

## First Steps in Collaboration between Teachers in Relation to the Provision of In-class Support

This article describes how collaboration took place between a class teacher and a support teacher who had begun to trial in-class support for the first time. It outlines how a pro-active system for structured communication and planning for in-class support for children with special educational needs (SEN) was developed. A progression towards joint thinking is detailed. Findings about the impact of their modified collaborative practice on their approach to in-class support provision are discussed as well as the impact of collaboration upon the teachers themselves.

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### INTRODUCTION

Collaboration between teachers is an inherent requirement of Department of Education and Science (DES) Circulars (DES, 2002; 2003; 2005). Class and support teachers are expected to be in “regular communication” and use a “joint programme” in working towards supporting the child’s learning while providing opportunities for “participation in whole class work” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2002, p. 8). However, as Day (2007, p. 22) emphasised, “collaboration is not easy...most teachers’ education and experience has taught them to operate independently within their own classrooms as autonomous beings”. Movement towards a more collaborative model of special education provision involves transition from over-reliance on expertise resting “with individual teachers in schools” (Rose, 2001, p. 148). The requirement that collaborators “share mutual goals and a common philosophy” (Lerner, 2003, p. 164) is emphasised by many (Emanuelson, 2001; Giangreco, 1997, cited in Rose, 2001; Day, 2005).

The provision of in-class support benefits children (Thomas and Vaughan, 2004; Day, 2005; DES, 2005; National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2006). However, there are also challenges involved (Zigmond and Baker, 1995; Thomas,

Walker and Webb, 2002). Rose (2000) emphasised the importance of collaboration at all stages “from planning to evaluation” (p. 195). The challenge of including a support teacher in a mainstream classroom and the need for more investigation and guidance in the dynamics of this relatively new strand of support were highlighted by Thomas et al. (2002) who argued that extra support staff in a classroom “do not automatically improve the situation for children” (p. 26).

The NCSE’s *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process* highlight how collaborative “reflection on and continuous review of the IEP is necessary, so the child’s needs remain the central focus” (NCSE, 2006, p. 40). While these guidelines have served as a roadmap for good practice in schools some difficulties have emerged. The need for discrete planning time (Nugent, 2002; Byrne, 2008), the class teacher’s engagement with differentiated tasks (Frankl, 2005) and the danger of the individual education plan (IEP) becoming a barrier to inclusion (Frankl, 2005; Byrne, 2008) are coupled with the challenges of balancing curricular access with differentiation (Westwood, 2000; NCCA, 2002; DES Inspectorate, 2005; Barry, 2007).

While inclusion has been defined in terms of supported mainstream placement (Lerner, 2003; Carey, 2008) the ideology that inclusive schools build inclusive societies has also been expressed (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2005; Barry, 2007; Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). Inclusion requires constant rethinking in terms of how schools deliver support for children with special educational needs (SEN) (Barry).

The social and cognitive benefits of learning in a multi-grade context have been highlighted (Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), 2000; Mulryan-Kyne, 2004). However, challenges are experienced by the pupil with SEN who “often has only limited access to the teacher” (Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) and The Equality Authority, 2004, p. 24). These include less time for oral instruction, re-teaching and reflection, and are often coupled with a high pupil-teacher ratio (Mulryan-Kyne, 2005) and the reality that most class teachers were trained for single grade teaching (Turner, 2008).

## CONTEXT

This study took place in a small urban mainstream primary school with an enrolment of one hundred pupils. It involved a mainstream multi-grade class teacher (First and Second Class) and a learning support resource teacher (LS/RT). There were two children with SEN in the class. The model of support historically

practised in the school was one whereby pupils with additional learning needs were withdrawn from the classroom for individual/group tuition. However, with the enrolment of an increasing number of pupils with SEN and considering the recommendations of *The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (Ireland, 2004) teachers had begun to express reservations about this approach.

### **Background**

In September 2012, one class teacher, together with the LS/RT (the researcher) decided to introduce in-class support for pupils with SEN during maths lessons. During the provision of this in-class support both teachers accumulated a considerable amount of informal knowledge and experience of this model of intervention. However, despite initial positive and encouraging experiences the teachers soon found themselves beginning to question a range of issues related to the intervention. Both teachers gradually realised that there were many contradictions between their expectations and their experience of in-class support and collaboration. This prompted an investigation by the LS/RT of key emerging issues and an exploration of how collaboration for in-class support might be improved. An action research methodology was deemed to be appropriate since it is “applied research, carried out by practitioners who have themselves identified a need for change or improvement” (Bell, 2009, p. 8). The research was conducted in two phases, an initial research period followed by the main research period.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Initial Research Period**

Research instruments were employed in order to gather qualitative data about current collaborative practice. A *Log of Collaborative Events* was maintained by the researcher in order to record details related to the time, location, content and duration of all on-going collaborative events. Alongside this the researcher used a *Research Journal* to record questions, concerns, thoughts and feelings about collaboration. Data relating to each teacher’s reflections and feelings about their experiences of collaboration for in-class support thus far was also required. A structured *Perspective Sharing Conversation* wherein the teachers interviewed each other was organised. Questions for this structured conversation were trialled and re-drafted. These questions prompted the teachers to explore their thoughts about the meaning, purpose, challenges and requirements for effective collaboration for pupils with IEPs and provided an opportunity for them to share these with each other. Ideas about possible improvements to current practice were sought. The conversation was digitally recorded, transcribed and verified by each teacher before analysis.

Analysis of the *Log of Collaborative Events* and *Research Journal* revealed a myriad of issues. Virtually all conversations between the teachers had been unscheduled, ad-hoc and of less than ten minutes duration with these discussions regularly taking place during lunch break. There was minimal evidence of planning for in-class support sessions. The LS/RT's main approach was to react to her observations while in the classroom each day. As the weeks passed the class teacher had started to place notes about the content of the upcoming daily lesson on the LSRT's desk some mornings. The *Log of Collaborative Events* also recorded how on several occasions the LS/RT interrupted the class teacher mid-lesson in order to clarify lesson goals. The LS/RT regularly left the classroom in order to locate appropriate supportive resources and materials. During the in-class support sessions the LS/RT worked only with pupils with SEN while the class teacher taught the class. The LS/RT was regarded as having almost sole responsibility for implementing IEPs. The *Research Journal* documented how feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction and frustration were experienced by the LS/RT because of difficulties with how the intervention was progressing.

The *Perspective Sharing Conversation* was examined and analysed for themes. A number of issues emerged in relation to collaboration for in-class support. There was considerable overlap in terms of the concerns voiced by both teachers. They were concerned about the need for:

- engagement in regular honest perspective sharing, because neither teacher knew what their colleague expected from them or from the pupils in the classroom during in-class support
- discrete time for such communication
- a system to facilitate mutual sharing
- more specific, relevant learning objectives for pupils with IEPs
- clarification about how each teacher could support pupils towards achieving these
- collaborative use of pre-planned resources during the lessons.

Both teachers emphasised the need for mutual evaluation and recording of pupil progress and detailed advance planning for in-class support sessions with regular review of plans and individual learning. The teachers both expressed how they felt overwhelmed by the extent of the challenges they were facing.

### Main Research Period

In order to drive the research forward and to endeavour to address the issues which had emerged through analysis of data from the initial research period the teachers decided to introduce two key changes to how they were working together. Firstly, they would share their own informal assessments and observations of pupil's progress in the classroom towards their individual learning targets. Secondly, they would plan in-class maths support together by previewing curricular/lesson content and then discussing and writing support plans for both individual pupils in advance. This collaboration was to take place during a weekly *Review and Planning Meeting*. A thirty minute time slot was made available by the school principal to facilitate these meetings.

*Review and Planning Meetings:* Before establishing these meetings the teachers discussed and agreed what they would need to do before, during and after each meeting in order to maximise their communication and productivity, with the overall aim of enhancing and maximising learning for children with SEN. They agreed that prior to each meeting they would reflect upon pupil learning and record their observations about what each pupil could do independently or with support in the classroom. The class teacher would supply the LS/RT with a copy of the content of the subsequent week's maths lessons. The LS/RT would reflect upon the lesson content in the light of each pupil's current level of achievement. The LS/RT would then source relevant resources related to weekly topics. During each meeting the teachers agreed to share perspectives, reflect on how the collaboration was going, discuss pupil learning achievements in the light of each other's reports, preview concepts and skills for the coming lessons, identify and select those which would be key for each individual learner to acquire and in what sequence. Individual learning targets were to be carefully planned, comprehensively worded and documented during the meeting. Duplicate copies of all planning and review documents were to be maintained by the teachers. After each meeting the LS/RT was to gather/prepare agreed individualised learning materials to be used during the lessons.

*Research Focus:* Digital recordings of each *Review and Planning Meeting* were transcribed verbatim. These transcripts provided the majority of the research data. The researcher also continued to record personal reflections, thoughts and feelings about how the collaboration was going in her *Research Journal*. The class teacher kept *Reflective Notes* throughout this period of research. The *Log of Collaborative Events* was maintained and a "critical friend" was engaged to critique any claims made. The research was conducted over a seven week period.

## FINDINGS

The data were collated, and analysed. A number of themes relating to new dynamic teacher interactive behaviours emerged. These were seen to contribute to the growth of new shared understandings about the learning of pupils with SEN. Subsequently, new ways of thinking about how to approach the provision of in-class support were seen to develop. Although the underlying purpose of developing collaborative practice was to investigate how improved collaboration could enhance in-class support, the data revealed substantial evidence about the impact of collaboration on the teachers themselves.

### Teacher Interactive Behaviours

The data revealed how the teachers began to engage in a range of reflective practices on pupil learning, each other's perspectives, their methods of teaching and differentiating lesson content. The *Review and Planning Meeting* transcripts were characterised by intense, meaning-laden dialogues wherein the teachers shared and explored complex understandings of their perceptions of individual pupils' learning achievements, progress and challenges. The teachers invested personal time in considering each other's reviews. This reflective practice infused subsequent dialogues. In one the LS/RT commented, "We make different observations, don't we?" which referred to how their differing perspectives according to their role affected what and how they reviewed (*Review and Planning Meeting 2*). She affirmed a jointly planned intervention after its implementation as having been "worth trying" (*Review and Planning Meeting 4*). The class teacher voiced how she was starting to reflect on her own classroom practice, how she was no longer using textbooks for many of the classroom learning activities and how she was realising "how much I try to cram into a lesson" (*Review and Planning Meeting 3*). She referred to how the LS/RT's comment about "the challenges of differentiation for the child with a learning difficulty" caused her to reflect deeply. The LS/RT recorded in her journal how the class teacher's sharing information about pupil achievements in other curricular areas contributed to her more holistic understanding of individual pupils.

### Shared Understandings

It became evident that the structured interactive sharing between the teachers began to impact upon how they were thinking about pupils with SEN. A mutual understanding of the learning strengths and needs of individuals began to emerge and develop. The teachers found themselves beginning to make daily formative assessments in the classroom of each child's learning achievements in relation to the pre-planned pupil learning objectives. The teachers fused what they were

continually discovering about each pupil and this was seen to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of pupils.

Clarification and appreciation of each other's roles and responsibilities in supporting learners during in-class support sessions was enhanced. The importance of adhering to agreements made about in-class roles was discussed. The class teacher questioned whether her heightened focus on pupils with SEN might be reducing her attention to other groups of pupils in the classroom.

The teachers' understanding of differentiation in planning and delivering IEPs was seen to expand. On-going concerns over the complexity of differentiating maths lessons in order to scaffold individual learning was evident. This was balanced by the teachers' shared sense of excitement as they realised how rather than being disconnected from the classroom they could now jointly transform IEPs for pupils within the classroom. The class teacher's notes revealed that the targets were "indelibly written on my brain for the next week" as she endorsed the new "meeting of minds" and "manageable steps" which they could implement in supporting individual pupil's access to class lessons (*Review and Planning Meeting 3*). The LS/RT commented, "It makes it all more relevant in relation to endeavouring to implement IEPs in the classroom" (*Review and Planning Meeting 3*).

### **New Thinking: Development of Anticipatory Practice**

After just a few meetings something pivotal began to happen between the two teachers. They began to think differently about how they might envision the provision of support as they started to anticipate each in-class maths support session together.

They started to anticipate individual pupils' learning needs before they manifested in the classroom. In anticipation of collaborative practice the LS/RT valued having "a sense of possibility in terms of thinking about exploring options together rather than having to continue with 'striving individually' as teachers" (*Research Journal*). The teachers anticipated which type of classroom observational information each of them could gather during the subsequent sessions, "We need to be able to see" (class teacher, *Review and Planning Meeting 4*). They began to anticipate curricular demands in terms of content and pace. The LS/RT was noted reassuring the class teacher, "eventually it will come" (*Review and Planning Meeting 4*) as she explained a strategic, scaffolded support which could enable a pupil to move forwards in their learning. At each meeting the teachers anticipated the sequence in which the whole class lesson would be taught.

### **New Thinking: Development of Joint Approaches to Practice**

As the teachers became involved in joint review and affirmation of each learning step taken by individual pupils this in effect provided a revised context for jointly planning IEPs and differentiation. There was clear evidence of a drift away from the use of textbooks as the teachers reflected on using more interactive approaches with the support teacher providing resources in order to motivate, support and engage pupils in accessing curricular targets. As the weeks passed the teachers progressed to a stage wherein they worded learning targets jointly whereas the LS/RT has initially taken responsibility for this. They constantly clarified what exactly each child would, should or could be enabled to do in each maths lesson. This joint practice affected the LS/RT who commented, “I feel a synergy with a feeling of wholeness in terms of co-operation” and noted how she had “less fear of failure” (*Research Journal*). The teachers realised that they were in effect now jointly constructing, implementing and reviewing IEPs which were now relevant in contrast with how the class teacher described them during the *Perspective Sharing Conversation* as being “dead on the page”. They swiftly started sharing ideas for teaching strategies and approaches. The LS/RT shared strategies and approaches which had been effectively utilised to scaffold the acquisition of learning steps during withdrawal sessions.

### **Impact on the Teachers**

The collaboration was seen to impact upon the teachers in several ways. The benefits were a new level of interpersonal motivation coupled with mutual support around taking risks in relation to their practice. They frequently encouraged and affirmed each other in relation to in-class support interventions. The class teacher’s comment, “this feels meaningful and exciting” (*Research Journal*) highlighted her increased job satisfaction and was echoed by the LS/RT who found herself “looking forward to each session with eager anticipation” (*Research Journal*). Both teachers felt that they had developed professionally as a result of working together more strategically. The class teacher decided to introduce some of the jointly planned customised resources with other pupils in her class. She expressed that the collaborative experience had impacted positively on her own class planning and that her understanding of how lessons could be adapted for individual pupils had deepened. Rather than feeling disconnected as expressed during the *Perspective Sharing Conversation* the LS/RT now felt “in tune with the curriculum” (*Research Journal*). A progression towards co-operative teaching was seen to take place towards the end of the research period when the teachers decided to engage in a planned, jointly delivered lesson on the maths topic of ‘time’.



The new model of collaboration for in-class support also brought some challenges. These included an extra workload in terms of planning and preparation for the meetings. At times it was difficult to adhere to the *Review and Planning Meeting* agenda. It was also difficult for both teachers to keep in mind the individual learning needs of the two pupils with SEN, while also catering for two class levels in the multi-grade classroom.

## DISCUSSION

### Inclusion

Findings from this study were in line with Kinsella et al. (2008) wherein inclusive schools are characterised by discussion and collaboration with adequate time and appropriate opportunities for staff to discuss issues concerning special needs provision and engagement in collaborative problem-solving approaches between class and support teachers. Similarly, Fullan (1992) had noted that “at the teacher level the degree of change was strongly related to the extent to which teachers interact with each other” (p. 132) while he attributed the success of such “interactive professionalism...which increased access to and scrutiny of each other’s ideas and practices” (p. 349) to being intrinsically linked to the frequency of communication and support. In this study the teachers found, in line with Florian (2008) that “it is what teachers do, rather than what they are called, that gives meaning to the concept of inclusive education” (p. 202).

### IEPs

Frankl (2005) had described the IEP as a ‘running record’ of individual pupil learning. The level of detail which was documented by the teachers, from assessment to planning, in this study actualised this description. The NCSE’s (2009) statement that differentiation is “viewed as a skill rather than a practice” (p. 5) was challenged in this study as the teachers were seen to move from the former to the latter as they endeavoured to support access to “the curricular content in the classroom context” together (NCCA, 2002, p. 2).

### Collaboration

In terms of learning how to collaborate, findings from this study illustrated Thomas et al.’s (2002) premise that “practical involvement is more effective than any amount of training” (p. 28). De Vecchi and Rouse (2010) had found that collaboration was pivotal to the planning and effective support for learning. The LS/RT’s greater ‘sense of connection’ (*Research Journal*) with her colleague coupled with the class teacher’s reference to in-class support times as being ‘the only adult interaction’ (*Perspective Sharing Conversation*) which she often

experienced during the day seemed to indicate how collaboration was contributing to counteracting the feelings of isolation experienced by teachers (Day, 2005). The findings of this study demonstrated Fullan's (1992) thesis that the power of teacher collaboration is where the power for change lies.

## CONCLUSION

The over-arching finding of this study was that the quality of in-class support is dependent upon the quality of collaboration between the teachers working together for the benefit of pupils with SEN. Despite the quantity and complexity of requirements for successful collaboration which emerged, once discrete time for strategically planned and designed meetings was provided, the teachers themselves became empowered as they came to realise that they held the key to improved inclusive practice. Their positive comments about the impact of collaboration upon themselves both professionally and personally further endorsed the value of such practice.

## LIMITATIONS

The study did not set out to describe the learning outcomes for the pupils with SEN. Rather, it aimed to explore and examine how the collaborative process was initiated, proceeded and was modified by the collaborating teachers with the objective of enhancing the provision of in-class maths support for children with SEN.

There were some limitations to the study as due to time constraints it was not possible to carry out a joint review of the modified collaborative practice which may have led to a further cycle of research. The collaborative model adopted may not be applicable to other educational contexts such as a larger school, different class levels, to other curricular areas or to situations where teachers' perspectives do not overlap as much as those in this study did. The model of collaboration adopted in this study might usefully be compared and contrasted with collaborative models in operation in other primary education settings.

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