Chapter 4
Other Considerations for the Consultant

Overview: Effective consultation requires attention to many factors outside the immediate consultant–teacher interaction. Chapter 4 reviews influences on the consultation and coaching processes and identifies outcomes to consider. Consultant factor and teacher factors are described, as well as parent and student factors.

In this chapter, we describe the following:

1. A framework for teacher training
2. Consultant characteristics that impact consultation
3. Teacher characteristics that impact consultation
4. Parent and student considerations

For decades, educational researchers have searched for answers to the question "What makes good teachers?" Some teachers are naturals. They make teaching look easy—keeping a classroom of students engaged and on task. But most teachers have to learn ways to instruct a classroom of students, adapt and modify teaching strategies and materials, and manage student behavior effectively. The effort to stay current and learn new teaching methods based on research is more difficult than ever today because teachers are responsible for all learners—those with and without disabilities. As more and more information becomes available, sorting through information on research-supported practices can be overwhelming. Assuring that all students learn is a daunting task and requires ongoing commitment to professional development. But as we have noted in Chap. 3, professional development is not enough for optimal outcomes. The focus of this chapter is to describe the multiple factors that influence outcomes, including consultant, teacher, and student factors. We begin with a description of a theoretical model for teacher training.

L.A. Ruble et al., *Collaborative Model for Promoting Competence and Success for Students with ASD*, DOI 10.1007/978-1-4614-2332-4_4,

A Framework for Teacher Training

A model that shows the various sources of influence on teacher training outcomes is provided in Fig. 4.1 (adapted from Sparks, 1988). It is helpful to be aware of this model because consultation is a complex task, and Fig. 4.1 shows the many pieces of the puzzle that must be considered. We have selected parts of the model that we believe affect teacher and student outcomes and used these parts in our development of COMPASS (future applied research will continue to study, adapt, and refine the model). A brief explanation of each of the pieces is provided. In this model, outcome variables—the most important part of the framework, are referred to as product variables. Product variables can include outcomes that relate to the teacher, parent, or student. For COMPASS, we selected goal attainment scaling (GAS) as the primary student outcome. GAS is a good alternative for measuring child-specific educational outcomes when goals are individualized.

- Teacher outcomes might include the teacher's instructional methods or style, the teacher's sense of self efficacy or competence, or the quality of the student's individual education program (IEP) plan. COMPASS is designed to improve IEP quality, which is thought to act as a mediating variable for student outcome. That is, IEP quality helped explain student outcomes because we found a positive correlation with student goal attainment scores. These variables in Fig. 4.1 serve as examples of areas that might change as a result of consultation, but other outcomes can also be targeted.

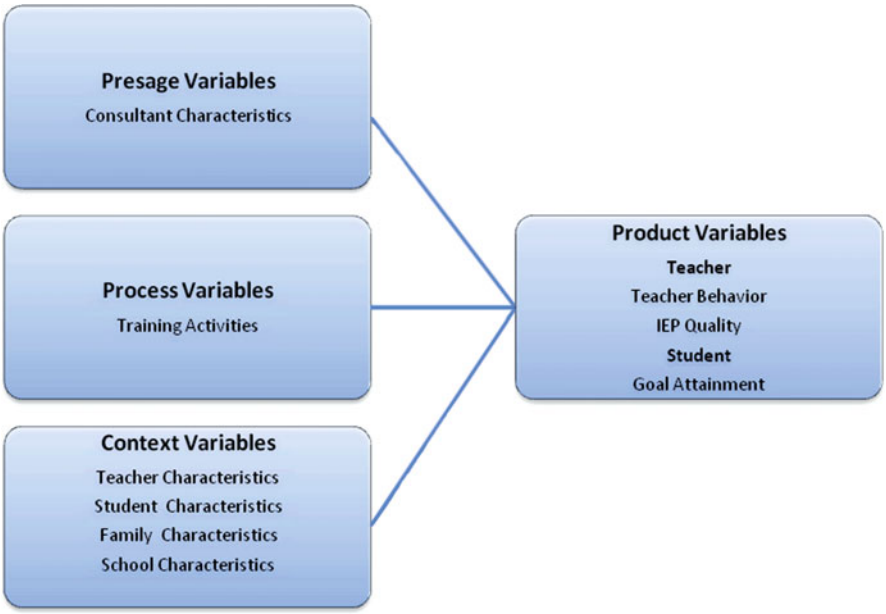

Fig. 4.1 Framework for teacher training

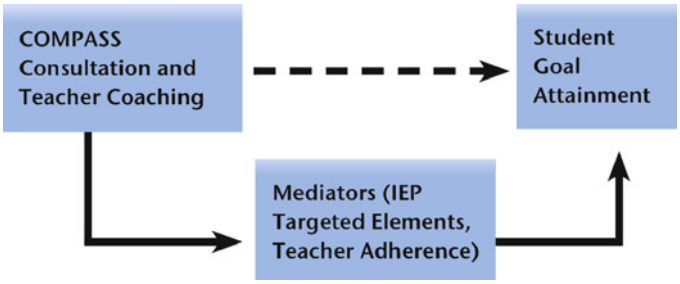

Fig. 4.2 COMPASS mediation model tested

- Parent or caregiver outcomes might include parent and teacher alliance or the amount of stress the parent feels. One parent told us that her stress was reduced because it was reassuring to know that a knowledgeable team was actively involved and working with her child. More research is needed on secondary effects of COMPASS on parents and caregivers.
- Recall that student outcomes are the primary focus of COMPASS. GAS serves as the primary mode of curriculum-based assessment of student attainment of IEP objectives and COMPASS outcome. Chapter 8 includes information on how we measured this outcome and developed the GAS Form. Figure 4.2 shows the COMPASS mediation model that we tested (Ruble, Dalrymple, & McGrew, 2010a) using parts described in Fig. 4.1. A mediator is a variable that helps explain the relationship between two other variables. In our model we examined only two possible mediators—or as we call them, active ingredients—of the COMPASS intervention: (1) the quality of the student's IEP and (2) teacher adherence to the teaching plans. IEP quality is described in more detail in Chap. 5. Teacher adherence is covered in Chap. 7.

It is important to have a theoretical model to test because it helps us to carefully and systematically examine what influences outcomes. If we study the model predictions and obtain the expected results, we can then make sure to include aspects that have been found to be important for positive student learning in our interventions. If we don't find the expected results, then we know what we should exclude and what factors are not necessarily important and influential. Of course, this assumes that we have all the relevant and important variables in the model. When comparing the model we tested in Fig. 4.2 with the original model in Fig. 4.1, it is clear that we examined a limited set of potential variables that could influence outcomes. More research on those other potential factors is needed. The following section discusses the other factors in more detail.

Three categories of influences on outcomes are proposed in the original model in Fig. 4.1. The first is *presage variables*, which refer to the characteristics of the consultant that are expected to have influence on outcome variables. Throughout this manual information on important consultant factors is provided (e.g., level 1 competence). COMPASS was developed based on current theories of effective consultation

and communication between adult collaborators and learners. Chapters 6–8 provide specific steps to help ensure that a successfully collaborative partnership is established with the teacher and parent. However, other influences from a consultant have to be taken into account and are described further in this chapter.

Additional features that influence consultation effectiveness come from *process variables* as well as *context variables*. The process variables are the activities we discuss in Chaps. 6–8 specifically. These variables represent the elements of the COMPASS consultation package (e.g., respectful communication, empathic listening, appropriate goal setting). Context variables include teacher (e.g., autism knowledge), student (i.e., language ability), family (e.g., economic resources), and school characteristics (e.g., supportive special education director) that influence consultation outcomes. As an example, preliminary findings from our COMPASS consultation intervention research analyzed data on some of these factors and how well they predicted student goal attainment outcomes. Although the findings need to be replicated in a different sample, we found that the following context variables of the student and teacher predicted outcomes.

For the student, IQ level, language ability, and autism severity were predictors of his or her outcomes. But only IQ exhibited predictive power to explain student outcomes beyond the contribution of the COMPASS consultation intervention. In other words, the consultation was able to account for and adapt to differences in language and autism severity so that outcomes remained similar.

For teacher-related context variables, we found that teacher engagement predicted child outcomes beyond the effects of the COMPASS intervention. For this reason, we included the Teacher Engagement Scale in the forms section in Chap. 8. Improving the instructional engagement of teachers may be another active ingredient that needs to be studied further. One other teacher context variable identified as important was teacher exhaustion. Surprisingly, we found that students whose teachers reported more exhaustion, which is representative of burnout, made less progress. More research is clearly needed to better understand the impact of burnout in teacher instruction and student outcome.

Together, these variables are thought to have impact on the product or outcomes of consultation. The focus of the rest of the chapter is to provide general descriptions of issues that consultants should consider.

Consultant Characteristics: External Vs. Internal Consultants

Consultants can be internal or external to a school, and each has advantages and disadvantages. Internal consultants might be autism specialists who have completed additional professional development training and workshops and developed expertise in this particular area. Large school systems often have designated autism experts on staff. External consultants, on the other hand, might come from local, regional, state, or out-of-state areas. Some state Departments of Special Education have regional consultants who are designated to work in certain school districts and

counties. The work reported in this manual is based on COMPASS consultants who were external to the school system. External consultants are more common for schools located in rural areas. Particular issues should be considered depending on whether the role of a consultant is external or internal to the organization. Issues to consider include entry, confidentiality, evaluation of the teacher, and willingness to participate in consultation.

Entry

Acceptance of the consultant is easier to achieve for internal rather than external consultants. An advantage of the internal consultant is that the (s)he is likely to have more information about the challenges and resources and to be better able to identify supports and the feasibility of the consultation plans that the teacher may not consider. Internal consultants may be better able to meet more frequently with the teacher and obtain data more easily and on a more continuous basis. They may also have more information about the student, the parents, and the teacher that may impact outcomes.

There are some disadvantages for internal consultants, however. One disadvantage may be a lack of role clarity. The consultant may have other responsibilities and titles that may affect the relationship with the teacher and, as a result, dampen outcomes. Teachers who are peers, for example, may be less likely to request or accept help and be more defensive and less inclined to provide data on student progress if the student is having difficulty achieving set goals. A second consideration is that internal consultants may have difficulty making demands on administrators or may have supervisory status over the teacher. They also may be in a position to more likely consult with or involve administrators or those with supervisory responsibility or other power figures. Another concern is that teachers may be reluctant to engage the internal consultant because of worries of how to terminate the consultation and what effects that might have on ongoing relationships.

Thus, it is essential that the role of the consultant be made explicit and be distinguished from other roles played within the organization. For example, a school psychologist who normally provides therapeutic services to students may want to explain that the role of consultant is different from that of therapist, and that the goal is not for the school psychologist/consultant to take over and assume responsibility of therapy for the student. A helpful summary of the relative advantages and disadvantages for internal and external consultants is provided by Brown, Pryzwansky, and Schulte (2006).

Similar to internal consultants, outside consultants also face unique advantages and disadvantages. Disadvantages include less knowledge about the history of the issues or contextual factors and resources and more difficulty identifying helpful linkages to address any problems that may arise. Another disadvantage is a dependency on information as given by the teacher, rather than from multiple sources that can help clarify or confirm the problem.

However, there also are several potential advantages for an external consultant. First, teachers may find it easier to share information with an external consultant and may be less defensive if a child is not making progress or recommendations are not being followed. An outsider may be afforded a perception as "expert" compared to a familiar internal consultant and thus, have more influence. An external consultant may also be better positioned to test how ready a teacher is to make change and obtain resources for change because of the lack of familiarity of the consultant to the system; an external consultant brings a wider perspective that may be helpful for leveraging participation and commitment of resources for making change.

Confidentiality

Establishing an effective relationship with the teacher is integral to consultation. Understanding the role of the teacher in the classroom and as part of the school is an active goal of the consultant. Also critical is the establishment of a nonhierarchical relationship within which issues and concerns can be discussed openly and in a nonjudgmental fashion. Equally and extremely important is dealing with confidentiality—explicitly, clearly, and repeatedly. It is necessary for the teacher to know that consultation will not be discussed with others, including supervisors, principals, or any superiors. For external consultants, this will be an easier objective to meet; for internal consultants, it may be more difficult, especially if the consultant is part of the administrative structure. In this latter case, the consultant needs to be aware of his/her authority over the consultee and limitations that follow. Under these circumstances, there may be barriers to discussing the questions and issues with the teacher because the consultation may not viewed by the teacher as strictly confidential or voluntary and may be used as part of teacher evaluation. Because it is not possible to establish a coordinated, nonhierarchical relationship, teachers may be more reluctant to open up and share information that will help the consultant to be more aware of the teacher's perceptions, roles, and feelings. Thus, each issue—confidentiality, evaluation, and willingness to participate should be discussed with the teacher.

Evaluation of the Teacher

Internal consultants must take great care to assure administrators that information shared during the consultation remains confidential. Potential conflicts of interest should be anticipated and discussed up front with the teacher and with administrators. Internal consultants likely take on several roles in schools. A school psychologist, for example, may conduct evaluation of students for special education services. They may also be responsible for assisting teachers with students with behavioral problems. Information learned during consultation may impact decision-making about referrals for evaluation. Supervisors may seek out consultants for feedback on

teacher performance. Issues related to teacher evaluation that come from internal or external consultants should be discussed up front and communicated to all for clear understanding.

Willingness of Teacher to Participate

Early in consultation research, it was assumed that the consultee had the power to decide whether or not to initiate consultation. Today, the picture is different. Often, it is the decision of a team, parent, or supervisor to initiate and seek consultation from a person external or internal to the system. It can be argued that an internal consultant shares in the responsibility for the student, as both the teacher and the consultant are employees of the same system. For nonvoluntary consultation, teachers may need to assess their own willingness to enter into the consultation process. The consultant needs to consider the balance in time and effort required by the teacher to be part of the process, the use of social influence strategies, and the transfer of ownership of the problem during the consultation process. Teachers who are better informed of the consultation process and expected outcomes will be more aware, and thus likely more committed, to the process, expectations, and outcomes.

Teacher Characteristics

Teachers have several activities that they must participate in that either directly or indirectly relates to student instruction. A variety of factors can influence the outcomes of consultation; several are discussed below.

Accountability

Today teachers are accountable for many student-related activities. They are accountable for how well the student responds to his/her educational program. They are expected to provide research-supported practices for all students. And they are expected to be able to provide data on how well students are achieving their educational objectives. Accountability of the outcomes of instructional practices is reflected in federal law and state standards. Because teachers have numerous responsibilities, it is important to acknowledge with the teacher the pressure in meeting all of these expectations. Helping the teacher to understand that the outcomes of the consultation is a shared responsibility between the consultant and the teacher is important. However, ultimately, the teacher is the primary professional responsible for the student's educational program. A goal of consultation, then, is to communicate to the teacher that the outcomes of the COMPASS consultation are consistent with the teacher's goal for the student—which is increased responsiveness of students to their educational programs.

Assessment

Standards vary state-by-state. States have academic content standards that emphasize areas of learning and achievement. Teachers have to be knowledgeable of portfolio assessment and alternative assessment strategies. In the spring, teachers may change focus from IEP objectives to skills related to portfolio or alternate assessment. Often, the skills targeted in these assessments do not correspond to the objectives or skills targeted by the IEP. It is helpful to discuss this with the teacher and help her or him see the link between IEP objectives and state academic content standards. Thus, a consultant needs to have knowledge of state standards in order to assist the teacher in seeing the links.

Individual Education Programs

The Individual Education Program is the road map that puts into place the direction and course to be taken for the student. It creates the foundation from which decisions regarding assessment, teaching plans, and accommodations and modifications occur. Given the high importance placed on IEPs, we were surprised to find little guidance on working with teachers on IEPs as part of consultation. We did find, much to our regret, that IEP quality was generally poor across states, districts, schools, and teachers (Ruble, McGrew, Dalrymple, & Jung, 2010b). This is important because we also found that the quality of the IEP was associated with how well the children responded to their educational program. Thus, it is important for consultants to review with teachers the quality of the IEP (how measurable are the objectives; how clear are the descriptions of present levels of performance; how clear are the environmental supports?). Chapter 5 covers IEPs in more detail, includes a checklist to consider when reviewing IEPs with teachers, and provides a more comprehensive discussion of this issue, as IEP quality is associated with student outcomes.

Time

Time has been acknowledged as a critical factor in school-based services and a major issue influencing consultation outcomes. Acceptability research suggests that logistical issues such as time and administrative support influence teacher's perceptions (Sheridan & Steck, 1995) and that administrators need information on the importance of parent–teacher collaboration. The COMPASS consultation and teacher coaching package takes into account the need to be sensitive to teacher time. Direct interactions require about 3 h for the initial COMPASS consultation and 4–6 h for follow-up sessions that last about 1–1.5 h each, totaling a maximum of 9 h throughout the year. Data from our study suggest that the intervention does not negatively interfere with teacher time or cause stress. Some teachers still may be concerned about the amount of time required to implement teaching plans, keep data and monitor progress, and complete

other forms. Thus, it is necessary to plan the consultation and coaching sessions taking into account teacher time constraints and fit within the schedule and the student's routines. Because we have conducted experimental research on the COMPASS consultation package, we have distilled the necessary elements of paperwork to maximize teacher involvement to the critical aspects of the intervention and minimize teacher involvement in those areas not related to outcome.

Role As Classroom Manager

In our research, something that became apparent from observing several classrooms was the teacher role in the classroom. Some classrooms have an equal number of adults to students, while other classrooms may have two adults and 20 students. Classrooms vary as much as the differences in students with autism. But some of the common elements observed are teaching assistants and therapists who may work with a student within the classroom or stay with a student throughout the day. As consultant, it is important to explore with the teacher his/her perception of his/her role in the classroom and how this perception may influence effectiveness. Teachers who are new to the profession may be intimidated by teaching assistants who are older than themselves or who have worked in classrooms for many years. The teacher's role should be one of manager—someone who teaches students and also oversees the teaching assistants and ensures that student IEP objectives are clearly communicated to all who work with the students and are being monitored systematically and continually. It is the teacher, after all, who is legally responsible for the IEP.

Teacher As Consultant/Collaborator

Special education teachers may be expected to be able to monitor IEP objectives in all school environments, including general education classrooms and other special areas. In addition, special education teachers are also expected to be able to collaborate with their peers, other classroom teachers, and therapists as well as transfer their own skill and knowledge to classroom teaching assistants. The ability to work well with general education teachers, classroom assistants, and special area teachers provides additional skills not necessarily associated with the ability to work directly with the student. Nevertheless, it is important to take into consideration the skills necessary to work with others because students with autism attend all types of classrooms, often have teaching assistants, and must have teaching plans that include plans for generalization as part of their IEP objectives. Generalization plans often include teaching the student to perform the skill in different environments, with different people, and with different cues. Nevertheless, on an individual level, we found that some teachers had difficulty implementing the teaching plans in classrooms outside of their own. It was unclear if this difficulty related to acceptability, skills, time, or other issues. For students with autism in general education classrooms, there appeared to be more difficulty with the

special education teacher implementing teaching plans when involvement or collaboration with another teacher was necessary. Thus, it is important for the consultant to discuss with the teacher specific strategies to engage other teachers, therapists, and assistants as early in the planning process as possible.

The consultant may also need to work with the teacher to convey the priority of individualization of the IEP goals within the total school environment. School principals vary tremendously in their understanding of the education of special needs students. The teacher often becomes an advocate for the student in obtaining accommodations in the halls, cafeteria, bus area, or playground. Some schools have strict school-wide disciplinary or behavioral rules that apply to each and every student. One school we examined required students to get "cards" for various infractions that led to a consequence of losing minutes at recess the following day. For a young student with autism, just receiving a card caused so much anxiety that the rest of the day was a loss. The consultant and the teacher worked out an individualized plan that would still help the student learn acceptable behavior but was based on positive behavior supports that were not counterproductive to his learning.

Parent and Student Considerations

Another role of the consultant is to assist teachers with understanding the different roles that parents and teachers hold regarding the student with autism. Teachers have knowledge of and responsibility for many students, often focus on student deficits or skills to be learned, have limited one-on-one contact with the student, are motivated to use research-supported practices, and have chosen to work with students with disabilities.

Parents, on the other hand, have different perspectives and experiences. They are experts on their own child and hold a more comprehensive view of the whole child. They are responsible for the child 24 h each day for their lifetime. Living harmoniously with the child and family is a key motivator. Research suggests that parents of students with autism experience more stress compared to parents of students with other developmental disabilities. Unlike teachers who have chosen to work with students with disabilities, parents did not choose to have a child with ASD.

Although the roles are different for teachers and parents, both are equally valid. Parents, as part of COMPASS consultation, play a key part in helping school personnel understand the student's history, how certain behaviors may have developed, how family members respond, what is important and relevant for the family, and what supports are available to the family. Perhaps the most important role of the parent is that the parent speaks for, and often in the place of the student, who may be voiceless, literally. The student's perspective is presumably represented by everyone, but if the student is not involved or not able to be involved, this responsibility falls most heavily on the parents. The consultant and teacher share goals of empowering parents and caregivers because they are the lifelong advocates for the student. Teachers who work well and communicate clearly with all parents demonstrate awareness, knowledge, and respect for their input as well as sensitivity to cultural differences. This

Table 4.1 Questions to consider prior to consultation

- What are consultation and coaching outcomes trying to achieve for the teacher, the student, and others?
- How will you measure progress toward the outcome(s)?
- How will you plan to monitor progress with the teacher using the measurement system?
- Are you an external or internal consultant, and have you thought about the implications?
- If you are internal, how will you
  - Address role clarity with the teacher and with administrators?
  - Discuss expectations of consultation and how it will terminate?
  - Discuss issues of confidentiality with the teacher?
- How will you assure the teacher that you are not evaluating her/him or sharing information with superiors?
- How will you assure that you are taking into account a culturally sensitive approach?

facilitates positive and satisfying partnerships. It also assists with generalization of student skills across environments and more consistent teaching approaches.

Student Characteristics

Much research has been completed on the characteristics of children with autism and how these characteristics relate to treatment outcomes. Intelligence, language, social abilities, and autism severity have been found to be associated with how well children respond to early intervention. Our preliminary research suggests that most student characteristics did not predict educational outcomes above and beyond the impact of the COMPASS intervention. This makes sense because COMPASS interventions are designed to be personalized to the student. The identification of teaching objectives and teaching strategies takes into account the student's present levels of performance, personal and environmental strengths and challenges, and parent and teacher concerns. We did find, however, that IQ predicted student outcomes and that more work needs to be done in implementing effective intervention strategies.

As students with autism are diverse, so are families. Particular attention to differences between the experiences and values of the consultant and those that may be a result of culture, ethnicity, race, economic and educational background differences in families must be given.

In summary, the ability to provide effective consultation and coaching is difficult. Multiple factors affect consultation. Some of the influences are under the control of the consultant, but many are not. It is the job of the consultant to be aware of all the various factors and use this knowledge continuously in evaluating progress toward outcomes. Questions to consider prior to beginning a consultation and coaching relationship with a teacher are provided in Table 4.1. Without clear outcomes at the start, it will be nearly impossible to monitor all the factors. But with authentic, open communication between the teacher and consultant combined with clearly stated goals that are observable and measurable, significant progress can result on behalf of the student.