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ABSTRACT

The experience of one urban school district in developing and implementing a program of team teaching for bilingual special education students is examined. Bilingual education teachers, special education teachers, specialists in speech pathology and English as a Second Language, and principals collaborated to construct their own programs in one elementary school and one junior high school. The program was studied by ethnographic methods. Its evolution is described chronologically, and its results are discussed in terms of four general collaboration competency areas needed by educators serving culturally and/or linguistically diverse students. These competencies are: understanding one's own perspective; use of effective interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving skills sensitive to cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary interaction; understanding the roles of collaborators; and use of appropriate assessment and instructional strategies. It is concluded that the program succeeded in helping teachers achieve these competencies. In addition, several lessons learned about the dynamics of bilingual special education teams are outlined. (MSE)

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DEVELOPING AND USING COLLABORATIVE BILINGUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION TEAMS

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Abstract

This paper takes a constructivist view of teaming and presents a case study of how bilingual and special educators developed and instituted their own collaborative bilingual special education teams in a southwest urban school district. Ethnographic methodology was used. The first author audio taped and kept field notes of team meetings at two schools as well as discussions with team members and other school personnel regarding the bilingual special education teams. Several lessons were identified regarding the development and maintenance of the bilingual special education teams in this district. First, self-determination of team characteristics was evidenced. Second, the teams and team processes continued to evolve. Third, cohesiveness among team members can be instigated by a crisis. Fourth, there are no "right answers." Finally, even without ideal conditions, positive changes can occur in a school.

Introduction

Transdisciplinary team structures are needed in educational settings in which bilingual/bicultural students are served. The importance of collaboration and the development of collaborative, transdisciplinary team structures within educational settings is well documented in the literature (Chalfant, Pysh, & Moultrie 1979; Idol, West & Lloyd, 1988; West & Idol, 1987). While some educators are beginning to use such structures, they lack experiences working in this manner (Chiarelott, Reed, & Russell, 1991). Even fewer school personnel have had experience in working together through collaborative interactions to meet the needs of students who are limited English proficient and also experiencing learning problems (Fradd, 1991; Hudson & Fradd, 1990; Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1991). For example, teacher assistance teams have been instituted in a few schools to specifically address the needs of bilingual/bicultural students who are having problems in school prior to referral to special education (Collier, 1988; García & Ortiz, 1988; Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1991). These joint efforts require coordination, consultation, and collaboration among bilingual and special educators.

The literature provides suggestions for how to institute school-based teams (Chalfant, et al., 1979; Heron & Harris, 1993; Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1993; Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1991) as well as evidence suggesting the effectiveness of these teams (Chalfant & Van Dusen Pysh, 1989; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bahr, 1990; Graden, Casey & Bonstrom, 1985; Nelson, Smith, Taylor, Dodd, & Reavis, 1991; Ortiz, 1990). Although the literature provides suggestions for instituting teams, research is needed to determine means for assisting schools in collaboratively constructing and using teams. The purpose of this paper is to describe a constructivist view of teaming and to present a case study of how

bilingual and special educators in one school district developed and instituted their own collaborative bilingual special education teams.

Method

Ethnographic research methodologies were used to study these teams (Miles & Huberman, 1984). By systematically participating in and observing the team process, the authors sought to understand the meanings of actions, practices, and events from the teachers and administrators working in the setting. Additionally, the longitudinal design of this study provided the opportunity to build working relationships between the authors and school district personnel. As rapport developed, it provided access to the beliefs and attitudes of the participants -- information that is often difficult to obtain in other ways (Edgerton & Langness, 1978).

Setting

The location of this study was a school district on the fringe of a southwestern city's traditional inner city area. The district's neighborhoods are a mix of small business and light industrial development. This K-8 district, with approximately 6,000 students, has 84% minority representation, 81% family poverty, 52% population turnover and 74% of its students are limited English proficient. The district is not rich in resources; neither does it have a reputation for being on the forefront of educational innovations. Therefore, it is representative of many urban school districts in the country faced with serving a challenging student body with limited resources.

Sources of Data

A university professor has been involved with the process of developing and implementing the teams in this district since the inception of the team concept. In the spring of 1991, she participated in district deliberations resulting in the decision to establish teams. During the first academic year of implementation (1991-1992), the professor attended the team meetings at both schools and kept fieldnotes. Periodically, she talked with team members, teachers who referred students to the team at the elementary school, and department heads at the junior high school to obtain their perceptions of the team process and its effectiveness. The professor has maintained a relationship with the district and has supported the establishment of a third team at an elementary school in the district. Throughout the past two years, she documented conversations with district administrators, principals and teachers regarding the developing teams and collected artifacts from the teams to document their development as well as transcriptions of tape-recorded team meetings, field notes, and interviews.

Procedures and Results

The results are interwoven with the procedures. Results are presented in chronological format, with excerpts from the interviews and logs, to illustrate the three phases of the study: developing the teams, collaboratively constructing the team processes, and using the teams.

Developing the Teams

The following words describe the impetus for the special education director at the school district to establish bilingual special education teams.

It was about three years ago now ... the scenario will probably sound somewhat familiar. I was in a situation where I had the coordinator of the bilingual program come to me and say, "we have a problem because there is a special ed. kid at one of our schools who is also bilingual and just not getting the services they need." And I said okay ... after Christmas we need to take a look at this. Well after Christmas the special ed. people came to me and said, "we got a problem because we have this child who is bilingual but they've got to have these special ed. services ... and the bilingual teachers are saying that I can't serve them....The bilingual people were saying he's special ed. but he needs to have all of his instruction in Spanish and he goes back to the special ed. room and all they do are these English things and the special ed. people are saying that he has to have special ed. because he's a special ed. kid ... " (Special Education Director, February 1993).

She called a meeting of bilingual and special education personnel. As she describes it:

We met in a library in one of the schools and the special ed. people sat over here and the bilingual people sat over here. It was very interesting because the bilingual people were saying "they don't understand our kids and they don't know what to do with them. If we refer them nothing happens to them." And the special ed. people were saying "well they never refer them" ... (we decided) to problem solve ... (we decided) we've got to have some training.... We did a day of training (with the first author), half of the morning bilingual training and half of the morning special ed. training. So the bilingual and special ed. people could communicate on somewhat of an equal basis In the afternoon we brainstormed and let these people tell me and (the first author) what it was they thought needed to be done And it came down to these specific seven. We felt that language of instruction needed to be based on the linguistic needs of the child. Collaborative efforts using expertise of teachers across departments was necessary. There needed to be buy-in by administrators and we're talking top down. We needed to have the numbers of kids in the class changed,... interface using materials, (provide) in service for both bilingual and special ed. staff and (orchestrate) parent involvement. (Special Education Director, February 1993).

During the first year (1991-92), the interface of bilingual and special education materials as well as the interface of bilingual and special education services was addressed through in services conducted by district employees. Administrative buy-in for collaborative efforts was addressed by talking with principals about the establishment of bilingual special education teams and

securing the participation of an elementary principal and a junior high school principal to establish teams at their schools. The elementary school principal received training in the teacher assistance team process used by Chalfant and Pysh (1989) and was eager to establish such a team at his school. The junior high school principal had not received training in the teacher assistance team concept but she was interested in interdisciplinary teams as a vehicle for delivering instruction to students.

Composition and Role of the Teams

The university professor and the special education director met with each principal separately. At this meeting, the professor, the special education director and the principal clarified the team purpose and determined the composition of the team. The purpose of the team was to provide support to the teacher in instructing students with non-native English speaking backgrounds who were having problems in school, a focus consistent with the teacher assistance team concept (see, for example, Chalfant, et al., 1979). The bilingual special education team did not replace the special education referral team (i.e., Child Study Team); neither was it a required step in the prereferral process for the Child Study Team.

The factors of expertise and staff personalities influenced the composition of the teams. At this elementary school, the core team members included: a primary level bilingual resource teacher (Mexican-American, bilingual Spanish/English), an intermediate level bilingual resource teacher (Cuban, bilingual Spanish/English), a special education resource teacher (Anglo, monolingual English), a speech and language pathologist (Anglo, monolingual English) and the principal (Mexican-American, bilingual Spanish/English). At the junior high school, the core team members included: a bilingual teacher (Mexican-American, bilingual Spanish/English), an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher (Mexican-American, monolingual English), a special education resource teacher (Mexican-American, bilingual Spanish/English) and the assistant principal (Mexican-American, bilingual Spanish/English).

During the first academic year, the composition of the elementary team did not change. However, the composition of the junior high team changed. Because the duties of the assistant principal prevented active participation in team meetings, he was replaced by the Title VII bilingual specialist (bilingual Spanish/English). The principal (Anglo, monolingual English) became a member of the team to emphasize its importance to school staff. Finally, in the spring, a general educator (Mexican-American, bilingual Spanish/English) was added to the team to provide credibility to the general education staff and to account for the general education perspective.

Collaboratively Constructing the Team Processes

The authors (both Anglo, monolingual English) used a constructivist approach to support the development of these teams. That is, the authors did not impose a model for school-based teams but supported school personnel in the process of team formation, team implementation, and team evaluation. This support was provided by creating a "community of discourse" (Fosnot, 1991, p. 58). The authors asked clarifying questions, paraphrased understandings, and

helped school staff use conflicts as opportunities to make structural changes. This approach for support was used to promote active construction of knowledge as well as team ownership.

In collaboration with the special education director (Anglo, monolingual English), the authors constructed a series of learning opportunities in which participants mutually developed and refined their teaming processes. Team members were released from school responsibilities and the sessions were conducted in the district office conference room. The goal for session 1 was to model a collaborative process to establish teams. Administrators and university personnel facilitated separate meetings of each bilingual special education team. At this time, team members shared information and beliefs with one another, established a purpose for their team and determined a team name. The elementary team identified the following aspects of teaming to be most important: communication skills and being supportive; evaluation and the ability to be flexible and follow-up resources; time; team effort, i.e., how the team works as a group, willingness to learn and being an advocate for the child; and knowing limits of team members. The purpose identified by the elementary team was: in depth study of helping and meeting the appropriate educational needs in the least restrictive environment via collaboration. The team chose to be named the Bilingual Education Support Team.

The junior high school team considered the following aspects of teaming to be most important: collaborative approach - share expertise, materials, resources (seek resources outside team, if needed), problem-solving, be open-minded (keep ego outside); establish comfortable situation for the referring teacher and focus on the student. The junior high team identified the following purposes: provide interventions; strategies; provide resources/materials; have weekly meetings; communicate activities of the team; identify exceptional students; articulate among programs (e.g., new ESL program, Child Study Team); and change negative attitudes into positive attitudes. The team chose to be called the Collaborative Assistance Team.

The goal for Session 2 was to model a collaborative process to maintain and refine team functioning. Information regarding a simple 30 minute problem-solving process and referral procedures used by other teams (Downes, Saver, Maass, Thaney, & Hill, 1990; Hudson & Fradd, 1990) was shared with participants. The teams themselves developed their own referral forms and processes.

The goal for session 3 was to model a collaborative process for mutual coaching and debriefing activities. Two 2 hour simulations were held with each team at their school site. The authors, the special education director and team members practiced reviewing the referral information, conducted a mock team meeting based on a hypothetical referral, and debriefed the outcome and the interpersonal communication processes after the simulation. Subsequent refinements occurred during weekly hour-long team meetings during which the first 15 minutes focused on setting the agenda, verifying roles, and discussing referrals; the next 30 minutes were devoted to the team meeting during which members practiced selected roles and collaborative behaviors; and the last 15 minutes focused on debriefing, deciding what to change, and celebrating achievements.

Using the Teams

During the first year of the project, the elementary team had seven referrals and was accessed by general and bilingual educators. Approximately 60% of the students who the teachers referred were born in the United States and approximately 50% were English dominant. Teachers referred students for both academic and behavior problems, including problems with the English language, problems retaining concepts, writing and reading problems (in both English and Spanish), problems with motivation, distractibility and socialization to school. The elementary team started with referrals one or two weeks after the initial aspect of the training was completed. The issues this team grappled with during the first academic year were: maintaining referrals at mid-year, interpreting feedback regarding the team process, and refining team processes for the following year which would clearly address follow-up of team interventions and support for team members.

To maintain teacher referrals throughout the year, the team members provided incentives to teachers, e.g., thank-you notes, coupons which reminded staff of the support provided by the team, and reminders at staff meetings. The first author obtained feedback from referring teachers by engaging them in unstructured interviews which addressed team process, outcome and suggestions for teacher support. Their comments were audio taped and transcribed. The transcriptions were summarized by the first author and summary statements under each general topic area were presented to the team members. Though referring teachers provided strong positive comments regarding the process and outcome of team meetings, the team members focused upon suggestions for change and, therefore, interpreted the feedback as negative. This "crisis" seemed to provide the impetus for the team to move forward in team development and to refine their team process for the second academic year.

During the first academic year, the junior high team had five referrals and was accessed primarily by special educators. Eighty percent of the students referred were born outside of the United States and were Spanish dominant. Teachers referred students for both academic and behavior problems including problems with speaking English and understanding English directions. The issues they grappled with were stability, effective use of a problem-solving process, referrals to the team, and support for team members.

The stability of the team was affected by the team's singular focus on outcomes of team meetings; team members had to be encouraged to develop their team process skills. Team stability was addressed through additional simulations and focused coaching on team process during debriefing sessions as well as changes in membership. To promote referrals to the team, team members personally approached teachers who they knew and who were receptive to make referrals to the team as well as reminders in the school daily paper and staff meetings.

Both the elementary and junior high teams struggled with obtaining support to maintain the teams' functioning. As the first year drew to a close, teachers indicated that the extra work team membership required (i.e., meeting once a week before or after school and consulting with referring teachers) was considered an extra responsibility. Support during the first year was provided through a university stipend to team members. At the end of the first academic year, the elementary school team identified several strategies that would help to support

their team membership including compensatory time for team participation as well as a priority for the collaborative bilingual special education team over other school committees. At the junior high school, the collaborative bilingual special education team became part of the school-wide planning for interdisciplinary teaching teams. For the 1993-94 academic year, the team members on the collaborative bilingual special education team were each assigned to an interdisciplinary team. Rather than waiting for referrals to come to the collaborative bilingual special education team, team members will work directly with the interdisciplinary teaching teams to support those teachers and to identify students who are in need of adaptations to their instructional program. There was reluctance, from both principals, to provide released time for team members to consult with the teachers who accessed the team as well as reluctance, from team members, to serve primarily in a consulting role. That is, during the first year of implementation, team members behaved as if the way to support teachers was to suggest interventions for students that required team members to teach students directly by pulling them out of their classes. However, by the end of the first academic year of implementation, the elementary school principal and at least one of the team members recognized that lack of assuming a consulting role was a weakness.

Title VII Teacher: ... And one of the problems that we did have at the junior high was the all day classes and I wasn't there enough to pull kids out and work with them...

Elementary Principal: But see that's also one of the weaknesses of our team is that we started doing that. It's not nearly as collaborative as possibly it should have been. They start taking on and which of course the teachers ate up.

Title VII Teacher: You know as I think about it, the pulling the kid out of the special, that's easier probably in the short term to do... but many times it felt like it was rough going all the way and perhaps it was because a couple of times we said "hey, we can't do their work for them. They've got to try this, they've got to try that." (End of year interview, June 1992)

Discussion

Results of this study are discussed within the framework identified by Harris (1991) regarding the four general collaboration competency areas needed by educators serving culturally and/or linguistically diverse students. The first general competency is to understand one's own perspective. By the end of the first academic year, both teams identified their beliefs regarding the nature of collaboration. That is, it became obvious to the junior high team members that they were outcome-focused as well as apparent to the elementary team members that they were process oriented. To establish a balance, it was necessary to provide opportunities for junior high team members to address team interpersonal communication process skills and for the elementary team members to redesign follow-ups to clearly address the outcomes of team meetings.

The second competency identified by Harris (1991) was to use effective interpersonal, communication and problem-solving skills sensitive to cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary interactions. Interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and organizational skills (such as arranging for meetings) were practiced by members of both the junior high and the elementary teams. Ownership of the team processes and products evolved when the teams were approached by another school whose faculty were eager to replicate the team process. Trust among the team members was strengthened when each team experienced a crisis which was stimulated by an evaluation of their effectiveness. When confronted with information that their meetings were sometimes intimidating to referring teachers, both teams began to understand the iterative cyclical process of re-design and the reciprocal interaction of the interpersonal skills that are needed for teams to be effective.

The culture and language used by team members was a mix of school and individual cultures. That is, junior high humor (e.g., recounting jokes/pranks evident among the junior high students) as well as references to Latino culture (e.g., talk about food to bring to team meetings such as tamales) were prevalent among members of the primarily Latino junior high school team. In contrast, the elementary team was a mix of Latino and Anglo cultures. The atmosphere was one of learning about Latino cultures from the Latino team members (e.g., asking the Intermediate Bilingual Resource Teacher to interpret a letter in a child's folder written in Spanish) but conducting team meetings from a linear problem-solving perspective and using the language of the school (e.g., acronyms for committees and special programs at the school).

The third competency, to understand the role(s) of collaborators, and the fourth competency, to use appropriate assessment and instructional strategies, were evident in the information and materials shared among team members. All team members were comfortable sharing material resources related to assessment and instructional techniques for students who are limited English proficient as well as for those experiencing learning and behavioral problems. As the teams continued to meet, members increasingly showed their willingness to learn from each other. This culminated in the development of a resource file for each team during the summer after the first academic year.

Several lessons were identified regarding the development and maintenance of the bilingual special education teams in this district. First, self-determination of team characteristics was useful in establishing the teams. That is, the teams identified their own focus (i.e., outcome oriented versus process oriented) and the communication techniques that worked best for them (i.e., institutional versus individual contacts). Second, encouraging the teams to evolve was useful. Ownership became more evident as the teams shared with other teams and school districts and increased interdependence among team members was apparent as time in team membership increased (e.g., team members accessed each other more as resources). Third, cohesiveness among team members was instigated by a crisis (i.e., when evaluating their effectiveness, team members pulled together to redesign and renew the team process). Fourth, there seemed to be no "right answers." The teams developed to meet the needs of each school. They did so with support which is based on principles of effective teaming and sensitivity to the process of change. Finally, even without ideal conditions, positive changes occurred in the schools. This is important as this is the reality of many urban

schools. They are not ideal "lab" schools yet they are the schools faced with the challenge of educating many of our culturally and linguistically diverse students.

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