

Exploring Primary Teachers' Views of Co-teaching for Pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Multi-grade Classrooms

This study focused on primary teachers' (multi-grade, mainstream and support teachers) views of co-teaching approaches in addressing the learning needs of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in multi-grade classrooms in Irish primary schools. Multi-grade classes are a common feature in Ireland where currently, there are 3,124 mainstream primary schools with over 1,700 schools having multi-classes (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2016). A case study incorporating a mixed methods approach was chosen using self-administered questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that while teachers believed the learning needs of pupils with SEN could be met through co-teaching approaches, the withdrawal of pupils for supplementary support remained the dominant approach. Teachers indicated that they would prefer a combination of withdrawal and in-class support as opposed to choosing one approach over the other. Teachers referred to both the benefits and challenges posed by co-teaching in delivering instruction for pupils with SEN. The data demonstrated that station teaching was the most common form of co-teaching in multi-grade classrooms.

Keywords: *models of co-teaching, special educational needs (SEN), multi-grade classrooms, teaching approaches, collaboration*

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INTRODUCTION

As mainstream schools strive to overcome the pedagogical challenges of including pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream

classrooms, co-teaching has been put forward as a response for improving the inclusion of these pupils. Mastropieri and Scruggs (2006) view co-teaching as a mainstream and a special education teacher in a mainstream classroom where pupils with and without SEN learn together. While co-teaching is linked with positive teacher and pupil experiences in many countries (Strogilos and Tragoulia, 2013) its application in the education of pupils with SEN is still under consideration.

The appropriateness of withdrawing pupils with SEN from their mainstream class setting to engage in one-to-one schooling with a support teacher has been the topic of much debate (Murawski and Dieker, 2012). The National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2013) have advised that interventions with pupils should be delivered in a manner that best meets the needs identified, which may be through group or individual teaching. Withdrawal from class by support teachers for individual and/or small group support, has been the dominant model of intervention in Ireland (Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O' Raw, 2015). However, examples of collaborative planning between support and mainstream teachers, and of team teaching are gradually emerging (Tiernan, Casserly and Maguire, 2017; DES, 2017). The co-teaching literature advises prospective co-teachers to contemplate the advantages and disadvantages of co-teaching prior to its implementation as it risks failure if the general education curriculum is inappropriate for the child (Cook and Friend, 1995; Friend, 2008). Murawski (2008) recommends monitoring teaching and learning progress so that well informed decisions can be made regarding the suitability of co-teaching going forward.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cook and Friend (1995) describe co-teaching as including two or more teachers, usually a general and a special education teacher (SET), delivering substantive instruction to a diverse range of pupils in a single physical space. As a result, Cook, McDuffie-Landrum, Oshita and Cotheren-Cook (2011) state that pupils with SEN have access to the same curriculum as their peers with the necessary adaptations provided by a SET in the mainstream class to meet individual needs (Friend and Cook, 2013). For effective co-teaching to take place, Friend (2008) states that co-teachers must share their expertise and engage in co-planning of instruction and co-assessment of pupil performance, and use a variety of instructional approaches including differentiation (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, and Williams 2000). Thus, collaboration between co-teachers is a key tenet of co-teaching

where mutual goals, parity, responsibilities, accountabilities, expertise, and resources (Friend and Cook, 2013) are central if pupils with SEN are to benefit from the specialised instruction to meet their needs in the mainstream classroom. According to Sileo (2011) co-teachers must be on the same page regarding lesson content, who will teach lesson elements, the instructional models to be used, and any accommodations that might be provided for particular pupils.

Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie (2007) have identified five co-teaching models, namely *supportive teaching*, *station teaching*, *parallel teaching*, *alternating teaching* and *team teaching*. Research findings are unequivocal that teachers need to choose the correct co-teaching approach for their context in order to experience success and also to suit the personalities and needs of pupils and colleagues (Friend and Cook, 2013). Friend and Cook (2013) assert that knowledge of curricular content, instructional strategies and pragmatic considerations should also contribute to the decision making process regarding the choice of co-teaching approach.

BENEFITS OF AND BARRIERS TO CO-TEACHING

The benefits of co-teaching approaches are many, including educators blending their expertise to ensure pupils with SEN access the same curriculum as their peers, a reduced pupil teacher ratio, and the active cultivation of inclusive learning environments (Scruggs et al., 2007). Scruggs et al. further assert that this process welcomes each educator's unique talents and perspectives and varied teaching styles (Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi and McDuffie, 2005) while creating teaching opportunities and instructional strategies that could not occur if just one teacher were present. However, Cook and Friend (1995) and Murawski and Dieker (2012) caution that co-teaching is not suited to every teacher which can result in conflict between ideal practice and actual practice. Other barriers to effective co-teaching have also been identified such as: increased planning, a resistance to participate, (Scruggs et al., 2007; Friend, 2008) and personality differences (Pratt, Imbody, Wolf and Patterson, 2016). Cook and Friend (1995) discuss how co-teaching should include collaborative assessment, planning, teaching and evaluation. Shevlin et al. (2013) found this can be problematic in rural areas as smaller schools have a differing dynamic with fewer teachers, reducing the chances of finding an agreeable partner willing to co-teach. Murawski and Dieker (2012) also state that scheduling is an issue for co-teachers in small schools, as chances for co-planning are few.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods approach using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was chosen as the most appropriate research paradigm as the researchers believed using both quantitative and qualitative data together, would provide a better understanding of the research questions. Following a review of research approaches; the researchers decided that a sequential, mixed method, single concept case study design (Yin, 2009) was the most appropriate method.

Purposive sampling was utilised for the questionnaire as the researchers wanted to gain comprehensive information from those in a position to give it (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). Forty questionnaires were distributed; 20 to multi-grade class teachers teaching Junior Infants to Second Class (4-8 years old) and 20 to support teachers providing support to pupils in these classes. Teachers were asked to complete and return the questionnaire within two weeks using the stamped addressed envelope provided. In total, 22 questionnaires were used by the researchers; 11 from multi-grade teachers and 11 from support teachers, reflecting responses from multi-grade and support teachers working in the same schools.

The researchers chose a semi-structured interview and appropriated the interviews after the questionnaire data was analysed in order to delve deeper into teachers' views of the research questions. Volunteer sampling was employed for the interviews. The researchers asked questionnaire participants if they were willing to be interviewed as part of the investigation while self-administering the questionnaires. Eight teachers were willing to be interviewed and the researchers randomly selected 2 multi-grade teachers and 2 support teachers to be interviewed. The multi-grade and support teachers interviewed were not necessarily from the same school.

Data from the questionnaire was entered into an Excel database where all numerical and textual responses were collected in their original format. In regard to the qualitative data, there were two sources; namely the written responses to the open-ended items in the questionnaires, and the oral data gathered from the individual interviews. This data was analysed through content analysis, and sub-categories emerged.

The researchers adhered to the ethical guidance received from the Research and Ethics Committee of the Third Level Institution involved. Additionally, the researchers consulted the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011) before undertaking the research. Permission to conduct the study was sought from all teachers involved.

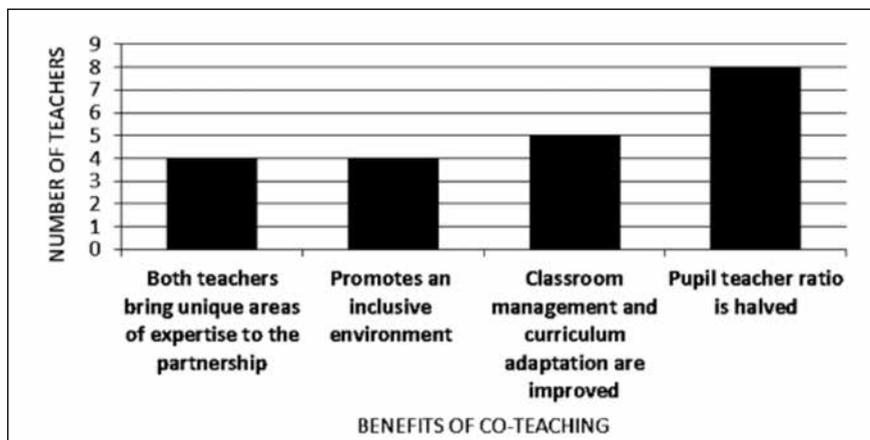
A number of limitations are acknowledged, including the sample being restricted to junior grade multi-grade teachers in a specific geographical region, as well as a relatively small sample. This may have impacted on the generalisability of the findings or the assumption that the views of the teachers sampled in this study are reflective of the views of teachers in the wider population. In addition, a dearth of previous research regarding co-teaching in multi-grade classrooms and the inclusion of pupils with SEN proved problematic for the researchers and hence, more generic literature on co-teaching had to be utilised. The findings of this study also confirmed teachers' lack of experience in co-teaching approaches in multi-grade classrooms.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The majority of teachers 82% (N=18) taught in schools where withdrawal support was the dominant approach to supplementary provision. Teachers were asked to indicate their level of agreement on whether or not they would be willing to co-teach with a compatible colleague. Out of the 22 teachers, 14 were prepared to co-teach with a colleague with whom they had a positive, working relationship.

Participants were asked to rank the benefits of co-teaching for teachers. Eight teachers believed a reduced pupil-teacher ratio was the greatest benefit; five teachers reported that the improvement in classroom management and curriculum

Figure 1: Benefits of Co-Teaching



adaptation were significant; four stated that the promotion of an inclusive environment was important, and four teachers identified the significance of both teachers bringing unique areas of expertise to the partnership.

Teachers described how having a colleague in the classroom provided professional support and development and eased the constraints of time, planning, workloads and multi-grade instruction while providing pupils with opportunities to learn in smaller groups.

I feel like I don't have sufficient time to address areas of the curriculum due to time/noise constraints. Therefore, support from our Learning Support teacher is vital. (Q.1, Multi-Grade Teacher)

Means classroom teacher isn't trying to do four different curriculums independently. (Q.11, Multi-Grade Teacher)

Data from teachers' interviews indicated being able to support a greater number of pupils in-class, hence, enabling more intensive teaching and learning to transpire, with a reduced pupil-teacher ratio.

It also allows you to target a large number of children e.g. If I go into the classroom during Maths or English I can support more children who are having difficulties. (Q.10, Support Teacher)

Allows content to be covered more deeply as pupil-teacher ratio is good. (Q.12, Support Teacher)

Teachers discussed how in-class support in the form of co-teaching could strengthen the inclusion of pupils with SEN in multi-grade classrooms by reducing stigma, increasing peer support and improving access to the curriculum.

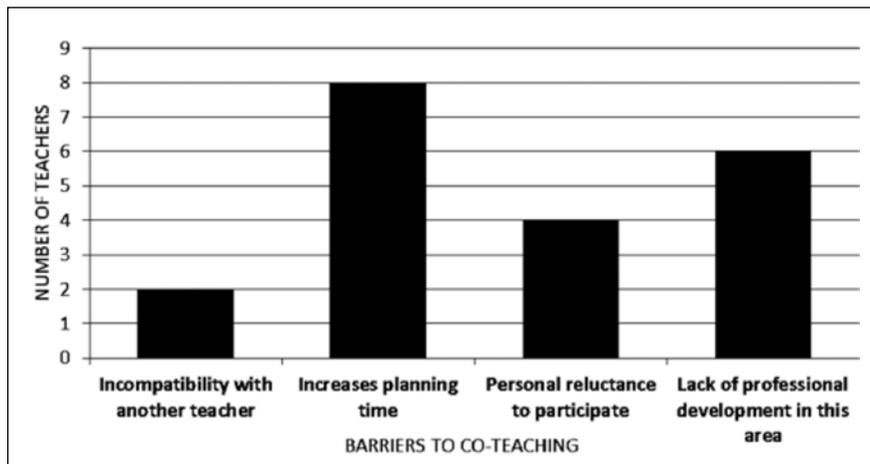
Co-teaching means the child with SEN is not being withdrawn from the class and missing out on what is being taught while they're gone. (Interviewee 3, Multi-Grade Teacher)

While working with a group you can target individual children without them being aware of it. (Q.22, Multi-Grade Teacher)

Participants were asked to determine the barriers to co-teaching (for teachers). Teachers were asked to determine the barriers to co-teaching (for teachers). Eight teachers cited increased planning time as the greatest barrier; six teachers

considered lack of professional development opportunities; four believed personal reluctance to participate to be a factor, while two teachers said that incompatibility with another teacher was the greatest barrier.

Figure 2: Barriers to Co-Teaching



Teachers elaborated further on how differentiated in-class support demands detailed planning and teaching through collaborative practices.

The learning support teacher and class teacher plan topics that children will work on and decide on specific targets that children need to meet.
(Q.21, Support Teacher)

Teachers discussed why co-teaching was not feasible for all teachers, with personality differences, differences in teaching styles and willingness to participate, being critical factors when deciding whether or not to co-teach.

Teachers' personalities/teaching styles may vary and this can also have an effect on the child. (Q.20, Support Teacher)

A number of support teachers made reference to the noise, level of activity and pace of a multi-grade classroom which can overwhelm some pupils with SEN. Reference was also made to the support teacher obviously targeting the pupil with SEN in-class which could further stigmatise the pupil in need of support and hence in instances, withdrawal might be considered a better approach.

The classroom can be hectic with four classes, so the small group allows me to focus in on a topic and teach it more in depth. (Interviewee 1, Support Teacher, L81)

This child is very aware of her difficulties and is embarrassed by them. She does everything in her power to avert attention away from her needs....this child can also get frustrated in class, so a break from the classroom is a good thing for her. (Interviewee 4, Multi-Grade Teacher, L148)

However, one teacher discussed how withdrawal support can lead to planning problems for the multi-grade teacher, while another referred to the fact that not all lessons were conducive to co-teaching in multi-grade classrooms.

...as a class teacher it can be difficult to plan around when a child or group has been withdrawn, as you don't want them to miss anything. (Interviewee 4, Multi-Grade Teacher)

Junior Infants is a crucial year where children learn phonics and blending and if this isn't mastered the child could experience difficulties going forward...so co-teaching in the same space wouldn't be ideal for this. Also, some children just need one-to-one as this is how they learn best. (Interviewee 2, Support Teacher)

Teachers were most familiar with station teaching as a model of in-class support with nine teachers explaining how they used station teaching for literacy and numeracy programmes in addressing the needs of pupils with SEN. Teachers described the classroom being divided into various centres including independent stations and those managed by the support and class teachers.

Station teaching Maths, one independent group, one group with class teacher and one group with me. (Q.12, Support Teacher)

It is not obvious at all who needs extra support during this programme as the children are so preoccupied at their own station. (Interviewee 3, Multi-Grade Teacher)

Some teachers viewed co-teaching as an equal enterprise and reported that pupils with SEN could benefit from being taught by different teachers with varying skills, experiences and competencies.

Children with SEN also benefit from the unique areas of expertise of each teacher. (Q.7, Multi-Grade Teacher)

Both teachers can bring their particular talents and areas of expertise to provide a comprehensive programme. (Q.14, Multi-Grade Teacher)

While 10 teachers stated that co-teaching could address the learning needs of pupils with SEN, they urged caution that pupils' learning needs should determine the choice of supplementary support provided. One teacher stated that supplementary support approaches should be explored, tested and compared before conclusions regarding their effectiveness were reached.

There is an argument to be made for both approaches – of that depends on how best the SEN pupils' needs can be met and best fulfilled. (Q.3, Support Teacher)

DISCUSSION

The findings indicated that withdrawal of pupils for supplementary support remains the dominant approach while co-teaching is not commonly used in multi-grade classrooms, despite successive educational policies promoting more inclusive practices (NCSE, 2013). Rose et al. (2015) also demonstrated that many Irish teachers are unsure of how to address the learning needs of pupils with SEN inclusively. However, the findings indicated that teachers are open to co-teaching approaches and feel that pupils with SEN can receive an appropriate education in mainstream classrooms.

The findings examined the advantages of co-teaching and the data demonstrated that the reduced pupil-teacher ratio enabled teachers to support a greater number of pupils, in-class, followed by more efficient classroom management and curriculum adaptation. These findings are supported by Friend (2008) and Scruggs et al. (2007) in that the benefits of co-teaching approaches allow teachers to maximise their expertise thus ensuring that pupils with SEN access the same curriculum as their peers. These pupils also experience a reduced pupil-teacher ratio and an inclusive environment(s) that supports the instructional requirements of all involved through deliberate differentiation (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000).

Station teaching as a form of co-teaching was the most common approach utilised in multi-grade classrooms which concurs with research by Tiernan et al. (2017).

This finding has also been stated previously by Walther-Thomas et al. (2000) and Friend and Cook (2013) as station teaching provides each teacher with a clear teaching role, while pupils have the benefit of working in small groups in inclusive classrooms. In addition, station teaching as a form of co-teaching may demand less planning and trust of co-teachers.

Teachers also referred to the challenges posed by co-teaching in delivering instruction for pupils with SEN. Planning time, teaching personalities and teaching styles in the area were all alluded to. In regard to planning, Pratt et al. (2016) state that the co-teaching relationship commences long before teachers meet their class of pupils. The findings also concur with previous research which found that teachers viewed the success of co-teaching to be dependent on teacher personality and compatibility (Pratt et al., 2016) and individual teaching style (Mastropieri et al., 2005). The findings indicated that parity of roles among multi-grade and support teachers is important. According to Pratt et al. (2016) parity in the co-teaching relationship is fundamental in co-teaching where both teachers take an active role in the classroom.

While co-teaching has been put forward as a promising method to include pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms (Stopgilos et al., 2016), teachers' views from this current study indicated that many factors should be considered when deciding on an approach to supplementary provision. This practice corresponds with advice from the NCSE (2013) which states that interventions with pupils should be delivered in a manner that best meets the needs identified. Correspondingly, Cook and Friend (1995) warn that co-teaching will not be successful if the general education curriculum is not considered appropriate for the child.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicated that withdrawal of pupils remains the dominant practice even though teachers are positively disposed to co-teaching approaches for pupils with SEN. One explanation for this is that teachers may find many co-teaching approaches difficult to implement in multi-grade classrooms. Consequently, station teaching is more commonly used as it is a more manageable form of co-teaching, suitable in these contexts. The findings demonstrated that teachers in the main support a combination of withdrawal and in-class support as opposed to choosing one form of provision over the other, hence reflecting a level of flexibility that ensures that informed decisions are made regarding the appropriateness of supplementary support.

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