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Developing an interagency approach: How agencies may be co-ordinated to provide specialist support in schools

This article was inspired as a result of Barnet's Local Education Authority's consultant sharing examples of 'good practice' across the Borough in a PSHE co-ordinator's termly meeting. Teachers and other practitioners attending these twilight sessions often comment that the most useful part of the evening was spent making contacts with other local schools and teachers, as well as contacts derived through the Borough to support staff in their roles.

Coherent approach

The Government's 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) agenda underpins 5 perspectives for a pupil's educational experience. It seems sensible that pupils should benefit from a coherent approach to their schooling, which encourages them to recognise their own achievements as well as their contributions to their community. Many Schools are now displaying how the pupils have achieved each of the ECM's five agenda areas by encouraging staff, pupils and Governors to share ideas (e.g. of school events, trips undertaken, visitors invited to school and so forth) displayed to celebrate achievements and contributions within the school community.

Inevitably, a variety of expertises will be called upon throughout schooling to support the pupils, their teachers and other

school staff and possibly also the pupil's parents/carers.

Drawing on my own experience, which is based mainly on working in a London Infant School, working in partnership with a variety of agencies has been a major focus for all staff.

I referred to a 'multi-agency approach' in the title and in this article I intend to illustrate how various agencies may be co-ordinated to provide specialist support.

Schools tend to seek expertise support from three main sources: educational support, medical support and social services. In order for a multi-agency approach to be effective, the relationships must be based on a mutual commitment to a collaborative nature of work. Armitage (1983)* defined 'collaboration' as the exchange of information between individuals which has the potential for action in the interests of a common purpose.

Various departments liaise to provide a collaborative, multi-agency approach in particular cases and the school, together with parents/carers, should also be involved as part of the multi-agency approach.

The role of a SENCo

Schools employ Special Needs Co-ordinators (SENCo's) to support the

*Armitage, P. (1983) 'Joint working in primary health care', Nursing Times, Occasional Papers 79 (28), pp 75-78

individual needs of some pupils. Support is also provided to parents and carers as well as the pupils' class teachers.

The SENCo working in our school has attended much training on the Governmental initiatives and has received specific training to support pupils in the school with particular needs (e.g. Makaton and Epipen training). She has also attended twilight sessions and forums on autism and encouraged other members of staff in the school to accompany her as a means of networking with other local professionals in order to share practise. It is important for staff as well as pupils' parents/carers to feel that there are agencies able to provide help for them, as well as knowing how this can be received.

A multi-agency approach

The Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice states that meeting the needs of children and young people with SEN successfully, requires partnership between all those involved - LEAs, schools, parents, pupils, health and social services and other agencies. Partnerships can only work when the partners have a clear understanding of their respective aims, roles and responsibilities and the nature of their relationships.

Our SENCo comments that her approach is based around the child's needs and how these can best be met. She commented that networking has become an increasingly larger part of her role. This is both with external agencies as well as with the children's parents/carers. By building relationships with various parties through regular communication, protocols can be agreed which will help to provide a coherent service.

Whenever possible, our SENCo tries to conduct meetings between parents/carers and other agencies on the school premises. The children who attend the school are described as coming from socially and economically deprived backgrounds. She commented that inviting the children's parents/carers to a familiar setting and asking the professional experts to come into school, helps to ensure that the meetings are less daunting. Staff from the school who may be required to provide support can also attend the meeting more easily, rather than travelling to another location.

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF), currently being launched, offers a standardised approach to conducting an assessment of a child's additional needs as well as deciding how those needs should be met. 'It is intended to provide a simple process for a holistic assessment of a child's needs and strengths, taking account of the role of parents, carers and environmental factors on their development.' The CAF seems to offer a common framework to support an integrated approach which is focused around the needs of children and young people - which should be the crux of a multi-agency approach.

Recommendations

- ~ Ensure that all staff involved in particular cases, whenever possible, attend meetings regularly
- ~ Use the school for meetings as a central base whenever possible
- ~ Ensure parents/carers feel they play a part in the process
- ~ Ensure Borough services keep you up to date with available support agencies
- ~ Ensure there is a key member of staff to oversee co-ordination of the agencies including regular updates and checks