

A COMMUNITY JUST FOR PRACTICE: A CASE OF AN INCLUSIVE/SPECIAL EDUCATION COURSE

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Using a reflective case-study methodology, I conducted an innovative method in my inclusive/special education course, informed by the Communities of Practice literature and interprofessional collaboration. The student participants, in groups, accomplished an assignment designed to support a learner with a disability/exceptionality by including in their plans relevant professionals and community stakeholders. Data consisted of tape-recorded focus group interviews and group planning meetings, as well as two researcher journals. Two themes emerged: the status of members of a community of practice affected group leadership, and to work effectively, promoting interprofessional collaboration within a university course should account for communities of practice already established in the field.

Key words: community of practice; inclusive/special teacher education

Dans le cadre d'une étude de cas réflexive, l'auteur a introduit dans un cours de formation à l'enseignement inclusif et d'orthopédagogie une méthode novatrice intégrant la littérature des communautés de praticiens et la collaboration interprofessionnelle. En petits groupes, les étudiants avaient un devoir dont le but était d'établir un plan qui incluait des professionnels et des parties prenantes dans la communauté pour aider un apprenant ayant une déficience. Des enregistrements réalisés lors de groupes de discussion, des réunions de planification en groupe et les journaux de bord de deux chercheurs ont permis de réunir les données nécessaires à cette étude. Deux thèmes ont émergé : le statut des membres d'une communauté de praticiens a affecté le leadership dans le groupe et, pour assurer un travail efficace, la promotion de la collaboration interprofessionnelle à l'intérieur d'un cours universitaire devrait tenir compte des communautés de praticiens déjà établies dans le domaine.

Mots clés : communauté de praticiens, formation à l'enseignement inclusive, orthopédagogie

Collaboration remains a substantive best practice component of inclusive/special education (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; Lang & Fox, 2003; Little & Houston 2003; Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot & Goodwin, 2003; Wesley & Buysse 2001; Zorfass & Rivero, 2005). Wesley and Buysse (2001) note that collaborative practices have "increasingly involved *relationships across disciplines and fields* and has included a focus on planning and problem solving" (p. 114, italics added). Indeed, more and more collaboration is recognized as an essential component of teaching practice more generally; it is not merely an artifact of inclusive/special education (Brabeck, Walsh, & Latta, 2003). Indeed, Lawson (2003) argues that collaboration may be the only way to effect positive outcomes for at risk students within schools. Similarly, Wesley and Buysse (2001) note that collaboration is often invoked in conversations around community: "professionals have begun to view the child and family in the context of the *community*" (p. 114, italics added). Lawson (2003) goes further – accounting for community within professional collaborative practice is not enough. Rather, building community is necessary for effective collaboration between schools and their constituent contexts. Such building involves "consensus building, developing awareness of reciprocity and mutual need, and developing the capacity for collective action" (Lawson, 2003, p. 47). Admittedly, collaboration and community are complex, multi-layered notions, and although they significantly inform the theoretical understandings of this article, my purpose is not simply phenomenological. Rather, my aim is more particular – to investigate how collaborative practices may emerge (if at all) within practice communities with novice inclusive/special teachers.¹

Researchers in inclusive/special education have investigated and promoted the practices of collaboration and community in several important ways. In practice-oriented research journals, such as *Intervention in School and Clinic* and *Teaching Exceptional Children*, numerous action research, classroom-based studies look at partnerships to effect particular changes for learners with special needs in localized settings. For example, Agosta, Graetz, Mastropieri and Scruggs (2004) composed a team of university professors and classroom teachers who formed a partnership, a community, to improve social skills for students

within a classroom with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Similarly, Langerock (2000), a mainstream teacher with four students with disabilities in her classroom, examined collaborative and co-planning processes between herself and the special education teacher. She credits improved student achievement and improved social skills for all her students as a result of collaborative work.

Other researchers in inclusive/special education have examined training around collaborative strategies and community-oriented practices under the rubric of professional development and teacher in-service (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; Lang & Fox, 2003; Little & Houston 2003; Pugach, 1999). Usually these studies consider larger contexts than a single classroom, such as collaboration within an entire school district, and/or between many professionals and paraprofessionals. Despite these efforts both local and broad within the literature, "many recently prepared special education teachers said their pre-service programs *did not address specific knowledge and skills* important to teaching, such as supervising paraprofessionals [operating in a professional community] ...and *collaboration* with general education teachers" (Scheurmann, Webber, Boutout & Goodwin 2003, p. 199, italics added). Teacher educators need to do more to advocate, encourage, and provide real school opportunities for the development and reflection upon collaborative and community-oriented practices for preservice teachers, novice inclusive/special education teachers, and even for in-service teachers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Within inclusive/special education, the theoretical underpinnings of Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice (CoP) have informed much of the professional development practice around collaboration (Buysse et al., 2003; Palincsar, Magnusson, Marano, Ford, & Brown, 1998; Perry, Walkton, & Calder 1999; Pugach, 1999; Wesley & Buysse 2001; Zorfass & Rivero, 2005; see the special issue of *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 22[4]). From a CoP perspective, knowledge is situated and contextualized within community; member participation is understood to be cyclical and constituent of identity. Learning is an evolving form of membership in community, not incremental mastery

over specific content knowledge. Best practice within inclusive/special education, the content of the discipline, is not separated from its members – inclusive/special education practice is the embodied everyday performance of enacted (best practice) identities.

Collaboration, then, is not considered to be an individualistic endeavour, as merely a set of skills educators acquire. Rather, collaboration is seen more holistically, as tied to participation within a community of practice. Also, Buysse et al. (2003) argue that CoP research approaches ideally facilitate a broad involvement of participants, (including student-teachers, novice inclusive/special education teachers, and researchers, for example) because such communities may be seen at the potentially bridged essence of the classic practitioner/researcher divide.

Local Context: School^{PLUS}

Bridging differences, working together, and supporting community are provincial mandates in Saskatchewan, under the School^{PLUS} initiative (SaskLearning, 2002; Tymchak, 2001a, 2001b). Professionals, paraprofessionals, community advocates, and stakeholders from education, academia, and various community organizations developed a meta-curricula document, namely School^{PLUS} – the thrust of which is to produce schools as community hubs.

School^{PLUS} [is] a completely new organizational environment for meeting the needs of children and youth, not just school, as we know it with more added on. It [is] a matrix organization that draws all of its resources from existing governmental and non-governmental agencies and co-ordinates and integrates those resources in relation to the needs of children and youth. (Tymchak, 2001b, p. 13)

Ideally, social workers, community health nurses, police officers, and so forth will work alongside teachers. So, the interdisciplinary implications of School^{PLUS} are integral to meeting the needs of diverse youth.

The new role of the teacher is illuminated In a School^{PLUS} environment, teachers must be able to adapt to diversified programs, meet a wide range of student needs, work with a range of human service providers, and yet continue to be student advocates. (Salm, 2004, p. 16)

And, of course, collaboration is prominent in the School^{PLUS} environment; in fact, "collaboration is the *cornerstone* of the School^{PLUS} movement ... [and as] a genuine collaborative process ensues, there will be new meanings to the present systems and challenges to conventional power and authority relations" (Salm 2004, p. 18, italics in original). School^{PLUS}, then, embraces and promotes collaboration and community, concepts that can be traced within the community school movement within Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Education, 1980), as well as similar movements nationally and internationally, such as full-service community schools (see Kronick, 2002).

Purpose

As Scheurmann et al. (2003) have noted, inclusive/special education teachers report that their teacher training did not effectively prepare them to collaborate with diverse stakeholders. Of course, a more solid focus on community and collaboration will certainly impact teacher preparation and professional development,

because the role of the teacher and the administrator will change. It can be assumed that the institutions that prepare pre-service teachers (e.g., faculties of education) will also need to change their approach to pre-service programming. Training for interprofessional collaboration is typically aimed at social and health service providers ... not principals and teachers. To prepare new teachers for the School^{PLUS} environment, it is important that education faculties dismantle conventional views of the roles and responsibilities for teachers. (Salm, 2004, pp. 16-17, italics added)

This case study research was conducted to explore the possibilities and problems with interprofessional collaboration within a course designed to prepare students to support learners with special needs – mainly Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The specific research questions were:

- Given opportunities to involve various stakeholders through students' assignments, will collaborative partnerships emerge?
- If collaborative partnerships do emerge, what might they look like?

METHOD

Case Study Methodology

To answer the above questions, I designed a qualitative case study. Merriam (1998) defines a case study as "a unit around which there are boundaries ... the case then could be a person such as a student, a teacher, a principal; a program; a group such as a class, a school, a community" (p. 27). Similarly, Stake (1995) describes a case study as a bounded system, "a specific, complex functioning thing" (p. 2). Yin (1994) stresses the contextual nature of the case study within which investigators must clearly articulate the unit of analysis as determined by the initial research question(s).

An instrumental case study facilitates "insight into the [research] question by studying a particular case ... [aiming] to understand something else" (Stake, 1995, p. 3). According to Yin (1994) "understanding something else" is a matter of analytic generalization that is "striving to generalize a set of particular results to some broader theory" (p. 36). Merriam's (1998) interpretive case studies are "used to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions prior to the data gathering" (p. 39). Similarly, Ghesquière, Maes, and Vandenberghe (2004) argue that a case study is used to "identify and describe phenomena and, on the other hand contribute to the development of theory" (p. 172); McCormick (2000) asserts, "a single case can be used to generate and/or apply theory" (p. 247). To reiterate, then, the conceptual structures and premises that undergird this case study investigation are an amalgam of the literature and research from communities of practice, collaboration, and School^{PLUS}, within the broader context of teacher education and inclusive/special education.

Case Study Context. I am especially interested in teacher education and inclusive/special education because the Faculty of Education, University of Regina, has recently enacted a post-baccalaureate *Certificate of Extended Studies in Inclusive Education*. Within this 10-course *Certificate*, we have targeted five courses, namely, Education of Students with Reading Disabilities and Difficulties, Enhancing Classroom Management, Designing Learning Environments for Students with

Special Needs, Functional Assessment and Positive Behaviour Support, and Autism Spectrum Disorders and Pervasive Developmental Disorders. Each course incorporates a mini-practicum. Quite purposefully, we constructed these mini-practica assignments as small research projects. Instructors position students as co-researchers and co-collaborators so that they may thoughtfully effect best-practice, inclusive/special education strategies within real-life, real-school contexts. In a recent iteration of a special education course, for example, students implemented a variety of strategies, such as comic strip conversations, social stories, and visual schedules to ameliorate a variety of challenging behaviours of learners with disabilities or exceptionalities. All students took baseline data, implemented strategies, and subsequently collected intervention data to ameliorate a variety of behaviour challenges in accordance with evidence-based practices for students with disabilities or exceptionalities (Simpson, 2005).

Ghesquière, Maes, and Vandenberghe (2004) argue that the case study is particularly useful in practice-oriented projects frequently found in the field of inclusive/special education. This case study is delimited by the Winter 2004 offering of Educational Psychology (EPSY) 330: Teaching Students with Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders course, which includes myself (as professor), my students, various school/community personnel, as well as learners with special needs/exceptionalities located in local elementary schools. (For clarity, I reserve the term *students* to refer to the university student participants and the term *learners* to refer to the children with disabilities/exceptionalities). I label this a reflective case study because I conceived, shaped, and actively participated in the project within my own university classroom as well as in various local schools.

Students were organized into five groups. I attempted to facilitate real school and community collaboration between students and a variety of professionals via a major assignment in EPSY 330, called the *School^{PLUS} Project (SPP)*; the student groups were called *School^{PLUS}* groups. For the SPP, students designed and implemented visual support material for learners with disabilities and exceptionalities (an in-depth analysis of which is beyond the present paper, see Thompson & Kesten, 2005). Because monitoring the SPPs was time-intensive, I hired a research

assistant, who had experience at the local *Autism Resource Centre* and was adept at implementing visual strategies. I supervised SPPs 1, 2, and 3; the research assistant, Jan, 4 and 5. Additionally, research assistant participated in the weekly university EPSY 330 classes.

Procedure

Participants. Twenty-six students enrolled in the course with an approximate 60/40 ratio of in-service/preservice teachers; 21 students consented to be research participants (see Table 1). Most of the in-service teachers were novices to the field of inclusive/special education. A member from each SPP volunteered to be the leader. Significantly, (as I shall note later), leaders of SPPs 1, 2 and 3 were in-service teachers; the remaining group leaders, preservice students. Each SPP group was assigned a local mentor, a developmental therapist from the Regina Autism Resource Centre (ARC), as well as an online mentor, former colleagues of mine in the field of autism from another province. Each online mentor had at least 10 years experience in the field of autism, and all had worked in direct service capacities as well as consultative ones. (An extended analysis of the technological dimensions of this project is the subject of a separate article, Thompson & Kesten, 2005). Connecting with these local and online professionals was presented as opportunities; students were not required to involve them in their CoP in the sense that contact with mentors was not accounted for in course marks. Of course, learners' parents were encouraged to be involved, and in three cases that occurred.

Project Settings. Many in-service teachers were involved in the case study. Rather than directing which learners with special needs to support and where to conduct SPPs, we decided to allow students, many of whom had several options of different learners that they could have supported, to choose these themselves. Most groups chose to support learners for which one or more of the in-service teachers were already responsible for educational programming. As a result, variability occurred among the chosen settings. Three SPPs were conducted in schools within Regina (groups 2, 3, and 4), another in an adjacent

Table 1. A Description of the SPP Groups

No	Learner with a Disability (with chronological age)	Learner's Official Diagnoses	Project Leader	Project Setting	No. of Students Inter-viewed vs. in SPP*
1	Lupe; 7	Nonverbal Learning Disability	In-service Teacher	Main-stream Classroom	5/5
2	Clarissa; 6	Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified	In-service Teacher	Specialized Developmental Classroom	6/6
3	Mark; 9	Autism Spectrum Disorder	In-service Teacher	Specialized Developmental Classroom	4/4
4	Stephen; 7	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Pre-service Teacher	Mainstream Classroom	2/5
5	Clayton; 4	Asperger's Syndrome (tentative diagnosis)	Pre-service Teacher	Home Setting	4/6

*Not all university students participated in the focus group interviews. In the first SPP, for example, all five students participated in the interview, but in SPP 4, only 2 of a possible of the 5 students in that group agreed to be interviewed.

community (group 1), and the final one, exclusively in a home setting, again in Regina (group 5). Learners with disabilities/exceptionalities were in mainstreamed classrooms in SPPs 1 and 4; specialized self-contained developmental classrooms in groups 2 and 3, and in the child's home in SPP 5.

Some Ethical Considerations. Of course, researching within one's own classroom brings in salient ethical dimensions – not the least of which is students' informed consent within an absence of coercion. To deal with this, I implemented the following safeguards. First, I constructed the SPP

assignment such that every student participated, whether they chose to partake in the case study research or not. Second, I did not know which students were participating in the case study research. At the beginning of the course, the Associate Dean of Education came into my classroom and passed out the Informed Consent forms in my absence. At that time, some students signed the forms; others did not. The forms were placed in a sealed envelope, which I did not see until I had submitted, with approval, all final student marks. One student chose not to sign the form at the beginning of the course, but did so upon completion. I scheduled the final group interviews after course completion; as a result some students who initially consented to be interviewed did not attend the scheduled interview time. Additionally all key school district personnel and learners' parents completed the informed consent forms.

Data Collection

To find out about group membership, how collaborative practices emerged (if indeed at all), and participants' general sense of community and School^{PLUS}, the research assistant and I interviewed them in their respective SPP groups. We wanted to get their point of view with respect to their sense of a CoP (again, if at all) including membership, roles, and general activities. Together, we collected the following data:

- At the conclusion of the course, we conducted and tape-recorded focus group interviews with the student groups. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes; I conducted three; the research assistant, one. Due to a timing conflict, I hired a graduate student researcher who interviewed the remaining group. Each of us followed prepared focus group questions (see Appendix A). Unfortunately, due to time and financial constraints, parents and other community/school personnel were not involved in the final focus group interviews.
- The research assistant tape-recorded two planning sessions (with groups 4 and 5), meetings where the participants drafted their visual strategy assignment. I maintained field notes from planning meetings with SPP Groups 2 and 3, although ideally these meetings should have also been tape-recorded. The learners' parents from SPP

Groups 2, 3, 4, and 5 as well as various other teachers and paraprofessionals attended the planning meetings.

- At the end of each class, the research assistant and I held reflective review meetings. We flagged salient issues concerning the SPPs, and engaged in our preliminary and ongoing analysis through our conversations. I typed our reflections into the computer; these notes constituted our co-constructed research journal. In addition, the research assistant maintained a separate journal.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted at several stages. First, all tapes of recorded interviews were professionally transcribed. The research assistant and I then read through every transcript. At this time, we reviewed the students' projects, visual supports for learners with disabilities/exceptionalities. Next, we examined the research assistant's Research Journal and our Co-constructed Research Journal. Reading through the sum of the transcripts, the student projects, and the two research journals was very useful to get a sense of the whole case study. Although we both actively participated throughout the research, there was so much to do in a relatively short time (a 13-week semester) that from my perspective the experience felt like a whirlwind, and afforded precious little time for preliminary in vivo data analysis as Merriam (1998) advocates.

Next, separately, the research assistant and I coded all focus group interview data, while I alone coded the planning meeting data and our co-constructed researcher journal. We assigned codes, "short-hand designation[s] so that [we could] retrieve specific pieces of data" (Merriam 1998, p. 164) that highlighted specific and relevant parts of the transcripts that related to our research questions. Through constant comparison, we each took "a particular incident [which was coded] from an interview, field notes or document and compare[d] it with another incident in the same set of data or in another data set. These comparisons [led] to tentative categories" (Merriam, 1998, p.159). Still independently, the research assistant and I collapsed our codes into categories. Our analyses were somewhat different. The research assistant developed the following categories: communication, relationships, mentors, technology, collaborative roles, group size, parents, time, expertise,

professional development, and School^{PLUS}. I fashioned the following categories: collaboration and resistance with other professionals, roles of paraprofessionals, parent roles, school climate, mentors at a distance, issues around the visual support projects, understandings of School^{PLUS}, language and tools of special education, technology and research. Using our two sets of categories, I performed categorical aggregation, that is I "attempted to reach new meanings about [this] case through ... aggregation of instances (or categories) until something [could] be said about them as a class [or theme]" (Stake 1995, p. 74). So what was the result of our categorical aggregation?

RESULTS

Although many interesting issues emerged from these data sources, we confined results to the research questions: will student groups involve stakeholders and, if so, will collaborative partnerships emerge and what might be their constitution and operation?

Students' Involvement of Stakeholders

The "practice" CoP constituents, like any team endeavor in real school/community contexts, varied from group to group. For example, the parents of learners with special needs within groups 2, 3, and 5 were significantly involved in the CoPs; in fact, Clarissa's mother (see Table 1) attended our final university class.

I think it was effective with the school and the home, having [Clarissa's mother] come to the meeting and actually having [Clarissa's mother] come to the presentation I really wanted to surprise her about the results [of the visual strategy project, which were very positive] and stuff; the communication with that was very good. (Leader, Group 2) ²

Within group 1, one student, Lupe (see Table 1), played a more prominent role in the actual construction of his project than did other students. Not only did Lupe help create materials for his visual strategy, he participated in making the concluding slide presentation shown in the university class because "it was something that Lupe liked to do, because he liked being on the computer. He found it exciting to build that piece of the PowerPoint. So there was like some new learning and some new technology pieces there for him" (Leader, Group 1).

All teams included their ARC mentor to greater or lesser extents, which they most often did through phone consultations. Three of the five groups used their online mentor, perhaps because there were no course marks allocated to use these at-a-distance professionals. Consequently, even when these mentors were used within the groups, their participation appeared to be less than meaningful.

We probably would have used them [online mentors] more if we would have had a little more time, but it was all crunching in and it was a big project for the group to do. So *I think it* [including the online mentors] *was done official, but I don't think they really played a role* in ours as much as we would have hoped. (Member, Group 2, emphasis added)

When asked, "how would you describe the participation of at-a-distance professionals that we have had involved with this class?" members from group 4, replied, "I never used [them] ...; No, I didn't either ... I didn't even think about it."

Issues with the Communities of Practice

To begin, almost all students remarked that collaboration among themselves was easily facilitated and generally agreeable.

As a [student] group, I think we collaborated very well together. We were always throwing out ideas. And it was nice, because at breaks and stuff we could sit there and talk about it and weed some of the stuff out that we didn't – so it was really nice to be able – because it was almost like we were a team working just for Stephen. And so that collaboration was really nice. (Member, Group 4)

Similarly, a Group 5 member stated, "I think you work as a team. You might not be able to give all the answers and know about [everything], but you work with someone and they just catch on right away."

Although nearly all group members agreed that they worked well with each other, notably, groups 1, 2, and 3 appeared to work more collaboratively or smoothly with outside persons than groups 4 and 5. Certainly, the leader from group 1 spoke directly to the benefits of interprofessional collaboration to complete their assignment.

So many numerous agencies are involved in intervention, and *unless we correlate and share our data* and the information that we have discovered and have techniques, suggestions, strategies, and use those together, we are only seeing

part of what is going on in a child's world [pause]. So an occupational therapist has an idea, a speech pathologist has an idea, a psychologist has an idea When we had an ed [educational] psychologist take a look at the performance and the verbal with the WISC [Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children]. And that kinda helped and aided in [creating the visual strategy project]. If all those people had not shared their information with the school ... *I think the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.* (Leader, Group 1, emphasis added)

Likewise, members of group 3 spoke to the benefits of collaboration and, again, specifically to interprofessional collaboration.

Member 1: Samantha, the teacher, was, you know, more than willing to help and the IAs [Instructional Assistants or Teacher's Aides] in that room and then especially Mark's mom, you know, more than willing to give us suggestions or to help out I thought that Scott [the Edpsy instructor] setting up the mentors was useful too. Because, you know, we would just ask them a question and they would have answers for us, you know?

Member 2: It was awesome. And it just goes to show that everybody in these kinds of professions generally wants to help, you know. (Members, Groups 1 and 2)

In contrast, consider this comment from a member in group 4, where the teacher was less than cooperative:

With the teacher I think – I felt, when I was in the classroom, that there was a little bit of a resistance, that she kind of – it was almost like we're stepping in little bit and she just didn't [pause] she didn't like that very much. (Member, Group 4)

The classroom teacher for Group 4 was not part of the university course, and seemed not to see herself, or the university students, as having a legitimate role within the CoP. It is plausible to suggest that this teacher tolerated the university students more than supported their participation. The research assistant supervised this group and recorded the following observation in her notes.

How can one honestly communicate how [this] project went when there was difficulty or tension in working with the classroom teacher? Considering this, this group did a remarkable job. The fact that the boy in this SPP has no functional means to communicate indicates to me that there are problems in the classroom. (Research Assistant's Notes, April 7, 2004)

The challenges of working with outside personnel were different for group 5 than group 4, collaboration with outside agencies for group 5 was also ultimately unsuccessful. Although all three local school districts completed the requisite consent forms, group 5 chose to do their project in an independent pre-school that was not part of any school district. The leader of group 5 speaks:

I actually did go to the school to get their consent and the teachers and the TAs [Teaching Assistants] all agreed that it wasn't [a problem], it was that we weren't getting higher up approval, is why we didn't do it [conduct the project at school]. So the teachers were very willing to participate. And I think they have a very good relationship with the parents, but *I don't think they are very open to outside help, like from other organizations* like, say, ARC [Autism Resource Centre] or even speech pathologists. They don't have speech pathologists coming into the class or OTs [Occupational Therapists] and – so I thought that they [the pre-school staff] were great with the families, but not with other professionals. (Leader, Group 5)

As a consequence, group 5 conducted Clayton's (the learner with special needs) visual strategy project exclusively in the home setting. Although resistance was pointed in SPPs 4 and 5, within our university classroom, many students expressed some angst around these collaborative issues as well as role definition within the CoP's. The research assistant and I documented student anguish in our researchers' journal.

[Students are concerned with] roles of the staff within the classroom, what are the roles of the different professionals? At the level of the classroom, one teacher is defining roles and she is the leader, to reinforce the roles. (Research Assistant & Scott's Research Notes, February 14, 2004)

Also, students wondered who should participate in the CoP. "Jan [research assistant] noticed students talking about setting and arranging meetings in terms of their SPP. Does the principal attend?" (Research Assistant and Scott's research journal, February 14, 2004).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Practising (Inclusive/Special Education) Teacher, Practising Collaboration

What accounts for the reported efficacies of groups 1, 2, and 3 and, by contrast, the relatively ineffectual efforts of groups 4 and 5? Certainly, within group 4 the classroom teacher was not receptive to the university students. As pointed out by the research assistant, there were serious

gaps in educational programming for Stephen, the learner with autism in SPP 4; no functional means of communication were observed. Perhaps a lack of content knowledge in inclusive/special education practices to facilitate communication programming and/or a lack of supportive resources within her classroom contributed to this teacher's apparent unease and resistance. Within SPP 5, the group leader suggested that there was energetic collaboration between families and pre-school staff, despite a decided lack of collaborative history among professionals that support learners with disabilities – an unusual situation in my opinion because pre-schools are usually noted for inter-professional collaborative practices in my own experience. An agency's or school's history of inter-professional collaboration seems definitely to impact any apprenticing university students in terms of creating or legitimately participating in an (interprofessional) CoP.

Although the inclusion/exclusion debate of where and how to educate learners with disabilities was not part of the purpose of this research, relatively speaking, successful CoPs occurred in both specialized developmental (segregated) classrooms and inclusive/mainstream environments. Perhaps part of what is at stake when creating and sustaining successful CoPs is a generally agreed upon, common agenda among members, be it explicitly articulated or not.³

Teacher Status. An obvious conclusion from examining the data is that the project groups headed by in-service teachers tended to function smoother than those headed by preservice teachers, even when there were in-service teachers serving as members in the latter groups. Perhaps a key factor in contributing to the success of a CoP is the status of the group leader, and generally speaking, in-service teachers carry more status than preservice teachers do. Preservice teachers are not yet insiders within real school/community contexts, although not quite outsiders either. They may experience a kind of illegitimate participation – accommodating community inclusive/special education practices while simultaneously being excluded in ways – while being denied legitimacy (Hodges, 1998). Hence, group 4 participants attempted to effect visual strategies for Stephen, while feeling as though they had "invaded" the (real) teacher's territory. Additionally, what may also hinder

collaboration are the often shifting roles in any CoP. The preservice teacher and group leader in SPP 4 found herself caught between the roles of student researcher, leader, and advocate for the learner and family.

[We] sort of allowed them [the family] to know what they can advocate for. Because until now they didn't even really realize what's different about him [their son] as opposed to the other children in the classroom. Because no one had ever explained to them why the teacher and the special ed[ucation] consultant had wanted him to [access other support services]. (Leader, Group 4)

Practised or Real: Will the Real CoP Please Stand Up?

I began this research wondering about the kinds of collaborative partnerships that might emerge through these practice CoPs. This question proved to be somewhat of an oversight because students who were in-service teachers participated within professional CoP's already. So, sometimes CoPs were not so much created as enlarged to include newer members, other students in class as in SPPs 1, 2, and 3. The leader of group 1 speaks directly to the benefits of including an occupational therapist in their CoP: "In our project, I think that the big picture became more apparent when we had an OT [occupational therapist] address the fine motor skills." This leader is an in-service teacher, and obviously well connected to local personnel to enlist an OT. In the following quotation, a group 3 member speaks to the benefits of working in a CoP where positive relationships were already in place. "It was wonderful to have Cindy, [the leader of group 3] as the resource [teacher], because the bond and the rapport [with the student and family] was already established." Note again that the leader of group 3 is an in-service teacher. It seems that even if a preservice teacher has significant, sustained, and meaningful relationships with a student and/or their parents, or even other professionals/paraprofessionals within schools, she or he does not often have the status to effect a positive CoP. To say it another way, it is only those CoP members with status who may confer it upon others, and thus legitimize new members.

In sum, practising community and collaboration among students in the university course and other school professionals appeared to be constrained by the larger practices of collaboration and community, the privileging of in-service teacher status. One future consideration for

similar assignments may be to limit the leadership position to in-service teachers; however, there may be other alternatives. For example, I recently shared some of this work at a luncheon of educational psychologists from the three local school districts; not only were they impressed with the outcomes, they asked how they could support other such assignments in the future. Maybe a requirement for future SPPs would be the active participation by an educational psychologist. The CoPs would then already have an insider with status partaking in the project, which might alleviate fears or concerns of some practising teachers. One psychologist remarked how helpful it would be for other teachers to view best practice “in action” for learners with disabilities in their schools. Indeed, I think that what is called for is the development of university and school district(s) partnership(s) around supporting students with disabilities/exceptionalities much like the project completed by Dyson (1999). These partnerships would include specific guidelines around collaboration, or as Dyson more precisely indicates in her study, the development of collaborative structures.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Preparation of this article was supported by a grant from the Saskatchewan Instructional Research and Development Unit, to which I express my thanks. I extend my gratitude to the Regina Public, Regina Catholic, and Qu'Appelle Valley School Divisions. I thank, too, the students at the University of Regina who elected to participate in this research. I am also indebted to Jan Seitz, my research assistant, for her in-class support, detailed data collection, and cogent analysis. Lisa Comeau conducted a focus group interview, and I thank her. Finally, I appreciate and acknowledge members of my Writers' Circle at the University of Regina for their feedback, advice, and support.

NOTES

¹ I presented versions of this article at the International Conference on Special Education (July 2005), Halifax, NS, and Checkmark 2005: An International Conference on Information Communication and Technology and Students 'At Risk,' April 2005, North Bay, Ontario

² For simplicity and reader clarity, unless otherwise noted, all quotes were taken from the group interviews conducted after the assignments were completed. I identify the leaders and members of these groups as such, (e.g.:

Leader, Group 2 or Member, Group 4) as opposed to creating a pseudonym for each one of the student participants.

³ Parenthetically, there is much more segregation of students with disabilities in the local context than I experienced while working in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions for the School^{PLUS} Project Teams

1. What role did you play in the *Teaching to School^{PLUS}* Project? (Please state your name and role clearly for the purposes of transcription.)
2. *School^{PLUS}* (2002) talks about "developing openness and communication" (p. II-4) between school, students family and community.
 - a). How would you describe the communication patterns that you experienced with persons involved in this project?
 - b). How would you describe the nature of the collaboration among team members? (see p. I-5 of *Working Together Toward School^{PLUS}*)
3. Within *Working Together Toward School^{PLUS}* (2002), parents and community partners are encouraged to assume *Advisory Roles* (II – 14). What advice would you give to the school in working with other students with Autism Spectrum Disorders?
4. Within *Working Together Toward School^{PLUS}* (2002), the benefits of parent and community involvement to students, parents, teachers, schools and community are listed (p. IV-13). How would you characterize the benefits that you personally experienced (if any) during this process?
5. How would you describe the participation of the At-a-Distance Professionals?
6. How useful do you think this project *Teaching to School^{PLUS}* was to helping student teachers learn to collaborate?
 - a). What are some examples throughout this project that you thought worked particularly well?
 - b). What are some examples throughout this project that you thought did not work particularly well?
7. If you were the instructor for this course (*Students with Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders*) what would you change to better realize the goal of *Teaching to School^{PLUS}*?
8. On a scale of 1-10, how do you rate the overall success of this project?