

The Special Needs Assistant Scheme to Support Teachers in Meeting the Care Needs of Some Children with Special Educational Needs, Arising from a Disability (Circular 0030/2014): Potential Implications for Post-Primary Schools

Circular 0030/2014 was issued by the Department of Education and Skills in 2014 in order to provide a restatement and clarification on the role of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). This article presents preliminary findings from a study on the role and training needs of SNAs in a cohort of schools in the Border, Midland and Western region of Ireland. Findings in relation to the role of SNAs in post-primary schools are presented and implications in the context of the Circular are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Two significant events occurred in the latter years of the 1990s which marked the beginning of an official policy of inclusion in the Irish educational context. In November 1998, the Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin, introduced the concept of automatic entitlement to support children with special educational needs (SEN). Any child assessed as having an SEN would have an automatic entitlement to a resource to meet that need and this resource could take the form of special extra teaching support, child-care support, or both (Department of Education and Science (DES), 1998). In addition to this, the Education Act (Ireland, 1998) made provision for the education of every child in the state, including children with SEN. Consequently, schools could apply for the support of a special needs assistant (SNA) where there were pupils with a significant medical need, a significant impairment of physical or sensory function, or where

their behaviour was such that they presented as a danger to themselves or other pupils (DES, 2002). The duties of SNAs were outlined in Circular Sp.Ed. 07/02 (DES, 2002) and these were described as being of ‘a non-teaching nature’ only (p. 2). Between 2001 and 2009, the number of SNAs in the system increased from 5, 869 to 10, 342 (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2011).

The DES report, *A Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme* (DES, 2011), highlighted the need for clarity with regard to the understanding of the role of the SNA and found what it termed as ‘the delegation of educational instruction to support staff’ (p. 12) to be inappropriate and unacceptable. It suggested that the role of the SNA was not well understood and recommended that the Department restate the SNA scheme to ‘ensure an efficient allocation of SNA resources’ (p. 96) and to provide clarification in relation to the role of the SNA. The continuing rise in the number of SNAs, associated costs, and projected increases in the number of students identified as requiring SNA support, together with the need to restate the role, led to a government decision to cap the number of full-time equivalent SNA posts at 10,575, in December 2010 (DES, 2011).

In 2014 a circular entitled, *The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Scheme to Support Teachers in Meeting the Care Needs of Some Children with Special Educational Needs, Arising from a Disability* (DES, 2014), was issued to all schools, the aim of which was to provide this restatement and clarification. This circular emphasises the role of the SNA in assisting with ‘significant additional care needs’ (p. 5) of students with disabilities. It provides an outline of what is meant by significant additional care needs, with examples of primary and secondary care associated tasks given for further clarification. While there is a distinction made between primary and secondary care associated tasks which may be performed by SNAs, it is clarified that SNA allocation will depend on the presence of significant primary care needs.

According to the National Council for Special Educational Needs (NCSE) 3,135 students in post-primary schools were in receipt of SNA support in 2010 (NCSE, 2010). Of these, students with emotional and/or behavioural disturbance (EBD) or severe EBD represented the highest number of students supported. This was followed by students in the categories of autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) and physical disability. The intention to address SNA allocation to students in post-primary schools is signalled in Circular 0030/2014 (Department of Education and Skills, 2014) in its assertion that continued and ongoing access to SNA support is generally not desirable for post-primary students as it may ‘impede their

independence and socialisation’ (p. 18). It is envisaged that only pupils with ‘chronic and serious care needs will normally be allocated SNA support in post-primary schools’ (p. 18).

This paper presents findings from an original study, the aim of which was to examine the role and training needs of SNAs in primary, post-primary and special schools in the border, midland and western region of Ireland (Kerins, Casserly, Deacy, Harvey, McDonagh and Tiernan, 2014). Preliminary findings in relation to the role of SNAs in post-primary schools are presented and implications in the context of Circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014) are highlighted in this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the role of the SNA as outlined in DES Circulars (DES, 2002; 2005) clearly states that SNAs are allocated to assist teachers in meeting the care needs of students and that they should be assigned duties of a non-teaching nature, there is evidence to suggest that, in practice, the role of the SNA in Ireland has been changed in schools to include an educational remit (Lawlor and Cregan, 2003; Carrig, 2004; Logan, 2006; O’Neill and Rose, 2008; DES, 2011). This has led to confusion and a lack of clarity in schools with regard to the role of the SNA (DES, 2011). This confusion is not unique to the Irish context, as international literature has also noted ambiguity about the role of support staff (Cremin, Thomas and Vincett, 2005; Giangreco, 2010; Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin and Russell, 2010). While much of the research on SNA support in Ireland has focused on the role of the SNA, there has been a dearth of published research on the training needs of SNAs and, in particular, whether these training needs are commensurate with DES policy with regard to the role of the SNA. A lack of relevant training for SNAs is highlighted by Ware, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, Harten, Farrell, McDaid, O’Riordan, Prunty and Travers, (2009), in a study of the role of special schools and special classes in Ireland.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative survey design was employed whereby self-completion questionnaires were distributed to a stratified random sample of eleven special schools, 216 primary schools and fifty post-primary schools in the border, midland and western region. Each questionnaire, composed almost entirely of closed questions, was arranged under a number of categories. These included: Demographic Information of SNAs and School; Current Responsibilities of SNAs; Current and Future Training Needs. In order to ensure construct validity in categories related to roles

and responsibilities of SNAs, items related to care needs, and school planning and collaboration, were based on duties outlined in Circular 07/02 (DES, 2002). Principals were requested to distribute the questionnaires to SNAs employed in their schools and, as such, acted as gatekeepers. Confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability were guaranteed as the identity of schools or participants was not requested. Responses were returned from 318 SNAs and 122 principals, yielding a total return of 440 questionnaires. Forty-five SNAs from special schools, 183 SNAs from primary schools and ninety SNAs from post-primary schools responded. Eighty-four percent (n=75) of the SNAs in post-primary schools were employed in a fulltime capacity. Questionnaires were analysed using the statistical software package SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics, 1989). Findings from post-primary SNA questionnaires are the focus of this paper.

FINDINGS

Findings are presented according to the profile of students supported by SNAs, and the role and duties identified by SNAs in supporting the SEN of these students.

Profile of Students Supported by SNAs

Findings in relation to the profile of students, supported by SNAs in post-primary schools, are presented in Figure 1.

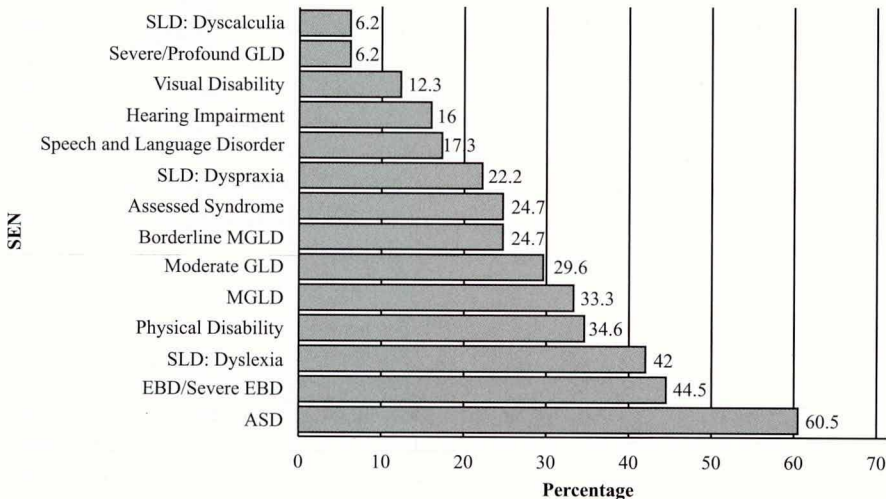


Figure 1: Profile of Students Supported by SNAs in Post-Primary Schools

The findings illustrated in Figure 1 indicate that the majority of SNAs were supporting students with ASD (60.5%, n=49). The next highest categories supported were students with EBD/Severe EBD (44.5%, n= 36) and specific learning disabilities (SLD): dyslexia (42%, n=34). Over a third were supporting students with physical disabilities (34.6%, n=28).

SNA Roles and Duties

SNAs were asked to indicate their roles and responsibilities in supporting students. These were divided into three categories: care needs; school planning and collaboration; and pedagogical/teaching duties.

Care Needs

The findings illustrated in Figure 2 indicate that the majority of SNAs reported that they were supporting the care needs of students with SEN in post-primary schools. Almost ninety-four percent (n=76) of SNAs supported the health and safety needs of students. Just over ninety-two percent (n=75) were helping with out-of-school visits and almost ninety percent (n=72) supported the supervision of students. Just over sixty percent (n= 49) of SNAs stated that they helped with clothing, feeding, toileting and general hygiene.

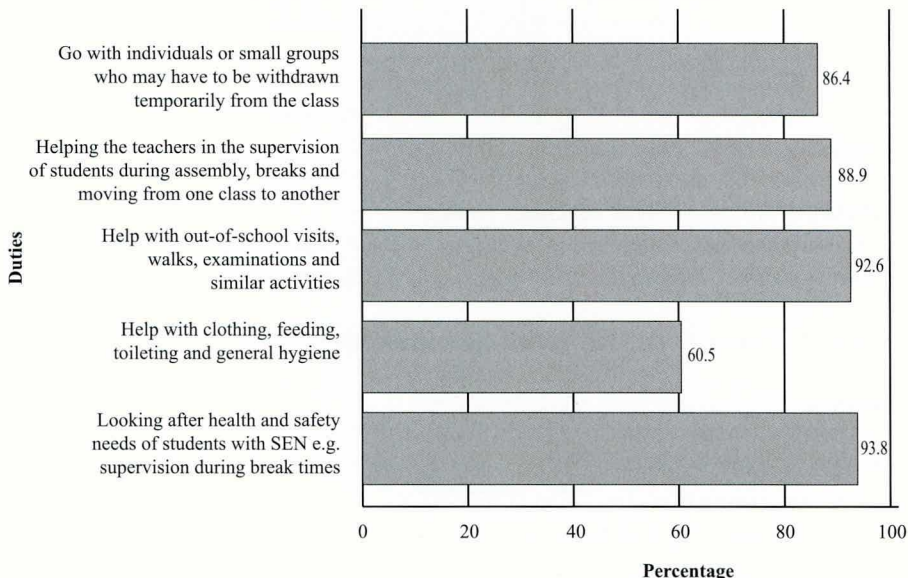


Figure 2: Care Needs Supported by SNAs

School Planning and Collaboration

SNAs were asked to indicate whether or not they participated in school planning and collaboration. The findings indicate that almost two-thirds of SNAs (65.4%, n=53) engaged with parents of students with SEN as required and directed by school management, over half of SNAs (58%, n=47) provided general help to subject teachers with duties of a non-teaching nature and less than half (44%, n=36) participated in school development planning. Figure 3 provides an illustration of these findings.

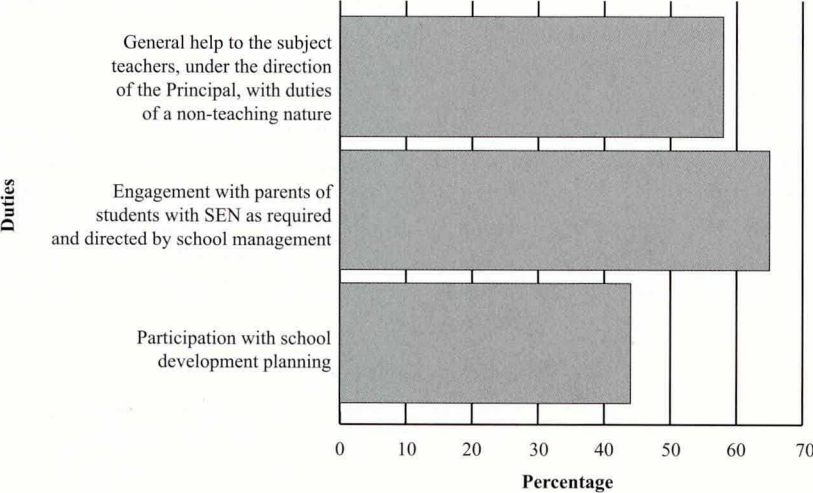


Figure 3: School Planning and Collaboration

Duties of a Pedagogical/Teaching Nature

The third and final category concerned duties of a pedagogical/teaching nature carried out by SNAs in the classroom. Table 1 illustrates the findings.

Table 1: Duties of a pedagogical/teaching nature

Duties	%	No.
Encouraging students with SEN	97.5	79
Repeating instructions for students with SEN	96.3	78
Helping students with SEN to stay on task	95.1	77
Writing for students with SEN	91.4	74
Reporting students' progress to the teacher	82.7	67

Duties	%	No.
Changing worksheets/materials for students with SEN to make work easier	66.7	54
Planning work for students with SEN to do in class	44.4	36
Developing Individual Education Plans with teachers	38.3	31
Correcting students' work	34.6	28
Teaching individual students with SEN	28.4	23
Developing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) on your own	21	17
Teaching small groups of students with SEN	13.6	11
Teaching small groups of students with and without SEN	3.7	3
Teaching whole class to provide cover for teacher absence	2.5	2

As Table 1 illustrates, the majority of SNAs in post-primary schools are engaged in encouraging students with SEN (97.5%, n=79); repeating instructions for students with SEN (96.3%, n=78); helping students with SEN to stay on task (95.1%, n=77) and writing for students with SEN (91.4%, n=74). Two-thirds of SNAs (66.7%, n=54) stated that they were modifying classwork for students with SEN and almost half (44.4%, n=36) were planning work for students with SEN to do in class.

Over one-third (34.6%, n=28) of SNAs were correcting student's work and over a quarter (28.4%, n=23) were teaching individual students with SEN. One fifth of SNAs (21%, n=17) were developing individual education plans (IEPs) without the assistance of a teacher.

DISCUSSION

Circular 0030/2014 (Department of Education and Skills, 2014) clarifies and restates the purpose of the SNA scheme as supporting children with SEN who also have additional and significant care needs. Primary care needs and secondary care associated tasks are detailed. The majority of SNAs in post-primary schools who participated in this study reported that they support the care needs of students with SEN. The categories of SEN most frequently identified by SNAs were ASD, EBD/severe EBD, dyslexia and physical disability. This is consistent with categories identified in NCSE statistics related to SNA allocation (NCSE, 2010) except with regard to the category of SLD: dyslexia. According to the NCSE, only

thirty students nationally, in post-primary schools were allocated SNA support for SLD. This includes all categories of SLD. It is also apparent from the findings of this study that SNAs were engaged in duties of a teaching nature and this will have significant implications for the future role of SNAs in post-primary schools.

Primary Care Associated Tasks

SNAs clearly indicated that they were supporting the primary care needs of pupils with SEN as described in Circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014). This included support for the health and safety needs of students, helping with out-of-school visits and the supervision of students. Over half of SNAs indicated that they helped with clothing, feeding, toileting and general hygiene. However, it is important to note that, while almost two-thirds of SNAs reported that they supported students with ASD and just over a third indicated that they supported students with physical disabilities, over a third also indicated that they were involved in supporting students with dyslexia. It is questionable whether or not the latter category of students had significant care needs.

Secondary Care Associated Tasks

Circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014) describes secondary care associated tasks for SNAs as those related to providing assistance to class teachers with regard to preparation, planning and supervision of pupils with SEN. The findings indicate almost two-thirds of SNAs engage with parents of students with SEN as required and directed by school management, over half provide general help to subject teachers with duties of a non-teaching nature and just under half participate in school development planning. However, the recent circular indicates that SNAs will only be allocated on the basis of students having primary care needs and that associated support tasks, including those described here, will not constitute a reason for allocation of SNA support. While the circular states that SNA support will continue to be provided for post-primary schools in a manner which recognises ‘the distinct requirements’ (DES, 2014, p. 18) of this sector, it is also made explicit that ‘only pupils with chronic and serious care needs will normally be allocated SNA support’ (p. 18). The understanding and interpretation of ‘chronic and serious care needs’ will have significant implications with regard to educational provision at post-primary level for many students with SEN in the coming years. It is not clear from the findings of this study if all SNAs were supporting students with ‘chronic and serious care needs’ (p. 18).

Supporting Behaviour Related Care Needs

Circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014) refers to the role of the SNA with regard to support for pupils with behaviour related care needs, although this is not clearly

specified as a primary care need. Neither is it specifically identified as a non-teaching duty in earlier circulars outlining the role of the SNA (DES, 2002; 2005). The findings of this study indicate that almost half of SNAs supported students with EBD/severe EBD. Circular 07/02 (DES, 2002) stipulates that students could be allocated SNA support where their behaviour was such that they presented as a danger to themselves or to other pupils. Circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014) states that students diagnosed within the category of EBD will not automatically receive SNA support. This is based on the view that SNA support may not always be appropriate for students in this category. The circular also imposes further restrictions in relation to SNA allocation for EBD, including a requirement that schools show evidence that implementation of behavioural management strategies have proven unsuccessful. Of great concern for school staff and authorities is the stipulation that SNA support will only be sanctioned in cases 'where there is a clear and documented history of violent behaviour, assault, or self-harm, or other safety issues including leaving the school premises' (p. 11). It is questionable whether or not the stipulation that a student should have committed assault or engaged in other violent behaviours before SNA support is sanctioned will play a part in influencing enrolment policies of post-primary schools in the future. The implications for the future inclusion of such students need to be considered. There has been much criticism of instances where students with the most complex needs receive support from members of the school community with the least training to support those needs (Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson and Oliver, 2009).

Duties Related to Pedagogical/Teaching Duties

The findings support the assertion contained in *A Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme* (DES, 2011) and Circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014) that practice in relation to the deployment of SNAs has moved towards SNA involvement in pedagogical/teaching duties. Almost all SNAs at post-primary level identified writing for students as one of their duties. While the high proportion of SNAs engaged in writing for students in post-primary schools raises a number of questions about the role of the SNA in this sector, it should be noted that Circular 0030/2014 stipulates that assistance with typing or handwriting may form part of the SNA role in supporting primary care needs for students with severe communication difficulties.

Findings of particular concern relate to teaching duties identified by SNAs in this study. More than two-thirds of SNAs in post-primary schools identified modifying work for students as part of their role. Over a third reported that they corrected students' work and just under a third of SNAs indicated that they teach individual students. Over a fifth of SNAs indicated that they were developing IEPs without

the assistance of a teacher. Circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014) reminds teachers that students with SEN can have very complex learning needs and emphasises that these students should be taught by qualified and experienced teachers, equipped with the necessary skills to meet these needs.

CONCLUSION

While the clarification and restatement of the purpose of the SNA scheme outlined in Circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014) is to be welcomed, the findings presented in this paper highlight some of the potential implications for post-primary schools. Firstly, the need for continuing professional development in order for teachers to meet the complex learning needs of students with SEN is paramount, as the stipulation that SNA support will only be allocated for students with chronic and serious care needs will undoubtedly lead to a reduction in SNA allocation to post-primary schools. While the importance of developing students' independence and socialisation is recognised, this can only be achieved where teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to meet the needs of these students. Secondly, the potential impact of criteria for the sanctioning of SNA allocation for students with EBD/severe EBD in the context of a policy of inclusion needs to be considered. If a policy of inclusion is to be realised effectively and the SNA scheme is to contribute to the realisation of this policy, then training for SNAs in supporting students with complex and significant behavioural needs is essential.

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