

RAP Coaching with Teachers

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Teachers need practical strategies to implement restorative approaches with students presenting emotional and behavior problems. RAP training was followed by coaching sessions to move from punitive strategies to build respect and accountability.

Background

Training for special education teachers rarely addresses how to work with students who are in crisis or who are displaying aggression (Gable & Van Acker, 2000). Often teachers are instructed that disruptive students should be punished or excluded from the classroom. The behavior management style becomes one of authority, power, and control rather than problem solving. Educators who work with students with emotional disabilities (ED) must develop skills and strategies beyond those of the general education classroom to help students cope with academic and other stressors. Many students

with emotional issues have experienced trauma and loss and do not trust adults easily. Ineffective student-teacher relationships can both significantly hamper students' success and lead to low teacher retention rates.

Given these trends, the Maryland State Department of Education provided grant funding so that ED staff in Montgomery County Public Schools could be trained in Response Ability Pathways (RAP; Brendtro & du Toit, 2005). RAP training provides adults with a system to connect with youth, foster pro-social behavior, and address individual needs for belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (i.e., the Circle of Courage; Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is Maryland's largest and most diverse school district and the 16th largest public school system in the nation. MCPS serves 560 students receiving support from ED services. MCPS addresses the needs of these students in the least restrictive environment, where many access a rigorous curriculum in general education and supported classrooms.

RAP Coaching

During the past three school years, approximately 225 ED staff members from 22 school programs were trained in RAP. The next catalyst toward transpiring substantive changes with these education professionals was to continue to help them utilize RAP strategies and techniques within their respective school programs. Five ED staff members who were certified as RAP trainers developed an educator-based coaching model. The purpose of coaching was to enhance the application of RAP skills by having participants practice RAP techniques and then make connections with real-life examples from their schools. Seven 3-hour evening coaching sessions took place during the school year, and ED teachers, para-educators, psychologists, and social workers who had already received RAP training were invited to attend. The coaching process included structured conversations, role-plays, and reflections. The staff were divided by grade level and population so that elementary, middle/high school, and Bridge (primary disability may be ED or characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder) staff were all able to attend three sessions.

The first coaching session reviewed major tenets of RAP, including pain-based behavior, child brain development, TRUE (trust, respect, understanding, empowerment) connections, and CLEAR (challenge, logic, emotion, action, results). The coaches then facilitated a discussion on what evidence of RAP would be seen if they walked through each special education classroom. Following this, the coaches performed a role play where staff purposefully did not use RAP skills during a difficult exchange with a student. Session participants were guided through alternative methods of communicating with the student as well as how to converse with their fellow colleagues to remedy the situation. Finally, participants worked individually or as teams to develop an action plan to further implement RAP in their school-based programs.

The second coaching session focused on consequences and discipline under a restorative model of communication. Survey and focus group data highlighted that a major obstacle to implementing RAP and creating a paradigm shift was the

misperception among many staff that RAP precluded limits or consequences for students. Participants responded to a variety of quotes on the topics of discipline and consequences. Coaches then reviewed the concept of restorative justice and helped participants examine the difference between discipline and punishment. A facilitated discussion was held to explore why staff often resort to punishment with students. Coaches conducted a role play where staff used punishment and non-restorative language with a student. A debriefing session was conducted after the role play and participants were challenged to reframe the punitive comments and directions using restorative language. They also brainstormed ways to

model healthy communication. Following the debriefing, participants were invited to conduct a program inventory to determine which aspects of their programs were punitive or restorative.

The final coaching session focused on problem solving and included a reflection on core professional values. Problem solving is frequently utilized in ED classes where teachers work through difficulties with students who display negative classroom or school behaviors. Historically, typical problem solving sheets have often proved ineffective and have not led to meaningful changes. Various approaches to problem solving were role-played and discussed. Coaches then solicited feedback from participants on the problem solving sheets used in their programs. Participants were asked to work in their school teams to develop RAP-oriented approaches to problem solving, namely *connect*, *clarify*, and *restore*. The final activity focused on core professional values. Using the Circle of Courage, participants were invited to reflect on how they will foster the universal growth needs of students and staff in their programs next year. They were encouraged to review their reflections over the course of the year to refocus on what is important to them as they work to fully implement RAP in their programs.

Next Steps

These coaching sessions provided opportunities for staff to meet with their peers and share similar experiences and concerns in their work with at-risk youth. Throughout the coaching sessions, staff indicated it was beneficial for them to hear about

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the challenges as well the successes in other MCPS school programs. They were also able to brainstorm potential solutions to problems with their colleagues using the structured conversations during coaching.

The goal is to move away from a philosophy of punishment and toward a philosophy of reclaiming and restoring.

The empirical feedback from the coaching sessions has been overwhelmingly positive. Participants provided survey data after each coaching session whereby 94% of participants felt they benefitted from the coaching and 90% of the participants indicated they would use what was discussed or reviewed in their programs. To continue to encourage the paradigm shift to RAP in ED programs, the coaches are designing ten 30-minute modules on RAP topics to be offered at weekly staff meetings. These modules will be facilitated by the coaches and will be on some of the following topics: CLEAR, TRUE, the Tit for Tat conflict cycle, Circle of Courage, restorative discipline, contracts and level systems, forming relationships, and RAP in general education classrooms. The coaches are also developing a Circle of Courage-oriented staffing form for use when discussing students and an inventory to be utilized when assessing a program for its commitment to and systematic use of RAP principles. RAP refresher sessions will also be offered to staff throughout the school year. At the core of these activities is the goal to continue to move away from a philosophy of punishment and toward a philosophy of reclaiming and restoring youth by giving them respect, opportunity, and accountability.

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