Perspectives on the Co-Teaching Experience: Examining the Views of Teaching Staff and Students

The purpose of this study was to investigate student and teaching staff perceptions of the co-teaching environment during the first year of implementation of a co-teaching model. It sought to elicit and document views and experiences of the co-teaching partners as they undertook the design, planning and implementation of a programme of co-teaching in a mainstream primary school. A qualitative approach was adopted, consisting of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study, to examine the key questions that this research hoped to address. These questions related firstly to the quality of the co-teachers' relationship and how that might impact upon the success of the co-teaching programme, and secondly how the co-teaching environment might impact upon the students' social interaction within the co-taught classroom.

RÓISÍN PRIZEMAN is a teacher in a south county Dublin school.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion of all children has been a central theme of education reform internationally over the past two decades, and the education of children with Special Education Needs (SEN) has undergone a radical move, from separate, specialized education to inclusion within a mainstream school. As a result of special education reform in Ireland, diverse groups of children are being educated in inclusive classrooms. This requires that educators explore new models of teaching and learning. Co-teaching is one way in which general education and special education teachers can work together in order to meet the needs of their students.

Co-teaching, defined as a classroom that is taught by both general education and special education teachers, can be viewed as a supplementary aid and service that can be brought to general education to serve the needs of students with and without disabilities (Villa, Thousand and Nevin, 2004). Co-teaching partners share instructional responsibility for a diverse group of students that usually includes a

number of children with special educational needs. Co-teaching partnerships between regular and special educators can combine complementary teaching competencies in core curriculum and instructional methodology, respectively, to work towards a common goal for all students. Whilst co-teaching is frequently discussed in the context of special education, the literature finds benefits accruing to all students in co-taught classrooms, including improved understanding and academic performance, and increased self-esteem and confidence.

PURPOSE, RATIONALE AND CONTEXT

This study set out to elicit and document views of co-teaching partners as they undertook the design, planning and implementation of a programme of co-teaching. It sought to analyse and report on the views and experiences of co-teachers and students, thereby highlighting challenges and positive and negative perspectives shared throughout the study. It was hoped that in so doing future co-teaching strategies and initiatives might be improved, leading to an enhanced learning experience for all students in co-taught classrooms.

The key questions that this study hoped to address were:

- How does the quality of the co-teachers' relationship impact upon the success of the co-teaching programme?
- How does the co-teaching environment impact upon the students' social interaction within the co-taught classroom?

The setting for this study was my general education classroom (5th class), where seven children were attending special education classes on a withdrawal basis. This number represented more than twenty-five percent of the total number of students in the class. Some of the children attended learning support in small groups. Others received one-to-one resource teaching. Increasingly, I found that the children were not accessing activities in the general classroom which I believed would aid their development. With so many pupils being withdrawn at different times, it was difficult to ensure that they didn't miss out. However, I understood that the work undertaken in the SEN classrooms was equally important for their development, and that some children would still need one-to-one support in that setting. I looked to the literature on co-teaching which reported advantages for all students in co-taught classrooms. It pointed towards increased self-esteem and social interaction, and improved learning opportunities for pupils in co-taught classrooms. I believed that co-teaching would help the children in my class to become a more cohesive group, to build closer relationships and to learn

from each other. My colleagues who were involved in SEN indicated that they too were keen to partake in a programme of co-teaching to support the children with SEN in class. This was not intended to replace the withdrawal model of learning support, but rather as a supplementary service to meet the needs of all children within the classroom.

We believed that many of the needs of the children with SEN, particularly those related to social learning, would be best met within the general classroom. The social aspect of learning is a fundamental principle of our Primary School Curriculum (Ireland, 1999), which states as one of its aims that "the child should be enabled to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others" (p. 15). Social interaction, and the ability to engage successfully in group work, was an area of concern with regard to a number of students in the class, and had been included as an objective in the Individual Profile and Learning Programme (IPLP) of some children with SEN.

We also believed that all children would benefit from a reduced student-teacher ratio and from exposure to a variety of teaching approaches and styles. Furthermore, we felt that the nature of our collaboration and our good working relationship would impact positively on the co-teaching programme.

The study took place from January to June, during which time the programme was designed, implemented and evaluated. Co-teaching lessons took place once per week for forty minutes, with the remainder of special education support being delivered on a withdrawal basis. Station teaching, with mixed ability grouping, was the chosen strategy, as it was deemed to be most suited to the context of this study and to having three teachers in the room. This allowed us to have three 'manned' stations at any one time engaged in different activities, and two stations where the children worked independently. All three teachers had responsibility for teaching all of the children during the co-taught lessons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Santamaria and Thousand (2004) identified active collaboration, co-teaching, and differentiated instruction as inclusive practices likely to improve access to core curriculum in general education classrooms for all students. Collaboration on strategies and sharing of expertise in the co-teaching environment assists teachers in effectively accommodating the learning needs of all students. Cook and Friend (1995) define co-teaching as "two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse or blended group of students in a single space" (p. 2). This

definition identifies four key components: co-teaching involves two educators (or more), one of whom is a general education teacher, and one of whom is a special educator; both professionals are actively involved in the instruction of all students; they teach a diverse group of students with and without SEN; and instruction is delivered primarily in a single classroom. For true co-teaching to occur, both professionals must co-plan, co-instruct, and co-assess a diverse group of students in the same general education classroom. Friend, Reising and Cook (1993) suggest that one of the benefits of co-teaching is that the unique perspectives and strengths of general educators and special educators are brought together to create teaching approaches and instructional strategies that could not occur if just one teacher were present.

The literature suggests co-teaching is effective for students with a variety of needs, such as English language learners (Mahoney, 1997); students with hearing impairments (Luckner, 1999) and those with learning disabilities (Trent, 1998; Rice and Zigmond, 2000; Welch, 2000). Murawski and Swanson (2001) demonstrated that co-teaching had a positive effect on student achievement, particularly in the areas of reading and language arts. Other research has shown that collaboration in co-taught settings can provide learning environments that empower students for success (King, 2003). Advantages for pupils in the co-taught classroom were reported by Wood's (2009) teachers as being lower pupil/teacher ratio, enhanced differentiation, and general inclusion of pupils and access by pupils to a greater range of professional skills. Further evidence suggests that students with SEN prefer to receive supports in class with their peers, rather than leave the classroom for special education classes (Walsh, 1992). Walsh reported that students with SEN enjoyed school more, learned more, and felt better about themselves in the co-taught general education classroom.

Benefits reported by Wood's (2009) co-teachers included that the co-teaching programme afforded them the opportunity to observe and learn from each other. The implementation of the programme also fostered more of a team spirit in the school, with everyone working toward a common goal. These teachers felt their co-teaching efforts helped to alleviate the traditional "lonely profession" of teaching. Similarly, Friend and Cook's (1992) teachers who were involved in collaborative partnerships reported increased feelings of worth, renewal, partnership and creativity.

Reported issues that impact negatively on the co-teaching experience include the lack of common planning time and an inability to voluntarily choose to teach together. Teachers are sometimes thrust into the experience with little direction or

support, and yet expected to blend their skills to meet the needs of their students (Keefe, Moore and Duff, 2004).

Despite the benefits of collaborative practices, many teachers reported experiencing difficulties when working collaboratively (Weiss and Lloyd, 2003). Some of these difficulties may stem from inadequate school structures and supports (e.g. lack of common preparation time, shortage of qualified teachers) as well as more proximal issues related to resistant attitudes, poor communication between collaborating teachers, personality conflicts or a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities within co-taught classrooms (Cook and Friend, 1995; Fennick and Liddy, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

I decided upon a qualitative orientation to my study, sought written permission from parents/guardians of the 5th class students and chose Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the study set out to engage all of the participants for its duration. Given that the purpose of this study was to investigate student and teaching staff perceptions, I considered it important that the participants be engaged in the process for the duration of the study. The co-teachers engaged with all aspects of the planning, implementation and evaluation of the co-teaching programme. The students were not directly involved in the planning phase but were involved in the implementation and evaluation phases. PAR involves practitioners in the research process from the initial design of the project to completion. In this process participants seek to identify an issue or problem, explore solutions, prepare and implement an action plan and then reflect on the changes and effects brought about before planning the next cycle. The use of PAR to formally explore the co-teaching strategy within the context of this study meant that the co-teaching partners became co-researchers and co-learners. The planning, design and implementation of the programme was viewed as a cyclical development that was informed through a process of action research. The three teacher participants were involved in and facilitated all aspects of this part of the study. After each co-taught lesson reflection and discussion took place which informed the following week's lesson and any necessary adjustments were made to the plan. Such adjustments were made as a result of feedback from students at the end of the co-taught lesson or suggestions from any of the co-teachers.

Data collection methods for this study consisted of self-completion students' questionnaires, semi-structured individual teachers' interviews and notes taken at the reflective meetings. Permission and informed consent were sought. The

voluntary nature of participation and the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time was emphasised to all parties involved (Kvale, 1996).

RESULTS

The design of the research study was chosen to accommodate the small-scale, in-depth qualitative aspects of the co-teaching programme. Data analysis encompassed a process of selection and interpretation of the data collected in the interviews, questionnaires and researcher's notes.

Overall perceptions of the co-teaching experience were positive. Many students expressed an interest to be included in co-taught classes in the future. Teachers felt that the co-teaching strategy can be effective under desirable circumstances, and they indicated their satisfaction with the programme. They also expressed interest in partaking in future co-teaching programmes. As identified in the literature, the need for collaboration among co-teachers was highlighted as being fundamental to the success of this co-teaching programme. It was found that co-teaching facilitated and enhanced social interaction in the co-taught classroom, thereby affirming the social validity of co-teaching.

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the data collected were as follows:

Benefits of co-teaching for students; Benefits of co-teaching for teachers; Practices which co-teachers valued; Negative perspectives of the co-teaching partners.

Benefits of Co-Teaching for Students
The perceived benefits of co-teaching for students, as reported by the co-teachers included: reduced pupil/teacher ratio; access to a variety of teaching methods and styles; IPLP specific student needs targeted; opportunity for learning to be consolidated in both the SEN and co-teaching classrooms.

Effects of these Benefits on Students as Reported by the Co-Teachers
The perceived effects of these benefits on students, as reported by the co-teachers included: increased self-confidence leading to increased participation; camaraderie amongst students and teachers; "upping the ante"; greater understanding and sensitivity towards each other; specific targeted areas showed improvement.

Benefits of Co-Teaching for Teachers

The perceived benefits of co-teaching for teachers, as reported by teachers included: increased confidence; building rapport with *all* of the students in the classroom; enhanced working relationship with co-teachers; greater understanding of the needs of students with SEN.

Practices which Co-Teachers Valued

The practices which the co-teachers valued included: collaboration amongst co-teachers; discreet time for planning, discussion and reflection; shared responsibility and shared workload; equality and parity in the co-teaching classroom; seeking feedback from students.

Negative Perspectives of the Co-Teaching Partners

The co-teachers highlighted no negative perspectives with regard to the co-teaching programme. Finding time for planning and reflection was deemed to be challenging for all teachers. Non-pupil contact time for collaboration was deemed essential, and it was considered desirable that that should be made available during school hours. From the viewpoint of the twenty students who completed questionnaires, when asked if they would like to be in a co-taught class again, sixteen said yes, they would like to be in a class with more than one teacher again, three said no they would not like to be in a co-taught class again, with one child offering "*No, I enjoy being with one teacher*", and another child was "*Unsure*".

The Co-Teachers' Relationship and its Impact upon the Success of the Co-Teaching Programme

With regard to the co-teachers' relationship, all co-teachers felt that the programme was greatly enhanced by the working relationship that existed among the three teachers involved. All agreed that confidence increased as the programme progressed because they were working and communicating well as a team, and this optimised classroom performance and the learning environment it sought to create. The importance of equality amongst co-teachers was expressed and all teachers reported feeling equally responsible in the classroom. When the students were asked what seemed to be the job of each teacher in the co-taught classroom their responses did not show any discrimination in roles between the SEN teachers and the mainstream teacher.

The Impact of a Co-Teaching Environment on Students' Social Interaction

The co-teachers reported a busy working environment with a "*lovely atmosphere*" in the co-taught classroom, where the children worked well in groups and demonstrated an awareness of each other's feelings. All teachers felt that the small

groups facilitated discussion and sharing of ideas for the children which impacted positively on their written work also. When asked to consider had we managed in the co-taught classroom to address the particular need with regard to social learning that existed for a number of children in the class, the teachers felt that yes, we had. One teacher cited the example of a child with SEN, who had initially isolated himself a little within the group but became more engaged during the co-teaching programme: *"I think by the end that particular kid was far more engaged. I heard him volunteering a couple of times the last day which I hadn't heard [before]"*.

Given that much of the work undertaken in the co-teaching classroom was based on oral activities, the co-teachers reported that all students were more confident expressing themselves in the smaller, supported groups, and more likely to participate due to increased confidence. *"I think very quickly they were secure enough in the small group with an adult there to try out things and have the laugh about it if it didn't work"* (T1). The students themselves reported that everyone *"got a go"* in the co-teaching classroom, and with only a few people in a group, they could all interact with one another.

Of the twenty children surveyed, sixteen indicated that they thought it was "easier to learn in a classroom with three teachers", two reported it to be "about the same", and two said it was" easier to learn with only one teacher". Many children wrote that having three teachers in the classroom meant they got more time and attention, and if they didn't understand something the teacher could explain it better to them. Several children wrote that having three teachers meant that they got to do lots of different activities. The majority of students reported that they liked the extra attention and support they got in the co-taught classroom due to the reduced pupil-teacher ratio. They also reported liking the fact that everyone got a chance to speak and to be listened to, thereby reinforcing the social validity of co-teaching.

In-Class Support Versus Withdrawal
The co-teachers in this study shared the views expressed by those in Wood's (2009) study which suggested that while substantial benefits accrue to a co-teaching model of learning support, a rationale still exists for the use of the withdrawal model. These findings echo those of Keefe and Moore (2004), where teachers highlighted the potential of co-teaching in raising student achievement as long as it was not utilized as a panacea for all student learning needs. It is evident that the option for withdrawal or in-class support must be made in the best interest of the individual student. Our co-teachers echoed Lerner's (2000) views that,

while no one placement option seems ideal, a combination placement may be a viable alternative.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study were encouraging. Teachers working in partnership with each other, building collaborative relationships, pooling ideas and resources, addressing the needs of all students and sharing success was highlighted as being beneficial to both students and teachers. The sense of achievement in working together as a team towards a common goal was highly valued by the teachers in this study, as has been reported elsewhere.

This study relied upon the personal and professional commitment of each of the co-teaching partners and a considerable amount of personal time was invested by them. To foster ongoing co-operation co-teachers need time to plan as a team for their shared students, providing opportunities to examine their responsibilities and to share tasks. The support of school management is an essential component in developing co-teaching programmes. This study attributed much of the success of the programme to the voluntary nature of the co-teachers' partnering. It is important to consider that it may not always be practical for teachers to choose their co-teaching partners/team. Teachers require professional development opportunities to build and maintain strong collaborative teams, including time to share and negotiate teaching beliefs and establish joint rules and procedures. Adequate time is needed to plan and reflectively evaluate co-teaching programmes, facilitating adjustments to strengthen the programme along the way. The commitment to co-teaching should be tied to a school-wide philosophy that is consistently communicated to all stakeholders – teachers, students, parents – and invites these stakeholders to actively support the programme.

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