



Collaborative classroom management in a co-taught primary school classroom

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers manage their classroom in co-taught lessons. The data were collected by observing and interviewing a pair of primary school teachers. The most important influence of collaboration on classroom management seemed to be the emotional support of another adult, and the opportunity to use different roles flexibly in the classroom. The results of the empirical research are discussed through comparison with classroom management in solo teaching.

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1. Introduction

In the name of inclusion, many countries are re-organizing the education for students with special needs. In practice this means that the general education teachers are facing increasingly diverse groups of pupils in their classrooms. This has led teachers to develop new approaches to teaching, such as co-teaching, in order to support them in their two main tasks: to teach, and to create an orderly learning environment. However, classroom management has mostly been studied in classrooms with only one teacher (e.g. Akin-Little, Little, & Laniti, 2007; Beaman & Wheldall, 2000; Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008) and rarely in classrooms with two teachers (Rytivaara, 2011). Thus, research findings on classroom management in co-teaching are few. Thus far the research in the field of co-teaching has tended to focus on teacher thinking rather than on practical classroom management issues. One might assume, nevertheless, that co-teaching could furnish teachers with more tools for coping with situations that one teacher alone may find difficult or problematic. On the other hand, co-teaching raises questions about the different views that teachers may hold on classroom management issues.

The focus of this paper is on classroom management as a shared practice by two teachers working together with a heterogeneous group of pupils, that is, a mixed group of pupils with and without special educational needs. This exploratory study addresses two research questions. First, what were the premises of collaborative classroom management in the studied classroom? Second, how did the teachers collaborate on classroom management during co-taught lessons? This paper reports on data obtained from classroom observations and interviews with the two teachers. The results of the empirical research are then discussed through comparison with classroom management in solo teaching.

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2. Classroom management and inclusive education

The concepts of classroom management, behaviour management and discipline are sometimes used unclearly in the literature. To be precise, only the concepts of behaviour management and discipline are synonymous (e.g. Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). Classroom management, in turn, refers to how a teacher achieves order in his or her classroom, and it has two dimensions: instructional management and behaviour management (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Martin & Sass, 2010). Classroom management can be divided into proactive and reactive strategies (Akin-Little et al., 2007). The aim of proactive strategies is to prevent problems in classrooms, and hence such strategies can be seen as a more positive approach to classroom management (Clunies-Ross et al., 2008). In acute classroom situations, teachers tend to use reactive (disciplinary) strategies. In this paper, I use the terms classroom management and discipline as defined above.

The concept of inclusion has become ambiguous for many because of its negligent use during the recent decades (see Howes, Fox, & Davies, 2009; Slee, 2001). This has further influenced practice and research done on the topic, as the term “inclusive education” has often been used simply to refer to a general education setting with children with special needs (e.g. Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Scruggs, Mastopieri & McDuffie 2007). The two main aspects of pragmatic discourse (Dyson, 1999) provide the starting point for this paper. The first aspect concerns what inclusion means in practice. It is widely held that inclusive education differs notably from traditional education (see also Thomas & Vaughan, 2004). An example of this is inclusive thinking where the possible problems are considered to be caused by the learning environment and not by the pupil. Thus, inclusive thinking is reflection about whether the learning environment supports or hinders a pupil's learning and development. The second aspect concerns the means of inclusion: inclusive education is seen as a result of certain kinds of actions people take. In the context in which the data for this paper were collected, co-teaching a special education class combined with a general education class in order to secure better education for all the pupils, can be considered an example of such an action.

The starting point for most studies on pupil misbehaviour is however that the pupil is the source of the problems. These studies have shown, for example, that although in primary school classrooms the problems tend mainly to be minor, such as talking out of turn and hindering other children, pupil misbehaviour is, nevertheless, one of the main stress factors for teachers (Forlin, 2001; Friedman, 2006; Jacobsson, Pousette, & Thylefors, 2001). The inclusive education framework challenges the traditional way of seeing things also in the field of classroom management. For example, the concept of a “difficult pupil” becomes problematic (Graff, 2009). The wider debate on whether we should talk about individuality and diversity, instead of deviancy, raises the issue of the origin of the problem. Vehmas (2010) points out in his philosophical analysis how “special needs” is actually a negative characterisation of individual differences. In accordance with this, Danforth and Smith (2005) emphasise, furthermore, that teachers ought to see a misbehaving pupil as a whole individual with a variety of experiences, and that the teacher–pupil relationship, the “pedagogical alliance” (p. 5), can be an important source of well-being to the pupil.

Nevertheless, teachers find some pupils more challenging than others. Teachers also regard pupils with behavioural issues as the least welcome in their classrooms (see, for example, Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). A reason for this, perhaps, is that despite the ideals of inclusive education, pupils are often integrated into general education classrooms with no additional resources and with no special training for the teachers. It is understandable, then, that classroom control is an essential, if rather complex, responsibility for educators (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Hargreaves, 2000) and that it is even more so in today's heterogeneous classrooms.

3. Teacher collaboration and co-teaching

Three basic co-teaching models exist (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004). The models differ according to the roles of the teachers. In the first model, one teacher is responsible for teaching and the other teacher assists by, for example, keeping discipline. In the second model, parallel teaching, each teacher has a separate group of pupils. The third model, team teaching, is based on shared responsibility for planning and classroom work. The literature on co-teaching tends to present co-teaching as collaboration between a special education teacher and a general education teacher (for example, Soodak & McCarthy, 2006) but the term can be applied to any pair of educators. However, literature on co-teaching between two teachers with similar education and position at school, in particular, is scarce.

Co-teaching is a demanding but, at best, a rewarding way to work. A metasynthesis of co-teaching (Scruggs et al., 2007) showed that teachers required administrative support (for example, commitment of the teachers and the school principal, and that co-teaching is voluntary), more time for joint planning, and training. The teachers also reported having experienced professional learning regarding co-teaching. A teacher in a study of Weiss and Lloyd (2003) thought that co-teaching can only be successful between colleagues who have same type of teaching philosophy. In general, open communication from the very beginning of the collaboration is essential for successful co-teaching experiences (Trent et al., 2003). This ensures that the responsibilities are shared equally and that both teachers, when necessary, can handle possible unexpected situations in the classroom. Yet, a teacher's work is highly individual and respect for this individuality, in addition to lack of problem-solving skills, can make it difficult for another teacher to express disagreement (Carter, Prater, Jackson & Marchant, 2009). If one can overcome this obstacle, peer teachers can provide each other with strong mental support (Kamens, 2007).

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