

Collaboration Between Teachers and Special Needs Assistants in Mainstream Primary Schools

The provision of large numbers of special needs assistants to support pupils in mainstream classes has become a trend in Irish education. In the absence of research in Ireland into the deployment of such additional personnel, the author discusses research carried out in Britain. She concludes that effective work practices must begin with clarification of the complementary roles of the teacher and the assistant and must develop through ongoing communication and collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Ireland, 1993) received several submissions, one of which suggested that the education of all students with disabilities required the support of personnel other than teachers. Furthermore it was argued that, “the integration of such pupils into ordinary classes cannot possibly be effective without the ongoing assistance of additional support personnel” (p.18). The Committee acknowledged the fact that the provision of support personnel to schools was uneven and inadequate and that it occurred on an ad hoc basis. It recommended that, “additional special needs assistants...be appointed to both ordinary and special schools” (p.186).

Following the publication of the Education Act (1998), a new trend has emerged in special education provision in Ireland, namely the appointment of a large number of resource teachers to support the education of heterogeneous groups of pupils. In March 2001, the Minister for Education and Science announced that over the previous two years the number of resource teachers had risen from less than 300 to over 750 and that the number of special needs assistants had increased from 299 to 1750. Full time resource teachers have been allocated to a single school or to a group of schools, which between them have the required number of pupils with special needs. Part time resource teacher posts have also been created

on a pro rata basis where a small number of pupils having special educational needs have been identified. This deployment of large numbers of special needs assistants and resource teachers is intended to facilitate the integration of more pupils with varied or multiple disabilities into mainstream schools.

Many pupils with special needs may require the provision of additional support when in mainstream classes. The SERC Report (Ireland, 1993) envisaged that visiting teachers, “would continue to provide a service for pupils with specific conditions, such as Hearing and Visual Impairment, and for isolated cases of pupils with mental or physical handicaps” (p.170). However, because each visiting teacher and many resource teachers cover such large geographical areas, the amount of in-school support which s/he can offer is often very limited. Some pupils who are supported by peripatetic teachers may require the additional support of a special needs assistant if they are to benefit fully from education in mainstream schools. In the absence of any research in Ireland into the deployment of such additional personnel, this article will focus on research carried out in Britain.

CHANGING ROLES

In their study investigating the integration of pupils with special educational needs in 70 schools in England and Wales, Hodgson, Clunies-Ross and Hegarty (1984) found that teachers identified ancillary staff as a major resource in educating pupils with special needs in mainstream settings. The Warnock Report stated that, “the help of an ancillary worker is often crucial to the effective placement of an individual child with a disability or disorder in an ordinary class” (DES, 1978, p.274). By 1997 the British Government Green Paper, *Excellence for All Children*, had reported that there were over 24,000 classroom assistants working in mainstream schools. This number was expected to rise significantly as many more children with a statement of special educational need would continue to have classroom assistant time allocated to support them. It seems likely that this trend will be replicated in Ireland and that special needs assistants will be seen as a major support in the integration of pupils with special needs in mainstream classes.

While traditionally these assistants undertook care and housekeeping duties, more recently their role has developed to include involvement in the learning process itself under the supervision of the class teacher. A cursory glance at the literature reveals that such staff are variously described as welfare assistants, classroom assistants, non-teaching assistants, teacher-aides, auxiliaries and ancillaries to list but some of their titles. In itself this multiplicity of titles reflects the ad hoc manner in which this kind of provision has developed in Britain. They are now

most likely to be referred to as Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) a title which in itself reflects the change in their role. Although the role has changed enormously there is as yet no single statutory role definition or job description.

Hegarty, Pocklington and Lucas (1981) also noted that in most schools assistants adopted a role which involved working with a group of pupils rather than with an individual pupil. This was seen as important both to avoid the pupil becoming over reliant on the assistant and to maintain interaction between the pupil with special needs and her/his peers. Hodgson et al. (1984) also found assistants adopting a range of roles and “identified two main educational roles for ancillaries in mainstream classes: working alongside a specific pupil, and carrying out general duties while having a watching brief on a specific pupil” (p.135). It appeared that working alongside a designated pupil often gave way to a more general role once the pupil became more established and confident in the mainstream class.

In The Wiltshire Study, Clayton (1989) used a questionnaire, case studies and interviews to investigate the background experiences and role of assistants working with pupils with special needs in mainstream primary schools. The questionnaire consisted of three sections for completion by head teachers, class teachers and assistants. In keeping with findings of the earlier studies it was found that only four per cent of the assistants worked solely with the pupil(s) to whom they were assigned. More than half reported that they were also working with other pupils with special needs and 96 per cent also worked with pupils who had no known special needs. Clayton (1993) states

Irrespective of the pupil’s primary presenting problem, in other words irrespective of whether the child had been allocated assistance as a result of a sensory or physical difficulty, or because of behavioural difficulties, or because the child had a learning difficulty of some kind, the support activities which most of the classroom assistants engaged in frequently were much the same. (p. 36)

It was shown that while the assistants were supporting pupils with very different needs, all spent most of their time on activities related to education and to a lesser extent behaviour management. It is interesting to note that class teachers and assistants agreed about the relative usefulness of particular activities. Both groups regarded direct instruction and general care and supervision as the activities most helpful to the teacher and the most valuable means of contributing to meeting the pupils’ needs. Furthermore, these were the activities which the assistants felt most competent in and which they enjoyed the most. Hegarty (1993) finds that

Ancillary staff can carry out a wide range of functions: providing physical care; acting as para-professional to implement programmes drawn up by speech therapists and physiotherapists; and contributing to pupils' education...by preparing teaching materials, marking work set, helping with practical work and ...by engaging in teaching activities under a teacher's instruction. (p. 112)

He concludes that, "quite apart from the intrinsic value of these functions, when ancillaries carry them out teachers are freed from doing them and have more time for teaching" (p.112).

SUPPORTING PUPIL, TEACHER AND SCHOOL

As part of his single school case study investigating the use of classroom assistants, Rose (2000) selected a sample of six pupils who had diverse special educational needs and who would previously have been likely to attend special schools. Four of the pupils had a general learning disability, one a specific speech and language disorder and one pupil had a diagnosis of Autism. Each pupil also had an additional disability such as an emotional or behavioural disorder (EBD) or an attention disorder. Of the six, the pupil who demanded most from a learning support assistant was a boy described as having EBD but Rose notes that "he received individual support for only 17.5% of taught time during the period of observation" (p.194). However Rose cautions that the relatively small percentage of assistants' time given to individual pupils

should not be interpreted as an indication that such support is not necessary. All the teachers interviewed believed that it would be impossible to include these pupils without the presence of a LSA. For some pupils the availability of additional support was seen as a safety net for the times when the unexpected occurred. (p.194)

Fox (1998) describes the role of the LSA in terms of the following three categories: supporting the pupil, supporting the teacher and supporting the school. She identified aspects of the supportive role with pupils.

SUPPORTIVE ROLE WITH PUPILS

- **promoting independence**
- **inspiring confidence and trust**
- **offering praise and encouragement**

Enabling the pupil, building self-esteem and fostering peer group acceptance of the pupil were also identified as key aspects of the assistant's role. Fox suggests that LSAs can support the teacher by working in partnership, providing feedback about how the pupil is managing work, recording information and maintaining a sense of humour.

WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

Joint planning and effective communication were seen as essential pre-requisites for effective partnership and mutual support of assistants and teachers. Fox (1998) stresses the importance of a clear understanding of the purpose of providing assistance which she describes as, "to assist and support inclusion of children with special educational needs within the school" (p.27). Fox adds that, "the job is not to be a minder or a personal servant for the pupil... the LSA is not there to do the work for the pupil" (p.28).

Precision in defining responsibilities should make it possible to avoid some pitfalls identified by many researchers including Lorenz (1998), Fletcher-Campbell (1992), Rose (2000) and Ainscow (2000). One potential problem is a tendency to treat pupils with special needs separately rather than including them. Rose observes that, "there are occasions when intervention may have a detrimental effect through a reduction of opportunities for interaction with other pupils or the class teacher" (p. 191).

A further problem arises when an assistant sits beside the pupil most of the time and rarely helps other children in the class. In a recent survey Lorenz noted that, "where an assistant is 'Velcro'd' to the child, there is a real danger that the child will be prevented from forming relationships with his or her peers and will develop a dependency on the support worker" (p.14). Furthermore, Lorenz describes how learned helplessness may result

Children used to their own personal slave may resent sharing the support with others in the class or may feel unable to initiate an activity without the permission of their assistant. These children then begin to believe that they can only produce good quality work when there is an adult sitting beside them, attributing success to the adult rather than their own efforts. This learned helplessness ensures that they stop work as soon as their support assistant or teacher moves away, but start up again the minute they return. (p. 14)

It is clear then that the ‘watching brief’ model described by Hodgson et al. (1984), and referred to earlier, may provide a more appropriate model of support and that once the pupil with special needs is established in the class it is not always necessary for the assistant to work exclusively with her/him.

COMMUNICATION

It is critically important that LSAs have clear job descriptions and that their role is clearly defined in order to avoid any possible conflict with the role of the teacher. Clayton (1993) stresses that although classroom assistants engage in a range of educational activities, they do so under the direction of the teacher and in a supporting and assisting capacity. Fox (1998) also emphasizes the importance of communication from the outset to ensure that the assistant is clear about the ground rules for working with the teacher. In essence the assistant needs to know how the teacher would like to be supported. Lorenz (1998) describes research findings that show that ongoing planning is the key to effective working partnerships. The assistant needs to ask questions, clarify expectations and get feedback on her/his work with the pupils. It is essential that time is allocated for this planning and evaluation.

JOINT PLANNING AND EVALUATION

Cowne (1998) and Fox (1998) stress the fact that communication must be two-way. Because s/he is working closely with a particular pupil the assistant is likely to be more sensitive to their needs and reactions in a given situation. The teacher of course, who is responsible for all the pupils in the class, must take a wider view. The assistant may be in a position to provide information about how well the pupil is coping with the demands made in class and about her/his general well being in class and at play. Lorenz (1998) finds that it is helpful for assistants to be involved in the formation of IEPs. While it is the responsibility of the teacher to decide what to teach, the LSA might contribute ideas about how this might be done bearing in mind such factors as the temperament and learning style of the pupil. Rose (2000) found that

In whole class teaching sessions the teachers seldom gave direct instruction to LSAs, but trusted in their ability to make judgements about who needed help and of what type. Such a situation demands a relationship built upon mutual respect and confidence and a shared purpose, which can only be achieved through joint planning and evaluation. (p.194)

CLARITY IN ROLE DEFINITION

Clayton (1993) stresses the need for clear job descriptions specifying the duties of the assistant and reflecting the relative responsibilities of teacher and assistant. He suggests that clarity in defining roles should also eliminate any anxieties about diluting the professional role of the teacher and facilitate the efficient use of resources. Fox (1998) points out that assistants should never be asked to do things which they feel they cannot do and that it is the responsibility of the teacher to decide what is to be taught and to select teaching materials and recording systems. Fox states that, "it is also the responsibility of the teacher to manage and monitor the work of the LSA in the classroom" (p.37) and concludes that the teacher can only do this effectively in a context of clear and realistic communication. Clayton (1993) states

Today's classroom assistants, particularly those working in mainstream schools with children with special educational needs, could well be described as 'assistant teachers'. However, one should add in caution that they serve in a supportive capacity under the day-to-day supervision of the class teacher whose role also seems to be changing towards that of 'classroom manager'. (p. 42)

Clearly for effective work practices to develop it is essential that teachers and assistants communicate. Lorenz (1998) found that in many schools joint planning is not given priority and staff find it very difficult to meet regularly. How to ensure that the work of special needs assistants is managed and organized effectively is a matter for all staff. Balshaw (1991) identifies some scenarios when things go wrong for an assistant because the teacher has mis-managed the situation.

The 'overgrown pupil' scenario arises when the support role of the assistant is ignored and s/he is treated as if s/he were another child in the class. Balshaw also describes the 'piggy in the middle' scenario which can occur when the teacher assumes that the responsibility for the pupil lies solely with the assistant who feels overburdened by this. The assistant can also feel like a go between when s/he realizes that an activity given to the pupil is too difficult and has to report this to the teacher. Clearly such difficulties can be avoided through good planning and communication.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Many of the same management implications apply to visiting and resource teachers working collaboratively with special needs assistants. While such

peripatetic staff may not be working quite as closely with special needs assistants as do mainstream and special class teachers, understanding between all staff working with a particular pupil is essential. Fletcher-Campbell (1992) advocates clear line management so that the assistant does not receive contradictory messages from different sources. Her research found that

There were examples of classroom assistants being officially line-managed by the peripatetic support teacher who might advocate, for the pupil, strategies different from those favoured by the class teacher. All of these strategies had to be mediated through the classroom assistant who, understandably, experienced undesirable conflict and divided loyalties. (p. 142)

In Britain, it is the responsibility of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) to organize and monitor the work of LSAs, while in Ireland responsibility for this seems to lie with the school principal. Given the huge increase in the number of special needs assistants in this country, it may be necessary to establish a position akin to that of the SENCO. In any case it is essential that there be one person, either a teacher or special needs coordinator who carries the main responsibility for the work of each special needs assistant.

JOINT TRAINING

While basic induction courses for classroom assistants are important, research would indicate that in-school joint training of teachers and assistants is the most effective means to develop a cooperative collaborative approach. Lorenz (1998), Fox (1998) and Cowne (1998) advocate joint training and observe that both teachers and LSAs favour such an approach. Lorenz records the comments of one teacher who remarked that, “teachers need training in how to work with support staff and the support staff need training in how to work with teachers” (p. 93).

Research identifies situations where rather than promoting inclusion, insensitive in-class support can be just as stigmatizing as segregated schooling. Lorenz (1998) finds that this appears to be particularly true in disadvantaged areas where students appear to be more sensitive to being singled out for too much individual attention. Clearly it is important to consult with parents and children when support by a classroom assistant is under consideration.

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (Ireland, 1993) spoke of a continuum of special needs which should be catered for by a continuum of

services. Special needs assistants are part of this provision and their effective deployment begins with clarification of the complementary roles of the teacher and the assistant and develops through ongoing communication and collaboration.

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