Inclusive Planning: Supporting the Development of Early Literacy Skills through Co-teaching in the Junior Infant Classroom

Current educational policy highlights the importance of developing literacy skills for all pupils (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). This article explores how this can be achieved in mainstream Junior Infant classes through co-teaching, with a focus on station teaching as a model of in-class support for a pupil with special educational needs. Station-teaching is also presented as an effective co-teaching model for facilitating the development of early literacy skills in all pupils. Elements of early literacy development, that should be considered when planning an early literacy programme, are outlined briefly. Advice is given on how to plan for an effective station-teaching intervention in the area of early literacy using a five-stage approach. The importance of inclusive planning to meet the needs of all pupils is highlighted.

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EARLY LITERACY

Early literacy can be defined as the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998). The *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2011) defines literacy as including "the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media" (p. 8). This definition broadens understanding of what is to be developed in young children, in the area of early literacy, and includes reading, writing, communication, and oral language in both print-based and digitised formats. The importance of literacy is recognised throughout the lifespan of the individual.

There are a number of early literacy skills that form the basis of literacy programmes in the infant classes. Key early literacy skills focused on in this paper include oral language, perceptual skills, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, phonics, sight vocabulary and comprehension (Lerner, 2003). Table 1 provides a brief explanation of each skill.

Table 1: Key early literacy skills

Oral Language	Includes expressive (production of spoken language) and receptive language (understanding of spoken language).
Perceptual Skills	Includes visual (ability to recognise and interpret what is seen) and auditory (ability to recognise and interpret what is heard) perceptual skills.
Alphabet Knowledge	Familiarity with letter forms, names and corresponding sounds.
Phonological Awareness	Awareness of the sound structure of spoken words.
Phonics	Knowing the sound-symbol relationships.
Sight Vocabulary	Words that are recognised instantly.
Comprehension	Taking the information that is on the page and combining that information with prior knowledge to understand text (Pressley and Hilden, 2002; Samuels, 2006).

Oral language is the foundation of developing early literacy skills. Pupils who do not develop strong oral language skills find it difficult to keep pace with their peers. They fall behind even before they start school (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998; Scarborough, 2001; Hart and Risley, 2003; Biemiller, 2006). The development of key visual and auditory perceptual skills is a core element of early literacy. Perceptual skills facilitate pupils in making sense of their world and the development of key visual and auditory perceptual skills is a core element of early literacy. Another key skill is alphabet knowledge which refers to pupils' familiarity with letter forms, names, and corresponding sounds, as measured by recognition, production and writing tasks (Piasta and Wagner, 2010). Pupils' knowledge of letter names and sounds is reported to be the best predictor of their later reading and spelling abilities (Scarborough, 1998; Hammill, 2004; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, and Foorman, 2004). Phonological

awareness refers to pupils' awareness of the sound structure of spoken words and includes the detection and manipulation of sounds at three levels: syllables, onset and rime and phonemes. The benefit of phonological training, incorporating phonological awareness, onset and rime and alliteration through nursery rhymes, is emphasised by Cunningham (1988), Goswami and Bryant (1990) and Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1995) as an essential pre-requisite for the learning of the alphabetic principle and for developing knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence and ultimately, for progress in reading. It is an important element of early literacy. Phonics is defined as knowing the connection between spoken sounds and the corresponding written letters or sound–symbol relationships (National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHHD), 2000). Research highlights that programmes which focus too much on teaching letter–sound relationships in isolation and not enough on putting phonics to work in meaningful contexts are not effective (NICHHD, 2000; Akhavan, 2008). Sight vocabulary comprises of words that are recognised instantly, without hesitation or further analysis. Fluent reading requires that most of the words in a selection be sight words (Lerner, 2003). Effective reading instruction needs to focus on word recognition and the development of sight vocabulary. The ability to read or listen and understand text is one of the major goals of reading instruction. Comprehension is defined as taking the information that is on the page and combining that information with prior knowledge and, in so doing, constructing a meaningful understanding of the text (Pressley and Hilden, 2002; Samuels, 2006).

Pupils need to acquire these skills if they are to develop independence in the area of literacy (Westwood, 2003). Programmes that focus on developing more than one skill area reflect the interrelated nature of literacy acquisition, in keeping with the philosophy of the *Primary School Curriculum* (Ireland, 1999). According to DES (2011), "one in ten children in Irish schools has serious difficulty with reading or writing; in some disadvantaged schools this is as high as almost one in three students" (p. 12). The need for "explicit and systematic attention in the English curriculum to the teaching and assessment of key literacy skills and strategies" is highlighted in the Strategy document (DES, 2011 p. 53). For pupils with special educational needs (SEN), challenges experienced in developing an understanding of the world can be compounded by the difficulties experienced in oral language development. Communication and language development is therefore, a priority for these students (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2007).

Some pupils may learn at a different pace and in a different way from other pupils and this is of relevance to the development of early literacy skills. However, all

pupils need to belong to a peer group and to mix with children of different abilities in a variety of situations. Current policy in relation to supporting pupils with SEN advocates that, wherever possible, schools should provide additional help for pupils in the mainstream classroom (DES, 2003). This can be achieved through the use of in-class support as part of the continuum of support in mainstream schools (DES, 2007).

PLANNING FOR IN-CLASS SUPPORT USING STATION-TEACHING

There are a variety of ways in which two or more teachers can work together in the mainstream class in order to meet the needs of all pupils in a particular curricular area, including literacy development in the early years. These are generally categorised as co-teaching models. Co-teaching involves two or more teachers sharing instructional responsibility for a group of students in a single class, or workspace, for specific content and objectives (Friend and Cook, 2007). Station-teaching is a model of co-teaching. Here, teachers work on specific content at a number of workstations in a class and pupils move from station to station over a set time period. Station-teaching is particularly suitable as a model of in-class support for developing early literacy skills in the infant classes, as it allows for variation in activities and for pupil movement in the classroom after relatively short intervals. However, it is important that teachers plan together in order to decide on appropriate outcomes for a station-teaching intervention in early literacy development.

Teachers working in the area of special education are encouraged to engage in a process of individualised planning for pupils with SEN (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2006). Inclusive planning for in-class support involves linking individualised planning, such as that in an individual education plan (IEP), to class planning for early literacy development. This process is essential for successful co-teaching, as all pupils in a class are involved in the station-teaching activities. The challenge, for the teachers involved, is to identify and make the link between specific IEP targets and curriculum objectives for the area of early literacy development. Co-teaching involves a number of teachers working together, so monitoring of skills related to IEP targets becomes more manageable in the classroom environment. For example, an IEP target may specify that a pupil follow a two-step instruction, or stay on task for a specific period of time. This can be applied in the class context, but it may be difficult for one teacher to monitor. Targets may also be related to specific literacy skills such as the development of receptive and expressive language skills. Targets such as these are compatible with the strands and objectives of the *Primary School*

Curriculum (Ireland, 1999) for infants in the area of early literacy. Co-teaching models such as station-teaching allow for teachers to work with small groups on curricular activities, related to early literacy, and at the same time monitor certain behaviour, or skills, targeted in IEPs for specific pupils. Resource and learning support teachers work alongside class teachers in the planning, implementation and monitoring of the intervention. An intervention may take place over a period of four to six weeks. Where station teaching is being introduced for the first time, a shorter time period is recommended to allow for earlier review and evaluation. There are a number of stages when planning for in-class intervention in the area of early literacy using a station-teaching model of co-teaching.

Stages in the Planning Process

There are five stages in the planning process, including:

1. Identify strands and strand units
2. Identify class outcomes
3. Identify content, strategies and resources
4. Link individualised and class planning
5. Evaluate.

Stage 1: Identify Strands and Strand Units
The first stage in the planning process involves identifying the relevant strands and strand units for the literacy intervention. This is important because the objectives identified for these strand units will inform the class objectives for the station-teaching intervention. Figure 1 highlights the strands and strand units from the *English Primary Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999) for Junior Infants.

Figure 1: Strands and strand units from the English curriculum for Junior Infants (NCCA, 2010)

There are three strands including oral language, reading and writing. The strand of oral language is subdivided into four strand units and 'Receptiveness to language' is highlighted in Figure 1, as this forms the basis of the example described later in this article for the development of early literacy skills using station-teaching. 'Receptiveness to language' is also a strand unit for the reading strand of the curriculum so it is possible to address more than one strand of the curriculum during the intervention. As mentioned earlier, the content objectives linked to the strand unit inform the design and proposed outcomes for the station-teaching intervention. The next stage involves identifying outcomes for the intervention.

Stage 2: Identify Class Outcomes

During Stage 2 of the planning process, all teachers involved in the station-teaching intervention choose the content objectives relevant to the current needs of the class in the area of early literacy development. The class teacher will be particularly familiar with the abilities of pupils in the infant class in this area. For the purpose of providing an example of a station-teaching intervention, the objectives outlined in Table 2 have been chosen.

Table 2: Objectives for the station-teaching intervention

Objectives for station-teaching intervention in early literacy

Pupils will:
Listen to and recall the story
Demonstrate print awareness
Develop awareness of rhyming endings from the story

Identify and match pictures, letters and words from the story
The objectives outlined in Table 2 are informed by the curriculum content objectives for the strand unit 'Receptiveness to language' and address a number of the early literacy skills highlighted earlier including oral language, phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge and word recognition. The next stage in the planning process is to decide on content, strategies and resources for the station teaching intervention.

Stage 3: Identify Content, Strategies and Resources

Stage 3 of the planning process involves deciding on content, strategies and resources. Decisions will be guided by the outcomes, or objectives, agreed in the previous stage. The theme for this example of a station-teaching intervention is the story '*There was an old lady who swallowed a fly*' (Twinn, 1973). Resources

include a big book of the story, puppets, pictures, words and letters on flashcards. A multisensory approach is adopted at each station. Table 3 provides an example of a planning template which outlines the structure and activities for the station-teaching intervention.

Table 3: Plan for station teaching activities

	Station 1	**Station 2**	**Station 3**	**Station 4**
Group 1 10 mins	Act out story with puppets – retell	Memory sequencing game – object recognition	Rhyming endings – occurring in story and inventing	Alphabetic work/word recognition – matching picture and letters/words
Group 2 10 mins	Alphabetic work/word recognition – matching picture and letters/words	Rhyming endings – occurring in story and inventing	Act out story with puppets – retell	Memory sequencing game – object recognition
Group 3 10 mins	Rhyming endings – occurring in story and inventing	Alphabetic work/word recognition – matching picture and letters/words	Memory sequencing game – object recognition	Act out story with puppets – retell
Group 4 10 mins	Memory sequencing game – object recognition	Act out story with puppets – retell	Alphabetic work/word recognition – matching picture and letters/words	Rhyming endings – occurring in story and inventing

All pupils in the class participate in each of the four activities outlined in Table 3 over a forty minute period. The number of groups will depend on resources, including personnel, available in the school. The number of children in each station should not exceed six. Where there are less teachers than stations available, an independent work station may be included, if appropriate for the class group involved. Teachers

should take turns with different stations so that all teachers facilitate the development of different skills. However, before beginning, it is important that all teachers are aware of how outcomes for the intervention are to be measured. The objectives outlined in Table 2 will be monitored throughout the intervention. Teachers at each station will monitor activities through observation and a simple checklist may be used to record progress. For some pupils with SEN, it will be necessary to link targets from IEPs with activities so that specific behaviours and skills identified on the IEP can be monitored. This is stage 4 of the process.

Stage 4: Link Individualised and Class Planning

Linking IEP targets to the content and activities outlined in Table 3 is an essential component of inclusive planning. By identifying relevant targets from the IEP and monitoring these in the context of the early literacy activities conducted at each station, access to the curriculum is facilitated for pupils with SEN. Consider the extract from an IEP presented in Table 4. This IEP was developed for John, a five year old boy with Down syndrome and moderate general learning disability. John is in the Junior Infant class and will partake in all the station-teaching activities.

Table 4: John's priority learning needs

John will:

Listen and attend during class activities
Show awareness of and respond to others in his environment
Develop his turn-taking skills
Use his emerging language skills

Table 4 illustrates some of the priority learning needs which have been targeted in John's IEP. The development of social skills and early literacy skills are addressed. How can these targets be met through the station teaching example in the area of receptive language? The activities at Station 1 include listening and attending to the story. Activities at all stations require pupils to respond to each other and to the teachers involved through participation in activities and games. These activities also require pupils to take turns in responding to the teacher and in playing the games of sequencing and object recognition. Throughout all activities, language, including naming objects and rhyming endings, is modelled by the teacher and other pupils.

The final stage of the process is to evaluate individual targets and class objectives in order to ensure that proposed outcomes of the station-teaching intervention are achieved.

Stage 5: Evaluate

At the end of the intervention period, teachers should hold a planning meeting to discuss and evaluate. The evaluation of objectives for the class will be based on teacher observation and checklists kept during the intervention. Table 5 is an example of a possible template that can be used for the final evaluation.

Table 5: Final evaluation

Objectives for station-teaching intervention in early literacy	Evaluation (tick)	Comments
Pupils will:		
Listen to and recall the story		
Demonstrate print awareness		
Develop awareness of rhyming endings from the story		
Identify and match pictures, letters and words from the story		

A tick system can be used to indicate which objectives have been achieved and comments on individual pupil engagement and progress may also be included. A more specific progress record may be kept for John which will inform the review of his IEP. Table 6 is an example of a possible template for recording individual progress.

Table 6: Individual progress evaluation

Assessment	John		
	A	E	N
Sit in place			
Listen to story			
Hold up relevant picture in turn			
Repeat rhyme			
Recognise animals			
Name animals			

The targets outlined in Table 6 can be assessed as being achieved (A), emerging (E) or not observed (N). It is important that these targets are monitored at each of the workstations over the course of the intervention as targets may need to be adapted according to pupil progress. This is made easier by the presence of a number of teachers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article has addressed inclusive planning for an in-class intervention supporting the development of early literacy skills. The importance of teachers working together to facilitate access for all pupils to the *Primary School Curriculum* (Ireland, 1999) in this area was stressed and co-teaching was presented as an inclusive model which can support this process. A five stage approach to inclusive planning, based on a specific example of a station-teaching intervention, was detailed. It is hoped that that this approach will be of use to teachers working in mainstream primary schools.

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