Collaborative Classroom Practice for Inclusion: Perspectives of Classroom Teachers and Learning Support/Resource Teachers

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Abstract

Collaborative practice is integral to effective inclusion. Within schools, teacher collaboration can foster communities of practice through a series of professional relationships that enhance the educational experience and learning outcomes of pupils with SEN. In Ireland, Learning Support Teachers (LST) and Resource Teachers (RT) provide additional support to the increasing numbers of children with SEN in mainstream classrooms. Working alongside Classroom Teachers (CT), this tripartite of teaching expertise represents an opportunity for whole-school and classroom-based approaches to successful collaborative, inclusive practice.

This article describes the perceptions and experiences of collaborative practice between primary CTs, RTs and LSTs in a cohort of primary schools in the West of Ireland. Using a mixed methods approach, the study sought to establish the nature and extent of collaboration amongst these teachers and to identify the benefits and barriers to implementation.

The findings suggest that whilst teachers are increasingly aware of the value of collaboration, its implementation is largely aspirational, with a series of challenges relating to time constraints, *ad hoc* planning and limited professional development opportunities most commonly identified as constraints to a consistent approach. The article considers the consequences of this shortfall and options for improved engagement between teachers are identified.

Key words: teachers, collaboration, teaching support, inclusion, special educational needs

Introduction

Inclusive education is generally accepted as the preferred option for many children with SEN (Hesjedal et al., 2015; Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2012), and national and international instruments which advocate rights-based principles of advocacy, non-discrimination, equality of opportunity and respect for difference have undoubtedly strengthened this position (UN, 2011; WHO, 2011; Oliver and Barnes, 2010).

In Ireland, provision for special education has been both a cautious and reactionary process (O'Connor et al., 2012) that has broadly replicated inclusive policy elsewhere, with successive governments simultaneously negotiating educational standards alongside rights-based principles, financial constrictions and public litigation (Keating and O'Connor, 2012; MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007). Paradoxically, the policy process has highlighted a dearth of legislation for children with SEN and illuminated shifting definitions on its nature (Banks and McCoy, 2011) whilst emphasising the right of children with SEN to an appropriate education with a continuum of services and support as well as automatic entitlement to appropriate resource provision. In this regard, the introduction of the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2005) was viewed as a positive step, providing a legislative framework to effectively and inclusively plan for children with SEN (CRA, 2015; Gleeson, 2010). In the Act, inclusion is defined as the '… *education alongside other children who do not have SEN, unless it is inconsistent with the best interests of the child or it interferes with the effective provision of education for other children*'. Whilst this legislation undoubtedly facilitated some progress – for example, adoption of a policy on inclusive education; a duty on schools in relation to children with SEN; and a systemic responsibility for assessment – the Act has not been implemented in full, reinforcing the perception of SEN provision as a '*transition phase*' rather than an inclusive reality (Shevlin et al., 2013, p.1120). More than 10 years after its introduction, it is clear there are compelling grounds for a review to address the apparent inequalities in educational provision (CRA, 2015).

Integral to the implementation of the EPSEN Act is the allocation of resources, including teaching support. An initial review by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2006) concluded that a model of provision whereby children had to fail in order to access resources was unsatisfactory and recommended that schools should have greater capacity to respond to the needs of children with SEN as they arose. In 2013, the Council provided policy advice on support for children with SEN and in 2014 it published a further report outlining a proposed new model for allocating teacher resources for pupils with SEN Kinsella, Murtagh and Senior, 2014).

Support for special education in schools

Whilst the philosophy of inclusion has garnered widespread endorsement, its application has been open to sundry interpretation and implementation (Boyle et al., 2011a; Valeo, 2008), with conflicting arguments on the ideology and practice that underpin it (Ravet, 2011; Kauffman and Landrum, 2009; Norwich, 2008). Studies show that many countries have sought to develop inclusive education in mainstream schools, with evidence identifying an eclectic range of approaches, ranging from adapted curriculum and full immersion in the mainstream classroom, to specialised individual and group withdrawal (Shevlin et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2008).

Undoubtedly, inclusive practice can be a challenging prospect and research evidence has highlighted a series of challenges, including limited teacher training, limited specialised support and variable teacher expectation (Nel et al., 2014; Lindqvist et al., 2011). However, the benefits are also apparent, with a range of positive outcomes including social and educational acceptance (Boyle et al., 2011b), the promotion of positive attitudes and increasing options for teacher education (Boyle et al., 2011b; O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010).

What does emerge, is that effective inclusive practice requires a collective engagement to ensure positive outcomes for children with SEN (Sharma, Loreman and Forlin, 2012; Boyle et al., 2011a; Hwang and Evans, 2011). The escalation in the numbers of pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms across many jurisdictions has underlined the need for investment in additional resources, including supplementary teaching support undertaken in collaboration with the class teacher (Devecchi et al., 2012).

In Ireland, additional teaching support for pupils with SEN is implemented through special education support teams either in individual schools or across clusters of schools (DES, Circular 24/03). These teams commonly comprise learning support (LS) and resource teachers (RT) and research has shown that the establishment of these networks ensures many pupils with SEN routinely receive high levels of support (Shevlin et al., 2015). The appointment of LSTs and RTs is viewed as a commitment to the development of inclusive practice and there has been a significant rise in both posts under recent national budget allocations − for example, the allocation in Budget 2015 of further resource teaching posts represented a 21% increase over the previous two years, with a total of 6,705 resource posts

estimated to be in place by the end of 2015 (CRA, 2015). It is within this professional context that the study was undertaken.

Learning Support Teachers are provided to primary schools through the General Allocation Model (GAM) which offers a permanent allocation of support to support pupils with mild general learning disabilities or high incidence disabilities[1] (CRA, 2015). The purpose of the GAM is to facilitate the development of inclusive schools through the timely and flexible provision of additional support that is allocated differentially according to individual pupil needs and that includes in-class as well as out-of-class teaching support (DES, 02/05). Learning support can be accessed without formal pupil assessment or diagnosis; posts can be full-time or part-time based on the numbers of pupils with SEN and are allocated according to the nature and degree of the child's disability and the current pupil-teacher-ratio for that particular disability (DES, 2002). Learning-Support Teachers provide supplementary support to pupils with low achievement levels and who are at risk of not reaching adequate levels of proficiency in literacy and numeracy before leaving primary school either in the pupils' own classrooms or in a learning support room. It is a post that requires close collaboration with the class teacher to ensure pupil needs are met in accordance with school policies on the identification, prevention and support of learning difficulties (DES, 2000).

The Resource Teacher is an additional post allocated to assist a school or cluster of schools to provide individual support for pupils with an assessed SEN (DES, 2005). The RT often has additional training in special educational needs; he/she works under the direction of the principal to provide additional teaching support for pupils with SEN whose learning needs have been established following assessments carried out be relevant professionals. The role includes assessing and recording pupil progress, providing complementary teaching capacity class teachers, including advice on curriculum adaptation, and liaising with parents and other relevant professionals. The RT also involves direct teaching of pupils, either in the mainstream classroom or in a separate room (DES, 2002). Although this can be delivered through a range of teaching approaches − as part of, or away from, the regular classroom − flexibility and efficiency are encouraged, and guidelines advocate a model of in-class support

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[1] High Incidence Disabilities are those that occur more frequently in the pupil population, namely, borderline mild general learning disability (eg physical disability), mild general learning disability (eg visual impairment), specific learning disability (eg autistic spectrum disorder, specific speech and language disorder, moderate general learning disability, emotional disturbance).

in preference to withdrawal and emphasise the importance of collaboration between teaching staff, principals and the parents of children with SEN (DES 2003, 2000). Overall, then, schools have the wherewithal to create special education support teams to work collaboratively with the class teacher in the planning and delivery of special education provision.

Collaborative Practice

Reducing the distinction between pupils with SEN and their peers is an intrinsic tool for inclusive capacity building (Solis et al., 2012; Hwang and Evans, 2011) and collaborative practice is an essential criteria (Florian and Linklater, 2010; Zigmond et al., 2009). The primary curriculum in Ireland is based on a collaborative planning process that includes a whole school approach to decision making on SEN provision and an expectation that classroom teachers and resource and learning support teachers will similarly collaborate in the planning and delivery of special education provision (DES, 2007; 2005; 2002). The literature indicates that for pupils with SEN teacher collaboration can maximise access to a wider range of instructional options and improved academic outcomes (Hang and Rabren, 2009). Just as importantly, its participative nature promotes greater interaction with peers, increases confidence and self-esteem and reduces behavioural problems (Murawski, 2010). For teachers, collaboration with colleagues intrinsically strengthens their capacity for inclusion, both encouraging and facilitating an organic process of professional development through sustained access to, and sharing of, knowledge and expertise (Horn and Little, 2010; Forlin, 2010).

The value of interaction between teachers and its positive impact on pupil learning is a process that cannot be left to chance (Boyle et al., 2011a; Moolenaar, Sleegers and Daly, 2012). Successful teacher collaboration is rooted in the concept of communities of practice where collective learning is encouraged, valued and shared (Wenger, 2011). It is alternately characterised as a series of inextricably linked relationships premised on mutual respect and trust (Friend and Cook, 2010) or as an arrangement committed to the principles of partnership (Hwang and Evans, 2011). At a systemic level, this requires structural and cultural changes if schools are to be able to meet their legislative requirements. At institutional level, it requires responsive and flexible leadership to prioritise and safeguard planning time, efficient deployment of resources and options for staff training (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010) whilst at

a professional level, it involves negotiation and consensus on a range of issues including classroom management, curriculum adaptation, instruction and assessment and a capacity to resolve professional differences (Scruggs, Mastropieri and McDuffie, 2007).

It is inevitable that collaborative practice may vary by teacher(s) and context and that some teachers will embrace it more readily than others (Solis et al., 2012). Research evidence suggests that many of the barriers to effective collaboration are, paradoxically, the foundation of its success and a series of structural and procedural challenges have been identified, including role ambiguity (Takala et al., 2009; Damore and Murray, 2008), limited mutual planning time, poor administrative support and limited professional development opportunities (Sharma et al., 2012; Murawski, 2010). Collectively, these reinforce the core requisites of cohesive capacity-building, where shared awareness of philosophies, skills and practice in relation to SEN and inclusion becomes a necessary preamble to successful collaborative practice.

Pupil withdrawal has been a common approach to support pupils with SEN in Ireland (Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008) and there has been some criticism that inadequate development of LST and RT posts in primary schools has inhibited a sustainable support system (Travers, 2010). Reliance on pupil withdrawal is not advocated as a default option. Its inherent separatism runs contrary to the principle of inclusion (Murawski, 2010; Ring and Travers, 2005) and raises the likelihood of pupil dependency which is viewed as counter-productive when alternative models of differentiated learning can be introduced (Shevlin et al. 2015; Solis et al., 2012; Sileo, 2011). Although there is some evidence of in-class teaching support, research indicates that it is a less prioritised dimension of classroom practice (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010), exacerbated by ambiguity around the role of support teachers, lack of planning time and specialised training and teacher perception that pupils with SEN are the responsibility of specialist staff (Blecker and Boakes, 2010; Takala et al., 2009). The intention of the research, therefore, was to address this paradox between policy and practice. Significantly, by aligning the findings within the context of professional identity, it sought to add to current understandings on the factors that enhance and impede teacher collaboration.

Methodology

The study comprised a convenience sample of 90 teachers: 55 CTs, 16 LSTs and 19 RTs from ten primary schools in the west of Ireland. The sample reflected the typical profile of teaching staff in Irish primary schools, with class teachers representing the biggest group. The research questions sought to explore: current arrangements for collaborative practice in primary schools; how CTs, LSTs and RTs viewed current arrangements for collaboration; the challenges of collaboration; and how collaborative practice could be improved.

A mixed methods approach comprising questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was employed to fully explore the research questions. The questionnaire was designed over four sections that covered general teacher information, current models of support teaching, school policy in relation to SEN and teacher views on collaboration. It comprised a total of 26 questions combining Likert scale, multiple choice and closed questions, with supplementary open questions for teachers to elaborate on key points. For example, teachers were asked on the number of hours allocated to the LST/RT per week, current models of support teaching, the nature and frequency of collaboration with LST/RTs and suggestions to improve current practice. Questionnaire responses were collated by teacher status (CT, RT and LST) into frequency counts and corresponding percentages and recorded onto Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Preliminary analysis of questionnaire responses informed the development of the semi-structured interview schedule which was designed to elicit further information on emerging issues. The interview schedule comprised eight open-ended questions that probed teachers' understanding of collaborative practice, the extent to which it was encouraged and facilitated in their respective schools, their experiences of what currently worked well and thoughts on how teacher collaboration might be improved. All interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis at a pre-agreed time and were digitally recorded and transcribed. Using a content analysis approach, interview data was analysed thematically. The study adhered to standard protocols for the ethical conduct of research and received approval from Ulster University before commencing.

From the original sample of 90 questionnaires, 51 were returned (57% return rate). Of these, the majority (n=36) were from CTs, with a smaller proportion (n=8 and n=7) respectively from LSTs and RTs, broadly reflecting a proportionate teaching profile of the schools. Due to the time-bound nature of the study, six participants were randomly selected for interview,

comprising two each of class teachers, learning support teachers and resource teachers. As a small exploratory study, there are inherent limitations in relation to the sample, however, the collective data from questionnaires and interviews clearly offer some initial insights into the concept and reality of teacher collaboration and indicates potential for further investigation of this crucial aspect of inclusive practice.

Findings

From the collective analysis of the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, four major themes emerged in relation to collaborative practice in primary schools, namely: current arrangements for collaboration; the value of collaboration; challenges to collaboration; and suggestions for improved collaboration. Collectively, these revealed a common narrative in CT, LST and RT perceptions and experiences of collaborative practice.

School Profile

Questionnaire data from respondents provided some detail on school profile. Of the fifty one participating teachers, most were female (n=46). The average number of teachers in each school was 5.1 and there was a relatively even distribution of teaching experience, with 6-10 years and 20+ years most common. A relatively even number of teachers were from rural, rural disadvantage and urban schools with a smaller proportion from designated urban disadvantaged primary schools. Given the geographic spread of schools, pupil populations varied, with enrolments ranging from 35 to 200 children. Only a minority (n=12) of teachers held a qualification in the area of SEN; of these, over half (n=7) were LSTs/RTs with a Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma in Special Education.

In terms of support for pupils with SEN, a range of approaches was adopted, with teachers tending to use a combination of interventions. The most popular approach was the withdrawal model – either 1-1 tuition (n=31) or groups of pupils (n=15). This was slightly more common amongst teachers with more than 10 years experience (n=29) than teachers with less than 10 years experience (n=17). Interestingly, however, a substantial proportion of teachers (n=31) reported that they also used team teaching in the classroom – this was more common amongst teachers with less than 10 years experience (n=19). A smaller proportion of

teachers used in-class group work or team teaching (n=17 and n=14 respectively) whilst a minority used in-class 1-1 or whole class teaching (n=6 and n=7 respectively).

Class teachers considered that their role has changed significantly in recent years. In response to an open-ended survey question, the most common adjustments spanned both administrative and teaching expectations. Increased accountability aligned to greater amounts of record keeping were cited as an on-going organisational demand. In relation to SEN provision, experience of working with different categories of SEN, and differentiation skills to meet the needs of individual pupils were identified along with increased emphasis on being a team player.

All of the teachers agreed that their schools had a Special Education Policy; it was most commonly developed amongst the principal, staff and Board of Management and in the majority of cases (41; 95%) the policy had been updated in line with government policy on the organisation of teaching resources for pupils who needed additional support. Interviewees stressed the importance of school alignment to SEN policy, with one Resource Teacher stating that:

> *'All of the policies were discussed and the templates were looked at, at staff meeting level and following on from that people were assigned to different parts of the policy to put together and bring back. All ideas were put into place in a policy.'* (RT1)

A classroom teacher added that it is paramount that CT's have an input into SEN policy development and have their views heard:

> *'We all come together as a staff to write and review the policy. It is important that the Classroom Teacher has an input in Special Education Policy too.'* (CT2)

Current Arrangements for Collaboration

All teachers surveyed confirmed that collaboration with each other takes place and considered it a very important dimension of their teaching. Collaboration is encouraged within schools and just over three quarters (n=40; 78%) of teachers indicated that their school had guidelines on collaborative practice.

> *'Well, it would be part of our Learning Support Policy that we would collaborate with the other Resource and Classroom Teachers'* (LST2)

Interviewees' views about current arrangements for collaboration were mainly positive, with teachers recognising and acknowledging the particular insight and expertise each can bring. For example, one LST2 explained the insights gained through collaboration with CTs:

> *'The Classroom Teacher has the full picture but maybe I might only have them for English or Maths. It's very important to gather the results of class tests as well as the assessments you conduct yourself. The Class Teacher and I will suggest a list of children who we feel will benefit from Learning Support … the Classroom Teacher might have someone who is not on that list but who they feel might be concerned about.'* (LST2)

Additionally, the three-way nature of collaboration was also highlighted and the professional practice of noticing and intervening in issues which might arise was a common thread linking the views of LST and RT:

> *'Everyone is on the same page. It is very easy to identify problems as they arise and find solutions together so as to maximise the learning outcomes for the child in the classroom and resource. Also things that are working well would be acknowledged and highlighted.'* (RT1)

Interviewees elaborated on the arrangements in place for collaboration as one Class Teacher explained:

> *'Our Learning Support Teacher is great at working with all the other teachers and that she is willing to come into the classrooms and work as part of the class or she is willing to withdraw pupils on a one to one or in small groups. Resource Teachers are the same-they are very willing to work to the needs of each class and each pupil.'* (CT1)

A Resource Teacher confirmed the informal nature of much collaboration but also acknowledged that flexibility exists for more formal meetings:

> *'From all the teachers I work with I would find them all most approachable, willing to give you five, ten minutes here or there and if you wanted an actual organised meeting that would be no problem.'* (RT2)

Notwithstanding the universal endorsement of collaboration, survey data revealed some discrepancy in practice, notably in the regularity of meetings between CTs and LSTs/RTs. Two thirds of class teachers (n=25; 66%) indicated they did not meet with support colleagues on a regular basis and this figure was higher amongst LSTs (n=6; 75%) and RTs (n=6; 85%). Further analysis of the data showed that, overall, teachers met less than once per term (n=12: 24%), with a slightly smaller proportion (n=11, 22%; n=10, 20%) meeting less than once a week and less than once a fortnight respectively. Teachers who met on a more regular basis reported this most commonly happened more than once a fortnight (n=6; 12%) or more than once a week (n=4; 8%). An equal minority reported they met more than once a month or more than once a term (n=2; 4% respectively).

Value of collaboration

A collation of the questionnaire data revealed that all class teachers advocated the value of collaboration with LST/RT, identifying a range of benefits, including:

- An opportunity to share knowledge and resources.
- Access to creative approaches for teaching and managing children with SEN.
- Additional and alternative perspectives which can help to plan and differentiate the curriculum.
- An opportunity for alternative teaching approaches, including co-teaching and team teaching.

Similarly, all LSTs/RTs endorsed the benefits of collaboration with CTs, citing::

- Recognition that the class teacher observes pupils throughout the school day.

- Assurance that all teachers are in tune with the child's needs.

- Less confusion and clearer focus on teaching and learning targets.

- Improved outcomes for children through regular communication of progress.

- Learning is reinforced.

These comments were elaborated further in the interviews. A sound working relationship between class teacher and LST/RT is viewed as a fundamental pre-requisite if pupils with SEN are to receive the most appropriate educational support as this Resource Teacher stated:

> *'I feel that from not really knowing these children before I started working with them that by talking to the Classroom Teachers, you get to know a little about them before you even took them. You know that you are supported in what is the right way forward with the child.'* (RT2)

Classroom teachers, in turn, identified the particular contribution of the LST/RT when planning for individual children:

> *'I suppose you can pool everyone's expertise and ideas. Sometimes, something I might not have picked up on, the Resource Teacher or the Learning Support Teacher might pick up on it, and so any difficulty the children might have, we can work on it together.'* (CT2)

Although all teachers stressed the importance of collaboration, over half of those surveyed (n=28; 55%) reported that they did not allocate regular time for it in their timetable. Almost three quarters (n=38; 75%) reported that meetings to discuss student progress tended to be informal sessions, although a smaller number (n=22; 11%) reported a blended approach of formal and informal meetings. Meetings most commonly took place after school (n=29; 57%) or at break/lunch times (n=20; 39%) whilst a minority (n=2; 4%) took place before school. For those teachers who actively allocated time specifically for collaboration, the benefits were clear:

> *'In some schools I go into the class with the teacher and work like that. That works well because we get to work together and plan together. I get to see what is happening in the class and what the teacher is covering. Also she is aware what I am*

covering. We have time on a Friday when we get together with the other Resource and Learning Support Teacher to plan and review.' (LST1)

Teachers acknowledged that even when collaboration works well there is always room for improvement, particularly in ensuring that good practice is developed and sustained over time.

'It's all very flexible … I suppose in an ideal world it would be lovely to have a teacher with enough time … at the moment in our school we have done the power hour which is where the LST, RT and SNA come in to work classes for a six week slot and it worked really well and we learned an awful lot about things that worked well and things that didn't work well.' (CT1)

Challenges of Collaboration

The challenges of collaboration were readily identified by interviewees and can be broadly encapsulated as a significant time issue. One class teacher described current restraints and, in doing so, highlighted the ad hoc nature of much collaborative engagement:

'To have these meetings with the Resource or Learning Support Teacher can be difficult. It can be hard to fit that into the timetable. Generally you end up updating them or speaking to them about progress on your lunch break or after school but it doesn't always suit.' (CT2)

Negotiating collaborative time in an already busy timetable was a particular challenge identified by all interviewees as one Resource Teacher explained:

'Based on the time constraints and the time allowed to us to collaborate there probably isn't really [enough of it]. I do feel that the school does as much as it possibly can. With timetables being as busy as they are nowadays, with extra time for Literacy and Numeracy, Confirmations and Communions. Basically it leaves very little time if any for collaboration between Classroom Teachers and Resource Teachers.' (RT2)

For some teachers, the conflict between time constraints and the inherent value of collaboration resulted in a tension that was seen, paradoxically, to detract from classroom teaching:

> *'Time is our greatest problem. I find that I would be talking to the Classroom Teacher and it would be within the classroom hours. You're losing time in the Learning Support room and the Class Teacher is losing time from their room.'* (LST2)

This observation was elaborated by another LST who considered it could result in independent rather than collective planning:

> *'I suppose in the bigger schools you don't get to talk to the Classroom Teachers enough about the children particularly, you are taking from their class. You don't get to plan enough with them. It would be great to get their opinions and plan on a broader scale together.'* (LST1)

Suggestions to Improve Collaborative Practice

Teachers were also asked in the questionnaire to suggest how collaboration within their schools might be improved. Suggestions included:

- Dedicated slot in the timetable.
- Introduction of a monthly planning meeting.
- Priority to structured rather than informal meeting times.
- Use of *Croke Park* hours[2] to discuss progress, collaborate and plan.

Just under two thirds of teachers (n=31; 61%) identified the *Croke Park* hours allocation as an opportunity to improve collaborative practice. As one Resource Teacher stated:

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[2] Public Service Stability Agreement (2013) whereby an additional 5 hours will be available to schools for planning and development work on other than a whole-school basis and as approved by management. (DES, Circular 0043/2014).

'There could be an opportunity there to allocate time to collaboration. It would be clearly defined and have clear topics and clear actions to be done and followed up on. The time is allocated to this is with the best interests of the child in mind.' (RT1)

The option of a formalised protocol was seen by all interviewees as strategic way to embed collaborative planning as an intrinsic feature of school practice:

'That time is set aside for liaising with the team and with Classroom Teachers. It would be great if there could be one hour at the start of the term to discuss the children. That would make it more formalised and help in meeting [pupils'] needs.' (LST1)

Similarly, all interviewees agreed that a dedicated protected slot on the timetable for collaboration was an imperative, with teachers contrasting this omission against time allocated for policy planning:

'There is no specific time on the timetable allocated for collaboration between staff members. At the moment there is specific time given to policy making and implementation of curricular policies and organisational policy plans.' (RT1)

Interviewees stressed that ring-fenced time to communicate with peers ensured that colleagues were uniformly updated on children's progress and the targets which they were aiming to achieve:

'… if there was more isolated time on the timetable for the Classroom Teacher and Resource Teacher to collaborate, maybe once a week, once a term or once a month to communicate about the child and the targets to be met. I think that would be the most beneficial thing to happen.' (RT2)

Additionally, recognition for classroom-based collaborative time was also acknowledged for the practical and experiential engagement it offered:

'It would be great to work more inside the classroom and work with the Classroom Teacher. Also if you were allocated a certain amount of time to meet with the teachers of the pupils you were working with to be able to plan and review.' (LST1)

Discussion

In recognition of the time-bound nature of the study and small sample size, the findings are not representative of collaborative practice amongst class teachers, learning support teachers and resource teachers throughout Ireland. However, the common narrative from participants illuminates some key issues and lends support to three conclusions that inform professional identity and that have implications for school and classroom practice.

First, teachers in this study appear to engage in some form of collaborative work, perceiving it as an important dimension of inclusive educational practice. Moreover, teachers felt that not only had collaboration benefitted them professionally, it also had the potential to inform school practice and improve educational outcomes for children with SEN. Second, teachers identified specific challenges to effective collaboration. In the main, these centred on the logistical challenge of time allocation and the impact of this on planning for effective practice. Third, teachers identified the improvements they would like to see in the collaborative process and many of these are applicable on a whole-school as well as classroom level. Arguably, any decision about the form and content of collaborative practice to support pupils with SEN must be a collegiate process that adheres to the principles of inclusion whilst acknowledging the particular professional expertise of groups of teachers.

Research evidence internationally has reinforced the value of collaborative teaching practices to enhance the educational experience of pupils with SEN (Kaldi, Filipattou and Anthopoulou, 2014; Florian and Rouse, 2010; Boyle et al., 2011b). Policy guidance in Ireland has similarly reinforced this approach as intrinsic to effective inclusion at classroom and school levels (DES, 2005, 2002, 2000) and recent research has confirmed that the quality of educational support for pupils with SEN is strengthened by established learning support and resource teacher networks working together with the class teacher (Shevlin et al., 2015; Kinsella et al., 2014). Yet the results of this study suggest whilst there is a willingness amongst teachers to collaborate, the withdrawal of pupils from class for supplementary teaching remains a standardised option in spite of its reported disadvantages. Such practice is not unique to this study and other research in the Irish context has highlighted a similar pattern in the organization and deployment of teaching support (Ware et al., 2011; Travers, 2010). A note of optimism in this study, however, is the juxtaposition of team teaching alongside pupil withdrawal. The concept of team teaching or co-operative teaching is rooted

in the principles of collaboration and its advantages in terms of teacher attitudes to inclusion and improved pupil outcomes have been noted (Mitchell, 2014; Festus et al., 2012). The findings of this study suggest teacher familiarity with team teaching is opportune and active promotion of this would be a significant step to encourage and facilitate collaborative practice. The timeliness of this should not be overlooked, not least since the obstacles reported by teachers in this study suggest collaborative constraints based on logistical issues rather than any reluctance to engage in inclusive practice. This is an important distinction that demonstrates the incongruous nature of SEN policy, where resource allocation that is strained between a willingness to collaborate and capacity to collaborate will ultimately determine the character and quality of inclusive education provision. Interestingly, all of the teachers in this study summarized challenges to collaborative practice in terms of time constraints, whether this was in relation to curriculum planning or access to professional development. Arguably, this perception underlines certain pervasive institutional and systemic shortcomings that impede rather than promote opportunities for professional co-operation. Teacher collaboration is a powerful tool for the implementation of effective inclusive practice, not least because of the capacity-building potential of co-operative learning and shared expertise. In the Irish context, there is some evidence of progress in the development of inclusive collegiate school networks to improve and enhance teacher collaboration (Shevlin et al., 215; Farrell and O'Neill, 2012) so it is important that the learnings from these studies are widely shared. By extension, active promotion of alternative models of collaborative practice, with individual and group responsibilities clearly defined, is instrumental to reduce reliance on the existing *ad hoc* approach. This clearly requires strategic planning and whilst learning support guidelines outline the options in some detail, other policy guidance is less clear cut, leading to some confusion on how they would be implemented (Travers, 2006).

More broadly, the findings of this study also suggest that whilst national and international policy for inclusive education has been commonly endorsed, its application has been less clear cut and there is scope for a more critical review of dimensions of inclusive practice, particularly the professional presumptions on which it is based (O'Connor, Hansson and Keating, 2012). Of significance for this study is the recognized weakness in SEN provision whereby the effort expended on identifying needs has not always been matched by similar efforts in meeting the needs (Kinsella, Murtagh and Senior, 2014; O'Connor, McConkey and Hartop, 2005). It is arguable that incomplete SEN policy has mitigated against effective

inclusion in Ireland where the non-implementation of the outstanding provisions of the EPSEN Act means that teachers continue to work in an incomplete environment (CRA, 2015). The recent increase in the numbers of resource teachers and the proposed new model for allocating teacher resources to pupils with SEN have both been a welcome boost and a positive development. However, there is concern that the increase in resource teacher numbers does not adequately meet the increasing number of children with SEN in mainstream schools (CRA, 2015) and, whilst a pilot of the new model for delivering teaching resources is intended to take place in schools this year, there will be no change to the allocation process until its completion (DES, 2015).

Systemically, a strategic approach to capacity-building is a fundamental consideration if schools are to nurture a community of inclusive, collaborative practice. The importance of professional development is a recurrent observation and there is evidence of some promising progress nationally and internationally. For example, in Ireland, the post-graduate diploma for teachers who provide learning support and/or resource teaching is intended to enhance schools' capacity to make appropriate educational provision for pupils with SEN and includes collaborative teaching activity (DES, 2014).   Although the diploma is not offered to regular class teachers, it is nonetheless an opportunity to disseminate good practice at classroom and whole school levels. Equally, tools such as the Inclusive Education Framework can assist schools to plan, implement and review of their inclusive policies and practices, including options for the effective deployment of school resource and staff training (NCSE, 2011). Elsewhere, in Australia, the Building Inclusive Schools (BIS) programme funds learning support co-ordinators selected from existing teaching staff to avail of professional development to support classroom teachers in the development, implementation and monitoring of learning plans for pupils with SEN and to model effective teaching strategies (Boyle et al., 2011b). Wiki technology has been employed in schools in Canada to facilitate greater teacher collaboration enabling easier sharing of teaching resources and other information (Egodawatte, McDougall, and Stoilescu 2011), whilst in Sweden a teacher model based on office hours is used to ensure teachers have dedicated time for collaboration (Pfeifer and Holtappels, 2008).

In conclusion, this study suggests that teacher collaboration is an area with significant inclusive potential but one that is a less developed aspect of special education provision in Ireland. In particular, whilst the views of Classroom Teachers, Resource Teachers and

Learning Support Teachers reveal a collective commitment to collaboration, the findings reveal a less linear approach, with a reliance on a teaching strategy that runs contrary to recommended inclusive practice. This raises questions about the effective deployment of a pivotal workforce and further research could investigate how collaborative practice amongst teachers can be improved. In addition, the institutional and systemic shortcomings identified as impeding rather than promoting opportunities for professional co-operation merit investigation within a framework of school planning and teacher professional development. Ensuring a culture of collaborative practice in Irish schools, therefore, requires a shift from accepted norms, a willingness to pursue alternative approaches and an education policy environment that facilitates a culture of professional change.

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