

In-class Support for Children with Special Needs in Mainstream Schools

Class and supplementary support teachers* in Ireland are currently challenged to work together more closely as practices shift from a model of withdrawing children with special educational needs (SEN) for supplementary teaching to teaching them effectively alongside their peers in the mainstream class.

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CHANGING TEACHING PRACTICES

In June 2003 the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2003, Circular 24/03) informed Irish primary schools of its intention to introduce a weighted system for allocating resources for pupils with higher incidence special educational needs. Pupils with higher incidence special educational needs (SEN) are defined as those pupils with “borderline mild and mild general learning disability and specific learning disability and those with learning support needs (that is, functioning at or below the 10th percentile on a standardised test of reading and/or mathematics)” (DES, 2004a, Circular 09/04, p. 1). While these announcements appear to have created concern and some confusion for teachers and schools, they have also initiated a welcome debate on how best to serve the needs of all children, including those with SEN, in the mainstream school.

From September 2005 all mainstream schools will be given more responsibility, along with greater flexibility, for the deployment of teaching resources for pupils with SEN. *The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (DES, 2004b) ensures that the debate has long since moved from whether or not children with SEN should be educated in mainstream schools. Since the early 1990s and particularly since the announcement of the ‘automatic entitlement’ (Minister for Education, 1998) stating that all children with SEN are entitled to be educated in their local school, there have been considerable strides and improvements in the provision for such children in the mainstream school.

One of the most significant advances has been the increase in the opportunities for professional development for teachers and schools in the area of special education. For example, the number of courses in special education, sanctioned by the Department of Education and Science, has greatly increased; concrete support for teachers and schools has been offered by the establishment of the Special Education Support Service (www.sess.ie); various publications have resulted in guidelines and advice for schools and teachers (DES, 2000; 2005, pending; NCCA, 2002). Despite the considerable support, and teachers’ genuine willingness to include children with SEN in mainstream classes, the gap between ideology and practice has been well documented and remains a formidable challenge for many teachers who are

*Supplementary support teachers includes all teachers in mainstream schools who support children with SEN, for example, learning support teachers, resource teachers for SEN, resource teachers for traveller children and resource teachers for language support.

sincerely committed to inclusive educational practices (Clark, Dyson, Millward and Skidmore, 1997).

This article does not, therefore, discuss inclusion from a theoretical or policy standpoint. Nor does it examine the issues surrounding whole school approaches and collective responsibility for children with special needs. Rather it takes as its starting point the fact that many children with SEN are in the mainstream school and that teachers, be they class or supplementary support teachers, are committed to teaching all the children in their classes effectively. Informed by the research on inclusive practices, a number of practical suggestions are offered on how class and supplementary support teachers can work together effectively to cater for the needs of all children. In this article, I will focus mainly on teachers working as partners. However, because it seems unthinkable for any discussion on inclusive teaching practices to ignore the need for classroom planning and organisation and the concept of differentiation, both these areas of collaboration also receive some brief mention. These two short sections are followed by the main part of the paper which addresses a number of ways in which mainstream class and supplementary support teachers can work together to best support classroom-based learning for children with SEN.

CLASSROOM PLANNING AND ORGANISATION

Whether class and supplementary support teachers teach together in the same room or not, if they are committed to implementing a learning programme which is inclusive and appropriate to the needs of all their children, they must grasp the nettle of finding alternatives to whole-class teaching, at least for large parts of each day. This involves reviewing existing classroom organisation and, where necessary, adapting to cater for individual needs. Much has been written about classroom organisation and management and basic advice on grouping children and mixed-ability teaching is readily available (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 1996).

Cooperative learning is one method of grouping children which can be successfully implemented by a teacher alone or by a number of teachers who wish to work collaboratively. As well as catering for the academic needs of children, co-operative learning groups offer all children the opportunity to develop their social skills as they develop their ability to listen and learn from each other. Slavin (2003, p. 275) argues that as well as improving achievement, “cooperative learning methods have had positive effects on such outcomes as improved intergroup relations, self-esteem, attitudes toward school, and acceptance of children with special educational needs”. This view is reiterated by Nevin (1998) who advocates the usefulness of cooperative learning methods for promoting successful social integration by influencing the attitudes of pupils who do not have disabilities. Mutual respect and interdependence are necessary attributes which need to be taught and carefully fostered if children are to benefit from this collaborative approach to learning and teaching (Kirk, 2001).

‘Numbered Heads Together’ (Kagan, 1992) is an example of a co-operative learning approach that can be used most effectively for all children including those with SEN. Children are assigned to small mixed ability groups where they are each given a number from one to three or four, depending on the number in the group. The teacher periodically stops the lesson and asks children to “put their heads together” to discuss

and decide on a response to a particular question or issue. The group takes collective responsibility to ensure that all group members understand and know how to respond. The teacher then calls on a particular 'number' from one group to respond. The teacher may then ask the same 'numbers' in the other groups if they agree or have anything to add to the first contribution.

Any lesson, directed and led by the teacher, is suited to 'Numbered Heads Together'. Oral discussions, guided or directed reading, where the teacher invites the children to predict the next part of the story, are obvious examples. Group cloze, sequencing or prediction exercises, carried out orally or through reading or writing, also lend themselves to such an approach. Further information and practical guidelines for implementing cooperative learning methods can be found in Slavin (1995; 2003), Putnam, (1997) and Sapon-Shevin (1999).

DIFFERENTIATION

According to the *Draft Curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Mild General Learning Difficulties* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, [NCCA], 2002) the term differentiation

refers to the method whereby the teacher varies content, activities, methodology and resources when taking into account the range of interests, needs and experience of the students. It is a process that allows for variation in, for example, pace, amount, content, level and method of curriculum presentation to ensure that learning experiences are appropriate for all students. (p. 20)

Although differentiation requires high levels of teacher expertise and experience, if schools and teachers wish to "ensure that learning experiences are appropriate for all students", they must engage in the process of differentiation. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss at any length the issue of differentiation and its importance when catering for children with SEN. However, in the context of class and supplementary support teachers working collaboratively, the process of differentiation is made easier and more effective if both teachers agree and plan how they intend to implement differentiated practices. This involves examining how they can differentiate their teaching methods and strategies, their materials and resources, the tasks and activities they demand of their children and the responses and expectations they have for the different children in the class.

An example of differentiation, which could possibly serve as a non-threatening introduction to both teachers working together, could be for both teachers to adapt the texts, materials and resources they will use with specific children when planning a particular topic or lesson. The class teacher might wish, for example, to use a chapter in history from the text book but know that it is too difficult for certain children in the class. The resource teacher might adapt the particular chapter in the text book by reducing or simplifying the text, highlighting certain words, phrases or sentences, adding extra pictures, diagrams or flowcharts or by providing simple questions or prompts to enable all children to understand the chapter. For some children the purpose of the exercise could perhaps be concentrated on one single skill, strategy or concept, for example, locating the main idea from the chapter. Similarly, follow-up or

extension work could be devised for these children by adapting or creating alternative activities or responses to the chapter. Such activities could involve less writing and incorporate oral responses, drawing, colouring, matching and sequencing exercises. Readers who wish to extend their knowledge of practical ways to engage in differentiated practices could usefully consult Stakes and Hornby (2000), Lerner, (2000), the *Draft Curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Mild General Learning Difficulties* (NCCA, 2002) and Westwood (2003).

WORKING AS PARTNERS

The education of children with SEN was once the sole preserve of the special school. It then became the task of the special education teacher/supplementary support teacher in the mainstream school. It is now firmly the responsibility of every teacher in every school to work together in order to provide the most effective, appropriate and inclusive education possible for all children. Effective, appropriate and inclusive educational programmes depend on good collaboration and communication between teachers. Furthermore, by planning and teaching together, teachers engage in one of the most valuable processes of professional development because their reflection and learning is grounded in the real experience of their own pupils and classrooms. Salend (2001) offers five models of collaborative practice whereby two teachers can work together in the same room to cater for all the children in the class. An adapted version of Salend's framework, together with specific examples, is offered below.

1. One teacher instructs while the other circulates amongst all the children in the room. This model is particularly useful for teaching new concepts or where one teacher has particular expertise in a specific area, physical education for example. Another example could be where one teacher is perhaps a talented story teller or reader and is able to captivate pupils as s/he reads with great fluency and expression. This model enables one teacher to support and monitor closely the understanding and performance of children who might otherwise fail to make progress or even participate. The teacher, who is leading the instruction, might for example conduct an oral discussion on a topic, directing children to take notes as the discussion develops. The other teacher, who is circulating, is then free to support children in recording their responses as they write, draw or use graphic diagrams or organisers, depending on their level of ability.
2. The class is divided into two equal groups with each teacher teaching the same material to their group. This approach facilitates the need to work with smaller numbers, enhancing children's opportunities to interact with the teacher and each other. Preparing for a debate is a good example of this way of working. One group brainstorms and prepares for the motion while the other group works similarly against it. Both groups benefit from the lower pupil-teacher ratio. All the children in the class have access to the expertise and support of two teachers rather than one. This method is useful for teaching new material or when providing practice for skills and strategies that need to be reinforced and perhaps over-learned.

3. Both teachers teach different content at the same time to two different groups of children, then switch groups and repeat the lesson. This variation on the previous model is most suitable for teaching difficult and non-sequential topics, strategies or concepts. The class teacher may, for example, be working on a particular aspect of the emergent literacy programme such as phonological awareness. One teacher may be engaged in oral work asking children to complete common nursery rhymes, identify rhyming words by listening to a set of rhyming and non-rhyming words and supply similar rhyming words. The other teacher may engage the children in working with rhyming words using magnetic letters, writing whole or parts of rhyming words or cutting up and reassembling rhyming words. Such a lesson could fruitfully conclude with both groups coming together to recite nursery rhymes or listen to a rhyming story narrated by one teacher while the other teacher helps emphasise the rhyming words as they occur in the story.
4. One teacher teaches a small group or individual children while the other teacher teaches the rest of the class. This is a simple, non-threatening approach which could be useful for teachers who are a little wary of working together in the same room. It is also necessary for some children who need highly structured support or extension and enrichment work. The resource teacher might, for example, teach the large group while the class teacher works intensively 1:1 or with a small group. This model of teaching can give class teachers opportunities, they might not otherwise have, to understand more fully and diagnose more specifically where individual children are experiencing difficulties, thereby enabling them to plan more strategically for individual needs. Children who are using a Language Experience Approach to listening, speaking, reading and writing could benefit greatly from this individualised approach (Westwood, 2003). Another example of this approach could be to use the time to introduce one group of children to a new piece of computer software. Thus they could be enabled to carry out extension work independently when they are finished the whole-class or group assignment.
5. The two teachers plan and teach together thereby combining and complementing their specific talents and expertise. This approach is particularly useful when the teachers want to act as expert models for the children. They may, for example, engage in role play or think aloud bouncing ideas off each other as they demonstrate how to tackle a problem or a piece of work. Shared reading or writing using big books or large chart paper are two activities that fit this manner of working very comfortably. Alternatively, one teacher could initiate and help sustain the children's contributions by prompting and acting as a 'pupil', verbalising their thought processes in a very concrete manner.

By working as partners, teachers can address many of the problems related to withdrawing children from the mainstream class, such as children missing out on various aspects of the class programme, timetabling difficulties and lack of communication and co-ordination of the curriculum between the class and supplementary support teachers. Many teachers also report that their teaching is more enjoyable and stimulating as a result of working together. They argue that such partner work helps prevent the isolation that some teachers can feel when working

alone all day (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells and Riley, 1997; Walther-Thomas, 1997, all cited in Salend, 2001).

CONCLUSION

It would be foolish and dishonest to gloss over the many real challenges facing teachers who wish to work together effectively in a collaborative manner. Summarising some of the problems encountered by teachers, Salend (2001, p. 131) concludes that team teaching “takes time and requires teachers to deal with philosophical, pedagogical, historical, logistical, and territorial issues, as well as concerns about working with and being observed by another professional”. However, anecdotal evidence, as well as studies reported in Irish educational journals over the past ten years, suggests that there is a great willingness amongst Irish teachers to go beyond welcoming children with SEN into the mainstream class. For evidence see recent issues of *REACH* (the journal of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education), *LEARN* (the journal of the Irish Learning Support Association) and *Irish Educational Studies* (the journal of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland) and relevant publications from the INTO (Irish National Teachers’ Organisation).

This research shows that Irish teachers want to provide effective and positive learning environments and experiences which cater for the individual needs and abilities of all the children in their classes. It is time for those teachers who are not already working collaboratively to do so, and for those already advanced in this process, to teach and support those who wish to learn.

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