

## Collaborative co-teaching of Numeracy and Literacy as a key to inclusion in an independent school

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*Inclusion of learners with diverse needs implies a shift from a medical deficit model of disability to a social systems model. The latter does not view these learners as a problem; instead the environment or society's response to these individuals is viewed as a barrier to learning. I focus on collaborative co-teaching as a key to inclusion. Collaborative co-teaching requires the learning support teacher and the general education teacher to partner in all aspects of instruction. The outcome of collaborative co-teaching includes effective instruction, a cohesive, accepting class community, positive learner development and the professional and personal growth of the learning support teacher and the general education teacher. A literature review provided the background to an empirical inquiry using a qualitative approach. Data were collected from a small group of participants by interviews, observations and documents and inductively analysed. The study shows that if the learning support teacher responds to learners' behaviour within the framework of inclusive practices, the positive effects of the teacher's work and interactions may be far-reaching. Learning support teachers have an important role to play in accommodating and ensuring the integration of learners with diverse needs.*

**Keywords:** collaborative co-teaching; Foundation Phase Literacy; Foundation Phase Numeracy; inclusion; integration of learners with diverse needs; independent school; learning support teacher

### Introduction

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005) views inclusive education as the dynamic process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners and of seeing individual differences not as problems but as opportunities for enriching learning. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range. It embraces the conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular education system to educate all children. For the purposes of this study, inclusion, from a South African perspective is, according to Education White Paper 6, about supporting all learners, educators and the education system as a whole so that the full range of learning needs can be met (Department of Education, 2001:17). Inclusion focuses on overcoming barriers in the system. Looking at education through an inclusion lens has many implications. In order to include learners with diverse needs successfully, a transformative shift from a medical deficit model of disability to a social systems model is necessary (Swart & Pettipher, 2005:5). This indicates a move from a view in which the child is seen as a potential problem due to an overemphasis of his or her impairments and problem areas (Bouwer, 2005:47) to a view which

considers the education system as a possible barrier to learning. Learning support implies enriching the regular education taking place in the classroom and therefore involves rendering a broad spectrum of assistance to the child to achieve the necessary outcomes. Within an inclusive environment learning support teachers become more integral to the broad educational efforts of the school. Accommodative support is thus brought to learners within their classroom environment and individual differences are not viewed as problems to be fixed but as opportunities for enriching learning (Lockhart Walton, 2006: 59-61; Ainscow, 1999:181-182; Aefsky, 1995:25). In contrast, providing support according to a medical deficit model has typically been an individual activity, performed alone by the teacher behind closed doors (Sands, Kozleski & French, 2000:127). The vision of inclusive education extends far beyond issues of learning support teachers and narrow reform aimed at those experiencing learning needs. However, learning support teachers are important cogs in the wheel of inclusion and may be charged with the moral purpose of creating classroom and school communities in which diversity is celebrated (Jorgensen, 2006a:69).

In South Africa the emphasis given to the implementation of inclusive education varies considerably. Public schools clearly fall within the ambit of the vision of Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) as they are state-controlled. Independent schools pursuing inclusion do so apart from a state mandate or resources (Lockhart Walton, 2006:1) as they are privately funded and governed. Independent schools which are members of the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA) are constrained by the Diversity and Equity Policy of this association. This policy encourages “inclusivity of learners with special education needs, wherever feasible educationally” (ISASA, 2002) and is congruent with both international and state drives towards inclusion.

Very few studies have focused on learning support teachers in independent schools and their possible contribution to an inclusive model of education. In this article I intend contributing to the knowledge and implementation of inclusive education within independent schools by attempting to find answers to the following key research questions, which are posed within the context of the transformative shift from a medical deficit model of disability to a social systems model:

- How can learning support be structured and implemented in the classroom?
- What learning support activities will be beneficial?
- What are the challenges and advantages of offering learning support in the classroom?

### **Developing a social systems model of inclusive learning support**

Four basic types of support have been identified according to Giangreco and Doyle (2007:262):

- Resource support which includes (i) tangible material: adapted equip-

ment; (ii) financial resources; (iii) informational resources: professional literature; and (iv) human resources: parent volunteers and peer tutors.

- Moral support which includes interactions that validate the worth of people's efforts.
- Technical support which includes concrete strategies, methods, approaches and ideas.
- Evaluation support that includes assistance in collecting and presenting information that allows the programme and support for learners to be monitored and adjusted.

This paper describes a support programme implemented for Grade 3 general classrooms in an independent school, according to these four basic categories of support. We involved three learning support teachers as integral part of our team from the onset and they are included in the first person plural references (i.e. 'we') in the ensuing discussion.

The *resource support* that we offered was confined to informational resources in the form of professional literature starting with an individualised education programme (IEP) for learners with diverse needs. An IEP is a written commitment for the delivery of services to meet the learner's educational needs. A high quality IEP contains learning goals from the general education curriculum and it specifies the individualised supports and accommodations necessary for learners to achieve their IEP goals (Jorgensen, 2006b:151-156; Smith, Polloway, Patton & Dowdy, 2006:103-107; Bauer & Shea, 2003:30-38; Sands, Kozleski & French, 2000:293). We compiled an IEP framework in conjunction with a general education teacher and the Head of Department. We involved the general education teachers and the Head of Department in the development of a customised IEP with the intention of making the IEP part of the teaching process rather than a document generated and enforced by an individual. We engaged further with the development of the IEPs during a process whereby we assisted general education teachers identify and update tangible goals for learners in Numeracy and Literacy in the Foundation Phase. We gave resource support to the Head of Department in the form of professional literature to substantiate the advantages of providing learning support within the classroom.

*Moral support* engenders authentic trust, promotes a healthy work environment and creates an atmosphere where perspectives can be shared without fear of cutting remarks, criticism or breaches in confidentiality (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007:262). The positive effect of moral support became increasingly apparent as the learning support programme gathered momentum. Active listening and non-judgmental acceptance of our colleagues were fundamental principles that undergirded the moral support that we aspired to generate. By actively listening to the hopes, plans, fears and frustrations experienced by the Head of Department and general education teachers in their endeavours to create a more inclusive educational setting, we had the opportunity to convey moral support in nonverbal and verbal forms.

*Technical support* refers to concrete strategies, methods, approaches and ideas. In this study, the technical support we offered largely took the form of collaborative consultations, demonstrations, and modelling. We found demonstrations and modelling particularly effective as this kind of support is rooted in reality and is non-threatening. The ensuing acquisition of new skills can be adopted or adjusted by the general education teacher and learners to suit their needs.

Regarding the learning area, Numeracy, our focus was on providing learning support in lessons involving problem solving. According to Pettipher (in Lomofsky, Roberts & Mvambi, 2007:93), the ability to solve problems is at the heart of mathematics learning. A cornerstone of our learning support in Numeracy was to demonstrate enthusiasm towards problem solving to inspire the development of a similar attitude in general education teachers and learners. During the weekly 'forecast' (planning) meetings with the general education teacher, we identified the area of problem solving which would be covered in lessons and sourced appropriate material. This material was shared with the general education teachers with the expectation that they would subsequently generate their own material. In finding or generating problem-solving tasks we were aware that the problem presented should be meaningful, credible and preferably within the learner's realm of experience.

Three basic collaborative co-teaching format variations were used in the problem solving lessons. A collaborative co-teaching model for inclusion supports learners within the general classroom by combining the content expertise of the general education teacher with the pedagogical skills of the learning support teacher. Ideally these two teachers should work smoothly together as a team and are not viewed as having discrete responsibilities. Collaborative co-teaching usually occurs at set times and co-teachers perform many tasks jointly including planning and teaching, developing instructional accommodations, monitoring and assessing learners and communicating learner progress (Sapon-Shevin, 2007:199-200; Smith *et al.*, 2006:48-49; Sands *et al.*, 2000:144; Daack, 1999:1-3). The three basic collaborative co-teaching format variations include: interactive teaching (the class is taught as a whole, however, learners may ask questions and obtain support from both teachers (Daack, 1999:2)), parallel teaching (learners are divided into two mixed ability groups which are taught simultaneously by the general education teacher or the learning support teacher), and alternative teaching (the class is divided into one big group and one small group of learners; one teacher teaches an enrichment lesson or re-teaches a concept for the benefit of a small group, while the other teacher teaches or monitors the remaining members of the class). The most predominant variation of collaborative co-teaching used was parallel teaching. During these lessons the configuration of the groups was determined by the general education teachers. The groups varied and we did not assume exclusive responsibility for a specific group of learners. At times the learners were given the opportunity of working in smaller groups or pairs and during these lessons an interactive co-teaching model was adopted.

In our interactions with general education teachers we endeavoured to make them aware of the merits of presenting a problem, both in writing and verbally, to accommodate both visual and auditory styles of learning. We encouraged the learners to state the problem in their own words and to discuss solution strategies with other members of their group. By giving the learners a chance to discuss the problem with their peers, they gained insight and understanding of numerical concepts and came to realise that their peers were a valuable source of support. This reinforced the worth of instilling a sense of community in the classroom where the emphasis is on belonging, alliances and mutual support rather than competition and individualism.

During problem-solving support lessons we encouraged the use of manipulative material or drawing as a means of identifying solution strategies. The cognitive development of learners in the Foundation Phase falls largely within Piaget's concrete operational stage of cognitive development (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2005:11). During this stage learning is optimised by active engagement in the learning process and by creating opportunities for learners to experiment and discover things for themselves. This also strongly appeals to learners with bodily-kinesthetic or spatial/visual learning styles.

When we planned a problem-solving lesson for the class, we were aware that differentiation of the tasks might be applicable. If the groups were homogeneously (in relation to abilities) arranged, the number range in the task was adjusted. Often the groups were heterogeneous and in these instances we provided an extra sequential problem solving task, but this was seldom the form of extension sought by learners. Therefore, we started sourcing puzzles, magic squares, tessellations, origami and calculator exercises which are appealing, promote the identification of number patterns and relationships, and develop fluid numerical thinking.

Space and Shape work is part of the Numeracy curriculum and learning support was at times incorporated into this area of learning. The learners enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of these lessons and this created an opportunity for different learners to excel and to offer support to their peers. For these lessons we sourced the material and helped manage the interactive, practical dimension of the lessons.

The support we offered in Literacy was largely confined to Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills (THRASS). The fundamentals of the THRASS philosophy and methodology were conceived by Alan Davies using the International Phonetic Alphabet. The building blocks of the programme are identified as 44 phonemes (speech sounds) and 120 key graphemes (spelling choices). The phonemes are represented by a picture and a keyword. Each keyword contains a bold key grapheme and is presented on a vowel or consonant THRASS picture chart. The keywords along with their outline pictures are grouped in phoneme boxes. Davies and Ritchie (2003:9) maintain that the strength of THRASS lies therein that it shows learners from the outset that one letter can make more than one sound and sometimes more than one letter can combine to make a sound. The interactive collaborative co-teaching model was used most extensively during THRASS lessons. We

often initiated the lessons; thereafter, we together with the general education teacher interacted with the learners who had the benefit of two teachers to provide assistance.

At times the content of the learning support lessons focused on the key phoneme being dealt with in class for that specific week. Where necessary we revised phonemes that were part of a previous syllabus or were not dealt with specifically. Learners have to develop their skills in analysing words by breaking them into phonetic components and synthesising and blending the phonetic parts to form whole words. Whilst there are definite merits attached to direct phonic instruction, the lessons run the risk of being stilted as vocabulary is restricted to words that can be sounded out. As such this does not always hold the learners' attention. In an effort to appeal to learners' interests, we made an effort to blend the instruction of phonics with a rich assortment of literature, activities and topics of general interest. To this end we linked some THRASS learning support lessons to the topics covered in Life Skills themes: Arbour Day, African animals, Animals from the Arctic, Insects and Giants. We also based certain lessons on the prescribed storybook which the teacher was reading aloud to the class, for example, *The BFG* by Roald Dahl and *Just So Stories* by Rudyard Kipling. By integrating THRASS into the broader curriculum (i.e. cross curricular teaching), we aimed to make it easier to apply and generalise phonic knowledge than it would have been if the sounds had been taught in strict isolation.

Furthermore, we introduced charades, interactive cards and board games into our support lessons. Learners enjoyed the element of fun in these lessons and this proved an ideal opportunity for learners to work in small heterogeneous groups. In many cases learners with diverse needs were given the opportunity to experience success during a lesson.

At times we supported the general education teacher in teaching comprehension skills. In these instances the interactive collaborative co-teaching model was implemented and the lessons were presented by the general education teacher. The teacher gave the instructions and explanations to the whole class. Thereafter, we both gave support to the learners. Together with the general education teacher, we provided the scaffolds of support for the initial comprehension questions and later withdrew thereby encouraging the learners to apply their skills independently. This form of support accords with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development whereby increasing cognitive competence and independence are mutual goals (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2005:12).

On a general level we supported the development of Literacy by taking responsibility for ordering new reading books for individual classes. We identified the material and liaised with the relevant agents to procure the readers. Whilst this intervention appears minimal, interesting, appealing and age appropriate reading material had positive ripple effects which benefited the learners, general education teachers and the parents. On a small scale this highlighted the systemic nature of inclusive support. It underscored the need for professionals to consider that the learner is part of a system and that

multiple contexts influence the learners' development.

*Evaluation support* refers to measuring and evaluating learners' progress towards learning goals to enable teachers to adjust their instruction to meet an individual learner's needs. Ongoing assessment is also a way of helping learners to self-regulate and self-manage their own learning processes. It is a means of raising their awareness and understanding of their own strengths, weaknesses, preferences and styles (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007:132).

Assessment in an inclusive setting is essentially a shared process. By working in a general classroom as a learning support teacher, we were able to gather information about learners in a comprehensive manner and discuss our findings with the general education teacher. Our assessments were based on observations of the learners in their general classroom which is their natural learning school environment. We were also involved in their general curriculum work. This allowed us to make in-depth, informed assessment of learners against the backdrop of our pedagogical knowledge. When conveying evaluative support to the general education teacher, we were conscious that we were in a collaborative co-teaching relationship and that our skills should complement each other. In many instances our assessments concurred with the general education teacher and at times we directed the focus to specific learners. By working in this manner we assisted in identifying learners who:

- needed multidisciplinary support. In this case we suggested referrals to the school's speech or occupational therapists;
- needed to work on an IEP;
- no longer needed individual out of class support lessons funded by parents. These learners were consequently given the opportunity to work entirely within the classroom with learning support from the general education teacher and the learning support teacher.

## Methods

A fundamental point of departure was to focus on learning support specific to a South African independent school. Whilst international inclusive practices and trends have a bearing on this study, South Africa's unique past and complex educational milieu make it unrealistic to simply transfer lessons learned from abroad.

The research paradigm was qualitative, intending to elicit participants' accounts of meaning, experience or perceptions (Fouché & Delport, 2006:74). A phenomenological research design was selected for the study. This approach aims to understand and interpret the meaning that participants give to their everyday lives (Fouché, 2006:270).

Further, purposeful selection of participants, which is a non-random technique, was used. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:401) refer to the power and logic of purposeful *sampling* in that a few cases studied in depth yield many insights about the topic. However, we use *selection of participants* as a better description of the qualitative process (Mertens, 2005:237-239) as "sampling" seems more appropriate to a more positivistic methodology. The selected site for this study was an independent preparatory school for boys in

Johannesburg. The group of participants included: a Head of Department, four general education teachers, three learning support teachers (one researcher who is a learning support teacher at the school and two learning support teachers at the school; the other researcher was involved as consultant), and selected learners. The Head of Department and the four general education teachers have been formally trained and are in possession of degrees or diplomas in Education. The general education teachers have all had some exposure to inclusive education and the accommodation of learners with diverse needs and they have experienced learning support offered within Grade 3 general classrooms. The three learning support teachers have formal training and qualifications in Special Needs Education. They were involved in individual and group out of class support and had not taken part previously in learning support within Grade 3 general classrooms. Although we (the researchers) were actively involved in providing direction for learning support, we also tapped into the experience of the remaining two learning support teachers.

Learning support that is given within the general classroom is not limited to a fixed group of learners. The group configuration varies according to the needs of the learners, the area of learning and the objective of the lesson. With regard to the selection of learners, we chose learners whom we considered information rich and who had already received learning support regarding Numeracy or Literacy, or both, in the general classroom. The boys were in Grade 3 and between the ages of eight and nine years. (Foundation Phase is the first phase of the General Education and Training Band. It starts with Grade R, the reception year, and includes Grades 1, 2, and 3. There are three Learning Programmes in the Foundation Phase: Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills.)

Permission to conduct research was secured from the principal of the school and the parents of the children who participated in the study. The learner participants also granted assent on a level suitable to their understanding.

The mode of inquiry was interactive. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:35) define interactive inquiry as an in-depth study using face-to-face techniques to collect data from people in their natural setting. The multi-method strategies to collect data included: interviews, documents (a non-interactive strategy) and observations. Interviewing was the predominant mode of data collection.

A semi-structured one-to-one interview was used to interview the Head of Department towards the end of the year after the implementation of learning support in the general classes. We decided to interview the Head of Department individually as she is involved with the management and implementation of the learning support programme and we wanted to afford her the opportunity to comment extensively on the topic. Focus groups were used as an interviewing method to interview general education teachers and the learners. The two focus groups each had four participants, respectively. A potential strength of focus groups is that the right group composition gene-



rates free-flowing discussion that contains useful data. The synergy of the group has the potential to uncover important constructs that may be lost with individually generated data (Greeff, 2006:299-312). We recorded the interviews on audio-tape and transcribed the tapes.

We made use of documents generated by Edward de Bono's mind tool: Plus, Minus, Interesting (PMI) to gather data from the three learning support teachers. According to this technique, a table with three columns headed Plus, Minus and Interesting is drawn up and the participants are asked to write down positive points, negative points and interesting implications pertaining to the topic on the table. We felt that using a PMI as a deliberate operation would give learning support teachers a means of by-passing a purely emotional response to an idea, thus creating an opportunity for rational thinking ([www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED\\_05.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_05.htm)). We discussed the principles of a PMI with the learning support teachers so that they had an opportunity to clarify their understanding of the task and discuss their responses with us where necessary.

Participant observation enables the researcher to obtain people's perceptions of events and processes expressed in their actions and expressed as feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. These perceptions or constructions take three forms: verbal, nonverbal and tacit knowledge (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001: 437-439). With regard to this study, active observation was always applied within the general classrooms, during interviews and document (PMI) collection.

Data analysis was based on content analysis. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:407) suggest that a combination of the following strategies will enhance validity: prolonged fieldwork, multi-method strategies, participant verbatim language, mechanically recorded data, member checking, participant review and low inference descriptors. Low inference descriptors ensure that precise descriptions from interviews and documents are made. We used these strategies to ensure a high level of trustworthiness in this study.

## **Results and discussion**

After the data had been analysed, themes and categories emerged which are discussed below in an effort to address the research questions.

The transformative shift to a social systems model of inclusive learning support The Head of Department's desire to make learning support an integral, working part of the school day was apparent. Her response to the challenge of fitting this kind of support into the school's timetable was to increase the number of teachers who could provide learning support.

The general education teachers were positive in their approach to the introduction of collaborative co-teaching and were supportive of the move toward a social systems model of support. By working collaboratively, they were able to: increase learning opportunities, engage in effective objective assessment and stimulate their own professional development.

The learning support teachers were not unanimous in their support of an

exclusive social systems model of support. A leaning towards the social systems model of support is evident in the following statement: *“If the remedial therapist takes children out, a lot of work is missed and needs to be caught up. These pupils often can’t afford to miss lessons in the class”*. However, a learning support teacher also raised the following issues: *“Individuals may be overlooked in favour of group therapy. Individual therapy is more expensive, but may be more effective for some children”*. This suggests that some learning support teachers may subscribe to the option that both models of support (medical deficit and social systems) may at times be complementary rather than mutually exclusive. While the social systems model forms the backbone of the learning support programme, instances exist where diverse needs may be addressed more efficiently by following a medical deficit model.

### Groups

The data collected indicated that the use of groups featured strongly as a means of bringing learning support into the classrooms. Flexible grouping was favoured by the Head of Department, general education teachers, learning support teachers and learners. They identified the following merits of flexible grouping: increased learning opportunities, less likelihood of stigma attachment, opportunities to give recognition to diverse selection of learners, facilitation of effective assessments and promotion of professional development.

The learners and one learning support teacher expressed their preference for small groups. The learners found small groups appealing because they foster a sense of acceptance and belonging, improve the teacher-learner ratio and reduce the noise level which is conducive to optimum concentration. The learning support teacher cited the need to monitor progress as her reason for wanting small groups. This suggests that there is scope for greater collaboration and communication between the learning support teacher and the general education teacher as assessment and monitoring of progress are their joint responsibility. Regarding the timing of the learning support lessons the general education teachers liked the lessons to *“fit into the existing daily routine”* whereby Numeracy is done early in the morning. This demonstrates the desire for learning support to become an integral part of the school day.

Constraints imposed by the school timetable, the possibility of personal differences between the general education teacher and the learning support teacher and a need for planning time were noted as possible challenges of teaching in groups in a collaborative fashion.

### Learning support activities

An overarching need for new and different activities that make learning fun was identified by the general education teachers. To this end games and puzzles proved to be popular forms of learning support activities and were considered to be of academic value by the general education teachers. Games were also favoured for the opportunities that they provide for the weak learner to learn in a *“less stressful situation”*. Positive mention was made of learning

support activities that are based in reality: “*You’ve made it (THRASS) into real life situations*”. The general education teachers liked learning activities that afford learners with different aptitudes a chance to excel. To this end they endorsed the Shape and Space activities. Learning support activities that facilitate the revision of fundamental skills including “*showing him [a learner] how to track*” were identified as being “*great*”. A need for additional learning support activities that offer extension to learners was voiced by a general education teacher and this underscores the notion that inclusion is beneficial for all learners.

The learners expressed their preference for learning support lessons that included an element of fun. They liked games to be varied and had valid suggestions as to how the repertoire of existing games might be extended. This highlights the importance of getting input from learners when devising support activities. Reference was made to learners working with manipulative material in problem solving lessons, such as “*cutting up chocolate*” and “*using your hands*”. This accentuates the relevance of making a variety of manipulative material freely available to learners. The latter expressed a desire for learning support activities that are in keeping with their personal interests and are grounded in reality, “*not make believe*”. This reiterates the need to extend the core lessons across the curriculum in order to make the learning of phonics, spelling and problem solving relevant to the learners’ world. The learners consider learning support activities to be beneficial.

The learning support teachers subscribed to a holistic form of support that encompassed academic support and support to the learner as an individual. Academic support that “*consolidates skills*”, “*uses class based materials*” and takes “*children’s interests into accounts*” were noted as merits of offering learning support in the classroom. With regard to individual support, the learning support teachers felt that that support rendered within the general classroom “*promotes self-worth*” and that “*confidence is built and not lost*”.

### Collaboration and communication

The Head of Department pointed out the merits of good communication skills in establishing and sustaining learning support in a classroom environment. She proposed that the relationship between the general education teacher and learning support teacher should be nurtured and any fears about collaboration should be allayed by “*setting the ground rules*” at the outset of the partnership. Communication was also considered important when motivating an increased budget allocation for the learning support programme. The Head of Department felt that “*feedback from teachers*” has had a “*huge impact*” on developing and promoting awareness of the importance of learning support among school management.

The general education teachers regarded the merging of “*the different personalities and different teaching styles*” of the teaching team as an opportunity to appeal to diverse learners. They welcomed the increased instructional opportunities that collaborative co-teaching affords and began to consider ways to improve the activities in order to accommodate learners more effectively.

The need for good organisational skills and planning was raised by the general education teachers. Co-operative planning or co-planning is an essential part of effective collaborative co-teaching and it takes time, good communication, trust in each other's professional competence and commitment to realise this effort (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin & Williams, 2000: 199). The general education teacher's comment: "*Make sure you do meet beforehand*" suggests that co-planning is seen as a non-negotiable in the quest to create an inclusive model of education. A general education teacher's statement: "*Afterwards it's good to reflect*" suggests that this collaborative team was able to communicate openly and constructively which would ultimately strengthen the development of the team and the services they deliver.

The importance of developing a working relationship that is founded on mutual respect and similar aspirations regarding inclusion was stressed by the statement made by a general education teacher: "*If you had a learning support teacher who was going to be very fixated on her own ideas or didn't have a good rapport with the class teacher, that might create a few challenges*".

Although the introduction of collaborative co-teaching is relatively new, the learners were positive about the simultaneous presence of two teachers in the class. They saw it as "*way easier*" with two teachers in the class and recognised the benefits of being able to ask questions of and receive help from two interested adults. A learner astutely summed up the value of merging teachers with different styles and aptitudes in his comment: "*You might get two bits of information and that might help you with your answer*". This suggests the possibility of accommodating learners with diverse learning styles and needs through collaboration.

One learner indicated that group work facilitated positive communication: "*It can help you better and guys like don't shout at each other and tell you what to do*". This comment draws attention to the learner's desire to learn by discovery rather than mere instruction and highlights the impact that communication has on the learning process. In keeping with inclusive practices communication among all stakeholders in the classroom should lead to greater acceptance and tolerance of diverse learners.

The learning support teachers identified the fundamental need for "*team-work*" and for learning support teachers and general education teachers to work "*hand in hand*". One learning support teacher maintained that learning support should be implemented proactively and that collaboration in the form of multidisciplinary support is conducive to learner progress.

Collaboration requires purposeful engagement of both teaching parties and the importance of enlisting "*trained and willing learning support staff, who are motivated*" was identified by the learning support teachers. The increased instructional opportunities embedded in collaborative co-teaching were noted by the learning support teachers: "*Pupils have an option of learning methods that may suit their needs better than methods being used in class*". The possibilities of developing new teaching strategies within a collaborative co-teaching environment were raised and the benefits of "*seeing other methods to help pupils*" were acknowledged. However, an increase in planning and pre-

paration time is an unavoidable side-effect of collaborative co-teaching. The fact that learning support, within the classroom, is “*very time consuming*” was identified as one of the inevitable challenges to be faced by a learning support teacher.

## Conclusion

Our findings in this study suggest that learning support will be implemented in the general classroom largely under the umbrella of a social systems model of support. Learning support is underpinned by the notion that inclusion is beneficial to all learners.

The learning support programme described in this study is still in its infancy and although challenges still prevail, the attempt at developing and implementing inclusive learning support has proved fairly successful. All the participants reported personal or professional growth to a certain extent. Learning support teachers have an important role to play in accommodating and ensuring the integration of diverse learners; if they commit themselves to working in a collaborative manner with all members of the school system, they will be empowered in the quest to offer inclusive learning support.

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