Student-Centered Teams in Schools: Still in Search of an Identity

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Currently most schools stress the importance of “teaming” to accomplish a range of educational goals. However, what is known about teams in general and how this information is applied in the design and operation of school teams remains unclear. In this article we clarify the general knowledge base about teams as professional work groups and examine how this knowledge coincides with current practices on two widely used school teams: (a) student-centered problem-solving teams that convene at the request of teachers to address students’ academic, social, or emotional problems; and (b) special education teams that meet to complete mandated special education referral, assessment, program development, and program evaluation activities. The resulting analysis points out challenges faced by such teams. Suggestions are made for improving the effectiveness of student-centered school teams.

Teams have become a standard way of doing business in schools. Middle schools are premised largely on the importance of faculty teams sharing both students and the responsibility to integrate curriculum and to plan, deliver, and evaluate instruction for students transitioning from elementary to high school (Husband & Short, 1994; Kain, 1995). The trend toward increased site-based school management has resulted in the formation of school administrative teams, staff development teams, and teams charged with clarifying and monitoring implementation of the school vision or

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mission (Abbott, 1995; Richardson, 1993; WohlPresident, 1995). Students experiencing academic, social, or emotional problems at school are often discussed in some form of problem-solving team (e.g., Bay, Bryan, & O'Connor, 1994; Harris, 1995). In special education, coteaching (Cook & Friend, 1995; Walther-Thomas & Carter, 1993), the service delivery arrangement in which a special educator and a general educator share planning and classroom responsibility in inclusive settings, is yet another example of teaming in schools. Unfortunately, teaming has become so popular a strategy for educators that it seems that almost any work group—from committees to faculty meetings—is referred to as teaming (Richardson, 1993), thus making it difficult to discuss teaming as an educational strategy and to study the composition and characteristics of school teams.

For professionals who educate students with disabilities, teaming is far from being a contemporary concept. Mental health teams were serving the needs of students with emotional disabilities long before schools were obligated to educate them (Elliott & Sheridan, 1992). Teams of professionals meeting to discuss students have also been a hallmark of programs for students with moderate and severe disabilities for many years (Gallivan-Felton, 1994; Hutchinson, 1978; Orelove & Sobsey, 1987). Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94–142, in 1975, a team approach to decision making has been mandated by federal law.

However, for all the time that has gone by and for all the descriptions of school teams in the professional literature, the picture of what such teams are and how they can best contribute to students' education is still far from clear. Some teams have focused on benefiting students by addressing broad school reform issues (e.g., Richardson, 1993), whereas others have emphasized more direct classroom or student interventions (e.g., Harris, 1995; Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996). Some authors have found that teams convening about students with special needs are effective in designing innovative alternatives to meet those needs (e.g., Nelson, Smith, Taylor, Dodd, & Reavis, 1991; Sindelar, Griffin, Smith, & Watanabe, 1992), but others have questioned whether the group process results in higher quality outcomes than could have been accomplished by an individual (e.g., Harrington & Gibson, 1986). This is particularly true for the two types of student-centered teams that are the focus for this article: (a) teams that problem solve about students experiencing academic, social, or emotional problems at school, referred to here as student-centered problem-solving teams (SCPSTs); and (b) teams that make decisions about students' referral to, assessment for, determination of eligibility for, and programs in special education, referred to here as special education teams (SETs).

The purpose of this article is fourfold: First, we review what we know about the fundamentals of teams—what they are, what their essential
features are, and how they operate. This consideration of teams is based primarily on the literature from the social sciences and education. Second, we briefly summarize what we know about the SCPSTs and SETs that operate in schools. Third, we offer an analysis of how the above teams incorporate effective team characteristics or fail to incorporate them, resulting in a clarification of why the school team literature appears to lack a clear set of recommended practices that reliably lead to positive outcomes. And finally, we present suggestions for maximizing school student-centered team effectiveness.

THE KNOWLEDGE BASE ON TEAMS

A number of authors across a variety of disciplines have offered definitions of teams. For example, Abelson and Woodman (1983) suggested that “a team is two or more interdependent individuals who work and communicate directly in a coordinated manner in order to reach agreed upon goal(s)” (p. 126). They stressed direct communication, interdependence, coordination, and shared goals as essential team features, as did Friend and Cook (1996). Donnellon (1996) and Hersey (1984) added the dimension of relationships, emphasizing that teams do not exist unless relationships among members are in place, even though those relationships contribute to team complexity. From a business perspective, teams are described as goal-driven work groups that function interdependently until their purpose has been accomplished or product produced (Williams, 1996). Finally, teams are governed by sets of norms that are sometimes explicit (e.g., meetings beginning on time even if some members are missing) and sometimes implicit (e.g., conflict among team members is not discussed in meetings; Donnellon, 1996; Williams, 1996).

Characteristics of Teams

The definitions of teams just summarized form a foundation of understanding. However, that understanding is considerably expanded by examining what contributes to team effectiveness.

Teams go through developmental stages. Not surprisingly, most authors agree that teams go through a variety of stages in their formation and operation. Tuckman (1965) offered the most well known description of these stages. He depicted forming, storming, norming, performing, and
adjourning as the life cycle of teams. Others have confirmed these stages. Jones (1988), Geber (1991), and Chance (1989), for example, proposed that teams must initially come together and identify the needs they exist to meet. Gladstein, Ancona, and Caldwell (1988) clarified the importance of teams recognizing their task work (i.e., the activities related to the team’s product or outcome) as well as their maintenance work (i.e., the activities that enable members to function effectively as a team). Gersick (1988) suggested that a team’s progress through various stages is dependent on members’ growing awareness of deadlines rather than the completion of specific tasks.

For several reasons, the notion that teams progress through stages is essential for an understanding of their functioning. The stage of forming indicates that teams must go through a process of learning about each member and clarifying the reason for their existence. Storming illustrates that teams do not come into existence just because a group of individuals meet; a group becomes a team by resolving issues related to power, procedures, and purpose. The norming stage suggests that teams have to establish patterns in their functioning. These patterns might have to do with the seating arrangements at meetings and the types of humor shared, but more important, norming creates a team culture that gives it a unique identity. The performing stage implies that at some point, teams reach a plateau in their development and can focus their attention on their tasks. Finally, the adjourning stage sets the expectation that teams do not exist forever; they cease to exist when their tasks are completed.

**Teams have clear and stable membership.** In the general team literature, considerable attention is paid to the importance to team effectiveness of team member selection and stability. For example, team membership is typically based on bringing together heterogeneous knowledge and skills that contribute to the team goal (Guest, 1989; Prince, 1989). If a team is convened to address problems related to the behavior challenges of a student with autism, experts on autism and behavior are likely to be solicited as members (Geber, 1991), but a speech/language therapist is not. This approach to team member selection includes acknowledgment of the fact that problems sometimes arise: Members participate because of their specific expertise or their job title or role but not necessarily because they are skilled at group process (Manning & Haddock, 1990).

Once selected, team membership is stable until the team disbands at the conclusion of its work (Pfeiffer, 1980; Prince, 1989). This stability enables members to clearly understand that they are part of the team and enables others to recognize members as a team (Feldman, 1985). It also enables team
members to establish their team culture, sort issues related to member roles, and clarify their relationships.

**Teams address both their task and maintenance activities.** As has already been suggested, teams generally are viewed as having two sets of crucial activities (Hersey, 1984; Williams, 1996). The first, often referred to as task or content activities, is related to the purpose for which the team exists. If the team is to develop a plan for implementing inclusive practices, task activities might include conducting a needs assessment of educators, parents, and community members; prioritizing goals for students; and setting short-term and long-term goals. If the team manages the education of a student with significant disabilities, task activities might include sharing progress reports and problem solving around educational needs. Clearly, task activities differ considerably across teams depending on the team’s purpose.

The second set of activities, those of a maintenance or process nature, concerns how the team itself functions. Maintenance activities can be as fundamental as establishing clear agendas for team meetings or as complex as designing procedures for ensuring that member participation in team discussions is relatively level. Although teams often have differing needs for specific maintenance activities, most teams will at some point need to complete many of the same ones.

**Team members have clear, but not rigid, roles and relationships.** The roles that team members assume and the relationships they develop with one another are considered primary determinants of team effectiveness (Fleming & Fleming, 1983; Lewin, 1951; Seers, 1989). One example of a key role is leadership (Hersey, 1984). Every team needs a leader who can assist the team in navigating its various stages and activities. However, unlike in schools, where leadership is often determined by job title (e.g., principal), the general team literature suggests that the individual filling this role should vary depending on the skills needed. For example, in a discussion of a technical matter, leadership might be provided by an individual who has the required expertise. If the team needs to resolve a conflict, leadership might better be assumed by a member skilled in managing group process.

A variety of other roles have been proposed for team members (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Some are formal, as when a team designates a member to keep a record of what occurs at a team meeting or to keep track of time. Other roles are informal and are taken on by team members as the need arises. For example, a team member might serve as a skeptic when other
team members are overenthusiastic about an idea just presented. Another
team member might serve as a compromiser when a minor disagreement
occurs, finding ways to satisfy all team member needs.

Empirical Evidence About Teams

Much of what has been summarized to describe teams is based on the
observations, experiences, analyses, and perceptions of professionals in the
social sciences and education but not on a strong body of research from
those disciplines. In fact, studies of teaming are quite limited and typically
address only a few aspects of this complex phenomenon. Some information
about teams and their functions has been gathered from case studies,
particularly in business (e.g., Worcel, Wood, & Simpson, 1992). Other
information, especially in education, comes from self-reports (e.g., Rankin
& Aksamit, 1994) or from studies of specific and often limited team vari-
ables such as organizational supports (e.g., Kruger, Struzzierto, Watts, &
Vacca, 1995).

STUDENT-CENTERED TEAMS IN SCHOOLS

Although school personnel have embraced teams for a wide range of
reasons and activities (e.g., Clark & Astuto, 1994; Richardson, 1993; Wein-
berg, 1989), teams that meet on behalf of specific students, or student-cen-
tered teams, are one of the most common. Two types of student-centered
teams have been widely discussed in the professional literature: SCPSTs
and SETs. Although these two types of teams sometimes are used almost
interchangeably, they differ in their primary purpose, their basis in law,
and their accountability.

SCPSTs

For two decades, educators have met to problem solve about students
experiencing academic, social, or emotional difficulties in school. Three of
the most commonly mentioned formats for such teams are teacher assis-
tance teams, intervention assistance teams, and mainstream assistance
teams. These are described later. It should be noted, though, that as school
personnel have implemented these approaches, they have used many other
names for such teams (e.g., prereferral teams, student support teams) and
have created many variations of these three models, sometimes blending
the approaches and sometimes developing other unique configurations and procedures to accomplish the same student support purpose.

**Teacher Assistance Teams (TATs).** One of the earliest models for SCPSTs was Chalfant, Pysh, and Moultrie’s (1979) Teacher Assistance Team (TAT). This model is premised on the belief that teachers have tremendous resources for recognizing and addressing students’ school problems but that they do not necessarily use their expertise when they participate on teams with special education professionals (Lloyd, Crowley, Kohler, & Strain, 1988). The model suggests that outside expertise should be sought only as needed by core general education team members.

In a TAT model as described by Chalfant et al. (1979), a teacher refers a student to a team coordinator, who reviews the referral, arranges for a classroom observation of the student, summarizes and distributes student information to team members, and calls a meeting. At the meeting, the referring teacher is asked what he or she would like to see accomplished, and the team then problem solves toward that purpose. Follow-up meetings are scheduled to monitor progress related to the recommended interventions.

Some evidence indicates that a TAT model can be effective in decreasing referrals for special education assessment (Chalfant et al., 1979) and in generating ideas that positively affect student learning and behavior (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989). In a similar model, Johnson and Pugach (1991) also found that such teams could effectively address student needs.

**Intervention Assistance Teams (IATs).** As an alternative to TATs, Intervention Assistance Teams (IATs) are based on the belief that problem solving about students experiencing school difficulties should marshal all the resources that can be located in a school, including those of special education and related services staff (Whitten & Dieker, 1995). In an IAT model, the procedures are similar to the TAT approach, with a teacher referring a student, additional information being gathered, team members meeting, and problem solving occurring. The primary difference is that membership on the IAT typically goes beyond general education teachers to include a special education teacher, a speech or language therapist, and sometimes other special services personnel such as school psychologists, counselors, social workers, or nurses.

Intervention assistance teams, like TATs, have been found by some authors to be successful in meeting student needs and providing teachers with supports (e.g., Whitten & Dieker, 1995), particularly when adminis-
trative support is strong (Kruger et al., 1995). In a review of this approach for supporting students and teachers, Nelson and his colleagues (Nelson et al., 1991) found the teams to be a viable means of delivering services. Other reviewers (e.g., Lloyd et al., 1988; Sindelar et al., 1992) have reported that intervention assistance teams seem to produce some positive outcomes but that several aspects of such teams remain to be studied, and additional and more rigorous investigations are needed.

Mainstream Assistance Teams (MATs). Yet another way of conceptualizing the problem solving that occurs regarding specific students is the mainstream assistance team (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bahr, 1990). In this model, team membership consists of two professionals (consultant and consultee), with counselors serving as consultants. The approach used relies heavily on behavioral consultation, and specific interventions are selected by the referring teachers and implemented with the guidance of the consultant.

Initial data from this team approach suggested that participating teachers were less likely than others to refer students for special education assessment and that a condensed version of this team approach was as effective as a more protracted process (Fuchs et al., 1990). This model is recommended by its developers as a data-based and efficient means for student-centered problem solving that more clearly builds in treatment integrity than other models.

Shared Characteristics of SCPSTs

Most SCPSTs have been formed to meet state requirements or recommendations for prereferral intervention (Carter & Sugai, 1989), and the members have a responsibility to assist in generating strategies to overcome or reduce students' academic, social, or emotional problems. However, most of these teams also include the following in their purposes: (a) decreasing unnecessary referrals for individualized assessment whenever appropriate; (b) engaging in group problem solving on behalf of students who are identified as having disabilities, as well as those who do not by bringing together the expertise of professionals from various disciplines; (c) developing appropriate educational plans for students with academic, social, or emotional problems; (d) ensuring that students receive recommended accommodations in general education settings; (e) monitoring the progress of students considered at-risk; (f) confirming for teachers that all appropriate steps have been taken to enhance a student's learning; and (g) fostering effective
communication among teachers and staff regarding students at risk. The importance of following a clear set of problem-solving steps is generally emphasized, and active participation by all members, but especially the teacher who has identified the student experiencing school problems, is stressed (Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996). It appears that the primary difference among the variations of these teams concerns the size of the team, the recommended members (e.g., with or without parent participation), and the relative emphasis on teacher-consultant versus teacher-team interactions and participation.

SETs

The second major type of student-centered team functioning in schools is the SET. This team, also referred to as a multidisciplinary team, child study team, transdisciplinary team, or case conference team, is mandated by federal law. Although the specific ways in which this type of team is structured and procedures it follows vary somewhat across and sometimes within states, the SET generally has as a purpose managing the referral, assessment, identification or eligibility determination, program development, and program evaluation process for a student in special education (Elliott & Sheridan, 1992). Usually, members on an SET include a parent, an administrator, a teacher who knows the student, a psychologist, and other individuals who can contribute to an understanding of the student, including special educators. These individuals review information gathered about a referred student and first make a decision regarding whether an individual assessment is needed. If an assessment is completed, the team then determines whether the student has a disability, whether the student is eligible for special education, what goals and objectives should be prioritized to address the student’s assessed needs, and the setting in which the student’s education should occur. The team also reconvenes to resolve problems regarding the student’s educational plan.

As with SCPSTs, the amount of data-based information about SETs is quite limited. For example, Elliott and Sheridan (1992) found only 20 articles related to multidisciplinary teams in their literature review, with only 16 of these being based on research, and most of that was self-report. Others have examined team members’ perceptions of their roles and responsibility in relation to teams (e.g., Huebner & Gould, 1991) and problems encountered by such teams (e.g., Pfeiffer, 1980). Generally, the available information about SETs is equivocal with regard to their actual and member-perceived effectiveness in designing educational programs for students with disabilities.
ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-CENTERED TEAMS

Although the empirical basis for identifying the factors that make teams effective is somewhat lacking, the accumulated knowledge on this topic collectively outlines “what seems to be working.” The many descriptions and few studies of SCPSTs and SETs describe “what is” for these common student-centered teams. The next step in the process is to juxtapose these two sets of information in order to analyze the status of teams and to suggest strategies for maximizing such teams’ functioning.

Developmental Stages

The developmental stages that characterize teams offer several significant insights into what might be occurring on student-centered teams. For example, the first stage a team enters is forming, and the team’s purpose is established at this time. Ultimately, what are the purposes of SCPSTs and SETs? Although the members of many SCPSTs might indicate that their purpose is to provide assistance to students, it is probably just as likely that they will note that they are required to provide interventions prior to making a request for a referral to special education, thus implying that the team’s primary purpose is a sorting and prioritizing of student needs. If team members are not clear about the student-centered purpose of the SCPST, teachers who refer students to the team might see the team primarily as a gatekeeper for special education. Even if this is not the case, the purpose of an SCPST can still be unclear. Given the multitude of problems that students experience in school, often as a result of conditions that exist in their families, home environments, or other contexts that school personnel cannot influence, some teams cannot meaningfully have an impact on the factors that would truly “assist” students. When this is so, what becomes the team’s purpose? Affirmation to teachers that they are doing everything that could reasonably be expected? Monitoring the student’s situation? Referral to community or other agency resources? How clear does the purpose remain for team members? The more an SCPST’s original purpose of providing specific academic or behavior interventions is diluted because of such factors, the more likely it is that the team will struggle to keep a clear focus.

SETs also face an issue related to forming because they exist partly in order to comply with federal and state law. Because of this reality, members sometimes perceive that their responsibilities are to ensure that all the correct paperwork is completed and all the legal issues resolved. The more child-centered purpose of such teams, providing services to address iden-
tified student needs, can easily be lost among efforts to be certain that parents’ rights are reviewed, all reports are made available, and all signatures are obtained.

Another stage of team development—adjournment—seems particularly relevant for an analysis of student-centered teams. In teams that exist in other contexts, members are brought together for a specific purpose, and when that purpose is accomplished, the team disbands. However, in student-centered teams, there seldom appears to be a clear point for adjournment. For example, on SCPSTs the team often meets for a semester or a school year and when the next year begins, the team takes up the same tasks that it had before. In other words, SCPSTs often fail to achieve a sense of closure on their purpose. They might adjourn for a specific student, but there is always another student who needs assistance.

**Suggestions.** Members of school teams should regularly review the purposes for which the teams exist. Particularly for SCPSTs, team members might clarify their purpose by generating a list of possible outcomes from a team intervention (Zins & Johnson, 1994). This list could then be shared with teachers. The list might include items such as these: referral to special education, classroom-based intervention to be carried out by the teacher, consultation between a team member and the teacher, collection of additional information, or no additional action, among others. Because student-centered teams do not adjourn per se, members might want to review accomplishments during the course of the year and share successes and frustrations at a final meeting before the close of the school year. Members might receive feedback regarding their accomplishments with individual students by collecting data on the interventions implemented and their outcomes. These small rituals and procedures can serve the purpose of bringing a sense of closure to the team’s work.

**Team Membership**

In an ideal situation, members choose to join a team because they perceive that they can make a contribution to the team’s tasks, they value the experience of working with colleagues, and they have the necessary interpersonal skills. On student-centered teams, voluntariness frequently is missing. On SCPSTs, it is not uncommon for a core of teachers to have volunteered for the original team. However, other teachers often are assigned to the team to “take their turn” at this form of school service. For special education teachers, school psychologists, administrators, and oth-
ers, membership on SCPSTs and SETs is often not a matter of choice at all; they are assigned because of the particular job they hold, and although it is assumed they have particular expertise to offer because of those job assignments, their skills for sharing their expertise are seldom considered.

The fact that student-centered teams have members who are usually present as well as members who are present only in specific circumstances (i.e., when they refer a student or when they are the parent of a referred student) also raises a number of concerns about the assumptions on which teams operate and the expectations that can be set for them. If teams are created by going through stages and developing norms for functioning and clarifying roles and relationships, how do transitory team members fit? If an SCPST consisting of a special education teacher, a general education teacher, a psychologist, an administrator, and reading specialist meets weekly or biweekly to discuss students referred by other teachers, it is likely that they will truly become a team, progressing through the stages outlined earlier and developing a culture that might include knowledge of each person’s preferred role and recognition of the strengths each person contributes. When teachers or parents join this group, it might be questioned whether they should be considered team members or guests. If the former is assumed, members might be surprised if the teacher or parent seems reluctant to participate. If they assume the latter, they will work diligently to help the individual feel comfortable becoming an active participant in the problem-solving process.

**Suggestions.** As much as possible, membership on SCPSTs should be voluntary, but at the same time, membership should be rotated so that all the expertise available in a school can be shared. For example, in a school with more than one special education teacher, each might take a turn serving on a team. Some team members might participate only as needed (e.g., speech and language therapists). If teacher participation on teams is a problem, incentives should be offered. For example, serving on an SCPST could be counted as a school committee assignment, releasing members from other committee work.

Both SCPSTs and SETs should consider the impact that core and transient membership has on the assumptions the team makes and the participation of the transient members. For many teams, an emphasis should be placed on making individuals who might attend a team meeting only once or twice per year feel that their contributions are sought and valued. This goal might by accomplished by re-examining the ways in which team meetings begin (e.g., are all the “real” team members seated and the transient member comes into the room and takes the last remaining seat?) and the types of
questions posed to these occasional members (e.g., are they questions really needing answers that only the transient member can give, or are they simply polite questions designed to permit the transient member an opportunity to participate?).

Task and Maintenance Issues

The procedures that student-centered teams use to complete their tasks generally are clear. SCPSTs use a set of explicit problem-solving steps to generate possible interventions, one or several of which are selected for implementation. Likewise, SETs carry out all the steps mandated in the referral, assessment, and special education decision-making process. The part of the tasks for these teams that is not as apparent is the outcome. For SCPSTs, follow-up is generally recommended, but few specific suggestions have been made for determining whether an intervention has had the desired effect, whether an intervention has had enough effect to be considered adequate, or whether an intervention has even been systematically implemented (Zins, Curtis, Graden, & Ponti, 1988). In fact, part of the rationale for the MAT model (Fuchs et al., 1990) was to better address the latter issue. If interventions are judged to have been ineffective, whether the reasons are valid or not, the student can be referred for special education assessment. For SETs, the outcome of the team effort—if a student is eligible for special education—is an individual education plan (IEP). However, whether the IEP adequately addresses student needs and how the goals and objectives are implemented is often left largely to the discretion of the direct service provider. The annual review of the IEP, usually completed by a smaller group of individuals than the one that initiated it, has only a moderate level of accountability: If a goal or objective is not met it simply is carried into the next year. Unless serious problems are occurring, little team attention is devoted to assessing the quality of the IEP.

Maintenance issues for student-centered teams remain an area of concern. How do these teams establish and sustain a sense of being a team? How do they address internal conflicts? How do they ensure that all members have opportunities to participate? To what extent are these teams able to implement the characteristics of collaboration (Friend & Cook, 1996) that generally are considered vital for effective teams? In general, although some professionals contend that considerable attention has been paid to team process (Lloyd et al., 1988), very little is known about the ways in which student-centered teams go about the business of being a team.

Suggestions. In striving to improve student-centered team effectiveness, the matter of accountability should receive careful attention. SCPST
members should devise specific strategies for monitoring the implementation of selected interventions, and they should specify procedures for evaluating whether the interventions are positively influencing the student's problems. When team members notice a pattern in which a student's teacher repeatedly requests assistance, this might be a signal that a different sort of problem exists. In some cases, the interventions are ineffective, but other reasons could include that the interventions are not being implemented, the teacher does not have the skill to implement the intervention, the intervention is not being implemented systematically, the intervention is not acceptable to the teacher, the wrong problem has been addressed, or the problems are beyond the influence of the team. A decision may need to be made on the advisability of continued team problem solving. Alternative actions might include referral to an individual team member for consultation or to another source of support.

To address maintenance issues, team members can be urged to occasionally allocate a small amount of time for discussing how they are functioning as a team. Issues such as whether all members are present when meetings begin, whether some team members monopolize conversations, how transient members are treated, and so on, can be addressed during these times. For some teams, prior to a discussion of maintenance issues, information should be gathered in a sort of informal team assessment. Which team members speak most often? Which seldom speak? How much time is allocated for various team activities? Does the team interaction most closely resemble a sequential reading of reports or a conversation about a student? In many cases, a skilled facilitator is needed to assist teams regarding maintenance matters. This individual could be the leader from another school team.

Roles and Relationships

Individuals who work on student-centered teams assume a variety of formal and informal roles. The issue is often a matter of who is doing what and how the role came to be assigned to the individual. For example, on many SETs the psychologist is the team leader (Huebner & Gould, 1991), and this responsibility has been assigned administratively. On SCPSTs other than TATs, special education staff often function as team leaders. Because the leadership of a team should vary during its life cycle, based on the activities occurring, a question arises concerning whether assigned leadership is the best arrangement. In addition, many team models include the principal as a team member. In some cases, problems are created if this person does not function in the leadership role. The team needs the admin-
istructive authority implied in this arrangement in order to effectively carry out its work. Similar questions can be raised about other roles as well. On SCPSTs, who generally is given the responsibility for monitoring the implementation of interventions? Does the special education teacher carry an inordinate amount of responsibility for working with general education teachers? What role does an administrator play on the team?

Another issue that arises is that concerns both roles and relationships was introduced with the topic of team membership. It is often problematic to achieve active participation by transient team members. In some SCPST meetings, transient members seem to perceive that their role is to present the case and then listen as others generate suggestions for addressing the concerns expressed. In SETs, the extent to which parents are able to actively contribute has long been a concern of the field. What are the perceptions of team members about the roles of transient members? Are these realistic? What are the perceptions of transient team members? How could participants’ understanding of each other’s roles and the working relationships among team members be clarified? It is essential that transient team members understand their roles and recognize the contributions that they make to their teams.

Suggestions. Teams can enhance their effectiveness by explicitly discussing the role expectations they have for one another. Whether the leadership of the team should be changed periodically should be considered, particularly on SCPSTs, with the express goal of fostering a collaborative problem-solving focus. Team members might also consider whether particular members seem to have significantly more responsibility for team management and strategy implementation. If records are kept of team meetings and decisions made, these records might provide a data source for this information.

To clarify the roles and relationships of transient team members, it might be advisable for SCPSTs to directly discuss with teachers who might refer students for team consideration what their role on the team should be. Team members should also explore whether transient members see their appropriate roles as passive ones. If this is the case, additional conversation about the topic is warranted. For SCPSTs, such a conversation might concern the difficulty other team members have in generating interventions without knowing how the interventions fit with the teacher’s style and classroom activities, information that is necessarily contributed by the teacher. In SETs, parents should be encouraged to offer their understanding of their child away from the school setting, information that school personnel do not know and that can greatly influence the assessment process, decisions
about the need for special education, and the design of the IEP. This contribution can be fostered by meeting with parents prior to team meeting to explain the team and expectations for participation.

CONCLUSION

Despite the popularity of the teaming concept in schools and the increasing emphasis on student-centered teams as a vehicle for addressing students’ academic, social, and emotional needs, little clear direction has emerged on how to form or use such teams most effectively, and only a limited empirical basis has been established to justify their use and clarify their optimum practices and procedures. This situation might exist because student-centered teams often seem to violate or only partially comply with factors traditionally associated with effective teaming.

Teaming is a relatively expensive student-assistance strategy in terms of personnel time, and in these times of constrained budgets and concerns about expenditures for students at risk, the justification for its continued use needs to be clarified. To accomplish this, a tremendous amount of additional information is needed. Each of the sets of factors associated with effective teams should be empirically examined for student-centered teams, and the specific purposes teams set, the tasks that they undertake, the outcomes they produce, and the interpersonal processes used to manage the team should be carefully studied. Only by adding significantly to the knowledge base on student-centered teams can their effectiveness ultimately be established.

REFERENCES


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