

Episode: 9**Title: Working with Educators: Strategies to Foster Collaboration****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari****Mahek Bansal**

Hi everyone, welcome back to the New PossibilOTs podcast. Larissa and I are very excited to have you back with us. Last episode we talked about community-based OT, so Larissa and I thought it might be nice to flow on from that and talk about specifically how we work collaboratively with educators. So whether that's early childhood educators, teachers, teacher's aide, learning staff, everyone in the school environment, I guess we can talk about why it's important to build a collaborative relationship and share some tips that we have for developing a collaborative relationship with educators. So Larissa, why do we want to foster collaborative relationships with educators?

Larissa Ferrari

I think we all come now from a point of view that everyone is part of a team and a client's team, and everyone brings a different point of view based on their training and experience. So before, I think a lot of allied health professionals would be considered experts because of their training, but I think we now understand that everyone is some type of expert in their own role. So, the parents are expert in the roles of understanding the day to day lives of the client, the teachers in the role of educating, and us in our role working with the task analysis and performance in daily living. So, I guess when we think that everyone is a piece of that puzzle, that big puzzle, we can work in collaboration to achieve goals and to partnership and to understand this different point of views. Is there anything else you think we could add to that definition?

Mahek Bansal

No, I think that's perfect. I guess if I think about why I feel like it's very important to build this collaborative relationship is sort of coming back to what we talked about last episode, that when I see a client in the clinic, I'm only seeing them in this one specific environment that they're only in for an hour a week. And it's not necessarily reflective of their own capacity as well as the demands of the different environments that impact their capacity. So having a collaborative relationship with the educator puts me in such a better position to be able to support this family because I'm able to then get more information and understanding about the child in a natural environment that they are engaging and participating in much more regularly and frequently and might be an area that they would benefit with support in.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes, Mahek. And I think just adding a little bit more to what you've said, the challenges that the teacher, educators might encounter in that group setting can also be very different from the difficulties or challenges and strengths we see in our one-on-one setting. And then I think that collaboration, that partnership helps us to understand the challenges in different contexts and, therefore, think about the best strategies for that specific setting. So, when we think about the collaboration as a partnership, then we can think that the strategies will also be more powerful in a sense that we have more people collaborating to that strategy, if that makes sense. So, I think that's why I really think that the collaboration is so important in our clients' life, in a sense that we have more people thinking about more strategies and supports.

Mahek Bansal

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Yeah, definitely. I guess that's one purpose of our collaboration. Another purpose of our collaboration with educators can also be to educate and I guess work together to understand what the OT scope is and what our role is so that we can support the clients in our best capacity. What I mean is that by working with educators to explain what we do, how we do it, the different areas that we might support children in, they might get a better picture of how we could provide support to the child and to them. And they are able to bring us more relevant information or observations that we will use to work together to build strategies.

Larissa Ferrari

That's a great point of view. It reminds me of one of our first episodes when we're explaining why empowering the community around us is so important - so therefore they can rely on us for the specific purposes. Like if they know what we do, it's more likely that they will come to us for help as well as by knowing what they do, we can get their opinion as well. So I think that topic, that purpose you've mentioned is a really good one. And I can see that in practice, like when we go to school and the teachers and educators build a rapport with us and know what we do, they feel more comfortable in talking about the challenges. This is something we've mentioned in our previous episode as well. It takes some time for them to feel comfortable, to rely on someone else to talk about their challenges. And I guess it's the same for us. So knowing what we do is really important, I agree with you.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah. And I guess Larissa I can think of another, I guess, purpose, and that is also advocacy. A big part of our role is advocating for our clients, for the support that they would benefit from, for adjustments in the environment or in relation to a school setting, differences in learning styles and things like that. And a big part of our role is supporting the people who support this client, to understand the client's strengths and areas of support so that the client can access the supports that they need. And so I think building a collaborative relationship allows you to advocate with a sense of mutual respect. It's not necessarily about coming in with I know more and this is what this person needs and you're not doing it right. It's coming together on a level ground, explaining our perspective, gathering an understanding of the other person's perspective and their sort of thought process and having that back and forth communication to come to an understanding - a common understanding that is in line with what is in the best interest of the client.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes, and I think that another thing we spoke in previous episodes, so many of the behaviours we see in children, unexpected behaviours we see in children are communication-based. Like they want to tell us something, but they couldn't adjust their behaviour to, say, in a proper way or in a way that we can understand. So I think when we try to support... to advocate for these clients, because we try to do the task analysis and understand what's the purpose of that specific unexpected behaviour or a specific way of communicating, then we can bring another point of view and brainstorm better strategies. Because I think sometimes some challenges can be seen as appearingly behavioural or something that's not with a meaning behind, with a communication behind. So it's through that collaboration and through advocating for that client that I think we can unravel the many layers of this behaviour and try to understand what are the strengths of that client and how we can use this strength to come up with better strategies. And I've seen this in practice as

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well. And it might seem simple, but I think that's one of the main purposes for me. This is something that I really value in this partnership.

Mahek Bansal

And I guess Larissa, you know, we collaborate with educators, like, as we said, to understand a client's capacity in the school setting. But what I guess puts us in a great position is that we liaise between the different environments. We often take on that sort of key worker role, where we're bridging the communication between school, between home, between community, and so we're getting a picture of the client in all of these settings, so we can, I guess take that information into our collaborative relationship with the educators and maybe where they're seeing the client only in the school setting and are trying to understand this client's behaviours and capacity within a school perspective, we can offer a different lens and I guess a more holistic picture to make sense of some of the challenges that might be happening. So I guess that collaborative relationship hopefully also supports the educators in the sense that they can get a better picture as well through us of what else might be going on for this family.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes, and adding to that, I feel like it's not rare that because of this one to one lens and group lens might be different, it's not rare that we as an OT, when working in collaboration with families and educators, we sometimes find some unhealthy relationships between educators and parents. But it's just because they're talking about two different scenarios and sometimes that communication gets a little bit lost or tricky or I don't know how to describe. And I feel like when we bring that different lens but in a collaborative way that we can also work on the relationship of the client's team so we can help to translate the parents and educators and ourselves to find the strength. So I think it's to make sure everyone can understand each other's perspective and work as a team.

I guess it can be challenging when I see something and someone else sees through another perspective. And when we try to communicate, it's hard to put that into words, it's hard to come to an agreement to what we're seeing. So I think just that collaboration helps everyone to understand each one's point of view.

Mahek Bansal

Definitely. I think we've said the word collaboration now Larissa more times than I can count. So how do we collaborate? Like if we are starting to build a relationship with an educator or if we've already got a relationship that we're wanting to develop and foster, what would your tips be to foster this relationship that has that healthy collaborative communication?

Larissa Ferrari

I guess it starts with being non-judgmental and just to reassure the teacher that you're there or the educator that you're there to offer support with their concerns. It's not that we're there to give them a list of things to do. So just listening to their concerns, listening to their point of view and having that open conversation, understanding conversation and just again building that rapport, it's so important and I think we're going to be talking about that in almost every episode. What will be your tip number two?

Mahek Bansal

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I guess going, sort of expanding on that Larissa. I think even when I have a picture of my client and some ideas of what might support my client in different settings, my first interaction with an educator is always one of curiosity. It's always a question, it's always an open conversation about what the educator's point of view is. Because where I might have made my own sort of hypotheses or had feedback from the parents of what they've seen in the school environment or what the educators are reporting to them, I think building a collaborative relationship, a big part of it is feeling heard, it's feeling valued, it's feeling like your opinion is being respected. So I always come in with asking, I've heard there's some concerns or there's some challenges I'd really like to support, but first I'd love to hear from you if there are any areas that you think I could support with or what are your observations, what does this look like? And I hope that sets up the relationship and shows the educator that I'm there to work with them and not, just, as you said, tell them what to do.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes, and I would add that as well, that I always try to call someone's team. So then I think even the language we use helps with that rapport building, with that open communication. When we consider that we are part of a team, that we're working towards the same goal, in a sense that it's the clients well-being and performance and function. So just that language we use, I feel like it's very important. So it's not me telling you what to do or how to say, it's us, it's a team. So even yeah, I'm always concerned about the language and always, again, like you said, reassuring that they have really valuable information that I cannot access because even when I go to school, I'm there for such a short time, so they do have valuable information that could really help all of us in our reasoning.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, I guess another tip is to get an understanding, a picture of what the educator's role looks like, so that you can come from a place of empathy. I guess you discuss with the educator your specific client, but I think gathering information as well about what does their classroom look like? How many kids are in this classroom? What's the adult to child ratio? What does the daily routine look like? When we have an understanding more of the environment and the teachers or the educators situation, when we are starting to think about strategies or ways to support this child, we can put ourselves in their shoes and understand what is feasible and realistic for this educator who's already doing a lot to support this child or trying their best. As we know as well, educators, a lot of educators are under resourced lack of time, burnt out and we don't want to add to the stress. Our whole job is to try and relieve the stress and not only for the teacher but for the client as well. So I think if we come from a place of empathy and in order to have empathy, we need to have a bit more of an understanding of what the teacher's situation, the educator's situation is.

Larissa Ferrari

That was a great one. And my next one would be what's the routine look like? So then once you understand what do they do in the morning, transitions time, to ask specific questions about how this child performs in the morning in comparison to the afternoon. So just try to understand the routine of the classroom and how the child participates in that routine, more so out of a curiosity. That can also help the teacher to reflect on with us about the child's performance and different performances like how does the child perform in different times of the day, different situations. That can really help with our reasoning as well as a team.

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I guess my next tip is also to be open to offer different options for collaboration. And what I mean by that is discuss with the teacher what their preference is in terms of how they communicate with you - whether that's a formal meeting. If they'd like to formalise an hour in the calendar to sit down and meet so that they have that time and space to talk to you. Or whether they prefer more informal, quick phone calls more frequently. Whether they prefer email - trying to meet our communication styles and meet the communication style of the teacher will also support you to not only build a collaborative relationship but also gather and get insightful, reflective observations from the teacher if they're able to do it in a capacity that suits them.

Larissa Ferrari

Yes. And I think my other tip would be after doing all of that and making sure you got great rapport, then to try to understand if any strategies were put into place and what were they. So just we don't come with these lists of things and they are like I've tried all of that. So first to understand what they have tried in the past, what worked, what it didn't work, or if they haven't tried anything, just to be understanding. Like you said, they can lack resources or human resources. So just to try to understand if they tried anything before or if they would like some help to come up with strategies. And when I say help, I mean really being hands on and helping them to prepare the material and put into place in that environment. If doable, if that something we can do.

Mahek Bansal

And adding on to that, I think take some time to really understand the resources that the teacher does have available and does have access to. Obviously, we don't want to be recommending strategies that are very costly or require equipment or resources that's not already available or that's hard to get or hard to use in their environment. So I think there's going to be much more increased success of implementing strategies if they use resources that are already part of the classroom or already part of the school environment and already accessible.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah, and this is really important. I remember I once asked for a photo because I couldn't go to the school, so I've asked for a photo of the classroom because even in terms of the physical space that can be a barrier for implementing strategies. Like you might think that a comic corner really works in your session, but the classroom just does not have that physical capacity. So just trying to understand even these little details before thinking about these amazing strategies that just might not work in that environment and that's fine. We can still find some other options and even considering classmates. So if it's a classroom that has one specific profile, what might benefit the child and the classroom at the same time? So this is another thing, it's actually another tip to consider that whole environment. How we can provide a strategy that could actually be beneficial for everyone and it does not require anything that's too costly or that requires a lot of human resources to be done.

Mahek Bansal

Yes, and I just want to emphasize one of the things you just said is, strategies are often more effective and educators have more capacity to do them when they can be done as a

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whole class approach. It can often be much easier and feasible for an educator to implement a strategy with a whole class, maybe just as part of their classroom routine, than to take time or allocate resources to support one child in the class. Whilst that child still needs that support, and that doesn't mean that they shouldn't receive the support, again, the more easy we can make it for educators, the more practical and the higher chance that it will be implemented more frequently. So if we can think of things that could be done as whole class approaches when we talk about regulation and movement breaks could be beneficial to an entire group of children and how that could look like within the classroom routine. Because the other thing is that when we implement strategies that are routine based, they're often more successful and more likely to be implemented if they can be attached to a part of a routine, whereas having to be done completely separate or extra time being taken out and resources being taken out for that specific strategy itself.

Larissa Ferrari

And again, another tip that's adding to your strategy, to your tip is to share knowledge. So maybe sharing those situations - why we have that reasoning that the movement break might help the whole group. So regulation strategies, why they're beneficial, why breathing is beneficial. So this basic for us, basic knowledge for us that help us to understand how human beings function, that might be fallible for the teachers to understand what's behind that. So why are you asking me to do this movement break activity? Why are you asking me to add, I don't know, blowing activities, lying on the floor activities? What's the reason behind? And we might be empowering a teacher to be more resourceful and find strategies in other scenarios and I guess that's so important, especially for educators that work with so many children.

Mahek Bansal

Definitely. I think we; Larissa could keep going on about how to foster collaborative relationships because it's so important and it really impacts the success of us working with a client within the school setting or collaborating and building relationships with people in the school setting. Having that collaboration can provide so much positive impact that it's really important. And for us, it does require us to continue to work on and develop our clinical reasoning skills where we might need to start being creative about the types of strategies that we're using to fit the resources and space of a particular environment and time to build this collaborative relationship. But I think the effort is worth the outcomes and once you have that relationship, it makes it very much more smooth for the future and I think.

Larissa Ferrari

And I think it will... It will help your client. And what's better than just providing more resource, more support and have more people working towards the same goals for that client that needs our help. So it is a very worthy practice to maintain with a team.

29:23**Mahek Bansal**

Definitely. So if anyone else has some top tips for working collaboratively with educators, we would love to hear it. Please get in touch with us via our social media or contacting us through our website.

Larissa Ferrari

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And even share this episode with the teacher that you really like working in collaboration with.

Mahek Bansal

Yeah, awesome. So Larissa and I look forward to joining you on our next episode. And until then, please be in touch and we will be with you again shortly. Bye.