CHILD AND YOUTH CARE IN SCHOOL SETTINGS: MAXIMIZING SUPPORT AND MINIMIZING FRICTION

Carey J. Denholm
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ABSTRACT: Strategies for child and youth care worker participation and acceptance in school settings are explored including suggestions for gaining support for child and youth care perspectives and intervention.

Introduction

Through a telephone call, direct classroom intervention, case conference, professional seminar or by accident, most child and youth care workers consult and/or interact with school teachers. Practical strategies designed to facilitate and promote the professional standing and acceptance of workers within educational environments, however, have not been discussed in the literature. This article is about schools, teachers, and ways in which child and youth care workers can perform their jobs more effectively in school environments. The premise is that a planned and carefully prepared approach to work within school settings enhances worker reputation and credibility, stimulates greater involvement from school staff and school administration, and results in more effective intervention with children and youth.

Child and Youth Care in Educational Settings

> "We are engaged in a struggle for credibility and for the legitimate right to practice and use our knowledge and skills within the school...not just to act as "trouble shooters" to deal with only nonconformers; we are neither policemen nor teacher aides. I know that, you know that, but how do we get them to know that?"

This statement was made to the author by a school-based youth counselor during a recent child care conference. Further discussion revealed issues relating to this worker's role and function, adequacy of academic preparation, and the degree to which the worker understood administrators' attitudes towards child care practice.

Information about the existence and status of school-based pro-

grams in Canada (Denholm & Watkins, 1987) and the United States (Goocher, 1975; Meisels, 1975) is available. Recognition of the importance this environment plays in the lives of children and youth is also reflected in the curricula for many child care training programs that include a practicum experience in a school setting.

The methods of working, (Denholm & Watkins, 1987) job titles, types of students, and channels of accountability vary considerably. For example, with itinerant work, child care workers maintain an indirect relationship to the school. Their position is contracted through a community agency to provide child and youth services to individuals or groups or serve as an external consultant and resource within the network of existing school student services (Nordstrom & Denholm, 1986). In Canada, child care practitioners provide services in schools to assist in the integration of developmentally handicapped students. They are also employed to work within elementary or secondary schools during nonschool times with referred children and their families.

Job titles include "youth counselor," "child care counselor," "child care worker," "life skills coordinator," "behavioral counselor" and "youth and family counselor." Workers work in schools, education-based day clinics and special education facilities with students who may differ in aptitude, developmental level and educational and personal need. Work may be on a full-time, part-time or itinerant basis and they may be direct employees of the school district, be responsible to a board of directors or be self-employed.

Regardless of the method of work, title, etc., however, prior to work within the school, it is helpful if workers clarify and organize their approach in the three areas most often cited by practitioners as critical to successful practice; worker role and function, the school system itself, and the application of child care intervention techniques within classrooms.

Role Definition

Child and youth care is a profession founded on a commitment to the well-being of children, youth and their families. It is based on a perspective which emphasizes normative development, social competence and the use of relationship in therapeutic interactions (Ferguson & Anglin, 1985). For school-based child and youth care workers, the following definition has been suggested by the author:

"The primary role of the child care worker within the educational setting is to promote behavioral change and personal growth in children and adolescents who are having

difficulties coping within this setting as a result of social, emotional and physical problems and to assist in their academic success." (Denholm, 1987, p. 28).

This definition can be translated into the following function statements.

School-related functions include:

- Working in the classroom modeling behavior management approaches.

- Assisting teachers to prepare recommendations on individuals and groups.

- Compiling information for school staff.

- Coordinating case meetings.

- Participating in school-related meetings.

Individual student functions include:

- Identifying and providing in-depth assessments.

- Designing, implementing and evaluating treatment.

- Referring and placing students in other programs.

- Participating in work experience programs.

Group intervention functions include:

- Assessing and preparing students for short-term group counseling.

- Initiating recreational groups.

- Developing new programs.

Family-related functions include:

- Conducting parent education programs.

- Referring parents to social service agencies.

- Coordinating family activity nights.

- Providing short-term crisis counseling support.

Community functions include:

- Liaison with community professionals.

- Promoting inter-agency cooperation.

A job description that outlines similar specific work-related objectives is recommended (Parsons & Meyers, 1984). This document might also include a brief theoretical statement explaining their approach to behavioral change (Egan, 1985) or the treatment approach of their agency. Copies can be provided for the school principal, and other administrative staff and workers can openly discuss their potential role at a staff meeting at the beginning of each school year.

School personnel often ask questions about the core aspects of child care or the "essence of the profession." Understanding the scope of the field (Denholm, Ferguson & Pence, 1987) and being able to articulate these core components are essential. Ferguson and Anglin (1985) identify four central elements:

- Child care is focused on the growth and development of children and youth.

- Child care is concerned with the totality of child development and functioning.

- Child care has developed within a model of social competence rather than pathology.

- Child care is based (but not restricted to) direct, day-to-day work with children in their environment.

The School as a System

The school like any other organization has structural components such as rules, policies, regulations, hierarchies, a management system and committees. Schools are built around routines, schedules and planned events that are repeated weekly, monthly and yearly. Examples include tests, reports, teacher advising, visits by administration, sports and dramatic activities, special assemblies for visiting guests, discipline measures, and special recognition of student, class and staff performance.

Schools are generally characterized by order and emphasis on academic learning, with instructional methods designed to engage students in the learning process. Student progress is carefully monitored and evaluated. There are usually written documents covering such areas as discipline, safety, parent involvement, and the after-hours use of school property.

Of central concern is the tone of the school, which is set by the principal. The quality of instructional leadership, staff member cohesion and support, the stated or implicit attitude towards parents and "external" personnel such as child care workers, and general cleanli-

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ness and appearance of order may all be indicators of school tone. School principals have been (and may be still functioning as) classroom teachers, and have undergone an extensive period of administrative training. In addition, principals are required to apply school, as well as district policy, on a daily basis. They must also respond to countless documents from the district office. Each principal will also have his own personal criteria for what makes a "good" school, such as classroom noise level, academic tests results, number of sports championships, degree of parent involvement, and community support.

Teachers are engaged in the process of stimulating, encouraging and monitoring learning in accordance with standardized grade curricula. Although teachers may enjoy the social environment at their school and involvement in a range of activities and events, work-related satisfaction comes primarily from the academic progress and achievement of their students. Teacher training prepares teachers for the day when they will have "their" own classroom. Thus much of the personality of the teacher is reflected by the physical appearance of the room, the behavior of the children, and the actual approaches utilized within the learning environment.

Child and youth care workers entering schools have to be sensitive to this. Concerning potential friction with teachers, confrontation may occur between a teacher concerned with maintaining high and uniform academic standards and a counselor who may be concerned about the low self-concept and emotional insecurity of a student in the competitive atmosphere of a particular classroom. Thus, child care and youth workers often have to search with the teacher for a parallel understanding of the children and their families.

Another key factor, is the notion of the classroom as a protected space. An invitation must first be extended by the teacher to enter the classroom, and the subsequent reaction by the worker while in this setting, is critical. For example, carefully reading children's statements on a notice board and asking about the related activity conveys a higher level of interest in learning than a brief comment about the colors on the pin board. At the first meeting, the worker is encouraged to maintain a confident approach, while realizing that much of the effectiveness of the intervention with the child or youth is ultimately reflective of the quality of the teacher-worker relationship.

Once the professional relationship has been established, workers can develop opportunities to relate to the teacher(s) outside the stated child care role. Practical ways may involve bringing an object for a class activity or display, accompanying the class on a field trip, offering to teach a musical instrument or being involved in a class project such as a dramatic performance. Such attempts serve to introduce other

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dimensions of the personality of the child or youth care worker to the school, many of which may not surface on the basis of the written mandate.

Application of Intervention Techniques within the Classroom

Child and youth care workers can be enthusiastic about promoting or advocating for the child, youth or family within the school, and they can suggest theoretical or developmental approaches for assisting in meeting the child's needs, but they must always be sensitive to the issues and demands placed on teachers in supporting child care interventions. Sometimes it helps to be able to translate child care terms into educational terms. For example "treatment" becomes "individual program plan," "interventions" may become "strategies" or "activities," and "case report" may be termed the "program summary."

It is also beneficial if a worker understands how child care techniques can be modified in accordance with the classroom environment (Apter, 1982; Kanfer & Goldstein, 1984). Then, as his or her relationship with a teacher grows, behavior management techniques can be demonstrated. For example, workers might introduce the stages of a temper tantrum as a way of understanding what's going on during physical restraint (Trieschman, Whittaker & Brendtro, 1969), promote the use of logical and natural consequences (Dreikurs & Cassels, 1972), implement step-by-step interventions using structured assessment (Cochrane & Myers, 1980); (Jarrett & Klassen, 1986) and programming approaches (Krueger, 1988), or techniques for interviewing and intervention with the entire class (Cartledge & Milburn, 1985). Introducing effective communication approaches (Gordon, 1977) may also assist teachers in using these alternative strategies.

Summary

Regardless of the size of the assigned case load and work contract, child and youth care workers are also required to deal with many of the day-to-day demands and issues within the school system. Decisions about child care practice are often done in isolation from other child and youth care personnel. Workers need to be engaged in the building of personal and professional staff-parent-student relations and in the careful adherence to a position of neutrality between administration and staff. Determination of the type and extent of prior experience school staff have had with human service professionals, awareness of the style of the principal and the knowledge the principal has about the role of child care and services offered, are all important issues to

be considered. School's staff have an existing hierarchy within which decisions, reactions and responses are made. It is therefore essential to carefully determine the existing boundaries, unwritten rules and routines and the process of decision making.

Child and youth care workers who select the school system as their primary employment setting need to be aware of the range of issues and questions needing daily and weekly attention. With accurate information and understanding of the public nature of the task, school-based child and youth care workers will be able to work towards support, encouragement and long-term survival and ultimately effective practice within this setting.

About the Author:

Carey Denholm is an Associate Professor in the School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria. He has also taught deaf, infant, elementary and secondary level students in Canadian and Australian systems. Since 1979 he has been involved in raising the professional profile of workers in school settings.

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