

## King, F. (2007) Co-teaching: Why and How? Learn 29, pp. 33-44

### Moving forward

The Department of Education and Science (DES) in Ireland advocates an inclusive model of education. While ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘integration’ have been around for many years advocating the rights of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to attend mainstream schools, the inclusion model advocates the need for pupils to be educated in the mainstream class. The inclusion paradigm takes a different viewpoint also in that it lays responsibility with the school to make instructional changes to accommodate all pupils (Thomson et al., 2003). This demands curricular inclusion, which requires systemic change (Ferguson 1995; Thomson et al., 2003). Systemic change involves changing the system i.e. curriculum and teaching methods, to suit the child’s needs instead of trying to change the child to fit into the system.

According to the Learning Support Guidelines (LSG’s) (2000) and Circular SP ED 02/05 (DES, 2005) the role of the support teacher includes assisting class teachers to plan and ultimately deliver a quality special education provision. The LSG’s (2000) advocate placing a high priority on enhancing classroom-based learning through alternative groupings and providing strategies for learning. Furthermore the LSG’s recommend ‘shared teaching approaches’ in the pupil’s classroom. However, this move from an exclusive reliance on withdrawal teaching will take time. Fullan (1991) states it takes two to three years for teachers to become fully competent in using new instructional methods.

Intrinsic in all of this is the need for collaboration among teachers (Arraf, 1996). One method of teacher collaboration is ‘**peer coaching**’. Peer coaching was produced to foster teachers’ development and the cultivation of new instructional practices in the classroom. It has been shown to be very effective for demonstrating methods of differentiation, especially for new teachers - they get on-site training with immediate feedback. Peer coaching enables teachers to observe one another and exchange support, ideas, feedback and assistance in an equal and non-threatening way. Teachers can model strategies for each other and be available to offer support at a later stage should it be required. Teacher collaboration will benefit pupils and teachers alike. It will provide professional development and may prevent ‘burn-out’ of teachers.

Furthermore peer coaching will shorten the length of time it takes to develop and use new practices and it will enable teachers to develop and tailor innovations to fit their own personal teaching styles. The ultimate goal for every teacher is to develop, refine and maintain strategies that address pupils’ diverse learning needs and capabilities. This process is known as ‘**differentiation**’. Hart (1992) described “differentiation” as the process teachers use in adapting instruction to achieve a better match between the demands of the task and the children’s’ existing knowledge and skills. Differentiation is the key to successful curricular inclusion. Differentiation of support is achieved through using alternative teaching methods, resources and groupings to meet an individual’s needs. These changes take time and form part of an on-going process (Fullan, 1992).

This paper will take a look at how to move towards a more inclusive model of teaching through in-class support. However, the author would like to acknowledge the benefits of withdrawal and the fact that there will always be a place for withdrawal in working with pupils with SEN.

There are many models of in-class support, which can be provided for pupils with SEN. Typical instructional groupings include: Peer Tutoring; Co-operative / Collaborative Teaching; and Parallel Teaching. The term ‘cooperative teaching’ was shortened to ‘co-teaching’ which is considered an umbrella term for all collaborative models of teaching and learning. It is characterised by the following:

- (a) Class teacher and special service teacher working together
- (b) Teaching by two teachers in the same classroom at the same time
- (c) Co-planning and collaboration between teachers
- (d) Instruction delivered to a heterogeneous group of pupils with and without disabilities (Murawski & Swanson, 2001).

No one model of support is said to be the ultimate. In fact from experience it is better to use a variety of models. Which model one uses depends on the focus of instruction i.e. if the focus of instruction is reading accuracy and fluency, then peer tutoring might be used. If mathematical skills are the focus of instruction, then parallel teaching (or station teaching) may be better. It also depends on the abilities of the pupils in the class.

### **Responses to in-class support**

The key to the success of inclusion is effective teacher training in models of in-class support so as to meet the needs of the students in an inclusive environment. I carried out research in my own school setting in 2004 using peer tutoring for reading accuracy and fluency and co-operative teaching for working on plural rules for spelling. Let me give you a support teachers’ response to the in-class support used in the research:

*“I certainly would sustain the use of in-class support. I would hate to see us regressing back to traditional teaching. I really enjoyed the classroom. I think the kids benefited hugely too. I definitely think there is still room for one to one teaching for some things though”.*

From working as a resource teacher in-class, I have found that in-class support, where teaching methods are adapted through active learning and the use of concrete materials, provides teaching and learning at an intensive level. Both teachers can work to their strengths and the teachers can learn from each other. There is a buzz from seeing all pupils access the curriculum, the relationships between teachers develop and the whole school gets a sense of inclusiveness that generates a great sense of community spirit.

The responsibility for pupils with SEN is shared between the class teacher and support teacher. In this way, the support teacher is not just seen as a teacher to help pupils with SEN – teachers experienced in SEN can peer coach class teachers in

methodologies that will enhance learning for all. All pupils in the class can therefore benefit from in-class support.

*“I am able to provide some support for all of the students in the class. Mind you, I never lose sight of why I’m in here...to assist the students with identified special needs, but there are benefits for other students as well”.*

A support teachers’ response to in-class support (Vaughn et al., 1997)

*“I think I’m a much better teacher now, and I definitely have a much better understanding of what goes on in the general education classroom and what kinds of expectations I need to have for my students” ...*

A support teachers’ response to in-class support (Vaughn et al., 1997).

### **Challenges to in-class support**

While in-class support is widely advocated in literature and in this paper, it would be naïve not to mention the challenges for teachers and pupils alike in transferring from an exclusive reliance on withdrawal teaching to developing an inclusive, whole school approach to SEN.

#### *Space*

While a large classroom would be desirable for team-teaching it is not necessary. Most classrooms could accommodate one more adult in the room!

#### *Noise*

Awareness of our voices as teachers is essential for team-teaching. Teachers need to speak at a normal pitch when working with a group as opposed to a louder voice when working with the class as a whole.

#### *Teacher Personalities / Attitudes*

Teacher personalities can play a large role in the success or failure of in-class support. Flexibility is key to the success of team-teaching. Teachers need to plan well in advance and be flexible in their thinking and approaches. Flexibility may be needed when trying to organise timetables for in-class support. Attitudes to in-class support can be fostered and it is advisable to start small with a well-planned programme to ensure success.

#### *Parent involvement*

It is good practice to inform parents in advance of team-teaching practices within your school. This can be done at the infant information evening for incoming pupils each year.

#### *Training*

Class teachers and support teachers need guidelines, preparation and training in various models of in-class support prior to implementation of same. Planning and organization are key to the success of any programme.

#### *Needs of pupils*

The needs of pupils are paramount in any decision making about models of support. Pupils needs must be catered for and therefore no one model is the ultimate. While

peer tutoring might be suitable for one term of instruction, a pupil may need to be withdrawn for support the next term. Decisions are made on a case-by-case basis.

#### *Content i.e. focus of instruction*

The focus of instruction is equally as important as the model of instruction. The content to be taught must suit the model of support and vice versa.

#### *Teaching styles*

One advantage of in-class support is that pupils are exposed to the different teaching styles of teachers. One teacher's strength may suit the 'inchworms' (logical sequential learners) in our classrooms while another teacher's strength may suit the 'grasshoppers' (global learners). Teachers learn from each other and adopt strategies from each other.

#### *Roles and responsibilities of each teacher*

Agreement on teacher roles and responsibilities must be reached prior to commencing in-class support. Areas such as content planning, discipline, homework, permission to leave the classroom etc all need to be agreed upon.

#### *Availability of time for planning and collaboration with class teacher*

Without planning and collaboration, in-class support will not be successful. Time for formal and informal meetings must be arranged. Ideally meetings occur on a weekly basis. Creative planning within schools may facilitate these meetings e.g. if an infant teacher is willing to give an hour a week to cover meetings between a support teacher and two different class teachers. In some schools a non-teaching principal may be willing give an hour a week to facilitate teacher collaboration.

While all of the above may be challenges to in-class support many teachers will rise to these challenges and the benefits of in-class support will outweigh the challenges in a short time.

### **Getting Started**

Over the past couple of years much time and paper has been used on discussing the merits of in-class support and indeed the various models of in-class support. It is time to look at **how and where to begin with in-class support**.

In-class support in my own situation came as a knee jerk reaction to a situation in a school in which I taught. The class teacher came to me in the month of June with serious concerns regarding how best to teach a class of twenty children in a multi-class situation, seven of whom attend resource and four who attend learning support. The class teacher reported three other children as having learning difficulties and in need of assessment. This meant fourteen children out of twenty were presenting with some form of learning difficulty. In discussing this situation, it was decided that we would implement some form of in-class support.

At the same time, staff members were undergoing an evaluation of the school organisation including the provision for special educational needs in the school. The teachers identified two main areas for development:

- Teacher collaboration
- Classroom planning / Differentiation

They also identified success criteria for differentiation /classroom planning as follows:

- Pupil participation in all aspects of the curriculum
- The application of group learning / peer learning
- Structured times for collaboration between class and support teachers, to plan for individual differentiation
- The inclusion of curriculum-based targets into the IEP
- The facilitation of different learning styles through the use of multi-sensory teaching techniques

Following this, at a school development-planning day, curriculum areas to be addressed, namely reading fluency, reading comprehension and maths, were agreed upon. I looked at the children's IEPs to see the extent to which their literacy, mathematical and emotional (self-esteem) needs could be met through in-class support. Having researched different models of teaching / learning I proposed to implement peer tutoring for reading fluency and co-operative teaching for maths.

### **Step by Step**

- Start by looking at the number of pupils in need of support teaching in relation to the number of support teachers available in your school
- Decide the level of support each pupil needs
- Decide whether these needs could be met through in-class support or withdrawal, or perhaps a combination of both
- Decisions then need to be taken on how to split the caseloads most effectively i.e. by class, subject, needs etc.

This is also in keeping with Circular SP ED 02/05 which endorses a step-by-step approach to planning for the deployment of resources. Let's take a look at some possible scenarios within schools:

### ***Scenario 1***

A three-teacher school with one full time resource teacher and a part-time teacher to cover general allocation. In this case there are enough resources in place to provide in-class support in each classroom and facilitate withdrawal time also. See page **XX** for sample timetables for the resource and learning support teacher...

### ***Scenario 2***

A four-teacher school with the same resources would still be able to provide similar in-class provision. In scenario 1, an hour of maths in-class support was provided in each of the classes. In a four-teacher school, thirty minutes could be provided in each room. A similar arrangement could apply to literacy.

### ***Scenario 3***

A seven-teacher school with two support teachers (including general allocation and resource): One teacher may take the senior end of the school for all children with SEN and one could take the junior end of the school. Another possibility is for one teacher

to specialise in literacy and the other in maths. The difficulty with the latter is that one teacher may have more experience (e.g. in behaviour modification programmes) and they may be needed in the junior and senior end of the school. In my experience flexibility is the key.

The roles of resource and general allocation may be interchangeable within a school, so this gives flexibility to allocate teachers with appropriate experience to the required areas. The ongoing monitoring of the provision for pupils with SEN is essential to the effective delivery of a support service. Formative assessment is an essential component of any intervention. One teacher should take responsibility for co-ordinating the provision of SEN. This is a big undertaking and could be made a 'B-Post' for the teacher who is coordinating it.

### **Start small**

When undertaking to provide in-class support for the first time, the challenges mentioned earlier need to be considered and discussed. In addition, I would advise that you start small, with one focus of instruction (maybe reading fluency). Having chosen this focus of instruction, look at the various models of instruction (peer tutoring / co-operative learning groups etc.) and decide collaboratively which model would suit best. Now the planning of content, roles and responsibilities can be discussed and agreed. N.B. The needs of the pupils must be addressed through the model and content chosen. In some few cases, pupils may need to be withdrawn for support also.

### **Timetables**

Devising a timetable that suits both the class teachers and the support teachers can prove very challenging. There is no single best method, as each situation is different and timetables can change from term to term. Rotating timetables is advisable for withdrawal to ensure that pupils are not missing the same subjects each day. In addition, try offering in-class support for a given topic on a term-by-term basis, and review timetabling issues at the end of each term.

Example: 30 minutes, four days per week.

*Term 1: In-class support for creative writing*

*Term 2: In-class support for reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension*

*Term 3: In-class support for summarising history and geography texts, using mind-maps*

If the support allocation does not allow for this much time in one class, then the support teacher could do a few weeks in each class to peer coach the class teacher in the strategies used. For example, a support teacher with experience in peer tutoring for reading comprehension could peer coach a class teacher in the method for a few weeks. In this way, each teacher (and class) gets the benefit from the expertise. This is advocated at second level also, where a teacher with specific expertise would peer-coach a class teacher. The support teacher would model the strategies and allow the class teacher to practise these strategies in his or her own time. The support teacher is available at any subsequent stage to help with difficulties that may arise and to give immediate feedback when asked. When the class teacher feels comfortable with the approach, the support teacher can move on to another class.

As an alternative, two classes could be taken together for a period of time e.g. peer tutoring for reading fluency could be done. In this way there are three teachers available to circulate among the pupils i.e. two class teachers and a support teacher. If in-class support is not possible in a particular situation, then the support teacher could take the pupils who need strategies for reading accuracy and fluency from various classes and work with them as a group in the support room. This is an efficient use of the resource teachers' time and it fosters social relations among the pupils. An alternative idea in secondary school would be involving transition year students in peer tutoring of pupils in need of help. This would need to be highly structured and planned in advance.

### **School books and workbooks**

It must be realised that in-class support is not an 'extra' task for the class teacher to accomplish - it is an alternative way of working with the whole class, to benefit all the pupils. In my experience, the textbooks can be a burden if teachers are under pressure to complete them. The difficulty for many pupils is that while the books and workbooks touch on many topics, they do not provide sufficient opportunities for repetition, which facilitates overlearning and automaticity (e.g. grammar rules, spelling rules, comprehension strategies etc.).

An alternative to the workbooks if, for example, reading comprehension and creative writing are to be the focus of instruction for the following academic year, would be to focus on the strategies to be taught and pull from various sources. In this way the class teacher is not under pressure to complete workbooks and in-class support for reading is not something that the teacher has to find time for in his/ her busy timetable.

### **In-class support for Early Intervention**

The benefits of early intervention are highlighted in all books and circulars. Support teachers have an important role to play in the early intervention process. In-class support is ideally suited to providing early intervention.

### ***Ideas for early intervention in the infant rooms***

From September to November in junior infants, support teachers could provide in-class support in the mornings during free-play time, to help the pupils develop their social skills, concentration skills and co-operative learning skills. November to December could be used for a phonological awareness programme. This could be done with the whole class together at first and then in two separate groups.

In a multi-class situation the classes could be divided into two groups. Each teacher could have responsibility for one group or the teachers could rotate the groups. Support around oral language can be devised for in-class support also. Reading a story from a 'big book' can be done with the whole class and then the class can be divided into groups, to work on differentiated activities based on the big book.

'Station teaching' could be used for literacy, where pupils spend ten minutes at three different 'stations', each with a different activity e.g. phonic games, pre-writing activities, reading activities and so on. Phonic programmes can be implemented by the class teacher and / or support teacher(s) e.g. Alpha to Omega, Jolly Phonics. The class could be divided into groups where each teacher works at the appropriate level of the programme with their group.

Early intervention is particularly relevant to mathematics, as maths is a cumulative subject where the pupils need to understand each step in order to progress to the next. Support teachers can provide in-class support for maths from junior infants to second class and this helps to prevent the incidence of mathematical difficulties arising.

### **Summary**

Formative assessment is essential when providing in-class support to ensure that pupils are learning according to their targets. Some pupils may need additional support programmes to be carried out in a withdrawal situation. The emphasis always has to be on targeting pupils who need help, not on teaching methods or groupings. It is my experience that pupils with learning disabilities are best served by a range of placement options and a range of provisions to cater for their individual needs. Teacher expertise is an essential component for effective teaching, which in turn provides individualised teaching, small groups, contextualised skills teaching, and more interactive lessons. Teacher expertise is improved through the use of in-class support and peer coaching. The role of the support teacher then moves from one of providing supplementary teaching for pupils with SEN to one that allows for continued supplementary teaching, while also helping teachers to improve the quality of classroom instruction. Support teachers must have a solid understanding and knowledge of the curriculum, which can be obtained through in-class support. However, support teachers need to learn how to plan their time to meet the needs of the pupils and to help them to develop their strategies for learning in all aspects of the curriculum.

The content of this paper was taken and adapted from King, 2006. *Special Education in Irish Classrooms: A Practical Guide*. Dublin: PrimaryABC.

For detailed explanations on models of support (e.g. co-operative teaching groups for maths, peer tutoring for reading fluency, co-operative learning groups for history etc) see the above book.

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