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Specialization and Collaboration: Today's Paradox in Education



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A recent Wall Street business report indicates that, for most manufacturers, the expected life span of a product, without updating, redesign, or modernization, is about two years. In today's world of rapidly developing technology, consumers demand the continued refinement and specialization of both products and services. They also expect these products and services to be integrated with other products and services.

Moreover, the past three decades have witnessed the gradual shift from generalist to specialist in a variety of areas, most noticeably in medicine, law, architecture, accounting, pharmacy, and engineering (Johnson and others, 1993). Not surprisingly, the profession of education has also shown signs of specialization in its approaches to educating a rapidly changing clientele.

During the last thirty years, schools have seen the evolution of special education, with separate classifications in as many as thirteen specialized areas. Other educational innovations include the development of nurseries and pre-schools, kindergarten learning centers, primary schools (grades K-3), middle schools (grades 4-6), alternative schools, and magnet/commu-

nity-based schools with a specific focus on the arts, sciences, mathematics, and computers.

One assumption underlying a specialized approach is that by limiting the scope or the focus of a school, a better job can be done of addressing the specialized talents of its students. One outcome of this emphasis on specialization has been the narrowed focus among those sharing the specialization, (such as subject specialists), and the further isolation of these specialists from others in the profession. It may not be as obvious when these specialists are housed in a shared building, (e.g., alternative schools, special education schools, day care centers, etc.), but such is not always the case.

An alternative to specialized schools is the "school campus" concept: limited local resources, the cost of real estate, and the availability of underdeveloped land force school districts to house children from ages three to eighteen at a common site with separate wings but with shared, non-instructional resources, such as cafeterias, gymnasiums, playgrounds, swimming pools, and vocational shops.

Another example is the national trend towards decentralization of all special needs students (Inclusion) by enrolling them in regular education classrooms and pairing special education and regular education teachers in a shared collaborative setting. Both are equally responsible for the instruction of all pupils assigned to the class. Hence, there is a need to focus on much closer collaboration within the educational process.

Longitudinal research studies have indicated that the needs of all teachers, regardless of area of specialization, are more similar than dissimilar. A meta-analysis by Vreenman (1984) indicates that few differences exist between teachers within the United States and those in other countries; among elementary, secondary, and special education teachers; between studies done in the '60s and the '80s; and between problems perceived by principals and by teachers (Neil, 1993). Vreenman (1984) cautions against viewing the problems of beginning teachers as unique and documents that experienced teachers also share many of the same problems.

It seems ironic that at the height of professional specialization in education, the hot buzzword is “collaboration.” Initially, the terms “specialization” and “collaboration” seem to be mutually exclusive, but in reality they are mutually inclusive and absolutely critical to a successful education for all children.

If the schools are to treat the whole child in education as medical practitioners treat the whole body in medicine, then it is not only logical that we share all pertinent information about the client—*it is paramount*. The medical profession, in fact, has been somewhat successful in designing a “whole patient model,” providing health services with the development of HMOs (health maintenance organizations) and community medical centers.

Many educational communities have already adopted similar models, including the Pupil Assistance Committee (PAC) and School Resource Committee (SRC), which review children’s backgrounds before recommending children for specialized services or even Child Study Team evaluations. But the need for educational collaboration goes far beyond the interactions of teachers within special education areas. In fact, it requires collaboration beyond the realms of professional educators.

There is an old African saying, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” In America, that village includes all those with whom a child interacts, both in and out of the classroom. In our haste to embrace the 21st century, some educators contend that parents and the community have abrogated some responsibilities which are best handled in the home, the neighborhood, the extended family, and the community at large. Who better, in their opinion, than parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, guardians, clergy, store owners, and other members of the community to teach and model basic values, such as politeness, courtesy, honesty, equity, respect for the law, for property, and for oneself?

Psychologists tell us that children believe and retain only what they themselves perceive as having value. Too often in today’s schools and homes, children hear about right and wrong, and good and bad. Then they leave their classrooms

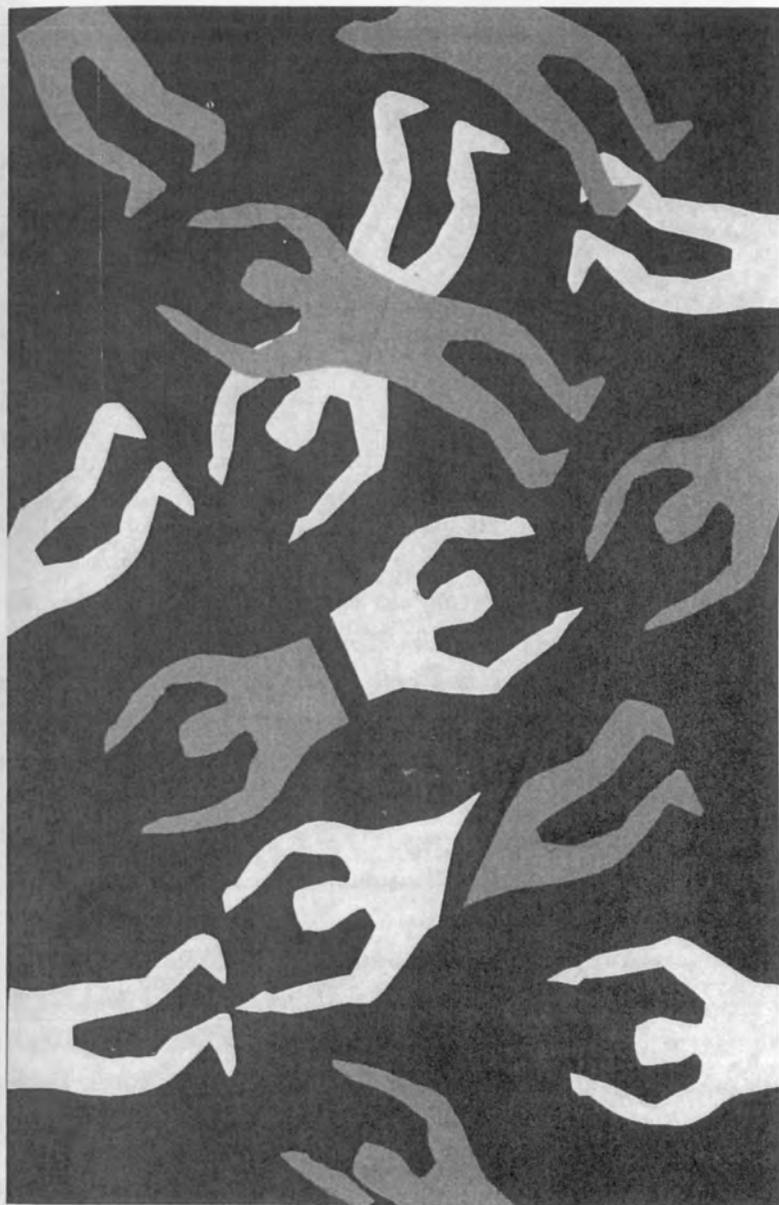
and homes to see their teachers and parents sometimes practicing a different value system. The children may observe adult role models bragging about conning their way out of speeding tickets, cheating on their income taxes, and abusing alcohol, tobacco, and designer drugs; and the children wonder what it means to be honest.

The growing diversity of today's schools and communities makes it even more difficult to reach out to parents and guardians without being suspected of belonging to the establishment. If teachers hug children who are starving for affection, teachers may be suspected of child abuse. If teachers teach middle-class or other values, they may be accused of forcing their values on their students. If teachers model American values only, they may be accused of ignoring or denigrating other cultural mores. For schooling to remain a valued segment of tomorrow's society, schools will have to change radically in their operation.

The goals and aims that drive the schooling process must reflect new and more meaningful curricula and redefine outcome products. If real change is to occur, it must reflect meaningful input from all segments of the community. The whole village must take an active role in the most important task assigned to parents and guardians—educating children.

References

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