
Expanding the Conversation: Family-School Collaboration

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Abstract

The two powerful systems of the family and the school are too often isolated from each other when it comes to the welfare of the child experiencing difficulties. This paper proposes a means of closing that gap—a process whereby school counsellors can facilitate family-school meetings. The authors propose that not only are family-school meetings a viable option in a constraining economic context, but they promise more enduring changes around declared problems because they facilitate the sharing of meanings among various levels of systems in the child's life. While this collaborative approach attends to systemic concerns, it shies away from directive interventions, favouring a view of counselling as therapeutic conversation where meanings are co-constructed among participants.

Résumé

Les deux systèmes puissants de la famille et de l'école sont trop souvent isolés l'un de l'autre quand il s'agit du bien-être de l'enfant qui éprouve des difficultés. Cet article propose un moyen de supprimer cet écart—un procédé selon lequel les conseillers d'orientation peuvent faciliter les conférences famille-école. Les auteurs soutiennent que les conférences famille-école constituent non seulement une option viable dans un contexte économique restrictif, mais qu'elles promettent des changements plus durables en ce qui concerne les difficultés déclarées, parce que les conférences facilitent le partage de significations parmi les divers niveaux de systèmes dans la vie de l'enfant. Bien que cette approche de collaboration s'occupe des soucis au niveau des systèmes, elle évite les interventions directives et considère plutôt le counseling comme une conversation thérapeutique, où les significations sont construites parmi les participants ensemble.

The 1990s might be remembered as the “decade of risk” for North American children. Gibbs (1990) ushered in the decade with a litany of disconcerting statistics:

Every eight seconds of the school day, a child drops out. Every 26 seconds, a child runs away from home. Every 47 seconds, a child is abused or neglected. Every 67 seconds, a teenager has a baby. Every seven minutes a child is arrested for a drug offense. Every 36 minutes, a child is killed or injured by a gun. Every day 135,000 children bring guns to school. Even children from the most comfortable surroundings are at risk. (cited in O'Callighan 1993, p. 7)

It is tempting to conclude that the ominous list of statistics above pertain to a society far removed from Canada. After all, it appeared in *Time* magazine (Gibbs, 1990), and was meant to depict the deteriorating predicament of American children at the turn of the decade. But a reflection on the current rapid evolution of public policy in Canada suggests that the difference between our two societies grows smaller each

day. The world is changing dramatically for our Canadian children, and the stresses are showing themselves in the schools.

The discussion to follow will explore some innovative thinking about counselling and therapy which are in step with our changing times. In addition, the authors will describe their own work in putting these ideas into practice in order to facilitate collaboration between the two most influential systems in the child's life: the family and the school.

THE EXISTING SITUATION

The phenomenon of shrinking resources for addressing the needs of school-aged children is not exclusive to the U.S. A recent Alberta study (Gora, Sawatzky, & Hague, 1992) suggested that counsellors were becoming increasingly concerned about what appeared to be impossible demands on their time and energy. Many emphasized the critical importance of working with families. Based on their concerns about time constraints, it was suggested that the number of school-based counsellors be increased, that counselling time allotted to schools be increased, and that counsellors be assigned to a maximum of two or three schools.

These recommendations, which might have been appropriate in the 1980s and early 1990s, no longer seem compatible with current financial constraints in Canada. While highly laudable, the notion of an increased helper-to-client ratio may not be feasible at this time. Consider some further aspects of the current situation:

1. For a large segment of the population, counselling services outside schools are not economically feasible.
2. A very limited segment of the population has access to marriage and family therapists. Clinic-based family therapy is less and less an option, especially for highly stressed single parents and families living on welfare, step-families, and many two-career families without the time or money for therapy, regardless of need.
3. More services are being moved outside schools. This trend is particularly evident in the Province of Alberta. However, referrals from schools to family therapists are notoriously unlikely to be followed up. An early United States study by Conti (1973) estimated that about 10% of referrals made by school personnel to outside agencies were actually followed through.

This diminishment of services to students exacerbates the isolation of key support systems in the child's life, that is, of schools from families, and of various helping professionals from each other:

1. Parents have tended to limit their parenting efforts to issues external to the school and school professionals have been reluctant to deal with problems traditionally considered family matters (Epstein, 1992).

2. Where counsellors, school psychologists or other school professionals are aware of the linkages between the school and the home system, they have often felt frustrated in their inability to know how to intervene in ways that are consistent with their mandate *within* the school (Gora, et al 1992).
3. A lack of collaboration among professionals has become a major problem in the field, and can result in students being inadvertently caught between professionals at odds with each other regarding assessment or treatment (Imber-Black, 1988). When professionals are mutually isolated, or in open conflict without a structure for resolving their disagreements, students and their families may be confused and discouraged.

A recurring thread through much of these observations concerns a striking separation of contexts. The family and the school—the two monolithic institutions of a child’s world—are largely severed from each other when it comes to many of the critically formative issues of youth.

The overall intent in this paper is to promote family-school collaboration as a means of reducing this segregation of systems within the sometimes smothering constraints of the current economic climate. The term *collaboration* suggests a process of families and schools working together—a shared responsibility by the two institutions for the education of children. The word *family* recognizes the potential influence of all family members, not just parents, as well as the increasingly varied range of family constellations, including non-biological siblings and parents in blended families.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: THE CHILD’S DILEMMA

Lightfoot (1978) captures this dilemma of mutually exclusive contexts which many children inhabit. She describes children attempting to function in two worlds, the home and the school, which may be in conflict and which are often based in different value systems. The dilemma is aptly portrayed in the film *The Dead Poets Society*, in which an anguished teenager attempts to grapple with the contrasting value systems of the home and school. In the end, the conflicting meanings offer no resolution, and tragedy results. Families and schools are two powerful meaning-making systems; when they are isolated from each other—or worse still, at odds—the impact on the children caught between them can be devastating.

To counter this mutual isolation, a number of researchers and clinicians have focused on connecting the severed domains of meaning. Synthesizing the research over a period of 15 years, Henderson (1987) concluded that when parents are involved in their children’s education, children tend to have higher educational achievement, better atten-

dance and more positive attitudes about education. Epstein (1992a) similarly describes the benefits of family-school partnerships. She supports a social organizational perspective of overlapping spheres of influence. The home and school spheres can be pushed together or pulled apart, with the amount of overlap representing the degree of shared responsibility. When the connections are productive, they often contribute to improved academic skill, self esteem, independence and other behaviours characteristic of successful individuals.

The perspective taken by Henderson, Epstein and other researchers suggests that, though it may be tempting to view children as isolated and self-contained entities, it may be more efficacious to adopt a systemic view. O'Callaghan (1993) and others have in the past few years utilized the term "ecosystem" to describe the wider context in which a child is situated, including the child's family and school. The term is intended to underscore the systemic nature of the child's interactions across settings, as well as the scope of the settings and reciprocal influences in which the child is involved (Fine, 1992). From a systemic perspective, an individual's behaviour must be viewed in terms of a context.

Family therapy theory, with its contextual emphasis, has given rise to a range of approaches to involving the family when the child is presenting academic and behaviour problems (Carlson, 1987; DiCocco, 1986). Following an extensive review of empirical research, Donovan (1992) concluded that family systems interventions are effective in treating students' behavioral problems in school. In those studies that specifically assessed students' behaviour in school as an outcome variable, both parents and independent observers noted less disruptive behaviour following systemic interventions with families.

At a time when school resources are scarce and counsellors are faced with ever-more-complex family constellations, we feel these systemically-oriented approaches offer much promise. It has been asserted that family-based interventions are time consuming, require school professionals to be family therapists, and are outside the mandate of most school jurisdictions. As the discussion continues, we will suggest that to the contrary, collaboration between families and schools enables school professionals to abandon the seemingly futile task of altering behaviour patterns and meanings in isolation from the critical domain of the family which gave rise to many of those behaviours and meanings in the first place.

FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS AS MEANING SYSTEMS

While what might be called a traditional systemic view has tended to construe problems as existing in physical domains, we prefer to emphasize the linguistic context. Following Anderson and Goolishian (1988), we therefore view the therapeutic system, and all human systems, as

language-generating, meaning making entities. The problem is seen as a meaning originating from one or more linguistic systems, and change is regarded as the evolution of new meaning through dialogue¹.

This narrative orientation is increasingly evident in emerging approaches to counselling and therapy (Held, 1995; O'Hanlon, 1994) which emphasize the manner in which persons construct the dilemmas they face through their interpretation of their experience. In many respects, this thinking echoes back to Kelly (1955), who argued that whatever exists can be re-construed. Contemporary narrative theory is less "skull-bound" (Hoffman, 1993) or intrapsychically-oriented, in that it points to the inevitable social context in which the re-construing unfolds (Gergen, 1985; Gergen & Kaye, 1992; White & Epston, 1990). And so while "persons' lives are shaped by the meaning they ascribe to their experience" (White, 1993, p. 35), these meanings always emerge from some meaning system and are never generated in a social vacuum.

Training this conceptual lens on this discussion, the family and the school are regarded as meaning-making systems which in effect *construct* problems. A problem is viewed as an interpretation, rather than a "reality" in the sense the word might be used in the natural sciences. Following Anderson and Goolishian (1988), then, the work of therapy is not to "solve" problems, but rather to "dis-solve" them through an ongoing dialogue which leads to "the creation of new themes and narratives" (p. 381). Elsewhere, Anderson (1993) puts it this way: "change, whether in a cognitive or behavioral domain, is a natural consequence of dialogue" (p. 325).

Andersen (1993) says this self-reflexive style rests upon the distinction between "either/or" and "both/and" ways of viewing the world. An "either/or" stance presupposes a single and unitary truth. It contributes to blame, because it assumes that only one person can be "right." A "both/and" stance favors a more tentative approach (Andersen, 1987) characterized by curiosity about how explanations for problems have evolved, rather than a search for the "truth of the matter."

What distinguishes this orientation from the more long-established systemic family therapy models is its favouring of a non-hierarchical, collaborative stance which eschews "interventions" in the familiar sense of the word. A "dialogic" (Waters, 1994) approach to therapy involves participating in what Anderson and Goolishian (1988) call:

a conversation that continually loosens and opens up, rather than constricts and closes down. Through therapeutic conversation, fixed meanings and behaviors (the sense people make of things and their actions) are given room, broadened, shifted, and changed. There is no other required outcome. (p. 381)

In the exchanges between counsellor and student, we believe it often makes sense to expand the conversation to include family members and school personnel.

THE FAMILY-SCHOOL MEETING

The family-school meeting as conceptualized by Weiss and Edwards (1992) from the Ackerman Institute in New York City was a significant milestone in working from a family systems perspective and applying it to the family-school context. A specific feature of their work was the development of specific techniques that were identified for the facilitator to break the blame cycle that is often a major factor in keeping school and home separate.

One of our own approaches (DS) is built on Weiss' and Edwards' work in many respects, but is founded on a conceptual base more closely aligned with a narrative view of the change process. We see each participant in a family-school meeting as arriving to the conversation with his/her own story. These stories might include the school's story of the child, the child's story about him or herself, the family's story of the child, the family's story about the school, or the child's story of the school.

From our perspective, it is the airing of these stories, and the creative co-construction which emerges from the dialogue, which goes a long way towards dis-solving the problem (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). Within this metaphorical frame, counsellors do not seek "solutions" so much as engage in conversations leading to new meanings which no longer construe the "problem" as a problem. This is *not* to suggest that the status quo is therefore accepted. But through conversation, the status quo evolves, and all participants find themselves in a new place where unforeseen options are opened up to view.

What frequently stands in the way of this process is the mutual blaming, a familiar element of many family-school relationships when a child is perceived as having a problem. The family-school meeting as we (DS) practice it is, therefore, devoted to the dissolution of problems by moving from rigid stories of blame characterized by "either/or" thinking to more open-ended stories of possibility founded on a "both/and" perspective. The goal of the consultant in this context is to create space for dialogue and to manage the conversation (Epstein and Loos, 1989).

The following case illustration, based on a multi-session role play exercise, illustrates how this might happen.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Paul is a 17-year-old student in a large high school who has been seen by parents and teachers to be "changing dramatically" both in his attitudes towards school and his grades. A year ago he was an honors student; recently he is barely passing in all subjects. At the parents' initiation, Paul had individual counselling with a psychologist/family therapist. The family joined the therapy for two final sessions.

Following these sessions, Paul seemed more willing to participate in family discussions. He was less reserved about sharing his experience, and through

his comments, he suggested a more optimistic prognosis for the family's dilemma. At school, however, little if any change was evident to his parents or teachers. A decision was made by the family therapist, in conjunction with the family, to refer the family for a family-school meeting with the senior author (DS) in the role of a school counsellor (DS) who was interested in working collaboratively with schools and families. The school counsellor met with the following individuals: the school principal, Paul's teacher/class advisor, members of Paul's family—dad, mom, Paul, and Paul's 11-year-old sister Penny.²

During the session, the stories varied. The school saw Paul as having developed a bad attitude, probably as a result of a poor choice of friends. Mom saw the school, and Paul's father, as not understanding Paul. Paul's initial story was that the expectations of the school for him were too high. Penny's story was that she hated always being the good kid—the more everybody saw her brother as “bad,” the more she had to be good. Dad was adamant that Paul was capable and that the solution most certainly did not lie in relaxing expectations. He saw Paul as lacking in motivation and needing to shape-up.

The counsellor's initial role in this conversation was to ensure that everyone was heard. Blaming statements, which usually have a distinct “either/or” tenor to them, were opened up into “both/and” reflections—an acknowledgment of the co-existence of multiple meanings which does not separate the “right” meanings from the “wrong” ones. As the session progressed, a new story began to emerge. Paul saw himself as similar to his sister Penny, in that he was having difficulty expressing his uniqueness.

As Paul's story of himself and his situation evolved, he indicated he wanted to find ways in which he could both have his uniqueness respected, and also succeed in school. He was interested in rock music and he had an original sense of clothing style. From his perspective, these were expressions of his individuality, not emblems of a counter culture. He wanted to succeed in school and felt that he could do better there if he was encouraged more and criticized less. He wanted to feel more understood. For both Dad and the school personnel, there were new awarenesses that came out of hearing Paul's and Penny's stories. There was an understanding on the part of everyone concerned that uniqueness and achievement in school were not mutually exclusive. Paul's principal and teacher offered to be supportive, but made it clear that Paul needed to take initiative in expressing his needs.

Through the course of this conversation, the consensual meaning of Paul's “problem” evolved from something to the effect that “Paul is hanging out with the wrong crowd and needs to buckle down at school” to a story about Paul's unique identity and his need to have that acknowledged and respected in order for him to rally around his school work.

The dialogue moved the conversationalists to a new place of understanding, and suggested a direction not anticipated at the outset. At the close of the meeting, family and school agreed to touch base again in several months time in order to evaluate progress.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHANGED ROLES FOR SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

It may be time to re-conceptualize how we provide services to children and youth in schools. It is an established belief that families are the most significant single influence on the development of children. There is now strong evidence that parent involvement enhances childrens' school success (Swap, 1992). Swap quotes Henderson (1987), who has done an extensive review of the literature on this subject, as concluding the following: "The evidence is now beyond dispute: parent involvement improves school achievement. When parents are involved, children do better in school." (p. 1). In spite of the strength of the data that appear to support this conclusion, when a student is having difficulty adapting to the school system (e.g., poor grades, disruptive classroom behaviour, truancy, or vandalism), the school system's intervention plans (e.g., time out, behaviour modification, suspension, detention, individual or group counselling) have traditionally tried to influence the individual student in isolation from the most significant influence in the child's life—the family (Petrie & Piersel, 1982, cited in Valentine, M. R., 1992). It makes good sense to attempt, when possible, to bring together the two dominant social systems in the child's life in order to engage in constructive collaboration towards more enduring changes. The family-school meeting is one aspect of this overall collaborative effort.

We believe the counsellor in the school is well positioned and well trained for this task. There are natural connections between the knowledge base and communication skills of counsellors and the needs of schools for better communication with families.

We acknowledge, with Fine and Carlson (1992) that the roles of the family and the counsellor may vary considerably from context to context. There are many levels and dimensions of family involvement in relation to what initially appears to be a school-based problem with the child. Counsellors might, for example, be involved at a preventative level with such activities as parent education. In some jurisdictions, they may have the mandate as well as training to engage in family therapy. Although these activities may be both legitimate and useful, this is not the kind of activities we are advocating. We are suggesting a much more central role in working conjointly with parents, teachers, students and other school staff. Counsellors might, for example, consult with teachers in order to identify cases where family school meetings might be useful. They might also meet with students (both individually and in groups) and with

parents in order to identify needs and to develop and implement plans for more meaningful family involvement in schools.

The work presented here certainly has a preventative dimension, but it is collaboratively oriented rather than didactic, and therefore does not fit the description of “parent education.” And while the ideas are highly congruent with contemporary approaches to family therapy, we see this work more in terms of intermittent case conferencing with families and school personnel rather than ongoing family therapy.

As we present our case for this position, we will address two concerns frequently raised around the subject of counsellors coordinating and facilitating family-school involvements: that this emphasis (and particularly family school meetings) is too time consuming, and that counsellors are not sufficiently trained for the work:

Concern #1: Meetings with families and schools are overly time consuming.

After an extensive review of the literature on family interventions, Donovan (1992) found that interventions with families ranged from 4 to 18 weekly meetings. It is our guess that many child-focused psychological interventions carried out by school counsellors are comparable in length. Family—school interventions typically require longer meetings as well as more time to organize and debrief. They also require that the school be well represented by both administration and teachers. On the other hand, one or two meetings during the course of a school year could have a major impact on the school career of a student. We believe there is a risk in relying on a limited “snapshot” view in attempting to deduce the time and energy demands of family-school versus individual interventions in the schools. When consideration is given to the extent of resources often devoted to a child experiencing difficulties over the course of an academic career, it makes sense to identify an approach to counselling which encompasses a wider systemic domain, and therefore adopts a more holistic approach to the situation at hand. When wider resources are mobilized, change is likely to be more lasting, as well as to occur across more contexts (Donovan, 1992).

Concern #2: Counsellors typically do not have adequate training and skills to work systemically with families and schools.

In many respects, by virtue of their basic training, counsellors are ideal candidates for bringing families and schools together. Counsellors are professional conversationalists: they are trained to listen to and reflect back expressed meanings, as well as to mediate between conflicting parties. However, we acknowledge that the work as described here calls for a certain familiarity with both systems and narrative thinking in the family therapy tradition.

Epstein (1992) suggests that an appreciation and experience with systems approaches is an important prerequisite to facilitating family-school collaboration. Systems approaches focus conceptually on the reciprocal nature of behaviours and, therefore, at the applied level are specifically directed towards staying out of the blaming modality. We would add that social constructionist and narrative ideas would be an important addition to this training. Narrative approaches emphasize collaborative dialogue, focusing on the meaning-making dimension of experience. Like other systems orientations, narrative eschews blaming in favor of focusing on persons' ability to "re-author" their lives.

Donovan (1992) reports that a survey is currently being carried out to determine to what extent family intervention training is currently available in graduate programs in the United States. Our observation is that educational opportunities related to working with family therapy orientations are more readily available in Canadian universities now than they once were.

SUMMARY

In summary, our overall perspective is that it may be timely to reconceptualize some aspects of counsellors' roles in schools. The shift may include a view of families and schools as partners in both creating and dissolving student concerns. We want to emphasize that the approach we are suggesting is essentially social and collaborative. It involves a different paradigm—not just an extra set of techniques to be added to the old paradigm.

If school counsellors, as well as school psychologists, can provide leadership in schools for involving families in an inviting and collaborative manner, the role of school counselling will be transformed. The new role will have school counsellors involved with facilitating the mutual understanding of divergent stories. While this role may be more challenging and more complex, we believe it will be more likely to bring about lasting change.

Notes

¹ Anderson and Goolishian's Collaborative Language Systems approach is now frequently located under the umbrella term of "narrative" family therapy (see Held, 1995). However, it seems fair to say that White and Epston (1990) emphasize the socio-political context of lived narratives, while Anderson and Goolishian (1988) favour the linguistic dimension of problem construction. What unites these, along with Solution-Focused approaches (Berg, 1994; de Shazer, 1991, 1994), is their non-essentialist stance, and their attention to the social construction of reality (Paré, 1995).

² Even within the culture of the school, the principal and the teacher can be seen as representing slightly different systems or domains of meaning. The principal's role is primarily administrative, while the teacher is more directly accountable for what happens in the classroom. Like his parents and sister, Paul's principal and teacher have formulated their own particular stories about his identity and capabilities.

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