

A Self-Reflective Study of Team-Teaching in the Post-Primary Mainstream Classroom

Anne Marie O'Regan-Ryan

Bachelor of Arts in Education, Business and Gaeilge
Mary Immaculate College, Thurles



I graduated from Mary Immaculate College in 2020 with a first-class honours degree in Education, Business and Gaeilge. While I certainly have a deep-rooted passion for inclusive education on a personal level, it was during a week of observation in a primary school, that I first became aware of issues surrounding support methods that involved withdrawal from the mainstream classroom. During my studies, team-teaching was introduced as a method of supporting students, while allowing them to learn alongside their peers. As a result, I was motivated to study how my interaction with team-teaching could affect inclusive learning in lessons I teach.

KEYWORDS: Post-Primary Teaching, Team teaching, Special Education, SEN, Inclusive Learning

INTRODUCTION

This article stems from a self-study that examines how I, the researcher, can utilise team-teaching to promote inclusive learning in the mainstream post-primary classroom. It was during a week of observation in a primary school, that I first became aware of issues surrounding support methods that involved withdrawal from the mainstream classroom. As I observed lessons, I noticed that while receiving individual support from a resource teacher, students would fall behind on what was being taught by their class teacher. This point is solidified by Ó Murchú and Conway (2017) who discuss an acknowledgement by both teachers and principals that the withdrawal model from mainstream classes often results in compromised communication between the class teacher and support teacher and, therefore, a lack of cohesive action between the two professionals.

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2017) suggest that team-teaching should be considered as a first step to supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) within the mainstream classroom. Relying too heavily on withdrawal from the classroom is advised against, as positive outcomes for students with SEN have been reported with the utilisation of team-teaching (DES, 2017). To ignore ‘withdrawal from the mainstream classroom’ as a sometimes necessary intervention, removes focus from what is best for the individual student (Ó Murchú, 2011). The use of one-to-one teaching is recommended only as a temporary measure “for intensive teaching of specific skills, based on level of need” (DES, 2017, p.18). By recommending the utilisation of team-teaching as the initial support method, over the use of classroom withdrawal, the DES recognise that this allows individual students to receive more support than the withdrawal method of teaching can offer.

While the article discusses the benefits of team-teaching, the most significant finding discussed is the importance of relationships on the success of team-teaching. These relationships include, but are not limited to, the teacher-student relationship, the teacher-teacher relationship and, possibly the most surprising, the relationship I have with myself and how I view myself as an educator. Positioning Theory provides the context for this finding.

CONTEXT

Team-teaching, or co-teaching as it is also known, is often interpreted differently from country to country. For the purpose of this article, described by Cook and Friend (1996, cited in Welch et al., 1999), team-teaching is considered as “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended group of students in a single space” (p.37). Ó Murchú and Conway (2017) add that these two professionals should be two qualified teachers as opposed to any other duo, for example, one teacher and one special needs assistant. Team-teaching, though used for many years worldwide with significant evidence of effectiveness gathered in America (Ó Murchú and Conway, 2017), is relatively new to the Irish classroom.

The purpose of team-teaching is to “make it possible for students with disabilities to access the general curriculum while at the same time benefiting from specialized instructional strategies necessary to nurture their learning” (Friend et al., 2010, p.11). It is important for the teachers involved to vary their approach to reach as many students in the class as possible. It is also important to change tactics regularly so not to draw attention to any student’s SEN. To do this could render team-teaching to have the same potentially negative effect on the self-esteem of vulnerable students as the classroom withdrawal method can often have.

Hattie (2009) argues that the lack of research into the effects of team-teaching on student achievement means that it is often overlooked and even disputed as a potentially effective solution to many of the issues of modern classrooms. Friend et al. (2010) also discuss dangers associated with over reliance upon a second teacher within the class to support students with SEN. It must be recognised that team-teaching is viewed as an additional support for students as opposed to a reason for excluding students with SEN when a second teacher is not timetabled. Effective teaching and learning must always be the main priority of the classroom (Friend et al., 2010; Griffin and Shevlin, 2007; Ó Murchú and Conway, 2017).

POSITIONING THEORY AND TEAM-TEACHING

The concept of positioning theory was first introduced to the area of social science by Hollway (1984) to discuss men's and women's subjectivities. Men and women take positions based on how both genders are viewed in all discourse. The belief that the social world stems from conversations (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999) adds to the argument made by Hollway (1984) that 'Discourses make available positions for subjects to take up' (p.233). Barnes (2004) states that people 'can be thought of as presenting themselves as actors in a drama, with different parts or "positions" assigned to the various participants' (p.1).

The concept is more fluid than that of 'roles', such as the role of a teacher or of a student. It is akin to the explanation given by Fenton-O'Creevy et al. (2015) of identity. Every community one participates in provides an opportunity to negotiate a new identity. Harré et al. (2009) state that the theory offers answers to questions about why a person may think a certain thought or act in a certain way, given the circumstances.

Harré et al. (2009) discuss the rights and duties associated with positionings. Examples of rights provided by Barnes (2004) include 'the right to be heard, the right to be taken seriously, the right to be helped, or the right to be looked after' (p.2). In addition to rights and duties, Barnes (2004) discusses the constraints and obligations that accompany positionings. Each actor is not only assigned their part in the 'drama' discussed above, they are constrained by the expectations that accompany the part. So while people are expected to behave in certain ways, they are also often prevented from acting outside of the expectations of their position. Ó Murchú (2011) argues that this perspective is significant in understanding inclusive practice within the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

This article presents a snapshot of a self-study action research project. The data analysed were gathered through a self-reflective journal. After each team-taught lesson, I documented how I acted during the lesson and how I felt as the lesson was taking place. Data from nine team-taught lessons were gathered. Once the data were gathered, I conducted a theory-driven thematic analysis. Extracted data were then coded and the themes that were generated from this process discussed.

As the focus of the study was team-teaching, there were other teachers involved. The anonymity of both teachers throughout this study was ensured by excluding their names and referring to them as Teacher A and Teacher B.

It must be acknowledged that this study has been conducted on a small scale within a limited timeframe. The research was to be conducted during a twelve-week school placement. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, placement finished abruptly after nine weeks, resulting in less data to analyse than was originally planned. I took part in nine team-taught lessons in total, six lessons with Teacher A and three lessons with Teacher B. The study itself has undoubtedly informed my practice but an opportunity to recreate the study with more professionals, and for a longer time frame, would have provided a more significant insight into my use of team-teaching as a tool for inclusive learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF TEAM-TEACHING

Studies by Friend et al. (2010) highlight some of the many benefits of team-teaching, including: increased interaction between teachers and students; increased literacy and numeracy skills; increased student self-efficacy; increased student retention and, a decrease in behaviour-related classroom disruptions. Despite these findings, however, whether team-teaching benefits students remains a much-debated topic. Evidence from Hattie (2012) shows that team-teaching has a less than average effect on student achievement. While team-teaching can have a minimal effect on students' learning, it stands to reason that it may not be team-teaching as a tool that is less than effective, rather how the tool is utilised. The question of how well Irish schools engage in team-teaching is notable. The Teaching and Learning International Survey report (OECD, 2009) shows that only 13.6% of Irish teachers engage in team-teaching on a weekly or monthly basis. Any findings questioning its efficacy, then, must be met with the understanding that many teachers have not engaged in a sufficient amount of team-teaching to support such a claim.

This study found that having an extra teacher in the room meant that students were simply heard more often. Students were able to ask either teacher questions more easily. While I drifted, the teacher was free to continue with the lesson. This has potential to benefit all students in the class. Correspondingly, Ó Murchú (2011) states that a clear benefit of team-teaching is the increased opportunity for dialogue and feedback. Though I was unable to venture far beyond ‘one lead, one support’ style of team-teaching, this configuration undoubtedly allowed students to make enquiries quietly to me that they may not have made publicly to the class teacher. *‘The students sitting close to us today asked me questions instead of the class teacher.’* (Journal Entry 3, 2020). The quiet manner in which questions were often asked by students who were not generally outspoken in class allowed me to see the benefit of a supporting teacher for students who may otherwise go unnoticed as experiencing difficulties.

Benefits of team-teaching include simple differences to the mainstream classroom such as more effective use of both teachers’ time. Performing simple acts, such as taking over the duty of writing on the whiteboard, outlining learning intentions and ensuring all students had written their homework in their diary, allowed Teacher A to continue with the lesson. Without as many interruptions or time constraints, all students benefited from a more suitably paced lesson. Similarly, with Teacher B, a noted benefit of team-teaching that arose was the ability to teach students who have been absent, while continuing to teach the larger group: *‘Today I spend time teaching the students who were absent the elements of the accounts they had missed.’* (Journal Entry 9, 2020)

Malcolm et al. (2003) discuss the added pressure faced by teachers who often have to help students ‘catch up’ after being absent from previous lessons. Also discussed, is the negative effect of absenteeism on the other students in the class. Higher instances of disruption have been reported by teachers of students who are regularly absent (Malcolm et al., 2013). This not only affects the learning of the entire group but can cause resentment towards the disruptive student, thus affecting peer relationships (Malcolm et al., 2013). Thornton et al. (2013) note a link between learning difficulties and absenteeism, across all school-going age groups, and argue that students who reported a positive experience in school were less likely to be absent. This adds strength to the argument made by Ó Murchú (2011), that team-teaching can reduce the incidence of classroom disruption and aid in student retention. All students can benefit then, from the utilisation of a configuration of team-teaching that allows for students who have been absent to learn, without undue interruption of the planned lesson.

While there are many benefits to team-teaching, I found that planning time quickly became evident as an issue when conducting this study. As I depended upon the goodwill of established teachers to conduct this research, I didn't feel that I could take from the limited time of already very busy teachers to plan for upcoming lessons e.g. *'Because teachers are so busy, it's not been possible, so far, to meet separately to plan classes.'* (Journal Entry 6, 2020).

For planning to occur outside of the classroom, it would have had to happen during the teachers' free time. While I feel that these teachers would have accommodated such a request, it was not something I was prepared to impose upon them. Further, as reported in TALIS (OECD, 2009), given that teachers spend an average of fourteen hours a week outside of allocated classroom hours working, 'free time' during the school working hours is something teachers simply don't have.

RELATIONSHIPS

Central to the success of team-teaching is the relationship between all participants. Students need to trust the teachers involved to benefit from them (Hattie, 2012). This was noted in how students did not immediately seem comfortable calling upon me for help when teaching with Teacher A. Teacher A had been establishing a relationship with the group since the beginning of the academic year. This meant that when students needed help, they did not call upon me until lesson three e.g. *'The students in this class are already used to me so they were quick to call on me for assistance'* (Journal Entry 7, 2020). While teaching with Teacher B, as I had been teaching the class group in question for a number of weeks, they immediately accepted me as their second teacher. Students were quick to seek clarification from me and trusted my opinion when it was offered to them.

While the relationship between students and teachers is of utmost importance, the relationship of the teachers involved cannot be underestimated (Friend et al., 2010). I found that *'I didn't feel confident enough in my knowledge to say...'* (Journal Entry 4, 2020), and *'It is also nerve-wracking to be working alongside such a well-established teacher'* (Journal Entry 4, 2020), and again, *'I'm still not confident enough to make suggestions to such a good teacher'* (Journal Entry 5, 2020). I was aware early in the study of the openness of the teacher A. If I had been confident to voice concerns, those concerns would most likely have been met with compassion and a willingness to listen. The issues I faced then, had more to do with my perceived ability and where I had positioned myself in the partnership. It was expected that the focus of this study would be on how to best utilise team-teaching to promote inclusive learning in the classroom. What resulted, however, was the sharp realisation that this wasn't possible if, even on a

subconscious level, I do not view myself as in a position knowledgeable enough to influence the education of others. It was only with reflection on the imbalance of power that I had created that I experienced the importance of parity in the relationship between team-teachers. Both teachers need to be positioned to make equal contribution to the planning and teaching of lessons (Friend et al., 2010).

Basso and McCoy (2016) discuss the importance of the initial meeting between teachers about to embark upon teaching together. This is a crucial step in outlining teacher values before the process begins. To create a plan that both teachers are happy with implementing, how each teacher views their rights and duties as an educator must be discussed and explored. Teachers planning to embark on team-teaching should use a set of pre-prepared questions to structure their initial meeting (Basso and McCoy, 2016). By doing this, the conversation can be steered and structured so the most important questions can be answered. Both teachers bring with them differing personalities, backgrounds, and teaching philosophies. By coming together before embarking on team-teaching, teachers can discuss the thought process behind their views and decide where they may be willing to compromise in the future. While this may only be the first step, any issues that arise while engaging in future team-taught classes can be navigated with the understanding each teacher already has of the other's point of view and values.

CONCLUSION

Team-teaching has the potential to benefit all students in the classroom. While two teachers are teaching in the same space, students are set to benefit from, for example, less behaviour-related interruptions and more frequent opportunities for dialogue with teachers (Ó Murchú, 2011). With increased interaction, teachers are able to identify areas that students both struggle and excel in. Students benefit from having their individual questions answered more often. These are factors that would benefit students, whether they have identified SEN. Team-teaching is not without challenges, however. The most significant challenge while conducting this self-study was the lack of time available to plan effectively for lessons with Teacher A and Teacher B.

Ó Murchú and Conway (2017) express caution in suggesting that students who are currently solely supported through withdrawal methods should all be supported through team-teaching instead. As advocates for team-teaching, they acknowledge that it may not be suitable for all students as the only support they receive. Thus, a combination of support methods is suggested to begin the journey of inclusive learning. The question is asked: "is there merit in beginning with team-teaching, and availing of withdrawal where necessary but only after team-teaching configurations have been exhausted?" (Ó Murchú and Conway, 2017, p.62). In this

way, students can be given the best possible opportunity for inclusion before being withdrawn. Withdrawal should only ever be a temporary measure, with the end goal always being successful reintegration into the mainstream class.

Positioning theory provides insight into the many relationships involved in team-teaching. The importance of these relationships cannot be stressed enough. Students benefit from positioning both teachers as people who can help them succeed in learning. With different opinions on education and, more simply, with different vantage points in the classroom, the input of both professionals should be perceived as valid and equal. Collaborating, welcoming and trialling the ideas of both teachers is how positive outcomes may be achieved.

Finally, the view each participant has of themselves is of utmost importance. Both teachers must perceive themselves and position themselves as valuable members of the team. It is therefore recommended that each partnership be entered into willingly, with the view that the other teacher is as knowledgeable and capable of suggesting meaningful and positive learning strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the school that allowed me to conduct my research and to the teachers who accommodated me so kindly. Thank you to all the staff at MIC Thurles for their help, advice, and encouragement. Thank you to Dr Aimie Brennan for giving me the opportunity to share my research. To my family and friends, thank you for all the ways you helped me. Thank you to my girls Sophie, Ava, Clara and Katie for being far more understanding than you should have been. Finally, to my husband Pakie, thank you for your unwavering support of everything I do.

REFERENCES

- Barnes, M. (2004) *The use of positioning theory in studying student participation in collaborative learning activities*. Symposium conducted at the Annual Meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne, Australia. Available at: <https://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2004/bar04684.pdf> [Accessed on 07/04/2020].
- Basso, D. and McCoy, N. (2016) *The Co-Teaching Manual: How general education teachers and specialists work together to educate students in an inclusive classroom*. 5th Edition. Columbia. Twins Publication.
- Department of Education and Skills (2017) *Special Education Teaching Allocation*, Circular letter No. 0014/2017, Available at: https://www.sess.ie/sites/default/files/2017-03/Circular%200014_2017.pdf [accessed on 03/04/2019].
- Fenton O’Creevy, M., Dimitriadis, Y. and Scobie, G. (2015) ‘Failure and resilience at boundaries’ in Wenger-Trayner, E., Fenton-O’Creevy, M., Hutchinson, S., Kubiak, C. and Wenger-Trayner, B. *Learning in Landscapes of Practice*. London and New York. Routledge.
- Friend, M., Cook, L., Hurley-Chamberlain, D. and Shamberger, C. (2010) ‘Co-Teaching: An illustration of the Complexity of Collaboration in Special Education’. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* [online], Volume 20 (Issue 1) pages 9-27. doi: 10.1080/10474410903535380
- Griffin, S. and Shevlin, M. (2007) *Responding to Special Educational Needs: An Irish Perspective*. Dublin 12, Gill and Macmillan.

- Harré, R. and Van Langenhove, L. (1999) *Positioning Theory: Moral Contexts of Intentional Action*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Harré, R., Moghaddam, F., Pilkerton Cairnie, T., Rothbart, D. and Sabat, S.R. (2009) 'Recent Advances in Positioning Theory'. *Theory and Psychology*. Volume 19 (Issue 1) pages 5-31.
- Hattie J. (2009) *Visible Learning: A synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. London and New York. Routledge.
- Hattie J. (2012) *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*. London and New York. Routledge.
- Hollway, W. (1984) 'Gender difference and the production of subjectivity' in Henriques, J., Hollway, W., Venn, C. and Walkerdine, V. (1984) *Changing the subject: Psychology, social regulation and subjectivity*. pages 227-263. London: Methuen.
- Malcolm, H., Wilson, V., Davidson, J. and Kirk, S. (2003) *Absence from School: A study of its causes and effects in seven LEAs*. The SCORE Centre. University of Glasgow.
- OECD (2009) *Teaching and Learning International Survey [TALIS]*. Paris. OECD.
- Ó Murchú, F. (2011) *Team-Teaching for Inclusive Learning: Purposes, Practices and Perceptions of Team-Teaching Initiative in Irish Post-Primary Schools*. PhD Thesis. University College Cork.
- Ó Murchú, F. and Conway, P. (2017) '(Re)Positioning Team Teaching: The Visibility and Viability of Learning in Classrooms'. *Education Research and Perspectives; An International Journal* [online], Volume 44, pages 43-69. Available at: http://www.erpijournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/03_ERPV44_Finn.pdf [accessed 25/03/2019].
- Thornton, M., Darmody, M. and McCoy, S. (2013) *Persistent Absenteeism Among Irish Primary School Pupils*. Dublin. The Economic and Social Research Institute.
- Welch, M., Brownell, K. and Sheridan, S.M. (1999) 'What's the Score and Game Plan on Teaming in Schools? : A Review of the Literature on Team Teaching and School-Based Problem-Solving Teams'. *Remedial and Special Education* [online] Volume 20 (Issue 1) pages 36-49. doi: [10.1177/074193259902000107](https://doi.org/10.1177/074193259902000107)