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Empowering Environments

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The special education system has come to a plateau. Although there have been significant advances in the quality of services delivered by special education teachers, this process can go forward only so far. It is now restricted from further significant advance by the bureaucratic and hierarchical form of education administration in this country. Until this structure is radically changed, special education teachers will not have the experiential knowledge to implement (on a wide scale) the individuality, empowerment, teamwork and overall spirit of the Individual Education Program process as outlined and intended in PL 94-142.

The IEP process has moved through two significant phases since 1975. The first was the "Legality Phase". It is defined by the numerous articles and training manuals that were devoted to the legal aspects of special education. Some were written for parents and advocates (Goldberg, 1982; Strickland, 1983), and other for administrators (Jones, 1981; Turnbull, 1978; Turnbull, 1986). Other authors examined the history of the legal victories concerning the education of children with special needs (Cremins, 1983; Levine & Wexler, 1981) and the impact of the law on educational innovations in the United States (Henning, 1979).

The need for the special education reform had emerged as a result of numerous lawsuits and developed out of congressional hearings (Goodman & Bond, 1993). Thus from this hostile environment, it is no surprise the legal aspects of the IEP process were so central to educators and administrators at that time.

Within three years of the enactment of PL 94-142, researchers began studying and reporting results on the implementation of the process. The studies showed consistent insufficiencies in its implementation in numerous areas. In some schools, goals were not written based upon assessed needs (Schenck and Levy, 1979; Schenck, 1980). In 1981, a study by the federal government found parents and local education personnel were not attending IEP conferences and a significant number of IEPs were not yet implemented (Comptroller General of the United States 1981). In 1985, Dodaro and Salvemini (1985) identified 595 delinquents with developmental disabilities, 63% (372) of whom did not have IEPs. In addition, 73% of the IEPs inspected were not in compliance with procedural requirements. (Smith, 1990).

The Dodaro and Salvemini study of 1985 showed that integrating special needs students into the mainstream educational schools did not provide the quality of services intended for individuals. Far from it, when 75% percent of the students being served were out of compliance. The next phase of IEP implementation aimed at changing that poor start by taking the popular managerial practices of the business community and applying it to the IEP process.

The second phase of the IEP process had its major focus on training. As educators began to look at the problem of implementing quality services to their students, Total Quality Management had begun to have a large impact on the business community. Some of the worlds largest corporations had devoted

millions of dollars toward restructuring according to these principles. The language of the IEP process became saturated with these principles and continues to the present.

Restructuring schools to site-based management has been a predominant theme in the literature since the late 1980's and even more so in the 1990's. It's fundamental goal is to decentralize power and redistribute it down to the individual school-based administrators and teachers. Issues addressed in the literature surrounding restructuring include the basic steps toward restructuring (Armstrong, 1990: Conley, D., 1993: Duttweiler, 1990: Murphy, 1994:), problems and concerns with it (Barth, 1991: Daresh, 1992: Epps, 1992), implications for school personnel with its implementation (Chapman, 1990: Sickler, 1988) the empowerment of teachers (Bolin, 1989:) and the need for collaboration among teachers (Conley, S. C., 1989: Conway, 1984: Duttweiler, 1990: Prestine, 1991:).

These Total Quality Management themes of restructuring, collaboration, cooperation and empowerment soon crept into the special education field as well. Popular IEP planning strategies such as Team Planning, Person Centered Planning, Circles of Support and Futures Planning dominated the field. However, these programs were essentially the same concept with a slightly different twist. Each focused on a movement away from a staff/administrative centered to a person-centered and person-empowered approach. There developed a pattern of using the theme of "more cooperation" and repackaging it every few years for new teacher training seminars.

This pattern of stagnation of quality programs and development of new paradigms to increase program quality raises significant questions. Why has IEP training stagnated? Why are teachers reaching a plateau in the quality of services they can provide? Why are some, if not the majority, of special educators simply providing services rather than fulfilling the spirit of the law?

Teachers, like most other workers have a desire for meaningful and useful lives (Pines, 1988). Demming, in his writings (1982) made a basic assumption that people are intrinsically motivated to learn and succeed. The issue of teachers reaching a plateau in service delivery is not due to a lack of teacher motivation (in most cases), but rather to how the administrative structure diminishes the innate desire and ability to be successful teachers. Unfortunately, most organizations are designed with the expectation that employees will do the minimum work expected of them to get their paycheck. Thus, they use control to maintain output rather than facilitating peoples natural desire to learn and succeed (Demming, 1982).

When teachers are controlled through vertically managed and valued bureaucracies, they tend to obtain control of there classroom through being, "bureaucratically proficient rather than student centered" (Smith and Brownell, 1995). Add to that managerial style a perception from teachers as having an increased caseload, excessive paperwork, insufficient support and non-sufficient training (Dudley-Manning, 1985; McGarry and Finan, 1982) and this can lead to a situation where work has no meaning and the stresses of the paper work and legalities outweighs the rewards. This is a recipe for teacher burnout. The cost of burnout is the diminution of the best people in the profession (Career Burnout, 1988).

The passage of PL 94-142 was doomed to stagnation for not attaching to it significant changes to the educational system as a whole. How can educators who perceive themselves as having little power in their job empower students in their lives? If the educational system does not value and trust its employees enough to allow more direct control over their environment and curriculum, should it be a

surprise that student inclusion, empowerment and dignity of risk are more often than not a show of presence than practice?

Empowerment is the concept that assumes that individuals are naturally interested and motivated to enter their world and master it to the best of their ability. Empowering work environments, therefore, should give employees some measure of ability to design their own work (Reinhold, 1996).

Disempowerment is the process whereby those who have power over the individuals and the administrative structures they work in take away other's power of self-determination, self-initiation, and self-motivation. There is a feeling of high demand and low job control in disempowering environments. (Reinhold, 1996).

The classroom should be a naturally empowering environment for teachers. Their job in the classroom is maintaining student civility and providing instruction. Administrators often disempower teachers by overloading them with work, increasing class size beyond effective ratios and limiting the decisions they are allowed to make. The teacher needs to be the center of the educational organization with the support network in place where needed. such a structure allows the teacher to maintain his/her natural supports, such as other teachers, student leaders and community contacts rather than be dependent upon and controlled by the administration.

Teachers disempower students by limiting the number of choices they have in their class. It requires additional time and emotional energy to empower students to experience a broad range of choices in their environment. This is especially true in organizational structures with an authoritative hierarchy. A teacher who is not experiencing the motivating dynamics of being empowered, is unlikely to have the emotional energy to empower his/her students. A teacher in such a situation is more likely to be bureaucratically proficient than student centered. The administration of schools, especially special education programs, needs to reflect the team concept critical to implementing an IEP.

A natural outgrowth of empowerment would be allowing teachers the "Dignity of Risk" in taking curricular chances with their students. The development of national achievement tests for students is a supreme example of what not to do to empower teachers. Over the past 20 years, the literature has manifested and legitimized the existence of a wide variety of learning styles, intelligence's, socio-economic differences and learning disabilities. It is ironic that the national movement toward the use of standardized tests should be endorsed at a time when more and more studies have demonstrated that people cannot be standardized by any learning style or test. The effect this movement on teachers is to remove the locus of control from their room, department, school, district and state. Teaching toward the test is becoming more and more a means of survival. Teachers are not allowed the "Dignity of Risk" of determining general guidelines for their students based upon geographic and local socio-economic needs.

What does all this mean for the teacher. How can the system be changed? Institutional change is necessary, but the changes needed are the same ones that were needed back in 1975 at the inception of PL 94-142. As a leader of that movement said at the time, "Bureaucracies such as educational systems will move institutionally only under threat or duress" (Gallagher, 1972). It was suggested at that time that teachers be made directly responsible for the academic outcomes of their students and be punished for failure to produce results (Gallagher, 1972). However, Demming in his work, which is consistent with the concept of empowerment and "Dignity of Risk," stated that workers (and thus, teachers) have an inherent desire to produce meaningful work and that working under threat does not motivate but rather unmotivates (Pines, 1988: & Demming, 1982). However, bureaucratic change must

occur to significantly raise the quality of services in education because disempowered teachers will not be able to provide an empowering environment for students.

Solutions toward institutional changes in education must begin with the policy makers who put them in place. The first and most essential change would be to allow school districts to develop their educational system according to their local needs. Just as general education teachers are now required to provide adapted instruction to meet the needs of individual students, so communities must be allowed to adapt their fiscal individualities as needed. For example, the school districts of North Lawndale, Chicago and North Manchester, Indiana are vastly different in socio-economic needs. Deciding if funding needs to be public, private, or a hybrid of the two is best made by local communities. It is disempowering to take away that right and ability to be fiscally self-governing.

Second, individual school district administrators need to recognize the massive bureaucratic weight of changing federal fiscal policy. These men and women should spend the majority of their time and resources supporting those below them as they attempt to empower students in an environment that is antithetical to that end. If administrators loose their focus of providing quality support services to those operatives below them now through trying to reform the controlling bureaucratic system, they will justify that very status quo bureaucratic system. One cannot provide poor quality services and at the same time ask for more responsibility in doing it.

Third, teachers (as well as administrators) need to understand the catch-22 they are in. The current status quo bureaucratic system is designed with the inherent belief that teachers will do the minimum work required of them to receive their paycheck. This type of management leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy of moving many teachers to a position where they only do the minimum required of them. The product of a disempowering educational bureaucracy is the disempowerment of teachers. One hope, especially for special educators, is that through knowing the catch-22 they are in, they will realize that they are underdogs against formidable odds and find the inner strength to create for their students the experience of empowerment they so deeply thirst to have for themselves. In doing so, special educators will begin to realize that liberating and empowering effects will accrue to themselves, not only as professional educators, but as role models to their students.

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