

Responding To Learning Needs Through Teacher Collaboration-A Resource Unit Model

The author describes a uniquely collaborative response to diverse pupils with special educational needs (S.E.N.) in a large urban mainstream primary school in Dublin. A group of ex-quota teachers with specifically designated responsibilities collaborated as a unit to serve the learning needs of any child with difficulties regardless of category or label.

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INTRODUCTION

After years of neglect, the Irish primary school is beginning to receive needs-driven automatic support in the form of ex-quota teachers with varying responsibilities. These teachers include resource teachers for children with special needs, special class teachers, learning support teachers (remedial), support teachers (teacher counsellors), home/school/community/liaison co-ordinators, resource teachers for travellers, resource teachers for refugees, and concessionary posts in areas designated as disadvantaged. In some of the larger urban schools it is possible to have all of these teachers and perhaps two or three of one particular designation. The addition of these teachers is a necessary and very welcome resource in the primary system.

How these teachers operate in the school can have a huge bearing on the effectiveness of the service they provide. Each of the above categories of teachers has a large degree of discretion as to how they choose to work in the school. For example, the balance of teacher time spent withdrawing pupils for small group instruction, withdrawing pupils for one-to-one instruction, working with small groups or individuals in a mainstream class alongside the class teacher, devising programmes for children with class teachers, working with parents or collaborating with other support staff would vary a lot across schools.

In this article the argument for much closer collaboration between all support staff, as a first step in providing the necessary support to class teachers, is outlined.

SUPPORTS FOR CLASS TEACHERS

In Ireland there is a tradition of very differentiated roles in relation to provision for children with learning needs of various levels in mainstream schools. The longest tradition is of the remedial teacher whose remit is essentially to serve those children who are failing in mainstream classes in reading. Normally these children do not have a general learning disability. Some of these teachers take children for maths as well. They nearly always work on a withdrawal basis. They have average caseloads of 46 pupils (Shiel and Morgan, 1998).

The resource teacher for children of travellers (R.T.T.) is an ex-quota position allocated on a ratio of one teacher to every thirteen travellers in the school. Such teachers originally worked as special class teachers but gradually the traveller children were integrated into mainstream classes and these teachers now work largely on a withdrawal basis. They were appointed because of the very low proportion of traveller children attending school and to help tackle the very poor levels of achievement of those who were attending.

The resource teacher for children with special needs is also an ex-quota position created as a response to the trend towards inclusive education. These teachers ought to have a caseload of between 6 and 11 pupils (Department of Education and Science, 1999). Often they are shared between many schools, particularly in rural areas. A substantial number of resource teachers have been appointed in recent years, reflecting government policy which favours as much integration as is possible with as little segregation as is necessary.

Each of these teachers is appointed to meet a perceived need in the system. In the appointments, each of the needs is considered in isolation from the other and the teacher is matched with a category of children. Many large schools have each of these teachers, while some have an additional support teacher for children with behavioural problems, a home/school/community liaison co-ordinator and a teacher to support refugees. In many cases these teachers are working in isolation from each other. There is not a strong tradition in Ireland of team teaching or of collaborative cultures in schools. A recent report on remedial teaching in Ireland pointed to the absence of remedial teachers engaging in consultative roles (Shiel and Morgan, 1998).

BEST USE OF SUPPORT SERVICES

If the primary aim of support services in the form of additional teachers is to support the inclusion of the child in all aspects of the curriculum of the school it follows that "support" teachers should be facilitated in working collaboratively with the class teacher and with each other. There are so many issues to be addressed if each child's needs are to be met all day and each day in relation to all aspects of the curriculum. It is highly questionable whether adopting a withdrawal method of intervention by default is the best option in all circumstances. Some areas that need to be deliberated and decided on include:

- **How best can extra supports actually support the child and class teacher and not lead to deskilling of the teacher and exclusion of the child from classroom activities?**
- **How best can support be co-ordinated across teachers and family?**
- **How best can the child be supported while in the mainstream class?**
- **How do you ensure class teachers are not receiving contradictory advice from various support staff?**

Many pupils fall within more than one category of need. Pupils do not often fall neatly into the category of need suggested by the teacher title. Learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural problems and home difficulties can often combine. In some cases just one teacher might be best to give extra support to a child. In other situations a child (e.g. a traveller child or a child with a learning disability) might benefit from participation in a mixed learning support group as well as receiving extra help from the R.T.T. or resource teacher. Prioritising pupil needs regardless of category may produce caseloads different from those which would arise if guidelines based on teacher titles were followed. A flexible approach based on the learning needs of the children should allow for creative combinations of joint planning, shared teaching and joint support for the class teacher. If a child attends both the learning support (remedial) and support teacher (formerly called teacher counsellor) how best can they co-ordinate their work on the one hand, and jointly support the class teacher on the other?

ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF SUPPORT

In outlining the possible benefits of closer collaboration between support staff, I am drawing on my reflections on working in an alternative model of support in a large mainstream primary school. The perceived benefits are subjective but I feel

worth outlining if only to raise awareness of other possibilities which could be evaluated in future research. I will briefly outline the context of this new approach.

The school is a very large suburban primary school of 850 pupils and 33 teachers. Two remedial teachers and a resource teacher for traveller children were working in isolation. A resource teacher for children with special needs was also due to join the staff. I was the resource teacher for travellers at the time and spurred by gaps in our response to learning needs and the literature on collaboration, we presented a proposal to the staff with the support of the principal for the formation of a Resource Unit in the school, staffed by the ex- quota teachers who would work as a team, serving the learning needs of any child with difficulties, regardless of category or label.

The advantages of such of an approach were outlined to colleagues and it was agreed that we implement it. As a special needs team in the school we were given our own direct phone for easier communication with parents, psychologists, social workers, speech therapists, visiting teachers etc. We had our own bank account with a budget for resources, computer and photocopier. Each of these aids ensured greater efficiency in the administrative work that needed to be done and freed up valuable time for planning. All team members knew one another and adapted quite well to the new situation.

A new response to learning needs

The team of four set about their new task. Regardless of what children we had taught previously, we assessed all children in terms of learning needs in relation to the curriculum and grouped children on the basis of these needs and not the categories of remedial, special, refugee, or traveller. This ensured that there were mixed groups of children from these old categories. There was no attempt to deny the individual needs or identity of particular children but rather to assert that these needs did not necessarily have to be dealt with in separate segregated groups matched with a particular category of teacher. Some children, particularly those in the moderate range of general learning disability, were offered both individual one-to-one tutoring and small group assistance each day to support their inclusion in mainstream classes. Each of the four teachers then had mixed caseloads of children from the old categories and had a combination of one-to-one, and small group work in both English and Maths.

The children liked the new groups and the increased variety of needs was challenging for the teachers. The team adopted a policy of early intervention so

that there were more younger than older children in the groups. The team met formally once a week to plan, discuss, share, review and deal with the most pressing problems. However, we met each day informally and these meetings became just as important as the formal ones. Once a month, on the day of the general staff meeting, we would meet class teachers formally to discuss progress and plans for the next month. Again, informal meetings, often daily with some teachers were necessary and just as vital as the monthly formal meetings. Regular meetings were also scheduled with parents and when the class teacher was meeting parents a teacher from the Resource Unit would join the meeting and the two teachers together would talk to and listen to the parents.

Cognisant of Fullan's (1993) argument that vision comes later, we did not in the beginning burden ourselves unduly with precise policy statements but rather articulated a vision of serving children with learning difficulties and disabilities in small mixed groups or individually where appropriate. In addition, we aimed to support staff in their efforts to implement inclusive educational settings. Policy evolved through reflection in and on practice and was informed by and closely related to practice.

ADVANTAGES OF COLLABORATION

Collegial context for learning

What effects did the creation of this new team have in the school? Firstly, it raised the profile of special education needs issues in the school. The team became a focus for the raising of many issues, difficulties, problems, and opportunities, which previously had been treated in a very *ad hoc* manner, if at all. Through the team these issues were treated in a very systematic way and then raised formally at staff meetings for further discussion and action if necessary.

For the teachers in the Resource Unit this was a new experience in having a formal structure and collegial context for learning from each other. This requires a professional attitude of openness and trust in an environment where, in the words of Hargreaves (1992), "failure and uncertainty are not protected and defended but shared and discussed with a view to gaining help and support...where leadership is dispersed and divisions are played down" (p.226).

One of the major advantages of the team approach is its suitability as a mechanism for dealing with the complex issues of curricular, behavioural, social and organisational dimensions that manifest themselves in the field of special educational needs. These problems or challenges are not amenable to quick uniform

solutions or to ready-made techniques or formulae. They are practical problems with uncertain solutions. To begin to solve these problems we must have a very clear appreciation of the nature of the problem in its naturally occurring context.

I found that, being plugged into that context, a school based special needs team was ideally placed to assess, deliberate, and decide on action that best suited the needs of the child while maintaining an understanding of the context in which the action was to take place. There is less of a danger of solutions being proposed on the basis of what Wise (1977) calls superficial, incomplete, or incorrect analyses of the problem. Learning problems are contextual: pertaining to a particular child in a particular class with a particular teacher. Such a situation demands a collaborative, school-based response.

Monitoring progress

Also of major advantage was the fact that the team was in place to monitor progress or the lack of progress in consultation with the class teacher, assistant, and parents. There was a structure to facilitate a quicker response to difficulties, to hold a mini case conference for example, where necessary. Involving the class teacher in every stage of the process ensured more commitment to the action plan at the end. More teachers were familiar with the children with special educational needs and were able to look out for their welfare in areas outside of the classroom, for example in the playground at breaktime.

Westwood (1997) cites Davis and Kemp on the importance of feelings of shared commitment, responsibility and accountability for outcomes in professional collaboration. He goes on to say "having significant input into the decision-making process, the teacher feels ownership for the plans that are made and can comment at once on the feasibility of any intervention strategies being planned" (p. 205). My experience would tally with the comment of Westwood that

referral of a problem to a school-based special needs team usually brings far more rapid action and assistance than referral to outside agencies could ever achieve. The system is also said to help individual teachers to become more confident in sharing problems with colleagues, and eventually more confident in dealing with students' difficulties and differences. (p. 204)

The team, in my experience, was a mechanism for changing the culture of the school to one of support for colleagues to come and look for help and participate in finding solutions.

Enhanced professionalism

In outlining the advantages of what they term interactive professionalism, Fullan and Hargreaves (1992), recommend that for collaboration to be effective it is important that teachers have something meaningful to collaborate about. The challenges presented by inclusive education are certainly meaningful and relevant and require the combined wisdom of many teachers to help work out feasible programmes and solutions in very individual situations. The team approach enhances the professional role of the teacher. Schon (1983) interprets the core of professional action as making discretionary judgements in situations of unavoidable uncertainty. The issues confronting the team certainly fitted this description and the judgements made were, I felt, enhanced by the collaborative nature of the Unit. There is no guarantee, of course, that this will always be so: as Fullan (1993) reminds us, people can collaborate to do the wrong things as well as the right things and, pushed to its extremes, collaboration can become groupthink- "uncritical conformity to the group, unthinking acceptance of the latest solution, suppression of individual dissent" (p. 34). However, a team approach to special educational needs can empower teachers in respecting their practical knowledge, providing substantial decision-making responsibilities and helping to create a community of teachers who are willing to learn from each other. It can become an antidote to the isolation and privatism that tends to be the cultural norm in many schools.

The team also had the confidence to engage with the local community, explain its rationale and tap into whatever resources were available locally that could benefit inclusive education. The school set up partnerships with state training agencies to employ classroom assistants who proved invaluable in facilitating inclusive practices. The necessity to search out opportunities like this was very pressing because, until this year, there was no automatic state funded entitlement to extra resources for inclusive education.

Professional Development

The team approach provided a structure in the school for the continuing professional development of staff. The Principal adopted a policy of changing members of the team every four or five years so as to induct more and more staff into the thinking and culture of the team. Fullan (1993) argues that

collaboration is essential for personal learning. There is a ceiling effect to how much we can learn if we keep to ourselves. The ability to collaborate - on both a large and a small scale - is becoming one of the core requisites of post-modern society. (p. 17)

Those who returned to classroom teaching did so with a much greater appreciation of the needs of children with special educational needs and were able to model a more sophisticated relationship with the resource unit team. Special needs assistants were also included where appropriate in discussions and in observing various approaches such as shared reading, or learning strategies for spellings, so as to assist the classroom teacher. Having a special needs team helped to ensure that a whole school policy in relation to remedial, special, refugee and traveller education developed. It became a priority in the school and the team stimulated many heated debates over various principles, issues, and possible courses of action. The policy developed over time and was informed by, and closely related to practice.

A distinction is sometimes drawn between the exhaustion of the teacher engaged in a lonely battle against the odds and that of the teacher working as part of a team where the struggle is worth the effort and the interaction stimulates and energises and allows him or her to bounce back. The novelty and excitement of a new structure, facilitating the sharing of expertise, resources, time, ideas and difficulties, in itself releases new creative energies in a job where some teachers can succumb to the habitual. Mutual support in a team can be a great source of motivation.

In contrast to our previous era of differentiated and separate practice much greater efficiencies were evident in the better co-ordination of timetabling, assessment, record keeping, planning, communication and teaching. There was an increase in the level of accountability to each other. Through sharing knowledge, resources and skills, a culture of shared commitment, responsibility and accountability developed. All of the teachers involved were highly committed to the success of the project.

Difficulties encountered

The difficulties the Unit encountered included the following: co-ordinating timetables so that children did not miss out on certain class activities, minimising the number of withdrawals from any one classroom, finding the balance of teacher time for each child, over-deliberation at the expense of action, meeting the needs of children for whom inclusion was not the most appropriate option. The tendency to direct many school problems that were not of a special learning needs nature to the team had to be counteracted as had unrealistic expectations on the part of some teachers and parents. There was also the danger of the Unit being perceived as an entity separate to the school and this had to be guarded against at all costs. The temptation to place teachers in the unit who could be freed up for other school administrative work more easily than classroom teachers needed to be avoided.

The time required for collaborative work while safeguarding teaching time is a very pressing problem which needs deliberation at a system-wide level.

As mentioned earlier, dealing with situations of uncertainty is a key feature of the work of the teacher. Uncertainty experienced alone can be painful and lead to feelings of powerlessness. Rosenholtz (1989) found that teacher collaboration had a most important impact on reducing the uncertainty of the job. However, it is important that the team does not become a cosy consensus, mutually reinforcing poorly developed ideas and practices. It must strive to be ever sharp and incisive in its questioning of ideas, assumptions and practices in the school. It must never suppress the individuality of the various members of the team but value the diversity of the group as enriching while always maintaining a bias for action and reflecting in and on that action. Little (1990) outlines different types of collaboration from weaker forms of sharing to engaging in joint work like team teaching, planning, observation, action research, and mentoring. While the team engaged in some of these activities they serve as a useful guideline for future development.

CONCLUSION

The experience described here suggests possibilities for operating a team approach to all learning needs in the primary school. Appointing specific teachers to meet perceived specific problems is perhaps too rigid and inflexible to meet the complexity of needs in a school and to plan at a whole-school level. The team model offers more flexibility, starts from needs assessment, matches resources to these needs and monitors and reviews progress. The Irish educational system values teacher autonomy but there is a danger of teachers being too autonomous in relation to each other (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992). In some countries a learning support teacher encompasses all the roles implicit in the Irish differentiated model. So, in larger schools, many learning support teachers with the same brief co-operate as a team in the school. Perhaps we could match the best aspects of the differentiated approach with this more global model to meet the learning needs of all children.

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