides both individual consultation interactions and leads to wider school change activities when necessary.

To further clarify how action research guides consultation, the following section presents three examples of the use of PAR in a variety of consultation settings.

Applications to School Psychology

Three scenarios utilizing action research are described in this section. Each scenario depicts a situation demanding consultation skills common in the work of school psychologists. Examples have been chosen that represent diverse situations, ranging from one-to-one consultation with a teacher, to working with a group of educators for program change.

Case-based consultation. In this scenario, a school psychologist (we'll call her Ruth) receives a referral of a student with behavioral needs from a teacher (Bill). The consultation process begins with defining the problem through a variety of information-gathering activities. PAR requires Ruth and Bill to examine the role their own beliefs and assumptions play in identifying the problem. It should be noted here that self-reflection

in behavioral consultation has recently been encouraged by behavioral experts (e.g. Kauffman, Mostert, Trent, & Hallahan, 1998), since it is recognized that a teacher's ideas about discipline, development, and their own teaching impact management problems.

As Bill and Ruth critically reflect on the nature of the problem, they may redefine the problem, may change the focus of intervention, or may continue in a way similar to common consultation models. Bill and Ruth view themselves as equal contributors during the process, but may assign duties for monitoring or intervention design in keeping with the skills each brings to the process. As the consultation process moves through stages of problem exploration, planning, action, and evaluation, the PAR model encourages continues reflective questioning. Ruth and Bill meet on an on-going basis, as the situation demands. When the behavioral needs of one child are addressed the process may end, or the qualitative content of consultation discussions may point to an expanded need for broader program change. Additional stakeholders would then be involved, shifting the process from individual consultation to consultation aimed at organizational or policy change. An example of consultation for policy change is presented next.

Policy change: Retention in the lower grades. The present scenario arises from the experiences of one of the authors in a large elementary school in which the school psychologist was involved in all cases where children were considered for grade retention. The number of students in early grades referred for possible retention in this school was high. The school psychologist was concerned about the high retention rate, because substantial research on retention outcomes did not indicate that retention was helpful to students (e.g. Holmes & Matthew, 1984). Teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the cumbersomeness of the retention process, and voiced concern with the emotional

outcome of retention for students and parents. It was a shared problem that involved numerous stakeholders and school policy.

The school psychologist invited all Kindergarten and First Grade teachers to form a team to look at the retention issue. The team began by exploring the problem. The school psychologist guided the exploration through asking questions aimed at uncovering the beliefs and assumptions of all team members with regard to retention. Teachers disclosed that they worried they would be judged as inadequate by their peers if a student they taught did poorly in the next grade. In addition, they expressed concerns that there were not enough existing supports for needy students, and sought to retain them as a way to strengthen skill deficits. Finally, because teachers only saw a child for one year, they did not see the long-term picture that concerned the psychologist. Through reflective dialogue, these many concerns became apparent to all involved.

After initial exploration of the problem, investigation was expanded: upper grade teachers were invited to participate in the group; and responsibilities for a variety of information-gathering activities were instituted. Team members reviewed the policies of other schools, the district records on students who had been retained, and the research literature, and talked to teachers and administrators from other schools. The team continued to meet and share what they learned. Change plans were made, with group members questioning the reasoning behind the suggested actions. Plans reflected group consensus, and specific duties were assigned to those identified by the group as being the most appropriate person for the job.

Actions taken included reviewing student progress early in the year in order to be proactive in providing needed supports, involving parents in early interventions, and

changing the district retention policy to require an individual change plan for each retained student. Review of progress included both teacher reports of student gains, but also teacher reports of satisfaction. Records of referrals and projected referrals for retention showed a retention referral rate one-tenth that of previous years.

Of great importance, although less obvious, was the process of working together in an atmosphere of encouraging reflection and collaboration. Exploration of feelings and attitudes encouraged participants to view the actions of peers more openly, and the group ownership of the project resulted in commitment to shared goals. Encouraging participation of all resulted in creative approaches to the problem, and relationships among the group became more cohesive.

The events described above took place over a six-month period. The process was not quick. The group initially met every other week and at times involved the building principal, special education director, or parents. Although time-consuming, the outcomes were far-reaching. With group support, teachers were highly committed to change. Furthermore, participants shared an increased sense of respect for each other that affected other areas of their work.

Special education program development. For the last decade, inclusion of students with disabilities has been a common theme in special education practice. The following example of PAR describes the experience of a group of special educators in a high school as students with moderate disabilities were returned to their home school from self-contained programs out of the district. The setting was a large suburban high school of approximately 1800 sophomores, juniors, and seniors. A special education staff of about 20 served this school, including disability teacher specialists, special education classroom

aides, a school psychologist, vocational consultants, a speech/language therapist, and an occupational therapist.

The team began the action research process during an intensive two-day meeting. Group members were encouraged to participate equally. Dialogue guided by reflective questioning addressed the concerns all stakeholders had about the impending inclusion of students with significant needs. Many group members felt unprepared to work with this challenging group of students. There was strong concern that local resources would be insufficient to meet student needs and that students would not easily be accepted by regular classroom teachers and students.

As a result, building principals, counselors, and the special education director were included in some of the planning meetings. Again, group members shared in generating ideas about ways to develop an innovative program. Collaborative planning encouraged creative thinking. The group explored research on team-teaching and cross-categorical teaching models. Innovative teaching strategies incorporating non-traditional instructional roles were planned. For example, the school psychologist agreed to take on the role of teacher in parts of the curriculum dealing with social skills needed in vocational settings.

Throughout the planning process, suggestions were carefully examined to understand the reasons behind the ideas. One assumption shared by many team members was that administrators would not support non-traditional methods of teaching. Had this belief not been addressed in the presence of the administrators, it is unlikely that the group would have developed the creative program it eventually did develop. As the group met, discussion included the cycling steps of action research: examining the problem,

planning, action, and reviewing. Ongoing meetings continued throughout the implementation of the inclusion process. Regular teacher comments, daily informal rating scales, and reports from special education assistants would be reviewed at weekly ongoing meetings to evaluate the program's success.

PAR guided not just the steps but also the qualitative process of problem solving. Equal inclusion of all team members, shared decision-making and dialogue that encouraged critical thinking and self-reflection became crucial in developing innovative solutions to the problem. Furthermore, the experience of program development was a source of professional and personal pleasure as group members learned to stretch their own skills and recognized the support of peers.

Conclusion

Collaboration is a popular term in educational literature. The National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP) *Best Practices in School Psychology* (NASP, 1995). is among a myriad of professional literature that extols members to engage in collaboration. In practice, collaboration is difficult to accomplish, often because of systemic limitations. Schools are often hierarchical in nature and it is within these structures that school psychologists must operate. Special education legislation, an indisputable influence on the practice of school psychology, is an external force that local schools cannot change and which they must obey. Time constraints often make true collaboration inconvenient.

Despite these concerns, meaningful changes in schools often require groups to work together on shared concerns. Participatory action research is a guide for collaborative consultation and school change. There are many strong reasons to invest the

time and effort PAR requires. When school communities work proactively to develop practices that translate mandates into workable forms, they are less vulnerable to the negative outcomes that may impact more passive systems. With important and complex problems, it becomes worthwhile to invest the time action research demands. In individual case consultation, action research guides interactions that are culturally sensitive, inclusive, uses on-going information gathering, and that may lead to more comprehensive changes in systems.

Most importantly, action research acts as a moral guide, prompting psychologists who use the model to act in inclusive ways, to be sensitive to the diverse perspectives of others, and to remain open to the changing demands complex situations present. Action research is as much about the process of change as it is about the product of change. If school psychologists wish to be successful child advocates, child, action research is a change model for the 21st Century.

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