

# Teacher-Special Needs Assistant Partnership: A School's Response

**A special school, catering for pupils from 4 to 18 years with mild general learning disabilities, recently undertook a process of staff development, which brought the roles of the teacher and the special needs assistant into sharp focus in all aspects of school life. This process and a significant outcome of the process, a Code of Good Practice for Teacher-SNA Partnership, are detailed in this article.**

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the many challenges facing the teaching profession in Ireland currently is the rapid expansion of the support staff of Special Needs Assistants recruited to work alongside the class teacher in support of pupils with significant learning disabilities. What can the role of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) be? Who in the school has responsibility for shaping the new relationships that must develop given that neither the teachers nor the new and enthusiastic recruits have received prior training for a collaborative dimension to the tasks of education?

## THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

Scoil Chiaráin is a special school in north Dublin designated to cater for the educational needs of pupils aged from four to eighteen who have mild general learning disabilities (MGLD) whose needs cannot be met in a mainstream setting. The school was founded in 1970 with a principal, 12 classroom teachers and one special needs assistant, then known as 'child care assistant' (CCA). This assistant was deployed within the school to work primarily with the teachers of the two youngest class groups and to be available for emergencies, for example first aid across the rest of the school. In the early development of the school, although most of the teachers did not have the experience of working with and providing a role for another adult in the classroom, the significance and value of the role was recognised by the principal and staff.

In the early 1980s the Board of Management responded to the needs of the school at the time and appointed and paid the salary of a second CCA and an in-house job description was devised with the input of the staff concerned. It went considerably further than the guidelines in *Circular 10/76* from the Department of Education (1976) and reflected both the pupils' needs and the experience and expertise of the staff involved. Unfortunately, in the tight financial circumstances of the time, the Board found that they could not sustain the financial commitment for the second CCA and turned instead to the possibilities of being involved with the publicly funded FÁS Apprenticeship Scheme (a community employment scheme). Until its demise in the mid 1990s, this programme provided the school with personnel on short-term training contracts to work in the capacity of classroom assistants. A training structure was provided by FÁS which significantly did not include the class teachers. When the Department of Education began to appoint further support staff to schools in the mid 1990s, the quota of childcare assistants went from one to four in Scoil Chiaráin. This new group, now called Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), had the earlier in-house job description to help shape their roles. Within the school it was now possible to provide support not only at primary age level but also for the

post primary pupils up to eighteen years.

This was a significant time in the development of the school. The then Board of Management commissioned a professional facilitator and in a comprehensive consultation process spearheaded a review and a five-year plan of development. The legacy of this process includes a clear *mission statement* and a school culture of inclusivity and openness to change. Although there have been personnel changes since then, it is with this backdrop that the process of staff development described in this article was undertaken by the current staff.

## **A TENTATIVE BEGINNING**

Anticipating the arrival of two newly allocated SNA staff in September 2000 and a further four in January 2001 to join the staff of thirteen class teachers, the staff member with the post of responsibility for staff development sought to put in place appropriate and practical guidance materials. For many of the teachers this would be their first experience of providing a role for another adult in their classroom. Newly available support texts from Fulton Publishers in the U.K. (Fox, 1998; Lorenz, 1998) were acquired for the staff library.

In particular, one set of guidance materials called *SENAT Special Educational Needs Assistants and Teachers: Training for Special Needs Staff* (Northumberland County Council, 2000) was specifically selected to stimulate in-house discussion and was introduced to the combined teaching and support staff. These materials, although designed to be used for joint training of teachers and SNAs in mainstream contexts in the U.K., were easily adapted to suit this special school. The content is structured in nine units of work on practical aspects of engagement with pupils who have special needs involving role clarification in areas such as *managing difficult behaviour, personal and social development, speech and language difficulties, parental liaison, programme planning and individual education plans*. The units are free standing, capable of being used flexibly and need only be used one hour at a time each having study materials and providing in-built feedback to users.

### **Making a Start**

Practical arrangements were made to facilitate teacher and SNA partners or small teams to work together on self-selected units on a trial basis. Feedback was sought from users and shared with the whole staff. The verdict was positive with some units proving more useful than others. The most striking aspect of the feedback from staff was the way the materials allowed partners to question, to address and to clarify aspects of the job pertinent to their own particular situation and concerns. This facilitated the beginning of a necessary debate on mutually agreed boundaries and role clarification. These materials continue to be used currently according to staff needs.

### **The Role of the SNA and Parents**

Throughout the school year 2001-2 the staff member with responsibility for staff development was engaged in developing further the school's home-school links policy and practice. In this one aspect of school development the role of the SNA was highlighted. The involvement of the SNA with the class teacher in the planning of, and participation in key activities with parents such as initial class meetings, 1:1 meetings, home visits etc. was documented, discussed, evaluated and subsequently entered into agreed procedural statements.

### **Emerging Priorities**

As a follow on to the experiences of the process of policy development on working with parents, the need for role clarification was identified as a priority and was seen as the biggest single challenge

facing the school at whole school level. A proposal put to the staff and wholeheartedly supported was that for the following year 2002-3 the partnership between the teacher and the SNA would become a priority across all aspects of school life. The staff meeting scheduled for October 2002 was planned exclusively for debate on the respective roles of the teacher and the SNA. The aim of the work was to address staff expectations of each other's role and to explore the potential support role of the SNA under the guidance of the teacher in relation to the students, the teacher and the school. In advance of the day, staff prepared by thinking and writing about their respective perceptions and experiences. The information provided was compiled and presented for open discussion with individual responses not identified. Discussion on the day was facilitated jointly by the principal and the teacher with responsibility for staff development.

The debate served to increase awareness among staff of the need for mutual respect and trust. A desire to engage in more of this type of thinking emerged as a declared outcome with the issue of *time* seen as the main hurdle to the development of collaborative practice. The use of the SENAT materials continued on an optional basis, further literature was acquired for the staff library as it became available and working practice was consolidated during the remainder of the year. Although not as advanced as we had hoped to be, it was clear that we should aspire to having our own *Good Practice Guidelines*.

## **GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES**

The staff development plan for 2003-4 had as a clear goal the development of *Good Practice Guidelines*. In September written feedback on the previous year's work along with suggestions for inclusion in the proposed good practice guidelines was sought from all staff. A whole Staff Development Day in October 2003 was designated for the task and a facilitator from the School Development Planning Support service of the DES was booked to lead us through the work. The principal and a representative group of staff met with the facilitator in advance providing background information and presenting staff views and school goals.

## **A GOOD DAY'S WORK**

The facilitator planned and delivered a full programme directly catering to the declared needs. In small groups allowing for full participation the staff was challenged firstly to review the school's operation in terms of positive school climate and good relationships - what were we doing well? and what could we do better? We were helped to find practical solutions to the problems raised – in fact, the facilitator insisted on us solving our own problems and on allocating responsibilities and on delineating a time frame for implementation. Secondly we worked together to define the roles of SNA, teacher, special duties post holder, principal and Board of Management, addressing priorities, overlaps and support needs. Our deliberations were documented and shared and at the end of the day it was agreed that the principal and staff member with the responsibility for staff development would use this material to create a first draft of a school code of practice on teacher-SNA partnership.

The document has been structured under the headings advised by the School Development Planning Support (Primary) service. Several drafts and a year later the school has a Code of Practice for Teacher-SNA Partnership and the school community is happy to share it with readers of REACH. The author wishes to thank the teachers and special needs assistants who listened to each other with sensitivity, who were frank and open in their discussions and who above all are committed to being the best they can be for their students. This is their document.

## **CODE OF PRACTICE FOR TEACHER-SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANT PARTNERSHIP**

### **Introductory Statement**

For over 20 years, Special Needs Assistants have been employed in Scoil Chiaráin, sanctioned by the Department of Education and Science (DES), to support children with special needs. Over time their role has become more complex as they operate beyond the narrow definition of DES *Circular 07/02* (DES, 2002) that “SNAs are recruited specifically to assist in the care of pupils with disabilities in an educational context”. In Scoil Chiaráin their role is more in line with the British model of being entirely integrated with the whole process of education and development of all children under the direction of the teacher.

In 2000 the current process of role clarification and development was initiated. Special Needs Assistants are seen as fellow professionals working in collaboration with teachers supporting our pupils with special educational needs. The number of SNA positions allocated to the school has increased in recent years from four to eleven. All thirteen class teachers have a partnership arrangement with a special needs assistant for either all or for half of the school day.

We have dedicated a staff meeting and a School Development Planning Day towards devising our own code of good practice to assist staff members develop positive working relationships in a pleasant atmosphere. This document has drawn on the collective views of all the teachers and SNAs compiled over a two year period of debate and review. In addition, all staff participated in reviewing early drafts of the code and have in March 2005 given their full approval to this current policy document.

### **Rationale**

It is in the interest of good staff relations to provide clarity of purpose and to foster mutual respect, trust and appreciation in the day to day working partnership between the teacher and the SNA. A clear understanding of each other’s role and responsibility helps to build teamwork and avoid misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts. We have agreed that good communication, openness to each other and flexibility with mutually understood boundaries are essential features of effective partnership. To this end we have devised this code of good practice.

### **Relationship to the Characteristic Spirit of the School**

In keeping with the Mission Statement which states –

*The principles of equality, participation and respect for difference ensure that in Scoil Chiaráin all the members of the community are valued and have a role in its development*

– teachers and SNA staff will be consulted and involved in school development.

- Scoil Chiaráin supports teamwork and recognises the importance of good channels of communication in the development of successful collaborative relationships between working partners.
- Scoil Chiaráin recognises that for staff to be in the best position to support the pupils and the school the roles and responsibilities of teachers and SNAs must be made explicit and be subject to review.
- In addition, where relevant information relating to the ‘business of the school’ is made available to the teacher or to the SNA, joint understanding of the need for confidentiality is required. All staff will adhere to the agreed policy on access to records.

## Aims

- to value and respect each worker in our school community
- to enhance especially the working partnerships between teachers and special needs assistants in the best interests of the students
- to define the roles and responsibilities of the partners and provide clarity of purpose and mutual understanding of role inter-relationships

## GUIDELINES: CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE

The *role of the SNA* in relation to teachers and pupils and their parents/guardians will be considered when drafting, sanctioning and implementing procedural arrangements and policy – in all aspects of development at whole school, area<sup>1</sup> and class levels.

The *role of the Teacher* in relation to SNAs and pupils and their parents/guardians will be considered when drafting, sanctioning and implementing procedural arrangements and policy – in all aspects of development at whole school, area and class levels.

1. To further understanding and develop expertise together:
  - all staff will attend monthly staff meetings (minutes supplied to those who did not attend including specialist teachers)
  - all staff will attend in-house staff development sessions
  - the teacher and the SNA will attend parent/teacher meetings and the SNA will contribute by request and will attend case conferences where practicable
  - teacher and SNA will meet on a timetabled basis to discuss working arrangements at class level – these timetables will be submitted to the principal
  - time will be made available to talk with other SNA colleagues, by appointment and agreement with relevant class teachers and the principal
2. The ‘induction’ process for new staff members (Teachers and SNAs) to Scoil Chiaráin will include:
  - where it is not possible for the teacher and SNA to meet in advance of the school year, the principal will make the necessary arrangements to facilitate an early meeting
  - discussion with the Principal re. *code of practice* for partnership and receipt of appropriate documentation
  - allocated time with teacher or SNA partner to discuss working arrangements and immediate priorities (supported by area colleagues providing class cover)
  - a specially convened area meeting to establish joint procedures
  - continued support for the new teacher from immediate area colleagues
  - support for the new SNA through placement in a number of other classrooms; arrangements may be made to ‘shadow’ an experienced SNA colleague where appropriate and with the support of the class teacher
3. Within the overall systems of communication specific support will be made available to Teacher-SNA partners in the form of TIME and RESOURCES:

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<sup>1</sup> There are three physical sub-divisions in the school known as ‘areas’. These three areas currently correspond to the primary, junior post-primary and senior post-primary class groups. Teachers and SNAs work together as a team for management purposes within each area.

- At the beginning of each term, timetables for planning meetings will be worked out at the first area meeting and submitted to the principal. These may be weekly or fortnightly sessions with additional opportunities for longer sessions on less frequent occasions depending on area staffing/timetabling arrangements. Brief records of meetings will be included in the end of year class report to the principal.
  - Up to date resource material will be provided in the staff library; in particular, the SENAT support materials specifically designed for joint discussion between Teachers and SNAs on practical issues related to the work in school are available and are recommended for use.
4. Specific guidelines for working collaboratively:
- It is the responsibility of the class teacher to guide the SNA as to how best she/he can support the student and how best she/he can support the teacher in relation to the management of the class and the implementation of the curriculum.
  - The teacher and the SNA will be expected to refer to and implement agreed procedures together – at class, area and whole school levels.
  - The teacher or the SNA may seek the support of the Principal in the event of misunderstanding or lack of clarity in relation to responsibilities and roles.
5. There are specific issues that the teacher and SNA will need to discuss together. It is suggested that each teacher-SNA partnership draw up a joint list specific to their own situation in the school, which will include the following essentials:
- how teacher will inform the SNA of the day's programme
  - how teacher will inform the SNA of his/her duties
  - how teacher expects the SNA to report back on work with pupils
  - protocol for taking phone calls from parents/guardians
  - protocol for messages to parents/guardians in home school notebook or student journal
  - administration of medication and the keeping of records
  - the code of good behaviour – class and area expectations
6. Arrangements for working with substitute teachers in the event of teacher absence:
- The principal will explain to the substitute teacher the support that is available from the SNA and other staff in the area.
7. Arrangements for working with student teachers on 'teaching practice':
- The placement and participation of 'students' in classrooms throughout the school has an implication for classroom management therefore requests for placements of trainee teachers, SNAs, or work experience students should be made first to the class teacher and in the case of the 'shadowing' arrangements also with the class SNA.
  - The class teacher will advise the 'student' teacher (who is to take over the running of the class temporarily) on the normal working arrangements with the SNA assigned to the class; any changes will be made by mutual agreement.

### **Success Criteria**

Structures are in place for continuous open dialogue and development of mutually satisfying partnerships between teachers and SNAs. This code of practice is a clear reference document developed by all the staff and is subject to regular review. All staff members are committed to its implementation in full. Support for in-house professional development is available through reference and guidance material and from colleagues. The Board of Management allocates financial resources for staff development and encourages participation in courses both within and outside the school.

<b>Roles and Responsibilities</b>	
Board of Management	<p><i>Leadership and Responsibilities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Appointment of special needs assistants and teachers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Criteria for the job, screening, interview</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Contract etc. according to DES procedures</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Maintaining school ethos</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Effective day to day running of the school</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> On the job support for personnel, encouragement and inclusion</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lobbying financial support re. professional development</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Conflict resolution</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Informing and being informed</li> </ul>
Principal	<p><i>Leadership and Vision</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Appointment and placement of teachers and SNAs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Maintaining good communication network</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Motivating and supporting staff</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Monitoring effectiveness of structures and agreements</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Being available to staff for advice, ideas, affirmation and for conflict resolution</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Liaising with post-holders and staff generally</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Accountability</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mentoring new staff</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sharing information and availing of training.</li> </ul>
Post-holder with Responsibility for Staff Development	<p><i>Leadership and Collaboration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Supporting the principal in the management of teacher-SNA partnership</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Working with the team of staff, being available to all staff with advice and practical support, supporting new members of staff</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Being a role model and providing leadership – through own practice and developing professional understanding</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Providing support literature</li> </ul>
Class Teacher	<p><i>Implementation/Delivery of the Curriculum</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Having ultimate responsibility for student development – at academic, social, personal and cultural levels</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Having administrative duties for – roll book, timetables and resources</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Assessing the needs and strengths of children, design of appropriate, differentiated curriculum relevant to the assessed needs, developing plans of work, record keeping and report writing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Establishing and maintaining a code of positive behavior in own class and in area in agreement with colleagues</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pastoral care of pupils in class; may prepare pupils for the sacraments of Communion and Confirmation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reporting to the principal on class activities and on interactions with families</li> </ul> <p><i>Responsibility to Parents/Guardians</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Having ultimate responsibility to liaise with parents/guardians – to</li> </ul>

	<p>inform and be informed, providing progress reports, maintaining weekly/daily contacts, arranging meetings – from planning to reporting/record keeping.</p> <p><i>Role of Teacher in relation to SNA</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Involving SNA in planning and implementation of curriculum</li> <li>❑ Involving the SNA in the support of the pupils</li> <li>❑ Involving the SNA in the home-school liaison process</li> <li>❑ Providing information, guidance and feedback to SNA</li> </ul> <p><i>Liaison with Others</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Liaising with area colleagues, with specialist subject teachers, resource teachers, therapists who work with any student from class group</li> <li>❑ Liaising with parents/guardians of pupils</li> <li>❑ Liaising with outside agencies through the principal</li> <li>❑ Fulfilling duties of any post of responsibility held</li> </ul>
<p>Special Needs Assistant</p>	<p><i>Supporting the Students' Learning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Under teacher guidance supporting the pupil/s particular needs (individually or small group) in the learning tasks set across the curriculum, and providing feedback on pupil performance</li> <li>❑ Motivating and encouraging the learner – in ways consistent with the goals for each student set by the teacher</li> <li>❑ Being observant of student responses – positive and negative – and reporting back to teacher</li> <li>❑ Distributing and collecting homework</li> </ul> <p><i>Supporting the Students' Personal and Social Development</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Being a good role model and being consistent, maintaining the code of behavior in the classroom and in the shared area as explained by and agreed with teaching staff, encouraging social interaction with and among students by showing interest in them at a personal level and by being caring and approachable</li> <li>❑ Playing a key role in supporting good habits in relation to personal needs – health and hygiene</li> <li>❑ Administering first aid and medication by arrangement and maintaining accurate records</li> <li>❑ Supporting the supervising teacher at break times and lunchtimes by maintaining agreed procedures both inside and outside the building, managing the 'Breakfast Club' with SNA colleagues as agreed at area levels, managing swimming money and records and supporting individual student's needs at swimming sessions in accordance with agreed procedures, supporting teachers with supervision of students on school outings</li> <li>❑ Being vigilant for the wellbeing of individual students at all times and reporting observations and concerns to the relevant teacher</li> </ul> <p><i>Supporting the Teacher</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Assisting in the preparation, organisation and maintenance of classroom resources by arrangement with class teacher</li> <li>❑ Participating in the planning process with the class teacher in order to be informed of the needs of the students and of the best ways to support them</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Participating in the structured home school contacts arranged by the school/class teacher – class meetings, class visits and meetings, case conferences, home visits</li> <li>❑ Supporting and maintaining the practical arrangements indicated by the class teacher for the management of the class</li> </ul> <p><i>Supporting the School</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Understanding the confidential and sensitive nature of the work with the students and their parents and guardians</li> </ul>
Resource Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Liaising with the class teacher in targeting the needs of individual students, negotiating work schedules, devising programmes of work and recording and reporting on progress to the class teacher</li> <li>❑ By arrangement with the class teacher, involving the SNA in the lesson and in the provision to the class teacher of relevant information/feedback on student progress</li> </ul>
Special Subject Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Providing expertise in a particular subject</li> <li>❑ Liaison with class teacher and by arrangement involving the SNA in the lesson and in the provision to the class teacher of relevant information/feedback on student progress</li> </ul>
Speech and Language Therapist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Providing expertise in a particular area of development</li> <li>❑ Liaison with class teacher and if appropriate and by arrangement involving the SNA in specific programmes of work with individual students</li> </ul>

### **Timeframe for Implementation**

This policy is based on existing practice and is therefore largely in place. Following acceptance by the staff at the March 2005 staff meeting and by the Board of Management and parents’ policy sub-committee in April 2005, all aspects of this policy will be implemented in full.

### **Timeframe for Review**

This policy will be reviewed in May 2006.

### **Responsibility for Review**

The teacher with the post of responsibility for staff development will bring this policy to the attention of all staff and guide the process of review.

### **Ratification and Communication**

Having been agreed by all parties – staff, Board of Management, parents’ policy sub-committee – this document is now available as part of the school plan. (Our next challenge may be to compile a staff manual for SNAs across the curriculum).

### **SUMMARY**

The responsibility for creating a collaborative role for the SNA should not be left to the talents of the individual class teacher. It is a multifaceted and potentially powerful role, the development of which should be dealt with as a whole school issue. When working effectively alongside the class teacher, SNAs can and do make a positive difference to the school life of the child with special needs.

### **REFERENCES**

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