

## **The Changing Roles of Teaching Assistants in England and Special Needs Assistants in Ireland: A Comparison.**

**In the discourse on how to deploy additional adults towards the achievement of classroom learning environments that are more inclusive in Ireland, a comparative study with England is useful. This article gives an account of a completed element of a wider study comparing the work of teaching assistants in England with that of special needs assistants in Ireland. While the two educational contexts differ systemically and developmentally, many of the variables at play on this issue are common to both.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The use of additional adults to support teachers in the classroom has become a focus for research and discussion internationally (Palladino, Cornoldi, Vianello, Scruggs, and Mastropieri, 1999; Riggs and Mueller, 2001) and has been seen as critical to the debate on emerging models of inclusive educational provision. Giangreco and Doyle (2007) compared practices in twelve countries around the world and concluded that whilst there is a general recognition of the need for additional adult support in classrooms, there is no consensus about the ways in which they should be utilized in order to attain maximum benefit for pupils. They suggest that our understanding of effective classroom support is currently at a crossroads and that there is an urgent need for research to ascertain the efficacy of the several models being deployed.

Such research, when conducted in individual countries may reveal interesting patterns of support and may provide data with regards to the effectiveness of nationally adopted procedures. However, in order to consider the adoption or rejection of approaches, which may have previously been overlooked, comparative study may have the added benefit of providing an opportunity for researchers and teachers to broaden their perspectives and understanding of what might be possible. It may also inform debate by bringing some clarity to perceived similarities and differences in approach. This paper reports on the first stage of a wider piece of research that will compare the work of the teaching assistant (TA) in England to that of the special needs assistant (SNA) in Ireland. Given that the research is not making a comparison between two identical groups, it is important first to examine developments that have shaped the context in which both groups are working and how their role is perceived before discussing the findings of the research.

### **THE ROLE OF THE TEACHING ASSISTANT IN ENGLAND**

Thomas (1992) describes how over a ten year period from 1980 – 1990 an increasing number of adults appeared as support staff in English classrooms. This occurred as a result of changes in schools that included the need to address an increasingly diverse school population, most particularly the support of pupils identified as having special

educational needs (SEN). The nature of this support in classrooms was later characterised by a lack of clarity and purpose. Indeed, the range of titles given to those working in positions of support – classroom assistant, education welfare assistants, learning support assistants – was in itself an indication of an ill-defined role. Over time, a gradual shift from an emphasis on care to a focus on supporting learning was identified in research (Clayton, 1993). This educational role was acknowledged formally by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) with the publication of a good practice guide (DfES, 2000). This document also sought to clarify terminology relating to support staff stating the term ‘teaching assistant’ to be ‘the Government’s preferred generic term of reference for all those in paid employment in support of teachers in primary, special and secondary schools’ (DfES, 2000, p. 4). Outlining the role of the TA as one that is fully integrated within the school, the DfES identified responsibilities that supported the pupil, the teacher, the curriculum and the school in partnership and under the direction of the teacher. Some of the activities identified as good practice for TAs working with pupils included encouraging pupils, assisting them in educational tasks, clarifying instruction, modelling good practice and reporting pupil progress to the teacher.

In 2003, standards for a new grade of Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) were introduced as part of a national agreement between education employers, trade unions and the DfES relating to workforce remodelling in schools (DfES, 2003). These standards increase career opportunities and make more explicit the activities that TAs meeting them may undertake. While stating that the work of teachers and HLTAs is complimentary and not interchangeable, the standards further the potential for involvement by TAs in the teaching process by expanding their role in relation to planning, monitoring, assessment and class management (Training and Development Agency (TDA), 2006). Groom (2006) suggests that by meeting these professional standards, HLTAs will be provided with ‘a degree of professional autonomy’ which will allow them to take on additional responsibilities in schools (p. 200). Bach, Kessler and Heron (2006) reporting on research investigating the impact of workforce reform in schools found mixed responses from teachers to these changes. Some teachers acknowledged that their expectations of TAs had risen as a result of discussions relating to the new standards, while a majority expressed unease about their changing role. This unease came from the perception that the Government was attempting to ‘blur the boundaries between teacher and TA work’ through the introduction of HLTA standards which have the scope for TAs ‘to be left in sole charge of classes’ (p.17-18). Another important aspect of the HLTA standards is that they are designed to complement those in place for qualified teachers’ status and as such, may offer a pathway to teaching for TAs. Bach et al. (2006) found little evidence of TAs pursuing this.

The number of full time equivalent TA posts in England has increased dramatically in the past decade from 61,000 in 1997 (DfEE, 1997) to 162,900 in 2006 (DfES, 2007). Groom (2006) reports that while some TAs were employed in 2005 directly to support pupils with SEN, the vast majority had a ‘generic classroom support role’ (p. 199).

### **THE ROLE OF THE SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANT IN IRELAND**

The introduction of support staff to Irish classrooms followed a somewhat similar pattern to that of England (Lawlor and Cregan, 2003; Logan, 2006). As was the case

with TAs in England, the progression from childcare assistant in special schools and classroom assistants employed through work experience programmes in the 1970s and 1980s, to that of SNA, is associated mainly with the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools (Logan, 2006). A review of published research relating to the work of SNAs in primary and special schools in Ireland identifies a number of issues of concern. The most problematic of these relates to the discrepancy between the role as prescribed by the Department of Education and Science (DES) which is identified as one of ‘care’ (DES, 2002), and actual practice in schools. The research has confirmed that, while SNAs do attend to the care needs of pupils with SEN, they also support learning and have a role in the educational process. It also confirmed that this aspect of their role had the approval of principals and teachers surveyed as long as it remained under the direction and guidance of the teacher (Lawlor and Cregan, 2003; Carrig, 2004; Elliott, 2004; Logan, 2006). In elaborating on the educational aspect of their role, Logan (2006) identified SNAs as engaging in activities similar to those outlined for TAs in England (DfES, 2000). Assisting with literacy and numeracy is identified by Lawlor and Cregan (2003) and with ‘communication and curricular programmes’ by Carrig (2004, p.121).

Prior to 2005, the model of allocation of SNA support to schools in Ireland was to assign support to individual named pupils based on psychological assessment reports. While this was the case, findings in Lawlor and Cregan (2003), Elliott (2004) and Logan (2006) found that while SNAs did work with individual pupils they also worked with other pupils and with groups. Following a review of the allocation of SNA support to schools in 2005 the DES signalled the phasing out of ‘child specific contracts’ to SNAs and a move towards a more flexible model, with the possibility of SNAs supporting more than one pupil with SEN (DES, 2005). Some changes to the duties of the SNA were also outlined. These changes introduce some flexibility in deployment within schools, outline SNAs responsibilities relating to contact with parents and also in relation to whole school development planning. They do not, however, reflect the reality of SNA involvement in educational activities identified in the research. Overall, the duties are described as ‘assisting schools in providing necessary non-teaching services to pupils with assessed educational needs’ and stipulate that SNAs may not in any ‘circumstances be left in sole charge of a class or group’ (DES, 2005, Appendix 1).

As is the case in England the numbers of SNAs in Irish schools has risen dramatically in the past decade. In 1992 there were 251.5 SNAs in special schools and special classes in Ireland (Ireland, 1993). This had risen to 8,646 in all schools in 2007 (information received through author’s personal contact with DES 5<sup>th</sup> June 2007).

## **RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

From this brief overview of the development of the role of the TA in England and the SNA in Ireland it is clear that formally two very different models are in place. The research in both countries would suggest, however, that there are remarkable similarities in the activities carried out by both groups in classrooms (Clayton, 1993; Logan, 2006). Research also identifies collaborative practice, partnership and teamwork between teachers and support personnel as important in supporting pupils with SEN (Lacey, 2001; Balshaw and Farrell, 2002; Lawlor and Cregan, 2003). However, the way that roles and responsibilities are prescribed within teams may result in different kinds of collaboration and teamwork emerging and also in some

team efforts working more effectively than others (Lacey, 2001; Rose, 2000). In 2004, the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) signalled opposition to any change in the role of the SNA that would result in an extension towards that of 'classroom' or 'teaching assistant' as represented by the English model (ASTI, 2004). The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) also urged caution on this issue but voiced a concern that SNAs might be underused in Irish classrooms (INTO, 2003). At a time when there is some discussion in both countries relating to roles and responsibilities of TAs and SNAs, some attempt at a direct comparison of the work of both groups is appropriate.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A questionnaire survey was conducted of TAs in England (N=74) and SNAs in Ireland (N=82). The sample used was a convenience sample gathered by the authors and their colleagues working in higher education establishments in the two countries. Respondents in both countries were working in primary, post-primary and special schools and were undertaking professional development courses at the time of the survey. The data gathered have been subjected to an emerging key concepts analysis using a template approach (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and the samples subjected to statistical comparison using a two tailed *t* test in order to identify significant differences and to manage variables.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The research reported provides initial survey data, which the authors feel is worthy of discussion at this point. Because of the nature of the sample the generalisability of findings is limited. Also, while the same questions were put to respondents in Ireland and England, it is not suggested that the two groups were identical, thus affecting interpretation. The comparison of data across the two countries that has been made within this study needs to be carefully interpreted to take account of legislative, organisational and cultural differences in the two jurisdictions.

## **FINDINGS**

In the questionnaire respondents were asked to indicate on a frequency table, the way they are deployed to work with pupils. Similarly, they were asked to indicate the level of their involvement in planning for lessons, preparation of teaching materials and assessment.

### **Models of Deployment**

Differences emerged between TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland when they were asked to indicate how frequently they worked with individual pupils, with groups and with whole classes. SNAs in the sample spent a significant amount of their time working in support of individual pupils. The figures reveal that 98% of the SNAs surveyed provided individual support to pupils either every day or often as opposed to 77% of TAs. While both of these figures are high they need to be interpreted with caution. They do not tell us whether respondents were working with the same pupil continuously and must be interpreted in the context of the numbers who reported themselves working with groups of pupils every day or often. In the SNA sample, 63% reported that they worked everyday or often with groups and 14% revealed that

this was never the case. In the English sample all TAs spend part of their time working with groups of pupils with 93% doing so every day or often. None of the TAs reported that they 'never' worked with groups. When this fact is considered along with the findings relating to individual support, it seems unlikely that TAs work with the same individual pupils continuously. On the other hand this may be the case for the 14% of SNAs in the sample who reported that they never work with groups. Asked to indicate how frequently respondents were engaged in 'taking the whole class', 74% of TAs in this sample report that they did this sometimes with 39% revealing that this is a regular practice. In the SNA sample this was an unusual occurrence with only 4% engaging in such activity regularly and the majority, 71%, never taking whole classes. However, given the stipulation by the DES that SNAs should not be in sole charge of classes or groups, (Ireland 2005: Appendix 1) the fact that 26% of SNAs in the sample responded that they 'sometimes' take a whole class is an unexpected finding.

### **Involvement in Planning for Lessons**

Whilst the number of TAs taking whole classes is significant the numbers planning lessons alone does not match it. Asked to indicate the frequency with which they planned lessons alone, 12% of TAs reported that they did this every day and 16%, often. While this may indicate teachers continue to maintain responsibility for planning, the combined figure of those who plan lessons alone, every day and often, at 28%, is significant, and worthy of further exploration. Similarly, while the figures for planning alone are low in the SNA sample (5%), the fact that 31% report that they 'sometimes' plan alone is interesting given the description of their duties as 'non teaching' (Ireland 2005, Appendix 1) as outlined earlier. Almost the same number of TAs (32%) and SNAs (31%) reported that they are involved in planning with teachers every day or often. A higher number of SNAs (37%) reported that they never plan with the teacher compared to 29% in the TA sample. The preparation of materials for lessons is something that is closely related to planning in teaching. Again a higher number of TAs (67%) reported that they carried out this duty every day or often, compared with 49% of SNAs.

### **Assessment**

In respect of assessing pupil performance there is a clear distinction between the two sample groups. The TAs in England report themselves to be involved in this function on a very regular basis with 40% seeing this as a daily activity as opposed to 16% of their colleagues in Ireland. A further 28% of SNAs reported being involved in assessment often as opposed to 22% of TAs. A distinction appears between those who never assess pupil performance with 24% of SNAs reporting this as opposed to 7% of TAs.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this survey significant differences were found between the ways in which TAs in the English sample and SNAs in the Irish sample operated. By examining these differences it is possible to gain insight into the distinctive nature of the role of TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland and to form an opinion in relation to the model in place in each country.

In relation to deployment, the most significant difference in the findings is that between the numbers of SNAs and TAs taking whole classes. The contrast in these findings gives a good indication of the different expectations of support staff in the two countries. While the expectation is that both groups will work under the direction of the teacher (DfES, 2000; DES, 2007) the fact that TAs are expected to manage whole class groups is one indicator that a greater level of responsibility is delegated to them. The survey does not describe the circumstances under which TAs will take whole classes, nor does it outline the role of the teacher when this occurs. It will be very important to explore in the next phase of this research whether TAs are involved in a supervisory role with whole class groups or one that involves the delivery of lessons. Another example of different role expectations relates to the use of TA and SNA support to work with individual pupils. It would appear that while the TAs in this survey spend a lot of their time working with groups or classes, there is still a high level of support to individuals. The SNAs were even more likely to work with individuals, and some did so exclusively. Bearing in mind the criticisms of the model of individual support which have been made (Jerwood, 1999, Marks, Schrader and Levine, 1999; Rose, 2000; Lacey, 2001) it will be important to probe deeper into the reasoning behind decisions to provide support to individual pupils and to examine when and how this support is given. The findings relating to individual support and working with groups for the SNA sample does not differ greatly from findings in previous Irish research (Logan, 2006).

A number of issues arise from the findings relating to planning. The first is that the numbers of TAs who report that they plan alone on a daily basis is high compared to the SNA finding, but lower than the number who engage with whole classes and groups alone. This may suggest that teachers are less likely to delegate responsibility for planning to TAs. The second relates to teachers and support personnel planning together. While TAs and SNAs reported almost identical involvement in joint planning, a much higher number of SNAs reported that they never planned with the teacher. Evidence in Thomas (1992), Lorenz (1998) and Carrig (2004) suggests that joint planning contributes to improved communications and more effective team building. Given this fact, the low level of SNA involvement in planning with the teacher would be a concern. This finding is consistent with findings in Lawlor and Cregan (2003) and Logan (2006) who report that many teachers did not involve SNAs in planning. In Ireland, the preparation of materials is not a duty stipulated by the DES for SNAs but it is one that many do engage in and which is approved of by teachers and principals (Lawlor and Cregan, 2003; Logan, 2006). The fact that TAs in England are much more likely to engage in this aspect of planning suggests that teachers there may use them more effectively as a support to themselves. In Ireland, it is possible that SNAs are underused in this respect.

In respect of assessing pupil performance there is once again a clear distinction between expectations of TAs and SNAs. The majority of TAs report themselves to be involved in assessing pupil progress on a regular basis while a large number of SNAs report that they never engage in assessment. If by assessment we mean the continuum from observation to formal tests (Ireland, 1999) then the findings in this survey are in contrast with findings in Logan (2006), which indicate that, the vast majority of SNAs are involved in relating pupil progress to the teacher. Involving SNAs in assessment at this level is in keeping with the role outlined to them in the individual education plan process (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2006). Further investigation

of this issue, including TA and SNA perceptions of what constitutes assessment, will be appropriate in the second phase of this research.

## CONCLUSION

At this stage of this research it would be ill-advised to draw too many conclusions from the data of a survey which is ostensibly aimed to shape thinking towards a more detailed study. However, it is possible to state that in recent years workforce remodelling in schools has impacted on the role of TA in England and has led to changes in the responsibilities that they may assume and the roles which they play in classrooms. In Ireland the SNAs in this survey fulfil some similar roles but there are very significant differences when compared to their English colleagues. The data presented raise important questions for the next phase of the study. These relate to further clarification of findings presented here and also to an investigation into the role of the teacher, as perceived by respondents in both countries.

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