

The Evolving Role of the Special Needs Assistant: Towards a New Synergy

The post of Special Needs Assistant (SNA) is now an integral part of the Irish educational system. This paper presents findings from an investigation into the evolving role of the Special Needs Assistant from an ‘extra pair of hands’ to a learning support person in the classroom. This role has evolved without clear definition, adequate preparation, specific training or appropriate induction. Its future success is very dependent on a generous enthusiastic and professional response from all parties - SNAs, teachers, principals, Boards of Management and the Department of Education and Science. From the context of developments abroad, through an examination of developments in Ireland, findings from this research offer suggestions for the successful integration of the Special Needs Assistant for the mutual benefit of all parties involved.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of education for all children is the same; the goals are the same. But the help that individual children need in progressing towards them will be different. Whereas for some the road they have to travel towards the goals is smooth and easy, for others it is fraught with obstacles. For some the obstacles are so daunting that, even with the greatest possible help, they will not get very far. Nevertheless, for them too, progress will be possible, and their educational needs will be fulfilled, as they gradually overcome one obstacle after another on the way. (The Warnock Report, DES, 1978, p.5)

In this seminal report the education of children with special needs was catapulted onto centre stage. The report acted as a catalyst in the UK and in other countries, notably Ireland, to direct worthy attention to many crucial issues surrounding the appropriate and effective education of these children. Central to the findings of the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) was the abolition of the statutory categorisation of handicapped children and a recommendation that the term ‘children with learning difficulties’ should be used in future (p.43). The concept of integration (p.99) in the education system was also highlighted in this report. It recommended that every effort possible would be made to ensure adequate inclusion in the education system at appropriate levels for these children.

An Extra Pair of Hands

To give effect to these findings, the post of Special Needs Assistant emerged. Prior to this, ancillary workers (the extra pair of hands) in schools for children with special educational needs, were known as care assistants. Subsequent to this report and others (Project Peg, 1978, cited in Thomas, 1992), the emphasis shifted from assisting teachers in the care of children in special schools to assisting children with special needs in

mainstream and special schools as appropriate. This shift in emphasis brought with it an expanded role for the Special Needs Assistant, who now was involved not just in the 'care' of children with special needs, but increasingly in the 'education' of these children under the direction of the class teacher in both special and mainstream schools.

DEVELOPING ROLE OF THE SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANT

It has long been recognised and acknowledged in the UK that the role of the Special Needs Assistant involves activities of an educational nature, carried out under the direction of the class teacher (Clayton, 1993; Garner, 2002; Hilleard, 1988, cited in Clayton, 1993; Lee & Mawson, 1998; University of Manchester, 1999; Mencap, 1999; Potter & Richardson, 1999; DES, 1978). This expanded role is most clearly evident in the array of titles assigned to the position at different times as outlined by Balshaw (1999). Some of these titles are:

special support assistant, key worker, ancillary, welfare assistant, special needs assistant, non-teaching assistant, teaching assistant, teacher aide and educational support worker. (p.6)

In an effort to clarify the role associated with this post, and to reduce any possibility of assigning negative connotations in relation to the children being served, recent titles in use include para-professionals, and para-educators in the USA and Learning Support Assistants and more recently Teaching Assistants in the U.K.

CHANGING ROLE OF THE CLASSROOM TEACHER

In conjunction with the evolving role of the Special Needs Assistant is the inevitable change in role of the teacher. Teachers are now increasingly taking on the role of classroom managers (Clayton, 1993; Mencap, 1999). According to Stakes and Hornby (2001), teachers must be able to provide their assistants with a sense of direction. They need to design appropriate learning programmes and involve assistants in implementing them. The task of managing other adults in the classroom requires time, effort and expertise to get the fundamentals of relationships and roles right for the benefit of the children (Ainscow, 2000; Lacey, 2001; Rose, 2000; Thomas, 1992). This will not happen by chance. Rose (2000) points out that the teacher and special needs assistant relationship is a complex one. He also cautions that the presence of additional staff in a classroom cannot automatically guarantee that a pupil's special educational needs will be served. If the presence of additional adults in the classroom is to be in the best interests of the child, then both teachers and Special Needs Assistants need preparation and training for this new role.

A Good Practice Guide

The need for preparation and training was also recognised by the DES (1978) and has subsequently been reiterated in later research (Balshaw, 1999; Clayton, 1993; DfEE Green papers 1997, 1998b; Fox, 1998; Lacey, 2001; Lorenz, 1998; Margerison, 1997).

Following research from the University of Manchester (1999), *The Good Practice Guide (GPG)* (DfEE, 2000) was published, outlining ways of defining effective practice in a complex area of work. This guide envisaged the role of the SNA as being entirely integrated with the whole process of education and development for all children. They should be part of the whole staff team and not be seen as a marginalised group who only work with individual children. (Balshaw & Farrell, 2002, p.15).

The GPG refers to six main areas of good practice. These are:

- defining responsibilities clearly;
- providing clear deployment within a flexible framework;
- creating partnership with teachers;
- supporting effective liaison with other people involved in education;
- developing teamwork among special needs assistants;
- reviewing performance and promoting development. (Balshaw & Farrell, 2002, p. 16)

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

The purpose of the research presented in this paper was to examine the situation in regard to Special Needs Assistants in an Irish context at this time. In the Irish schools context the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Ireland, 1993), taking its lead from the Warnock report (DES, 1978), adopted the term special needs assistants and welcomed their employment as a means of delivering support in both mainstream and special schools.

The support services, for both special and ordinary schools, must be developed substantially. Additional Special Needs Assistants (at present known as Child Care Assistants) must be appointed to both ordinary and special schools (Ireland, 1993, p.23).

Given the context as it has evolved in the UK and other countries, the questions which this research sought to investigate were as follows:

What is the role of Special Needs Assistants in Irish classrooms?

How effectively does the title (SNA) reflect this role?

What is required by the role in terms of training and support for both teacher and SNA?

What are the implications of the role of the SNA for action by the various partners in the education process of the special needs child?

Dramatic Increase in Numbers

Responding to statements in the Education Act (Ireland, 1998) concerned with ensuring adequate educational provision for students with special educational needs, the Department of Education and Science has sanctioned a dramatic increase in the numbers of Special Needs Assistants appointed in Irish classrooms. The number has increased

from 299 in 1998 to 4,000 (approx.) in 2002 (figures issued by the DES to the INTO in March 2002). The assistants are deployed in both special and mainstream schools as follows:

3,059 in mainstream primary schools

200 in mainstream post-primary schools

987 in Special Schools (200 of these in special schools for pupils with Mild General Learning Disability)

Job Description

This dramatic increase in numbers was followed in March 2002 by a circular from the Department of Education and Science (DES/Irl, Circular Sp.Ed. 07/02) to Boards of Management and Principal Teachers of National and Special Schools setting out criteria regarding:

Applications for full-time or part-time Assistant support to address the special care needs of children with disabilities.

The use of the word ‘care’ was reiterated in the role definition in the opening statement of the circular:

Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are recruited specifically to assist in the care of pupils with disabilities in an educational context

And repeated again :

They (SNAs) may be appointed to a special school, or a mainstream national school to assist school authorities in making suitable provision for a pupil or pupils with special care needs arising from a disability.

The duties of the Special Needs Assistant which are outlined in the circular (DES/Irl, 07/02) are an exact reiteration of the duties as set out in a previous circular in October 1976 (Cir. 10/76) including the phrase “duties of a non-teaching nature.” *This phrase is highlighted in bold print in the recent document. Clearly, what is being advocated in this circular is in sharp contrast to the role of the Special Needs Assistant as reflected in research from other countries, and may be in contrast with the reality on the ground in an Irish context (Logan, 2001), leading to comments such as that of O’Keeffe (2002):*

The quantitative increase in such personnel (SNAs and others) has become almost a mantra for Department of Education and Science spokespersons in recent months. It may well be seen, in future years, that these years have been marked by profligacy, unless some more fundamental issues are addressed.

Schools Involved in the Study

In the absence of any research on the prevailing situation in an Irish context, this study

set out to investigate the evolving role of this relatively new phenomenon (SNA) in the Irish educational context and to examine the implications of this changing role for all involved. For feasibility purposes the study was confined to schools for pupils with Mild General Learning Disabilities (MGLD). This category of school comprises a combination of students requiring both care and learning support. All schools for pupils with MGLD in Ireland were included in the study. Data was gathered through questionnaires returned by Special Needs Assistants, Teachers and Principals in the schools and triangulated through semi-structured interviews with a group of Special Needs Assistants, a group of teachers, one individual teacher, and a principal. Interviews with experts in the field of Special Educational Needs in third-level institutions in Ireland and the UK were also carried out. The study was conducted between February and May 2002.

FINDINGS

Role

The overwhelming finding from this study in relation to the role of the Special Needs Assistant in Ireland is that this role has changed from that of a 'care' role to one concerned predominantly with activities of an educational nature. In addition, findings suggest that this is the preferred role, not just for the Special Needs Assistants, but also the preferred role of the SNA for both teachers and principals. Eighty-four per cent of SNAs reported being involved mainly in a learning support role or in the role of teaching assistant. Ninety-five per cent of teachers indicated that SNAs were involved in educational tasks through their literacy and numeracy work in the classroom. Teachers responded in their questionnaires that SNAs in their classrooms were involved in tasks such as assisting with group work, assisting with reading, writing, mathematics, and tasks involving computer work.

Involvement of the SNA in the Learning Process: Teachers' Perspective

Principals' responses in relation to the role of the Special Needs Assistant in their schools returned similar findings. Seventy-four percent of principals reported that SNAs in their schools were engaged in a learning support role and 76% responded affirmatively to the question of whether the role has changed from one of care to one of learning support. Reflecting this changing role, a large proportion of the SNAs questioned (46%) believed that the title Learning Support Assistant would more accurately reflect their changing role.

Training

To prepare them for this changing role, SNAs were asked to indicate any training received. In response to this question, 22% of SNAs indicated having had some training prior to their employment and 53% had received in-service training since taking up their position. When asked if they would attend in-service training to enhance their existing qualifications, an overwhelming 97% of SNAs responded 'yes'. Interestingly, 97% of teachers also responded in favour of training being provided for a learning support role for SNAs, while 95% of principals indicated the desirability of having in-service training

to help SNAs deal with their changing role.

Relationship between SNA and Class Teacher

It is clear from the literature that the relationship between the SNA and the class teacher is central to the success of the educational experience of the pupils (e.g. Thomas, 1992). Lacey (2001) reports that a balance of support partnership between the teacher and the SNA is important, and crucially identifies time to talk and plan as paramount. Prior to circular 8/99 it was the custom in Ireland to appoint SNAs in a general classroom capacity, usually in special schools. It has become more common, to assign an SNA to an individual child, in order to facilitate the inclusion of that child in the education process, despite findings from research (e.g. Lorenz, 1998, p.28) outlining the disadvantages of such a practice. It is possible, therefore, for one teacher, to find him/herself working with more than one SNA in the classroom. Over 80% of teachers questioned in this study expressed a preference for an SNA who would work in a general capacity in the class rather than an SNA assigned to a specific pupil in the class. Over 50% of the SNAs involved in this study were assigned to specific pupils.

While the vast majority of both Special Needs Assistants and Teachers reported having an excellent relationship, 36% of the SNAs indicated that the relationship was either 'fair' or 'poor' and 28% of teachers indicated that they experienced difficulties working with the SNA in their classrooms. A significant majority of teachers (73%) reported that they would welcome training to work with the Special Needs Assistants in their classrooms. These findings suggest a need for support in the form of training and preparation for both SNAs and teachers. Eighty per cent of principals expressed the view that teachers and SNAs should experience training together to assist in the collaborative process. Time for planning emerged also as a crucial issue to optimise provision for the special needs child. Fifty-three percent of the SNAs indicated that they were not involved at all in the planning process. A majority of teachers (60%) would favour the SNA attending in-school planning, but both SNAs and teachers identified a lack of time as the crucial issue preventing collaborative planning, as exemplified in the following quotes:

A big problem is that there is no time for planning or discussion...there is no time to plan or review. I think SNAs could do effective work with children, under teacher's direction, if there was time to implement this (response from an SNA);

In relation to planning, one teacher said:

We could do much more if we had time.

Qualifications

The management implications associated with the arrival of four thousand additional staff members with minimal or varied qualifications, little or no training and a thirty years old job description are considerable. Responses from the principals questioned in this research suggest a belief that the basic qualifications (Junior Certificate or equivalent) required by the Department of Education and Science for the evolving role of the Special Needs Assistant in contemporary classrooms is inadequate. Increased responsibilities,

tasks requiring specialist knowledge, and the need to establish a supportive, collaborative relationship with the class teacher, require training and qualifications. These are crucial prerequisites for the strategic deployment of SNAs to optimise access to appropriate education for all children.

Findings from this current research suggest that:

The role of the SNA in schools is changing.

There is confusion surrounding the role and the title of the post.

There is a need for enhanced qualifications to implement the changing role effectively.

There is a need for on-going training to ensure effective implementation of the changing role.

There is a great deal of support for training of the short in-school variety along with the extended courses leading to certification.

Many SNAs are assigned to work with individual pupils, while teachers' preference is for class-based assistants.

There is a great deal of variation in the extent to which SNAs are involved in lesson planning – more time is needed to facilitate a higher level of planning and collaboration between teacher and SNA.

There is a need for clear guidelines, similar to the good practice guide in the UK, to be devised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is unlikely that any initiatives will occur in special education provision until the Council for Special Education (CSE) is established. The establishment of such a council is imminent:

It is hoped to have the Council established in the New Year. (DES, October, 2002).

In light of these findings the following recommendations are suggested:

DES/CSE need to:

Revisit Circular 07/02.

Issue guidelines to Boards of Management on the recruitment, induction, training and development of Special Needs Assistants.

Appraise the need for enhanced qualifications.

Assess how best to maintain a balance between qualifications, maturity and experience in a potential SNA employee.

Negotiate with Colleges of Education to provide appropriate training for SNAs, class management skills for teachers, and management training for principals.

Develop with Colleges of Education appropriate modules which will prepare student teachers for the collaborative partnership framework which awaits many of them in their future classrooms.

Develop a co-ordinated and nationally recognised programme of training for SNAs that will be linked to career progression.

Develop a Good Practice Guide.

Provide supply cover to enable teachers and SNAs to participate in training and development opportunities.

Allow for non-pupil contact time, as an integral part of the system, to enable teachers and SNAs to plan and prepare their work together.

Schools need to;

Develop in consultation with the stakeholders, whole school models of learning support in which the roles of teachers, SNAs, and other support staff are clearly defined.

Having journeyed with the Special Needs Assistant, whose voice has not previously been heard, and with the class teacher and the school principal through the complex changing dynamics of support partnership in the education of the child, it is suggested by this research that the evolving role of the Special Needs Assistant has the potential to become a stifling threat or a very valuable resource to be embraced and developed for the benefit of all involved in the education of the child with special needs.

The opportunity presents itself. So does the challenge.

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