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Preparing for personalisation? Approaches to developing teacher trainees for collaborative working with school support staff.

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Background

The increase in numbers of support workers in schools and the recognition that these, often highly experienced staff, have the potential to impact significantly on the personalisation of the learning of students with additional educational needs[i], has led to a reevaluation of what such staff have to offer to teachers in initial training, as demonstrated by a number of researchers, including the author of this abstract in previous BERA papers[ii]/iii The Chief OFSTED Inspector's Annual Report 2009 draws attention to their finding that teacher trainees' "ability to use assessment to focus more closely on personalised learning continues to be the least well-developed competency."iv The research in this abstract has aimed to develop ways of training teachers to work with support staff in order to maximise the impact on personalised learning for pupils.

Research Questions

The research under discussion in this abstract, supported by The Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), is centred upon a Community School in North Somersetv which works within a Federation of Schoolsvi and with initial teacher trainees from five different partner higher education institutions. For some years the school has been instrumental in providing all teacher trainees on placement with training for and experience of supporting individual school students for an hour per week in the classroom. Trainees' perceptions of this experience have been evaluated and have been the subject of previous research.ii/iii The value perceived by trainees of this experience has prompted the question which underlies this current research; namely, how can teacher trainees be helped most effectively to develop the skills of working collaboratively with school support workers? The significance of this question was enhanced by the introduction in June 2007 of the DFCS/TDA Professional Standards for Teachers, within which no less than six Standards relate in some way to the skills of collaborative working within the school and classroom. Moreover, the debate about the management of school support staff by teachers has been enhanced by the finding of Blatchford et al (2009)i concerning the absence of progress by pupils receiving support in class, leading to the recommendation that more attention is given to teacher training for work with support staff.

Methods

The research methods adopted by the project relate most closely to small scale Action Research methods; the project starts with and finishes by seeking ways to improve its own practices of introducing trainees to collaborative working with support workers in the school context, although the research also encompasses good practice exemplified by support workers in schools outside the Community School and the Federation. The project has involved support workers from six English secondary schools, of which one is a special school, and two American schools, including one middle and one high school. Support staff involved in the study include: Higher Level Teaching Assistants (2), Key Stage Learning Support Managers (2), Teaching Assistants (4) including one in a Special School, and one working with Looked after Children, Learning Support Assistants (2), Paraprofessionals or teaching assistants in secondary/middle schools in America (3), Learning Mentor (1), Parent Support Advisers (2), Inclusion Support Staff (1).

Research findings

A key issue upon which the project has focused is that of investigating the roles of individual support workers and what their work involves, including the key professional decisions undertaken by these

staff in the course of their work. Although such roles have been the subject of past study, the pace of change forced by the massive increase in numbers of support staff in the last four years, has effected changes in roles and practices as staff develop more effective ways of working, in response to the challenges of decisions confronted daily. In order to achieve this, research participants were asked to keep a five-day diary in which the events of each day were reflected upon, in particular in relation to the perceived contribution of the diarist to students' learning in school. The resulting diaries, although very different, all revealed insights into the work of support staff and a number of common themes emerged in the Dairy Analyses. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed from the Diary Analyses and videoed interviews took place with all diarists, as well as with teachers working with support staff, which again confirmed the emergent themes.

The paper for which this Abstract is put forward will discuss in detail the themes which have emerged from the diaries, classroom observations and videoed interviews with support staff and teachers working with them, and will consider ways of training teachers to work most effectively with support staff.

i Blatchford, P. et al (August 2009) DEPLOYMENT AND IMPACT OF SUPPORT STAFF DCSF-RB148

ii Work Force Reform for Teachers in England: a Perspective on the Impact of Teaching Assistants on Teacher Trainees Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Warwick, September 2006 by Linda Fursland;

iii Learning guides leading trainee teachers: a case of the blind leading the blind? Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of London Institute of Education, September 2007 by Linda Fursland;

iv OFSTED November 2009 The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2008/09 The Stationary Office v Training and Development Agency R&D Award (SEN T34736) Trainee teachers tapping into Paraprofessionals in secondary schools (TaPs)

vi Priory Community School, Weston super Mare BS22 6BP

vii Weston Education Partnership (A Federation of 4 Secondary and 2 Special Schools in Weston super Mare)

viii What do teaching assistants really do? Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Glamorgan, 14-17 September 2005 Danny Durant (Adviser) and Julien Kramer (Director of Education)