The shifting role of the special needs assistant in Irish classrooms: a time for change?

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The education of pupils with special educational needs in Ireland has generally been influenced by national and international inclusion policy and legislation so that the majority of these children now take their place alongside peers in mainstream classrooms. In Ireland, a support network comprising the teacher and additional classroom assistance now characterises much inclusive school provision. Such support is often provided via learning support teachers, resource teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs), the latter group being the focus of this article. Whilst the professional credentials of this post have evolved in other jurisdictions, the position of the SNA in Ireland has remained largely unchanged, with a job specification that continues to emphasise its caring, non-teaching nature. This article will consider the juxtaposition of the statutory functions of SNAs with their reported role(s) in Irish classrooms. Using quantitative and qualitative data, it will explore the professional profile of the SNA, identify current perceptions on the nature of this post and consider its collaborative potential within an inclusive education system.

Keywords: special needs assistant; special education; classroom assistance; role; duties; inclusion

Introduction

The policy landscape for the education of children with special educational needs (SEN) in Ireland has undergone a series of significant reforms over the past 20 years.[1] Articulated in the language of inclusion, equality of opportunity, human rights and non-discrimination, successive documents charted government intentions towards the right of access to, and participation in, education as well as the nature of support for children with SEN (Carey 2005; Griffin and Shevlin 2007; MacGiolla 2007). This reflected international instruments that have advocated the right to an effective and inclusive education, enabling the development of a child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to his/her fullest potential (UNESCO 1994; United Nations [UN] 1989, 2006, 2007, 2011). Inclusion within mainstream education is now widely endorsed as the default option for the majority of pupils in Ireland (Government of Ireland 2004; National Council for Special Education [NCSE] 2011a); however, the extent to which the State and the school system fulfil these

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rights – particularly in the provision of resources – is subject to some debate (Logan 2008; Children's Rights Alliance [CRA] 2012).

A key feature of inclusive education policy has been access to a continuum of services and support and an automatic entitlement to resource provision that includes special needs assistants (SNAs), learning support teachers and resource teachers, each of whom have a particular contribution to fulfilling the educational rights of pupils with SEN (Meaney, Kiernan, and Monahan 2005; Winter and O'Raw 2010; NCSE 2011b). The contribution of the SNA has been relatively unexplored in Ireland (Logan 2006). Whilst the post has steadfastly been defined as one involving duties of a non-teaching nature (Department of Education and Science [DES] 2002), successive research has challenged this definition, identifying instead a role of much potential but also one that has evolved contrary to statutory guidelines (Lawlor and Creggan 2003; Carrig 2004; Logan 2006; Griffin and Shevlin 2007; O'Neill and Rose 2008; DES 2011a). Collectively, findings indicated that many variations exist in practice, with SNAs becoming increasingly involved in duties outside their official remit. Additionally, the post has come under close scrutiny in terms of economy and efficiency, with implications for the allocation of SNA support in schools (DES 2011a).

The SNA in Ireland

The increased allocation of SNA support has been a key development in improving the inclusive capacity of mainstream schools in Ireland (CRA 2010). The numbers of SNAs have increased exponentially in line with education policy and funding,[2] representing an unprecedented rise of 922% between 2001 and 2009 (DES 2011a). The figure has now been capped at 10,575 posts across mainstream and special school sectors. Allocations for 2012–2013 indicate approval for 10,311 SNA posts (NCSE 2012).

The post of SNA has been defined in a series of circulars[3] which outline the care duties of assistants in the classroom, with the clear distinction that they are of a non-teaching nature (Logan 2006). Recruitment to the post is specifically to assist schools in making suitable provision for pupil(s) with special care needs arising from a disability in an educational context. Schools can apply for an SNA post for a pupil with a disability who also has a significant medical need, a significant impairment of physical or sensory impairment or where their behaviour is such that they are a danger to themselves or to other pupils. Allocations are made on a full-time or part-time basis and can be shared by pupils for whom support has been allocated. The minimum required standard of education for appointment to the post of SNA is a Further Education and Training Awards Council Level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications or a minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate or equivalent (DES 2011b). This means that a person as young as 16 or 17 years of age and with no specific training could be assisting a child with SEN (Lawlor and Creggan 2003; Watson and Robbins 2008).

Debate on the role of the SNA has largely focused on the nature of duties undertaken and the extent to which these align with its prescribed remit. Successive studies have established that the post has evolved beyond the original care duties to encompass a range of therapeutic, behaviour management and pedagogical activities (Logan 2008; Rose and O'Neill 2009; DES 2011a). This deviation has been ascribed, in part, to poor understanding of the role amongst schools, parents and

other professionals (DES 2011a), with the prospect that the inappropriate deployment of support staff compromises pupils' right to an equal and inclusive educational experience since it allocates '… the least powerful staff to the least powerful students … perpetuating the devalued status of both groups' (Logan 2008, 8).

The wider literature confirms that classroom support is a key factor in promoting the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms (Farrell 2001; Moran and Abbott 2002; Mistry, Burton, and Brundrett 2004; Forlin, Keen, and Barrett 2008; Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF] 2010). Nonetheless, the role of the SNA in Ireland is characterised by contradictions, tensions and ambiguity about its status, function and deployment within schools. Whilst continuation of the SNA scheme is clearly recognised 'to enable schools to meet the additional care needs of some pupils with disabilities' (DES 2011a, 14), there is a corresponding requirement to clarify the purpose of the role amongst all stakeholders. Research in Ireland has suggested variable standards in inclusive school provision, where incomplete practice and provision risks compromising pupils' learning experience and future options (Winter 2006; Ferguson 2008; Drudy and Kinsella 2009; Ware et al. 2009). The review of the SNA scheme confirmed that implementation of inclusive education policy is '… resource sensitive at multiple levels' (Flatman and Watson 2009, 278), where the inherent value of a post can be undermined by poorly defined or misunderstood interpretations. Clarification of the role of the SNA, then, serves to establish professional boundaries supporting pupils and teachers in classrooms.

Methodology

The research adopted a mixed methods approach, involving questionnaires; interviews; focus groups and classroom observation. The sample size for this study consisted of principals ($n=28$), class teachers ($n=90$) and SNAs ($n=89$) in 55 mainstream primary schools situated in the Midlands and Mid/West Region of Ireland. Their size ranged from 7 teacher schools to 27 teacher schools. Full ethical approval was granted prior to undertaking the research in accordance with University of Ulster protocol. The methodology sought to address key issues relating to the role of the SNA; the position of the SNA in schools; and training and professional development opportunities. Qualitative data were coded and categorised using the editing analysis style; quantitative data were recorded on a spreadsheet and cross tabulated to facilitate comparative analysis between each group. Although this is a small-scale research study and the findings may not be wholly representative of perceptions on the role of the SNA in all Irish primary schools, the conclusions are intended to inform current debate on this pivotal position.

Key findings

The collective findings of this study have enabled consideration of the post of the SNA in relation to: their role within schools; their position within schools; and their options for training and professional development.

The role of SNAs in schools

Questionnaire responses indicated that the majority of principals ($n=25$; 89%) and SNAs ($n=74$; 83%) considered there was a clear job description for the post. Three

quarters of principals ($n=21$; 75%) reported that the job description was regularly reviewed and half ($n=45$; 50%) reported SNA involvement in the review process. Over half of principals ($n=16$; 57%) and just under half of SNAs ($n=42$; 47%) agreed that the job description did not reflect all of the duties carried out. Just over half of principals ($n=15$; 53%) and over two-thirds of teachers ($n=63$; 70%) agreed that the role of the SNA should continue to conform to the remit prescribed by the DES. The most common reason given for this related to the mutual factors of training and qualifications, with particular reference to the professional distinction between this post and that of the class teacher, one of whom stated: 'The teacher in the classroom is specifically trained and qualified. We need to recognise the professionalism of the teacher and not undermine their role'. Principals ($n=13$; 46%) who disagreed with the current remit cited the capacity of SNAs to undertake other assisting or tutoring duties such as checking written work, working with and supervising small groups of pupils. This perspective was acknowledged by a principal who stated: 'It is already common practice in many schools for SNAs to assist with group work, particularly in the areas of Mathematics and English'. At the same time, such practice was accompanied by the caveat that such duties should be carried out under the direction of the class teacher. Interestingly, the two SNA focus groups revealed mixed feelings on this. Whilst some SNAs were happy to engage in educational duties, others considered such intervention inappropriate, not least in terms of pupil need, with one stating: 'We don't know how to teach, yet we are always assigned the weakest group, those who require the most help and instruction'.

Interestingly, over half ($n=54$; 60%) of the teachers surveyed did not suggest any change to the role of the SNA. Changes that were suggested included greater clarity on duties; expansion to include teaching duties and more allocated time for collaborative planning. Amongst the SNAs who suggested changes to their post ($n=46$; 52%), the most common suggestions were recognition as a valued member of staff; more involvement in staff meetings and in planning meetings for pupils; greater clarity in the role; and improved options for professional development.

The position of SNAs in schools

The position of SNAs in schools covers two areas: classroom duties and the status of the post within the classroom and wider school infrastructure.

Collectively, the data suggested some discrepancy between teachers and SNAs in understandings of the duties of the post. Whilst interviews with both groups indicated common consensus on activities that reflected the statutory remit, including assistance with the supervision of pupils, assisting with out-of-school visits and classroom preparation, there was less agreement on additional activities, including preparation of resources and teaching aids and general paperwork. Interestingly, analysis of questionnaire responses revealed closer alignment between teacher and SNA responses, with both groups identifying a range of educational duties. These included clarifying instructions for pupils ($n=78$; 87% and $n=80$; 90%, respectively); helping students to concentrate and finish work ($n=78$; 87% and $n=84$; 94%, respectively), giving encouragement to students ($n=72$; 80% and $n=84$; 94%, respectively) and relating student progress to the teacher ($n=72$; 80% and $n=79$; 89%, respectively). Although almost half of teachers ($n=43$; 48%) and SNAs ($n=38$; 44%) reported they 'sometimes' provided input to the evaluation of

learning outcomes, a smaller proportion were 'sometimes' involved in the individual education plan (IEP) process ($n = 23$; 26% and $n = 24$; 27%, respectively).

The majority of SNAs ($n = 84$; 94%) considered their presence was valued by teachers and a high proportion ($n = 53$; 60%) indicated they had an 'excellent' or 'very good' professional relationship. A proportionate number reported that time was set aside for joint meetings ($n = 42$; 47% of SNAs and $n = 41$; 46% of teachers). The frequency of these meetings varied from school to school, ranging from 'daily' to 'monthly' sessions and, in a few instances, taking place 'when necessary'. Meetings most commonly took place during school time ($n = 50$; 56% of teachers and $n = 60$; 67% of SNAs). Although over two-thirds of SNAs ($n = 60$; 68%) were not invited or permitted to attend staff meetings, a higher proportion contributed to meetings with parents and other professionals ($n = 51$; 57%).

Professional development

The findings suggested a range of qualifications. Almost half of SNAs had a leaving certificate ($n = 41$; 46%), whilst a small number had a higher qualification ($n = 6$; 6%), including a degree and a nursing qualification. Almost three quarters of SNAs ($n = 65$; 73%) had undertaken a range of relevant professional development courses prior to commencement of employment and a similarly high proportion ($n = 60$; 68%) had since completed training programmes, most commonly in relation to the role of the SNA and/or SEN. Limited access to job-specific professional development courses, exacerbated in part by insufficient funding, was a recurrent concern of both SNAs and teachers. Nonetheless, the majority of SNAs reported a preference for further training, particularly in the areas of specific learning difficulties ($n = 28$; 31%), behaviour management ($n = 22$; 25%) and ADHD ($n = 16$; 18%).

Professional development in relation to teacher management of SNAs revealed that the majority ($n = 68$%; 76%) identified this as an important training need. The majority of teachers ($n = 86$; 96%) considered the presence of an SNA beneficial in the classroom, and two-thirds ($n = 59$; 66%) reported that they 'never' felt uncomfortable with the presence of another adult. The advantages and limitations of this arrangement were broadly categorised, with the benefits identified as assistance to pupils with SEN ($n = 51$; 57%); provision of general assistance ($n = 10$; 11%) and assistance with group work ($n = 9$; 10%). Disadvantages were identified as lack of clarity around the role of the SNA ($n = 12$; 13%); management of the SNA ($n = 5$; 6%) and pupil dependency on the SNA ($n = 5$; 6%).

The limited or absent nature of collaborative classroom practice was a recurrent observation; for teachers, the most commonly cited training issue related to clarity surrounding the role of SNAs ($n = 56$; 62%), although other training needs, including leadership skills; management skills; communication and teamwork were reported. A small minority of principals ($n = 2$; 7%) called for a higher basic qualification for SNAs as well as more in-service training for both teachers and SNAs to fulfil their management and support roles, respectively.

Discussion

The findings of the research are revealing in the contrasting perceptions of the role and duties of SNAs in Irish classrooms. These can be considered in relation to three key areas: professional identity; training and professional development; and professional relationships.

Professional identity

Research has highlighted the particular contribution of support staff in enhancing inclusiveness in the classroom (Moran and Abbott 2002; Groom 2006; Logan 2006; Giancrego and Doyle 2007; Alborz et al. 2009; National Sensory Impairment Partnership [NatSIP] 2012; Rutherford 2012). The inclusion and effective education of children with SEN in mainstream schools is inextricably linked to the nature of support provided (Bourke and Carrington 2007; Abbott et al. 2011; Mäensivu et al. 2012). Although the nature of classroom support has evolved elsewhere, in Ireland its status remained categorically non-teaching in nature (Logan 2006). The findings of this research suggest that the role of the SNA is surrounded by inconsistencies in perceptions, practices and expectations within schools that are inconsistent with statutory specifications. It is an observation reiterated in other research (Lawlor and Cregan 2003; Carrig 2004; Logan 2006; Rose and O'Neill 2009), with implications for the educational rights of pupils with SEN.

Paradoxically, this research suggested that SNAs already have certain educational duties assigned to them by the class teacher, raising questions on professional boundaries, not least the capacity of SNAs to effectively carry out such activities. Other studies (Downing, Ryndak, and Clark 2000; Shevlin, Kenny, and Loxley 2008; Carter et al. 2009) have identified similar issues, not least the delegation of unqualified staff to pupils with SEN whilst teachers focus on the rest of the class. Such practice visibly undermines any stated commitment by the school to the promotion of inclusivity of pupils with SEN. It also means that pupils requiring skilled, differentiated teaching are potentially not receiving their enforceable right to an appropriate education in an inclusive environment wherever possible with children who do not have such needs as recommended by the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland 2004). Such 'blurring' of professional identity has been demonstrated elsewhere (Blatchford et al. 2009; Devecchi and Rouse 2010; Mackenzie 2011; Butt and Lowe 2012), with the inherent 'de-professionalisation' of teachers' work and an unrealistic imposition of pedagogical and behavioural responsibilities on support staff (Thompson 2006; Takala 2007; Giangreco, Broet, and Suter 2011).

One of the key conclusions to be drawn from this research is that perceptions of the role of the SNA can have implications for professional relationships in the school. It follows therefore that explicit and up-to-date job descriptions that identify classroom support as significant stakeholders (Riggs and Mueller 2001; Balshaw and Farrell 2002; Alborz et al. 2009; Butt and Lowe 2012) are vital to establish occupational boundaries (Groom 2006; Mackenzie 2011) and ensure they are included in discussions on the children about whom they have particular knowledge (Balshaw and Farrell 2002; Hammet and Burton 2005; Mackenzie 2011; Symes and Humphrey 2011). Acknowledgement of SNAs as professionals in their own right can be demonstrated through a more strategic position in schools, for example, where the SNA is a member of a core and/or senior management team (NSCE 2011a). The development of a career pathway to assist in the 'professionalisation' of the role is essential if SNAs are to gain insight into the environment in which they operate and acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to be effective.

Training and professional development

Debate on the qualifications for the post of SNA and the nature of support provided has been exacerbated by findings that the cost-effectiveness of the SNA scheme had been '… compromised by the general misinterpretation of the role of the SNA … and the involvement of SNAs in duties beyond those envisaged by the objectives of the Scheme' (DES 2011a, 93).

Undoubtedly, the increased allocation in SNA numbers has had a significant impact on the provision of resources for, and inclusion of, pupils with SEN (Groom and Rose 2005). Recent guidance for schools identifies good practice for all staff involved in supporting pupils with SEN (NCSE 2011a). Training for SNAs is accessible through a range of providers, although this research suggested that it can be cost-bound, with SNAs sometimes self-funding. A fully funded National Induction Programme for SNAs ran for several years and a series of follow-on DES-funded Certificate Courses have been delivered by a number of Higher Education Institutes[4]. Requests for training have highlighted a range of preferences that include: supporting the care needs of pupils, specific types of SEN, effective collaboration and teamwork and the school curriculum (DES 2011a). Other evidence suggests that options that are modular, progressive and accredited are considered most useful (Logan 2006; DES 2011a; NCSE 2011a).

Various options for training have been advocated (Trautman 2004; Bourke and Carrington 2007; Liston, Nevin, and Malian 2009; DCSF 2010; Butt and Lowe 2012), including in-service or 'on-the-job' training; regular ongoing skills-based training and career pathways such as traineeships or university courses. The advantages of this approach lie in the range of options available to classroom support staff at each stage. These might include, for example, specific programmes on child welfare and protection, programmes on school policies and procedures relating to behaviour management, emergencies and first aid, IEPs, confidentiality and privacy policies and home–school liaison (Butt and Lowe 2012). On-the-job training offers an immediate and proactive skills base in particular areas, such as specific types of SEN, alternative communication, inclusive practices and the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), whilst a pathways approach offers an advanced career development through accredited third-level courses. Notwithstanding the increased knowledge and expertise this suggests, a degree of caution against the 'training trap' is recommended (Blatchford et al. 2009; Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle 2010; Giangreco, Broer, and Suter 2011). Clearly a balance must be struck, with teachers maintaining the lead in instruction and informed support staff providing additional, secondary support (Butt and Lowe 2012).

The benefits of training for classroom support staff has been noted in the research (Black-Hawkins, Florian, and Rouse 2007; Wilson and Bedford 2008; Alborz et al. 2009; Blatchford et al. 2011; NatSIP 2012). Studies, however, also confirm it is a role that support staff have felt underprepared for (Blatchford et al. 2009; Radford, Blatchford, and Webster 2011), with concerns ranging from over-reliance by the class teacher (DSCF 2009); negative impact on academic outcomes (Webster et al. 2010); interference with peer interaction (Giangreco and Doyle 2007); and unnecessary dependency (Rose and Forlin 2010). A similar cautionary note is identified in the Irish context (DES 2011a), underlining the importance of careful and appropriate deployment (Etscheidt 2005; Blatchford et al. 2009).

Managing collaborative practice

As the numbers of classroom assistance have grown, teachers have had to assume a greater management role which demands skills in people management (Rubie-Davies et al. 2010). The SNA has a pivotal role to play in assisting with the meaningful inclusion and participation of the pupil with SEN in the mainstream setting, and the SNA who has a unique relationship with the child, has a key role in this regard. Whilst the findings of this study suggested a positive relationship between teachers and SNAs, it also reinforced other research findings that SNAs are generally involved on the periphery of the planning process (Lawlor and Creggan 2003). Clearly, recognition of the contribution of each staff member reinforces the inclusive culture of a school. Cooperation between teacher and SNA can be a productive and mutually informative experience for both teacher and SNA as each has a particular knowledge and insight into the pupil(s) with SEN (Logan and Feiler 2006).

In light of the evidence that SNAs are becoming more involved in educational duties, a collaborative partnership assumes an increasingly vital function. Management training is an increasing imperative if inclusive practice is to meet the needs of pupils of SEN but it is a role for which many teachers are typically not trained (Rubie-Davies et al. 2010; Butt and Lowe 2012). There has been a renewed emphasis on management training for teachers in Ireland (DES 2011a; NCSE 2011a); this represents a positive step in furthering good practice, highlights a collaborative relationship with the class teacher and endorses the position of the SNA within the wider school community.

Research elsewhere suggests that teachers and classroom support staff tend to work across a continuum, spanning inclusive (positive working relationship), assimilationist (confusion over roles) and exclusive (limited or no direction from teacher) educational contexts (Rutherford 2012). Whilst the ambiguity of job descriptions has undoubtedly been a contributory factor, teachers' limited access to management training at both pre-service and in-service levels has meant that team work between teachers and classroom assistance has been a less developed aspect of inclusive practice (Riggs and Mueller 2001; Radford, Blatchford, and Webster 2011). It is generally accepted that the most effective schools have clear guidance for teachers and learning support assistants (Ofsted 2010) that involves a shared and collective exchange of information on pupils' needs and studies have stressed the importance of shared commitment at macro and micro levels to build inclusive partnerships (Flatman and Watson 2009; Blatchford et al. 2011; Bignold and Barbera 2012). It is an approach endorsed in Ireland, where a whole-school ethos based on the principles of collaboration and team work constitutes a key feature in the effective deployment of SNA support (DES 2011, 16).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding statutory guidance, there is consistent evidence that the role of the SNA in Irish classrooms has assumed a broader profile than originally intended. The caring aspect of the post is one that undoubtedly provides reassurance to many parents, teachers and pupils with SEN. However, there would seem to be a strong case to review the current definition of the post, including renewed consideration of the particular knowledge and skills that SNAs can bring to supporting pupils and teachers in the classroom. Whilst not without challenges, such a review has the

potential to reinforce policy commitment to inclusion, clarify the professional status of SNAs and strengthen the statutory educational rights of children with SEN.

Notes

1. Including for example, The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993); The Comprehensive Initiatives for Assessment and Delivery of Special Needs Education (1998); The Education Act (1998); The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004); The Disability Discrimination Act (2005).
2. SEN Circular 0006/2011.
3. Including: SP ED 07/02; SP.ED 24/03; SNA 15/05; SP ED 0009/2009; 0021/2011; 0071/2011
4. Including for example, The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993); The Comprehensive Initiatives for Assessment and Delivery of Special Needs Education (1998); The Education Act (1998); EPSEN Act (2004) and The Disability Discrimination Act (2005).

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