

Barriers of Communication

During this course, we discussed the importance of collaboration and how there are many barriers that affect proper collaboration. Most importantly, as future educators we discussed how these barriers come into play in the school setting and how they ultimately hinder professional growth and success as well as the growth and success of the students we service. While there are many different barriers to collaboration, the one that stood out to me the most was the lack of adequate communication between all team members. Communication is an umbrella term as it is so broad and has so many different meanings and ways of executing. While team members can communicate frequently, they still may be communicating ineffectively and thus creating a barrier to successful collaboration. Learning about these barriers also taught us how they can create an unjust environment for ourselves, our colleagues, and parents we work with and can impede by-in. Thomas Crum stated that “The quality of our lives depends not on whether or not we have conflicts, but on how we respond to them”. As future educators, conflict is going to be the unfortunate reality of our jobs and it is important to prepare how to respond.

As educators, parents should be viewed as one of the most essential components to a child’s success and they should be treated as such. The prevalent issue that I found between teachers and parents is that both parties have a difference in opinion on what the best plan is for the child. There are so many different reasons why this disagreement happens, but one of the universal best practices that I have found to handle this situation is to communicate to the parent with compassion. Hearing that their child is struggling, whether it be academically, behaviorally, or socially, is never easy for parents to hear and it is important to recognize that

their first response is always going to be to protect their child. That may come out in the form of denial, blaming, or even in problem solving. However a parent responds, it is still our job as educators to listen and actively involve the parents. Including parents in the process means to ask parents personal questions and goals they have regarding their child, ask them for feedback regarding goals and concerns you have about their child, and make sure that they are informed and understood. While it is important to communicate to parents about your concerns with their child, it is imperative to also communicate to them about the successes. Maryln Applebaum wrote that "Parents don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (*How to Handle Hard-to-Handle Parents*, 94). This quote stuck with me because when dealing with conflict, especially from parents, there is not always going to be one solution nor right way to handle it, but if the situation is approached in a way that shows how much I care about the child, then I think it will help us find a common ground. When suggesting those hard to hear solutions, let's say one such as a special education placement, it will be hard to have parents buy-in if they do not trust the overall intentions of a teacher or the team. On the contrary, if a parent feels the compassion the teacher and team has for their child then, in my opinion, they will be more susceptible to trust and follow the proposed plan.

Another approach that Applebaum discussed is what she called "The Six 'Nevers'" (pg 26-29). Out of these six "nevers", the three that I found to go along with communicating with compassion is to never argue, never get defensive, and never take it personally. These three are the most important because they all entail an emotional communication barrier. As educators, I truly think that we have the best interest of the student at mind, but we are also coming from an education standpoint. While parents are prioritizing education, there are so many other

facets they are coming since they have a strong emotional attachment and protective instinct that it may be hard for them to accept something that they are unfamiliar with or weary of. It is our job from so it is part of our job to listen, understand, and find a way to work together. By arguing and taking offense the feelings and expressions of the parents, we are only lessening the chance for a successful collaborative relationship.

Another strategy that I learned and found to be extremely beneficial when working with parents, especially those with conflicting views, is to communicate with the intent to solve. In this field I believe that it is very easy for everyone involved to take such a strong stance on their direction for the student that it often gets hard to see other perspectives in a positive light. However, I also believe that everyone on that child's team has the same common goal, which is to do what is best for that child's overall success. When everyone has the same common goal, collaborating with the intent to problem solve is key and can often be achieved through proper and effective communication. The term "proactive problem solving" was discussed in our textbook *Interactions* by Marilyn Friend and Lynne Cook and had amazing strategies when laying the groundwork for active communication between parents and their child's education team. Prior to meetings, the lines of communication should be open. As the child's teacher, it is important to communicate the child's successes and struggles frequently, ask the parents questions when they arise, and make it known that you are also an available resource for them. This communication prior to meetings is important not only so that the parents feel and remain informed, but also so that a rapport is built. During the meetings, it is important to make it a priority to actively involve the parents in the meeting. Since emotional barriers are very prevalent with parents, it is the educators' job to ask the parent if they need

clarification or understanding but it is also important to make sure that the educator is understanding and clarifying the desires and expectations of the parents. After the meeting, it is imperative to follow up with the parents and continue the communication. By taking these steps it shows the parents that you are actively working for the success of their child and believe that they are a crucial role in all that success.

While parents are a very viable member of a child's educational team, so are paraprofessionals. However, just like parents, there are many instances where communication barriers between educators and paraprofessionals creates conflict and thus affects the paraprofessionals' buy-in for a student's educational plan. Over this course, I felt that a conflict faced between teachers and paraprofessionals was that communication is not effectively being executed among both parties. While working as a paraprofessional and talking with both teachers and paraprofessionals, I heard so many complaints that paraprofessionals did not understand the reasoning behind a child's plan and therefore did not complete it with fidelity. The feeling of not being included during the formation of a plan continues to leave paraprofessionals with the feeling of frustration and distrust of the plan. One plan of action to work through this issue is to, as the teacher, explain the "why" behind a plan. Paraprofessionals have an essential role to the entire plan but have more of a backseat role which becomes very belittling and hard. Many decisions for a child are made in meetings that the paraprofessional does not attend and therefore they are left out on the full explanation of why a certain plan is implemented. For them to feel more included and for them to truly understand the "why" behind a plan, the teacher must communicate with the paraprofessional. Often, the chosen plan is only discussed with the paraprofessional, but the reasoning is left out, so it is important

to not only tell the plan, but to thoroughly explain it. The best strategy that I learned during this class was the “I do, I do, We do, You do” strategy. For this strategy, the educator identifies the goals and objectives of the new proposed plan by fully explaining the strategy with thorough reasoning behind it. The paraprofessional can ask questions and ask for clarification. Then, the teacher models this practice and clearly and demonstrates ways to implement. After that, the paraprofessional then practices the strategy and how they would carry it out when working with the child. During this time, the teacher is the one to ask questions, suggestions and give confirmation to the paraprofessional. Finally, the paraprofessional is responsible for implementing the strategy with the student by themselves. This way, it creates a shared accountability and sense of respect between both parties as they both understand the importance of the plan as well as how to do it.

Another useful strategy that I learned was through my Teacher Interview. I interviewed a teacher who currently has a 1:1 paraprofessional in her classroom and I focused on challenges they faced working together and how they worked or continue to work to overcome them. In the beginning, the teacher felt as if she was adequately communicating with the paraprofessional about her expectations and responsibilities, but it was not until the paraprofessional brought her feelings of being excluded from the importance of the class and felt isolated. Ultimately, it boiled down to the teacher feeling as though she was perfectly communicating with the paraprofessional but then saying that she was missing out on viable information. Moving forward, they have decided to create weekly meetings where they share the lesson plans for both the student the paraprofessional works with as well as the entire class. That way, the paraprofessional can step in when needed and feel comfortable doing so. They

also have both expressed the desire to check-in with each other and verbally told each other that they want to move forward with open communication and constructive criticism. Just by putting that conversation and understanding out there, they feel like equal partners in the students' education. By making both formal and informal meetings a common occurrence, they have been able to create a collaborative relationship and now the paraprofessional understands her role and the reasoning why she is doing it. In my future classroom, I would like to also create both formal meetings where I can discuss the class and student expectations, fully discuss behind the changes and solutions, successes and concerns, as well as just have a set time to check-in with one another. I also want to create informal meetings so that it is an environment that is conducive to feedback as well as compliments and appreciation for all that is being done. These communication changes can help break the barriers and create a greater understanding among all parties.

Along with explaining the "why" to a plan, I loved learning the strategy about collecting data on students to learn which students need support and which ones need to work on more independent strategies. For instance, by having a sheet that collects the data regarding the setting, task, time taken to complete, and support given to a student, it can show when a student may be ready for less paraprofessional support. While this is a positive outcome and at the best interest for the student, it may become an unsettling feeling when a paraprofessional is moved from one student, possibly one they have been working with for some time, it may be an unpleasant feeling for the paraprofessional as they could feel like their role is being taken from them. By having this data collected, it will be a great way to show the paraprofessional why exactly the change was made and why another student is best serviced during their time. Again,

these simple communication strategies are amazing ways to work together with the paraprofessional and hold each other accountable for the students' achievements.

Overall, I have learned so many beneficial strategies to overcome barriers when working with both parents and paraprofessionals. The most important thing that I have learned, however, is that there is no one size fits all when it comes to strategies but taking on conflict with the approach of compassion and understanding can make all the difference. As educators our job is crucial but one that cannot be done without a collaborative team and effective communication and therefore actively working on creating solutions will only positively affect all who are involved in the process.

References

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