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Examining the role of Special Needs Assistants in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools

This article explores the role of special needs assistants (SNAs) in mainstream post-primary schools from the perspective of principals, teachers and SNAs. The contractual duties of SNAs as prescribed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) are examined. Tasks performed by SNAs in classrooms, training and education are also discussed. The current study found inconsistencies between principals and SNAs in their understanding of the role of the SNA and highlighted the importance of providing formal induction courses for SNAs. The study also found discrepancies between the role of the SNA as described on SNA contracts and actual practice in mainstream post-primary schools.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of the SNA in the mainstream primary and special school sector in Ireland has been researched previously. However, there is a dearth of research focused solely on the role of the SNA in the mainstream post-primary sector in Ireland. This article discusses a study which investigated the role of the SNA in the mainstream post-primary environment drawing on the experiences of working with SNAs. The study examined a number of questions pertaining to the role of the SNA in this sector. These were:

- (1) Do SNAs perform the duties as prescribed by the DES on their contract?
- (2) What work do SNAs perform in the classroom?
- (3) What training, if any, have SNAs completed pertaining to the role?
- (4) What educational level have SNAs attained?

BACKGROUND

In the 1970s, childcare assistants were recruited primarily in the special school sector. Their duties were concerned mainly with the physical care of pupil(s) with





special educational needs (SEN). In the 1980s a different kind of support became available to some schools through FÁS schemes, known as Community Employment schemes. The Community Employment trainees were expected to help teachers and perform general duties in the classroom. During the late 1980s and the early 1990s SNAs were recruited to work in schools assisting teachers and carrying out general tasks in the classroom.

The Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report (Department of Education, 1993) supported a continuum of educational provision for pupils with SEN, ranging from full time placement in special schools, to placement in ordinary classes in mainstream schools with support. This support included the allocation of SNAs. Legislation, including the Education Act (Ireland, 1998), the Education For Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Ireland, 2004) and the Disability Act (Ireland, 2005) was enacted over the following two decades which provided a statutory basis for the growth of effective structures in relation to the education of pupils with SEN. A substantial increase in the numbers of SNAs working in schools ensued.

The number of SNAs employed in Irish schools has increased steadily over the years rising to 10,583 in 2009-2010; 7,298 in primary schools, 1,887 in special schools and 1,398 in mainstream post-primary schools (personal email to the DES, 28th May 2010). According to the DES (2011b) there has been a 922% increase in expenditure on the SNA scheme between the years 2001 and 2009.

The numbers of SNAs in schools has been negatively affected by the financial situation in the Irish State in recent years. It has been necessary as part of the National Recovery Programme to place a cap on the number of whole time equivalent SNA posts in schools. This number is now set at 10,575 (DES, 2011b). It notes that this number represents a substantial and significant level of support to schools.

Not all pupils with SEN in Irish schools require the support of an SNA. Those pupils who do include those with “a significant medical need for assistance or a significant impairment of physical or sensory function, or on behalf of students whose behaviour is such that they are a danger to themselves or to other students” (DES, 2007a, p. 83). Stevens and O’Moore (2009) note that the majority of SNA positions are allocated to pupils with SEN in these low incidence categories.





Duties of SNAs

SNAs are employed for care in the educational context and assigned non-teaching duties.

O'Neill (2004), notes that Circular 07/02 (DES, 2002) includes an outline of the role of the SNA which has not altered from the one described for Childcare Assistants in 1970s.

The non-teaching duties for SNAs distributed to primary schools (DES, 2005b) are an exact replication of the duties given to SNAs in post-primary schools (DES, 2005a). This does not take into account the different stages of development between primary and post-primary pupils or the different approaches needed to support them. When allocating SNAs duties in the different educational sectors, consideration must also be given to the differences in administration and structures in these environments.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

It was decided to research the role of the SNA in all mainstream post-primary schools which had SNAs in a selected county in the south of Ireland. This approach provided the opportunity to collect a larger amount of data on the role of the SNA from a broader population base. In order to achieve an objective and informed view on the role of the SNA it was decided to investigate the issues from three perspectives: principals, teachers and SNAs. A questionnaire was the measurement instrument selected for data collection.

SNAs were working in twenty-seven mainstream secondary schools in the chosen county. Each school was contacted and it was established that a total of 118 SNAs were working in these post-primary schools. These SNAs were identified as the target population. It was decided to distribute questionnaires to all these SNAs and the principal in each of the twenty-seven schools. Consideration was given to how many teachers in each of the schools would receive a questionnaire, as the number of SNAs varied from school to school. After examining various options, it was determined that the best approach was to send a questionnaire to four teachers who worked with SNAs in each of the schools. Four was seen as the optimum number, in order to achieve a good overview of the role of the SNA, from a high percentage of teachers who worked with them in their classrooms. One of the twenty-seven schools was not included in the current study as it was involved in the pilot stage of the research.



It was decided that the distribution of questionnaires to four teachers with whom SNAs work and the SNA(s) in every school would be left to the discretion of each principal in the post-primary schools in the selected county. For a variety of reasons, five schools were not in a position to participate in the study. The response rates from completed and returned questionnaires from the remaining twenty-one schools are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Questionnaire response rates

Group	Principals	Teachers	SNAs
Possible Respondents	21	84	94
Actual Respondents	17	49	45
Percentage Response	80%	58%	47%

An overall response rate of just over fifty- six percent was achieved for the region, with 111 completed questionnaires being returned. The SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to analyse the data on the questionnaires.

Structured interviews were conducted on completion of the survey stage of the study. Each questionnaire distributed gave the option to the respondent of agreeing to attend an interview. Contact details were provided by those agreeing to be interviewed.

All were contacted and a number of those who had expressed interest in attending the interview were unable to attend due to other commitments. This resulted in structured interviews being conducted with two principals, one deputy principal, three teachers and four SNAs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Information

Most principals and SNAs in the current study note that SNAs report to the principal in their school and that the principal co-ordinates their work. At interview stage of the current study, the principals and the deputy principal agreed that SNAs benefit from having regular meetings, with one principal stating that it was “absolutely essential”. The length of time SNAs in the current study have been deployed in schools is presented in Table 2 and the length of time teachers have been working with SNAs is listed in Table 3.

Table 2: Length of time SNAs in the current study have been deployed in schools

Length of Time	1-5 years	5-10 years	10-15 years	15 years +
% of SNAs	44.4%	51.1%	2.2%	2.2%

Table 3: Length of time teachers in the current study have been working with SNAs

Length of Time	1-2 years	3-4 years	5-6 years	7 years +
% of Teachers	22.9%	29.2%	29.2%	18.8%

SNAs and Deployment

The first research question addressed in the current study examined if SNAs performed the duties as prescribed by the DES on their contracts. The initial issue investigated was whether SNAs were providing care to one or more pupils. The current study notes that fifty-three percent of principals and SNAs state that SNAs are allocated to one pupil. In a very slight majority of cases Special Educational Needs Officers (SENOs) are not, as yet, assigning SNAs to more than one pupil in the mainstream post-primary sector. This suggests that SENOs believe that there are certain pupils with multifaceted care needs who require individual support. Logan (2006), states that seventy percent of SNAs in mainstream primary schools are assigned to one pupil. According to O'Neill and Rose (2008), the DES indicated the phasing out of 'child specific contracts' in 2005 following a re-evaluation of the deployment of SNA support to schools. They state that the DES pointed towards a move to a more flexible model with SNAs supporting more than one pupil¹.

The second issue that was explored in terms of SNA contractual duties was the categories of SEN of the pupils to whom SNAs were assigned. In the mainstream sector, SNAs are allocated to pupils with a range of SENs. The current study reports that the main category of SEN to whom SNAs are allocated is emotional/behavioural difficulties at fifty-one percent. Logan (2004), remarks that

¹ It should be noted that at the time of publication of this article (January 2013) SENOs were increasingly sanctioning 'SNA access' to a number of pupils in schools rather than sanctioning SNAs to individual students.

thirty-one percent of SNAs are assigned to pupils with emotional or behavioural disorders, seven percent to pupils with severe emotional disturbance and eighteen percent to pupils with a physical disability.

In Ireland, the main SEN condition of those pupils to whom SNAs are assigned in the mainstream sector is emotional and/or behavioural difficulties. This is of note, as the DES (2011b), state that there is evidence that the category connected to behaviour (i.e. where behaviour is such that they [students] are a danger to themselves or other students) is being misinterpreted and leading to an over identification in this area. Furthermore, this criterion may now be replaced with a requirement "... for explicit evidence in relation to the precise needs of the students..." (DES, 2011b, p. 16).

SNA Contractual Duties

Seventy percent of principals in the current study report that SNAs are performing care assistance tasks for their assigned pupil(s). Care tasks described by some SNAs included assisting with clothing, feeding, toileting and general hygiene and being mindful of the health and safety needs of the pupil. Other care duties performed include: organising books and lockers, carrying bags at all times and comforting students when they are "in trouble". However, fifty percent of SNAs reported that they were not providing care assistance for the pupil with SEN to whom they are assigned. As most SNAs and principals report that SNAs receive a list of duties upon employment, this finding suggests that SNAs are undertaking these duties but do not interpret them as care assistance. Therefore, an induction period is needed so that SNAs understand exactly what their duties are.

The current study reports that most SNAs are performing, to varying degrees, the prescribed duties on their contract. There is a discrepancy, however, between the expectations of principals and the actual practice of SNAs in schools with regard to some of the tasks. The current study indicates that school principals are significantly more likely than SNAs to report:

- SNAs helping with the supervision of pupils during recreation, assembly and dispersal from one classroom to another
- SNAs participating in school planning
- SNAs engaging with parents in an informal way.

This also suggests the need for formal induction courses in schools to clarify the role of the SNA.

Tasks Performed by SNAs in the Classroom

The second area examined in detail was the actual work performed by SNAs in the classroom, for example, special assistance as necessary for children with particular difficulties e.g. helping pupils with SEN with typing/writing or computers or other use of equipment. Ninety-nine percent of principals, teachers and SNAs report that SNAs spend most of their time during a typical working day supporting their pupil or general class *inside the classroom*. The activities carried out by the SNA in the classroom were varied and there were some differences in the perspectives of school principals, teachers and SNAs (Table 4).

Table 4: Staff perspectives on the activities performed by SNAs in the classroom

Activities of SNAs in the Classroom	<u>Perspective on Activities of SNA</u>		
	Principal n=17	Teacher n=49	SNA n=45
Clarifying teacher instructions	88.2%	67.3%	62.2%
Explaining work assigned to pupils	82.4%	65.3%	60%
Assisting pupils with work	88.2%	73.5%	77.7%
Helping with reading, writing and spelling	64.7%	69.4%	57.8%
Providing assistance in a practical subject	100%	42.9%	68.9%
Assisting with numeracy	58.8%	22.4%	42.2%
Helping with typing, computers or using other equipment	76.5%	26.5%	44.4%
Organising materials and other equipment	94.1%	81.6%	71.1%
Writing homework into homework journal	70.6%	51%	53.3%
Giving general assistance to the teacher	70.6%	51%	53.3%
Other work	5.9%	4.1%	17.8%

All SNAs report that they perform at least one of the stated tasks. This finding suggests that SNAs are supporting the learning of their pupil(s) with SEN in the mainstream post-primary sector. SNAs are therefore, intrinsically involved in the educational process. This corresponds to research in the special school and mainstream primary sector (Lawlor and Cregan, 2003; Carrig, 2004; Craig, 2006;

Logan, 2004, 2006). Griffin and Shevlin (2007) note that under the direction of the teachers, SNAs are increasingly concerned with the learning needs of pupils within the Irish context. One teacher at the interview stage of the current study stated that, "...there is definitely an educational aspect to the work that they [SNAs] do. What they [SNAs] do definitely promotes learning". The educational aspect of the role does not concur with the DES description of it. The DES note that cost effectiveness of the SNA Scheme is compromised by the expansion of the role beyond what was imagined by the Scheme (DES, 2011b). However, the importance of the educational aspect of the SNAs role is emphasised in literature from other countries also (Clayton, 1993; Rose, 2000; Fox, 2003; Groom and Rose, 2005; Takala, 2007; Causton-Theoharis, 2009).

In the classroom, Logan (2006), notes that seventy-three percent of SNAs work with their assigned pupils and also work with others. O'Neill and Rose (2008) observe that a significant number of SNAs (ninety-eight percent) are providing individual support to pupils either every day or often. They further remark that sixty-three percent of SNAs work every day or often with groups. In the current study, teachers and SNAs (seventy-six percent) note that SNAs work separately with their assigned pupil in the classroom, and almost thirty-two percent of them report that SNAs generally work with all the pupils in the classroom. Twenty-one percent of teachers and SNAs state that SNAs work with a small group of pupils in the classroom.

All teachers stated that having the support of an SNA in their class was beneficial. When examining this in more detail, the following was reported by the teachers:

- 51.4% stated that the presence of an SNA created a better learning environment in the classroom
- 44.1% reported that the SNA provided additional support for their pupil
- 27% noted that "an extra pair of eyes/ears is great to have" in the classroom
- 5.4% mentioned other benefits of having an SNA in the classroom.

All SNAs reported that they believed that pupils with whom they work benefit from their support. In particular, SNAs noted the following:

- 16.2% believed that their presence in the classroom contributed to a better learning environment
- 35.3% thought that they provided additional support for their pupil

- 2.9% reported that “an extra pair of eyes/ears is great to have” in the classroom
- 17.6% mentioned other benefits of them being in the classroom.

It is interesting to note that teachers appeared to value the role of the SNA in creating a better learning environment, providing additional support for pupils and being an extra pair of eyes/ears in the classroom more than the SNAs themselves. One principal interviewed in the current study stated that having an SNA in a lesson was like having a “second pair of eyes and ears” in the classroom.

Training

The third area investigated if SNAs had any training relating to their role. Only a small number of SNAs reported that they had completed some form of SNA training course. All SNAs interviewed agreed that they would benefit from an SNA training course. Specific SNA training courses are available for SNAs at various places (e.g. Education Centres). Formal training for SNAs would, for instance, assist them in developing an understanding of the SEN of the pupil to whom they are assigned and the implications of these difficulties for their learning. The need for training pertaining to the role is reflected in literature (Fletcher-Campbell, 1992; Clayton, 1993; Fox, 1993, 2003). The DES (2011b) notes that SNAs affirmed the benefits of training and suggested the need for an initial qualification soon after entry into the profession.

The current study reports that almost seventy-three percent of SNAs have completed other training courses. The most common courses taken by SNAs are child care, SEN and health and safety courses, some of which are certified by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). It appears that SNAs have completed courses which are relevant to their job and it also shows an interest in continued professional development. Many SNAs may have completed more than one course.

At the interview stage of the current study, when the principals and deputy principal were asked what kind of courses they think SNAs should complete, one principal mentioned, “...FETAC as they have standardised courses”. The other principal remarked: “...yes, I’m afraid that I couldn’t go beyond that”. Principals, it seems, perceive some FETAC courses as being a source of relevant training for SNAs.

A minority of SNAs (twenty-five percent) and a considerable number of principals (seventy percent) reported that SNAs have completed an induction course in their school. This discrepancy between principals and SNAs suggests that, if induction

courses are occurring in schools it may be done in an informal manner (e.g. reading appropriate material). SNAs noted at the interview stage of the current study that they would benefit from induction courses in their school. The importance of induction courses has been highlighted in literature (Clayton, 1993; Groom, 2006).

Educational Qualifications

The fourth and final main area of enquiry of the study examined the level of formal education attained by SNAs. At the time the current study was undertaken, every SNA "...must have been awarded Grade D (or pass) at least, in Irish, English and Mathematics in the Junior Certificate examination, in the Day Vocational Certificate Examination or in an examination of equivalent standard" (DES, 2007b). The current minimum qualification requirement of the DES is "... A FETAC level 3 major qualification...OR...A minimum of three grade Ds in Junior Certificate...OR...Equivalent..." (DES, 2011c, p. 1). Lawlor and Cregan (2003) state that principals believed that a Junior Certificate qualification or the equivalent was insufficient for the evolving role of the SNA in modern classrooms. Furthermore, they report that, increased responsibilities and the need to form collaborative and supportive relationships with the teacher require qualifications and training. The current study in fact, revealed that only one SNA had the minimum educational requirement as requested by the DES, all of the others being educated to either Leaving Certificate standard or higher (Table 5).

Table 5: Highest level of education attained by SNAs

Level of Education	Junior Certificate	Leaving Certificate	Post-Leaving Certificate	University Diploma	University Degree	University Post-Grad. Diploma
% of SNAs	2.3%	36.4%	22.7%	18.2%	18.2%	2.3%

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study pointed to inconsistencies between principals and SNAs in their understanding of the role. This highlights the importance of providing formal induction courses for SNAs.

The current study also found discrepancies between the role of the SNA as described on SNA contracts and actual practice in mainstream post-primary schools. Therefore, a working party should be established which includes

representatives from the various partners in education to review and re-negotiate roles and responsibilities. Agreement should be reached between all the stakeholders on re-defining SNA contracts to reflect the educational aspect of the role.

CONCLUSION

SNAs are recruited for a care role in mainstream post-primary schools in Ireland. They are performing, to varying degrees, the non-teaching duties as assigned by the DES. Furthermore, SNAs under the direction of teachers are reinforcing educational tasks in mainstream post-primary classrooms. These activities include: clarifying instructions, assisting and explaining work assigned and helping with reading, writing, spelling and numeracy. The current study finds that SNAs are playing an intrinsic role in the educational process. This corresponds with Irish research in the special school sector, the mainstream primary environment and also to international literature on the role. "This changing role does not reflect the role of the SNA as described in Circular 07/02" (DES, 2011b, p. 34).

However, the literature indicates that an *expansion* of the role has occurred, and this, in addition to a substantial increase in SNA numbers over the years, suggests that it is time to review, reflect and re-negotiate the role of the SNA in Irish post-primary schools.

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