

Collaborative Practice: Passions that bind, not titles that confine

WORDS | LAURIE SCHULZ & KAREN COPELAND

The notion of “not doing this work alone” is heavily encouraged within the social work field, emphasizing the importance of supervision, collaboration, and supportive colleagues. But what happens when we create opportunities with a more diverse and expanded group? Collaborative practice is an established guideline within the field of social work, a core ethic ascribed to by social workers. But collaboration is anything but static or one dimensional. It is practiced in diverse ways and with equally diverse agendas. One of the many forms of collaborative practice is illustrated through the growing movement of having those with whom we work inform our services. Collaboration on a large scale, as seen in systems, committees, and directed programs can feel overwhelming and perhaps even uncomfortable. This led a parent, Karen Copeland, and a professional social worker, Laurie Schulz, to wonder what they might be able to accomplish if they challenged their ideas of partnering. What kind of opportunities would be created? How might this influence their perspectives on the value of collaboration?

KAREN'S STORY

When I first discovered that I would need to learn how to advocate for my child, I did a lot of research. Much of the information I discovered promoted the concept of collaboration; parents were encouraged to work *with* their child's team and should be considered equal partners in the decision-making process. Let's just say while a great amount of information was available to explain why collaboration was important, and some ideas provided about how to collaborate, it didn't mean that all people at the table were *willing* to collaborate. I often felt like I was expected to *co-operate*, not necessarily bring forward my own concerns or ideas for consideration. These experiences did not lead me to a very nice place in my life, and certainly did not give me much of an idea of how collaboration could be done in effective ways.

My first real collaborative experience was born from an idea that had been introduced to me in a group facilitated by Laurie. The concept introduced in that session was my “lightbulb” moment. It provided me with a framework to evaluate and understand the various relationships I had in my life—with my children, with my family, and with professionals. Laurie was just

as passionate about this concept. When we spoke with each other about it, all kinds of ideas and thoughts were generated. It was exciting to have these conversations, to find this person who could validate my thoughts but also challenge me to think bigger. I wanted to share my learning with other families in my community. I felt like my message would be more powerful and likely to be heard if I shared this information in a workshop alongside a professional. I approached Laurie about collaborating to create a session related to the concept. She agreed and we went to work.

As we pushed forward, our given roles of parent and professional began to change. A formal connection evolved into a partnership that was not confined by any titles. We considered each other simply as two people with different knowledge bases and experiences, bound by common passion around this topic.

This collaboration and others in which I have been involved are important because they have allowed me to step outside of my own experiences to identify other unique and amazing things that are happening around me in systems and in my community. I have a new appreciation for the roles of others; it has fostered curiosity about the systems I am navigating as opposed to the negative thoughts I experienced in those early days. Authentic collaboration has allowed me to step into the positivity of what's around me, not just the critique.

The workshop was a huge success. We intentionally invited parents and professionals to attend. Parents appreciated the information being shared by Laurie with her professional expertise; professionals appreciated the information being shared through my perspective and lens. Throughout it all, Laurie and I modelled what collaboration looks like. This particular collaboration was also the catalyst for exploring further opportunities; it fuelled my commitment to do more. I purposefully seek out individuals who will collaborate with me on upcoming projects. Each and every time I walk away from a collaboration, I am excited to discover new ideas that emerge, to think about what I can do next. This gives me the opportunity to continue making a difference and expanding my network of support in my community and beyond. I am no longer working in isolation. My ideas are made stronger through the collaborative process and I now believe what I have to say is in fact important.

I have discovered that collaboration doesn't need to be on a large scale. It can come in all different sizes and have huge meaning even in small pockets. The freedom of an organic, grassroots collaboration is powerful. My experiences engaging in collaboration have given me the confidence to continue creating new opportunities. Most importantly it has provided me with the confidence to determine who I really am. I no longer see myself as *just a parent* who may or may not have thoughts and ideas to share. I have been offered the opportunity to discover my true self; I actively embrace my vision for change, knowing that my voice matters, because I have been told and *shown* that it does. Collaboration has drawn this out of me, and I can't wait to continue on this path going forward.

LAURIE'S STORY

Embracing the importance of collaboration like many social workers, I anticipate opportunities to participate with other disciplines around the care for a client. I consult with others and approach clients with a collaborative spirit. However, collaborations that occur on a broader scale such as those that involve community development, committees, and planning meetings evoke feelings of intimidation. There are individuals who shine in this context but I am not one of them. Nonetheless, I applaud the advances to practice, policy, and programs that can occur from this work. The movement to have service users at these tables, informing initiatives, service delivery and policy issues is another practice to celebrate, yet these platforms are not where many social workers find themselves. When larger movements to have clients direct, inspire, and inform programming began to emerge within the agency I work, I began to consider how I too could collaborate with service users in a way that was meaningful and tangible.

Partnering with Karen in a variety of presentations has brought new life to the principle of collaboration. It has not involved committee meetings or grant proposals, labour-intensive work or competing agendas. Our work together has resulted from shared values and a respect for what the other has to offer. We have had numerous opportunities to bring forward ideas that are of interest to each of us, but perhaps of even more importance, we modeled the capacity for a professional and a parent service user to work together. Collaboration does not need to be large-scale or eloquently packaged to be worthwhile.

It is an empowering experience to recognize that as a professional, it is okay not to be an expert. It is okay to "not know." Approaching collaborations from a position of curiosity, asking the question "what can I learn from this person?" has been freeing and exciting, fostering a deep appreciation for those we work with and the knowledge they carry. From this place, Karen

and I have been able to facilitate numerous presentations that bring forward the voice of a parent and a professional, voices that don't compete but enhance the other.

The way in which I experienced these partnerships has helped shape a new lens in which to view clients. Rather than looking for what I can do *for* or provide *to* a client, I consider what I might be able to accomplish *with* a client. This challenges the traditional perception of professional-client interactions. Collaborations with those we support bring about a sense of togetherness. This empowering shift has also provided opportunities for others to discover their own strengths. Witnessing Karen experience the value of her voice has made me even more committed to encourage others I work with to share, speak out, and bring their voices forward. We can show a client their voice matters by coming alongside and having the courage to regard each other as equals.

SUMMARY

This partnership allowed each of us to move beyond our traditional roles (and the assumptions we make about these) to discover unique and powerful opportunities to connect with and empower others in our community. We have learned a great deal from one another; our individual perspectives create added layers of understanding and value to the collaborative process. We continue moving forward with the goal of making an impact, together. Engaging in this process has resulted in a commitment to continue learning from and with each other, but most importantly, it has motivated us to create opportunities for others to experience this as well. We have created workshops directed to parents and professionals alike with the hope of fostering a better understanding of our respective experiences. Our most powerful collaboration has been co-facilitating two parent panels where we have supported and empowered seven parents to share their knowledge and experience with professionals within the social work realm. We firmly believe that a position or title does not define the value of a voice. We actively embrace this belief and carry it forward in all our collaborations and hope to inspire you to do the same. 

Karen Copeland is the parent of two children in Abbotsford BC. She has extensive experience navigating school, health, and ministry mental health (children and youth) systems to obtain the services her family needs and deserves. Karen is the founder of Champions for Community Mental Wellness, an online resource dedicated to changing the conversation about children, youth and families in our communities.

Laurie Schulz is a Registered Social Worker and Clinical Counsellor working at a community agency and in private practice.