

Pathways to Innovation and Development in Education

A Collection Of Invited Essays



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Chapter 13

Collaborative Practice at the Heart of Student Welfare

Margaret Keating

This article endeavours to shed some light on the notions of leadership and collaboration as they apply to the work of school Guidance Counsellors. In attempting to do this it is necessary, in the first place, to consider some of the significant characteristics of modern second-level school environments.

There is a considerable body of data in the relevant literature which asserts that teaching - as a professional practice - has been experienced as a more solitary, isolated pursuit than a collaborative one. Jean Ruddock (1991) claims that around the world teaching has been one of the loneliest professions. In her words, “education is among the last vocations where it is still legitimate to work by yourself in splendid isolation”.

In the 20 or so years since Ruddock carried out her research, there has been a huge impetus for change. There has been a growing realisation that working in schools is a collaborative exercise. This does not take away from the autonomy of the teacher but should, rather, improve both the benefit to the student and enhance the teacher’s professional experience and development.

One powerful metaphor of schools is that of the ‘egg-crate’ (Lortie 1975). This draws attention to teacher autonomy, where individual practitioners facilitate learning. The flip side of autonomy, of course, can be isolation where individual teachers engage in little or no professional conversations with colleagues who are teaching the same children. The contrast, for example, with medical teams in hospitals where collaboration is the norm, can be striking.

Hoping to overcome widespread professional isolation reformers began to advocate for new school structures and teacher practices that recognise the importance of learning within communities (Westheimer 2008). By focusing on the environment in which teachers do their work, these reformers hoped to foster collegiality and increase professional dialogue.

Many of the fresh insights into schools and teaching, in recent decades, have focused on the teacher as team player as well as the autonomous professional. In a study of six kinds of professional cultures in schools Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) found that it is better to be

collaborative than individualistic - as a teacher - and that we need to think harder and deeper about better and worse ways to work collaboratively with one's peers.

When collaborative improvements and decisions are guided by experienced collective judgement and where they are pushed forward by grown-up challenging conversations about effective and ineffective practice you have a professional learning community (PLC).

According to the originator of this term, Hord (1997), a PLC was a place where teachers inquired together into how to improve their practice in areas of importance to them, and then implemented what they learned to make it happen. This school community is likely to be far more effective than that suggested by the 'egg-crate' metaphor mentioned above.

The call for leadership and collaboration in school guidance counselling is something of a 21st century phenomenon although the debate and arguments for this were going on during the last decades of the 20th century. Baker and Gerler (2003) have asserted that leadership and collaboration are requisite functions for school guidance counsellors and school guidance programmes "because of the circumstances that exist in the world, the nation, in communities and schools".

Here in Ireland, the development of a 'whole school approach' as part of a school's response to the guidance and counselling needs of its students has been an active concern of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) since the mid-seventies. However, research and experience would suggest that until the late 1990's this assertion was carried out in an informal and ad hoc way rather than a formal and systematic way. McKenna et al (1997) found that more than a third of school principals described their knowledge of guidance and counselling issues as inadequate. While the principals recognised that a lot of good and valuable work was being done it was neither visible enough nor accountable in a formal way. One reason for this situation could be the likelihood that guidance counsellors (as teachers) were for the most part working in isolation.

Another very likely reason is that of the expectations and orientation of people who went into school counselling. As a general rule aspiring guidance counsellors can be described as having a helping orientation. They tend to see themselves as working more closely with individual students, parents and teachers. According to Baker and Gerler (2003), "seldom do these aspiring counsellors consider that leadership skills are required to build and maintain successful guidance counselling programmes".

So, as well as realising that working in schools is a collaborative exercise guidance counsellors need also to have a sense of the kind of leadership which would serve them best in carrying out their work.

One must not forget that a vital and unique part of the school counsellor's work commits them to working alone with students. This is the counselling aspect. Notwithstanding the demands of child protection issues and the shared responsibility for student welfare that is characteristic of a school community, the effectiveness and value of the counselling work is to a large extent reliant on the confidential nature of this work.

Jeffers (2002) suggested that guidance counsellors often feared a tension between their unique and professional role as guidance counsellors and guidance counselling as part of a more collegial and whole school function. Recent developments in both legislation and policy have put a stronger emphasis on the 'whole school' and curricular dimension of the work. In an article written for NCGE in 1996, Collins argued for a collaborative approach to whole school guidance. In her view the days of the 'solo run' were over and it was incumbent on Guidance Counsellors to co-operate with other professionals in schools (NCGE, 1996).

This view is in keeping with the research already mentioned on 'isolationism' in schools and in teaching in particular. According to Fullan "isolation protects teachers (and guidance counsellors) to exercise their discretionary judgement, but it also cuts them off from the valuable feedback that would help judgements to be wise and effective".

The Department of Education and Skills (DES), the IGC, and the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) have asserted over several decades that the school guidance counsellor's role and functions encompass three main areas:

1. Personal/ Social Guidance Counselling
2. Vocational Guidance
3. Educational Guidance

This assertion emanates from a shared philosophy and belief that the whole person matters and it recognises the enormous amount of developmental change which takes place during adolescence. The main theory which underpins this philosophy is Rogerian and the core elements which Rogers (1961) advocates for education and personal development within which the educator and the counsellor demonstrate empathy and positive regard as each young person/student develops as a social being, with educational and vocational possibilities and choices.

Internationally and at home the 1990's were years in which intense and extensive public debate on education took place. An OECD report in 1991 set the ball rolling, so to speak. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) put a moral and legal obligation on signatory countries to ensure that children everywhere had access to education. In Ireland these various discussions led to a Green Paper, a White Paper and culminated in the Education Act of 1998. School guidance counselling was a central theme throughout

these policy consultations and article 9 (c) of the 1998 Act enshrines the rights of children and young people to appropriate guidance.

The DES Guidance Inspectorate and NCGE produced various guidelines for interpreting how ‘appropriate guidance’ could be delivered and managed, most notably, *Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications of 9(c) of the 1998 Education Act, relating to students’ access to appropriate guidance* (DES 1999)

A Whole School Guidance and Counselling Service and Curriculum: Roles and Relationships (IGC 2008) defines the role of the guidance counsellor in a school setting. The key role has two distinct but complementary elements; firstly, the provision of a responsive service, staffed by trained guidance counsellors, to meet the students’ needs, as they emerge, throughout the student’s time in school; and secondly, the development of a curricular programme which is developmental, preventative, appropriate to the needs of the students, and delivered in a proactive manner in a whole school context.

Both of the elements described above require varying levels of co-operation and collaboration. However, delivering a curricular programme in a whole school context requires that several people work together towards common shared goals. With this in mind the most effective form of leadership is proposed as collaborative. Although it is not within the scope of this paper to consider the question of leadership from the designated school leaders’ perspective (principals) it needs to be said that the 1998 Act has put the responsibility for whole school guidance in the remit of the management of the school.

The first step in thinking as a collaborative leader is to view the work through the prism of relationships. Therefore planning, delivering preventative programmes, co-operating with local organisations and agencies, involving parents, surveying students and working with colleagues have as their cornerstone the building of good, professional, working relationships.

Rubin states this very powerfully:

A lot of the work of building collaborative cultures is informal. According to Fullan, ‘it is about developing trust and relationship and it takes time. But, if all this is left to spontaneity and to chance a lot of collaborative effort will dissipate and provide no benefit to anyone’.

As asserted earlier, the young people with whom guidance counsellors work are in the throes of the demands of (arguably) the greatest period of developmental change that will occur during their lives. This period needs to be handled with optimum care and skill. The different initiatives and responses from the bodies and organisations mentioned above attest to a deep understanding of the value of the work that was being done and needed to be done. Young people, and the people who work with them, need nurturing and time. Collaborative ventures take time if they are to take root and flourish. From this perspective it seems very difficult to

comprehend why the role and work of the guidance counsellor was ‘downgraded’ in such a serious way in the Budget of 2012.

Marland, a leading light in the pastoral care movement in education in the UK, came to the following conclusion; “It is really a truism of school planning that what you want to happen must be institutionalised. It is not enough to rely on good will, dedication, hard work and personality”. It is fair to say that since the Education Act (if not before) there appeared to be a growing realisation by principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, inspectors and others of the key role played by guidance counsellors in nurturing and structuring collaborative, pastoral approaches in schools.

Through involvement in and commitment to in-service, supervision, NCGE courses and so on guidance counsellors affirmed the seriousness with which they embraced whole school approaches and the benefits of collaboration. It has become increasingly evident that guidance counsellors have a greater understanding of harnessing the shared wisdom and expertise of all staff members for the benefit of the students in school.

Guidance counselling - as with teaching - is uncertain by its nature (Schon,1983). It is uncertain because it is different every day. Collaborating in a formal, structured way with colleagues minimises the effects of uncertainty and the feedback advice and support ensure both the quality of the service and the health of the professional.

In conclusion, to extend the metaphor implicit in the proverb that “it takes a village to raise a child” one could argue that it takes a whole school to educate an adolescent and to give him/her the opportunities and supports that help her/him grow into a confident, self-actualising adult (Maslow).

During my time as a guidance counsellor I witnessed many examples of this in the course of my work. One such example illuminates the benefits to the student of adopting a whole school approach. In the early 2000’s Chinese students began to attend the school where I worked in significant numbers. In the main these students were intelligent, hard working, positive and ambitious. Of course there were obvious cultural differences in how they approached education and life in general.

However, it was only through regular conversations between tutors, year heads, language support teacher and guidance counsellor that we realised that ‘saving face’ was an even more important from a cultural point of view among the adolescent Chinese in our care than it was among Irish adolescents. This ‘saving face’ frequently meant that they would say that everything was fine and going well until evidence at a later stage would suggest that it wasn’t. This realisation on the part of the staff was instrumental in our managing them in a more beneficial way for all concerned-especially the students.

A structured, collegial approach to students' welfare and development, as distinct from a plethora of well-intentioned individual efforts, not only makes sense within schools but also enriches professionalism and deepens the care of students.

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