

Teacher Support Teams: School based peer group support for teachers' problem solving

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Background

The development of practices of integration of children with special educational needs (SEN) in ordinary schools has been associated with a gradual acceptance that assessment and intervention must focus not only on individual difficulties but also on factors within schools which can prevent or exacerbate problems (NCC 1989). The current emphasis in the Code of Practice on Individual Educational Plans (IEPS) and school development planning from an SEN perspective is a manifestation of this interactional orientation to SEN intervention. Support is available for institutional development and individual learning. Support for groups of teachers led by outside professionals rather than peers has been discussed and developed by Hanks (1989, 1990). Collegial support for teachers in their approach to SEN work has received relatively little attention despite recommendations for teacher peer support systems to be found in the Elton Report (DES, 1989, recommendation 6). One possible reason is the often found culture of schools, which encourages a conception of the teacher as isolated in the classroom with no established system of peer collaboration.

Many classroom teachers feel that they do not have sufficient training and support to meet many of the challenges presented by children with special educational needs (SEN) in their classes. They tend to lack confidence in their ability to provide programmes of study which are appropriately differentiated. Many teachers find themselves working in school situations where they regularly teach large classes with little or no internal special needs support and where external resources are rarely available. Facing the task of meeting a wide range of needs in isolation can lead to acute stress or disaffection. This can happen to capable teachers working in unfavourable circumstances. This briefing paper introduces a practical way of easing the difficulties

experienced by many such teachers by transforming their work situation.

Teacher Support Teams: an outline

Teacher Support Teams (TSTs) act as school based problem solving groups of teachers which function to support pupils indirectly through teacher collaboration. TSTs are novel in that they are an example of a school based development designed to give support and assistance to **individual teachers**. They may be seen to complement existing forms of SEN work within schools and existing patterns of informal mutual peer support as and when they exist. Individual teachers approach teams of their peers for collaborative support in understanding problems and designing appropriate forms of intervention related to learning and behaviour difficulties. These teams aim to enable staff to develop their confidence and competence in making provision for children with SEN in mainstream classes. As such the operation of TSTs would have some contribution to make in alleviating some of the stresses of teaching.

Teacher support teams represent a significant way of establishing peer support which is compatible with professional autonomy. Professional autonomy would be well served by schools having a system of collegial assistance in response to voluntary requests for assistance. In providing a structured and accessible forum for encouraging an interchange between peers in connection with specific teaching difficulties, support teams can contribute to making schools more effective. In this way TSTs become an intermediary form of provision between individual child focused support arrangements and whole school policy initiatives.

What are TSTs ?

- They may be seen to constitute a practical embodiment of a school's commitment to SEN by offering an indirect mechanism for