

Learning Support/Resource Teachers in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools: Their Perception of the Role in Relation to Subject Teachers

This article describes the role of the support teacher (learning support/resource) in Irish post-primary schools as perceived by a sample of those teachers with particular reference to their role in relation to supporting other teachers in their schools. The methodology used is outlined followed by a summary of the findings and discussion on the implications arising. These findings represent part of a wider research project which investigated a range of issues in relation to inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) at post-primary level. This project was funded by the Research Committee of St. Patrick's College and Church of Ireland College of Education (CICE).

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INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools presents challenges to educators and has been the subject of much discussion in recent decades. A number of factors have been identified as supports or barriers to inclusion. Mainstream teachers' attitudes to inclusion and their perception of their capacity to include students with SEN is one factor (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Carðona Moltó, 2003). School culture, organisation and academic expectations are also identified as influential factors (Butler and Shevlin, 2001; Emanuelsson, 2001; Rose, 2001). The question 'who's responsible for inclusion?' emerges in research relating to the role of special support teachers and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) in many countries, where the role is identified as complex, demanding and one requiring leadership skills (Forlin, 2001; Cole, 2005; Abbott, 2007). While these common themes have emerged in research in schools at all levels, there is evidence that these factors, as

barriers to inclusion, are more acute in post-primary schools (Avramidis and Norwich; Cardona Moltó; Layton, 2005).

Post-primary schools are complex organisations in comparison with primary schools. Students and curriculum are organised differently, there is far more choice in terms of subjects and levels, formal examinations are central within the school system and, usually, there are many more teachers with responsibility for particular aspects of a student's learning (Naughton, 2003). Inclusion of pupils with SEN in such an organisation presents complex challenges requiring "a transformation in the culture of some schools" (Church of Ireland College of Education (CICE), 2005, p.15). The role of the learning support/resource teachers (hereafter referred to as support teachers) may, as has been the case in other jurisdictions, place these teachers "at the vanguard of this process" (Emanuelsson, 2001, p.134). In addition, recent legislative and policy initiatives (Ireland, 2004; National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2006; Department of Education and Science (DES), 2007) have added to the demands placed on schools in relation to the inclusion of pupils with SEN.

The DES (2007) guidelines for post-primary schools outline the importance of the role of the principal in implementing inclusion policy but acknowledge that s/he may divest that responsibility to another member of staff and recommends that a support teacher with a SEN qualification would be appropriate. The DES guidelines list eleven possible functions associated with that role. The level of responsibility that such a co-ordinator may have is daunting. For example, the first function of the SEN co-ordinator is to "assume an overall responsibility for co-ordinating the school's provision for the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs" (p. 69). What does that mean in reality? In practical terms it could possibly encompass facets of a managerial role ranging from timetabling, allocating teachers, deciding on and developing appropriate curricula modifications for individual students inter alia. Recent research highlights the importance of the close relationship between the co-ordinator and the principal in ensuring the effective implementation of SEN policy in a school (Travers, Balfe, Butler, Day, Dupont, McDaid, O'Donnell and Prunty, 2010). This study goes on to recommend that "professional development for co-ordinators should include an emphasis on leading and supporting change for inclusion" (p. 289). Further, O'Gorman, Drudy, Winter, Smith and Barry (2009) stress the importance of professional development programmes promoting critical reflection, creativity and a dynamic, imaginative approach to inclusion in mainstream schools. It is difficult to separate management and leadership (Fullan, 2001) although "a useful distinction may be made between leadership, as involving setting a vision and

motivating others to follow it, and management, as implying the day-to-day arrangements within that overall vision and direction” (Farrell, 2001, p. 49).

The specific roles of learning support and resource teachers are also outlined in the post-primary guidelines (DES, 2007). These state clearly that the “core task of the resource teacher is the teaching of students with SEN” (p. 76). Similarly, the teaching role of the learning support teacher is outlined as the “selection of students for supplementary teaching by that teacher” (p. 77). Responsibilities relating to assessment are also outlined. In addition it is suggested that both roles involve a high level of consultation and collaboration with subject teachers, other professionals and parents. With subject teachers, it is suggested that this would take the form of advice regarding assessment, teaching approaches and resources appropriate to the needs of students in receipt of support. Tracking student progress, record keeping, planning, monitoring and coordination of support to individuals and groups as well as administration relating to the organisation of reasonable accommodations in state examinations are also included.

The responsibilities suggested for co-ordinators and support teachers in the guidelines mirror the development of these roles in the literature from other countries and their realisation has proven to be complex, demanding and controversial (Cole, 2005; Abbott, 2007; MacKenzie, 2007). In the study outlined below participants articulated that complexity very clearly.

METHODOLOGY

Background

The first phase of this research was conducted in November 2007. A brief questionnaire was sent to a convenience sample of sixty-five post-primary teachers who had completed a twenty hour course organised by the researchers on behalf of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education. The questionnaire sought information on their current roles and their perceptions of the supports needed to include students with SEN in post-primary schools. The response rate was forty-three per cent (n=28). The profile of the respondents is outlined in Table 1 below. Respondents were invited to indicate if they were willing to be interviewed in the second phase of the research with a view to exploring in greater depth, some of the issues raised in the questionnaires. Eleven respondents agreed to be interviewed.

Table 1: Profile of questionnaire respondents (phase one of the study)

Respondents' School Type	N=28	Respondents' Employment Status	N=28	Hours Allocated to Support Teaching on Respondents' Timetables	N=28
Voluntary Secondary School	19	Permanent	17	None	3
Community College	2	Temporary whole-time	7	1-5 hours	2
Community School	3	Eligible part-time	2	6-10 hours	3
Vocational School	1	Contract of indefinite duration	1	11-15 hours	13
Comprehensive School	1	Part-time	1	16-20 hours	4
No response	2			22 hours	2
				N/A	1

The data gathered in the questionnaire were analysed and emerging themes were used as a basis for constructing the interview schedule for the second phase of the study.

The aim of the second phase was two-fold:

- To identify the challenges to the inclusion of students with learning support and SEN in post-primary schools as perceived by support teachers in those schools
- To investigate the role of the support teacher in the mainstream post-primary school.

The focus of this article is on some of the findings arising from the data in the second phase in relation to the role of the support teacher, with particular reference to support of other teachers. Additional findings from the study will be available in further publications at a later date.

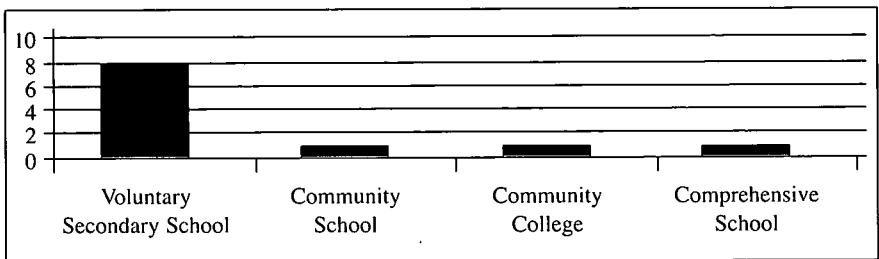
Interviews

Interview Schedule: The interview schedule was generated from the information gathered in the first phase of the research i.e. the issues arising from the questionnaire data and relevant literature. The schedule was piloted with two support teachers. One minor change was made to the interview schedule which was then sent to the interview participants in advance. The interviews took place between June and September 2008 at locations mutually agreed with the interviewees and researchers. Four broad questions were asked in the interviews. The researchers had also agreed a series of prompts based on questionnaire data to probe participants' responses. Interviewees were invited to:

- describe their work in the school in terms of supporting pupils with SEN
- discuss the types of supports needed for pupils with SEN in post-primary schools
- identify the role of the support teacher in a post primary school
- describe the role of the subject teacher regarding support of pupils with SEN in post-primary schools.

Participants: The profile of the eleven participants in phase two of the study reflected that of the questionnaire sample in phase one in terms of school type, teaching position and role.

Table 2: Interviewees' school type (phase two of the study)



Ten of the interviewees were directly involved in supporting students with SEN for at least eleven hours per week. Two of the participants had 'special/resource' classes, one of which was officially recognised as a special class by the DES. All of the interviewees were experienced support teachers ranging from five years to more than twenty years in this role. Seven described themselves as SEN co-ordinators.

Analysis: Interviews varied from twenty-five minutes to one hour in duration. The data arising from the interviews were analysed using NVIVO, a package designed for use in analysing qualitative data. Initially, two interview transcripts were manually trawled independently by both researchers to identify possible themes emerging. Agreed themes were used as a basis for NVIVO analysis. Additional themes emerged as the remainder of the interview transcripts were analysed. Related themes were collapsed into wider categories as the analysed data were trawled manually once more to ensure rigour. Pseudonyms are used throughout when reporting direct quotes from individual interviewees.

FINDINGS

When asked to describe the role of support teacher in a post-primary school, the dominant response from all eleven interviewees referred to their work with other adults in the school and particularly with other teachers. The responses primarily described a wide array of tasks such as co-ordinating, organising, informing, advising, upskilling, liaising, encouraging and providing resources to teachers in an effort to support the teaching of students with SEN across the school. What struck the researchers in their analysis of the data was that, with the exception of assessment which was referred to by eight interviewees, there was little unsolicited reference to their own teaching activities with students with SEN. Reference to this aspect of their work was elicited through probing by the researchers. The findings outlined below relate only to the work of interviewees in supporting other teachers in the school.

Upskilling/Informing Teachers

All eleven interviewees spoke about their role in terms of upskilling and/or informing other teachers in the school. Four participants felt that a meeting at the beginning of the year was the best vehicle for disseminating information relating to SEN:

... there is a lot of turnover in relation to teachers that would support my role in terms of learning support and resource in that we do not have an assigned resource teacher so therefore I have to timetable up to between twenty-five and twenty-seven other mainstream teachers to assist me. And that means upskilling them at the beginning of September, giving them an induction programme in relation to the specific areas of special educational needs that the students are presenting, giving them a little bit of ground work in relation to IEPs and how to design them ... (Fionnuala).

The weight of responsibility and the volume of work that the above quote implies reflect the views of the interview participants as a whole. The training that Fionnuala is attempting to provide, as described above, would actually form a substantial part of any/all of the state funded Graduate Diplomas in SEN provided in third level institutions across the country.

Six participants identified the importance of informing teachers of the characteristics of the different types of SEN. Two of the participants linked the lack of knowledge regarding the characteristics of SEN with resistance on the part of some subject teachers to include children with SEN in their classes:

... they [subject teachers] wouldn't have been as aware of the needs. And again, maybe that is part of my problem, why don't mainstream teachers know as much as I'd like them to know about particular learning needs? And then when I say that they don't want these pupils in their class, maybe that is part of my problem in the sense that I haven't given them enough information, do you know what I mean? ... I was surprised by one of my own teachers saying to me, 'I didn't realise so much about dyslexia until you started coming in to me'. And I was surprised because this teacher, in my estimation, was very good, very good with special needs pupils. I had worked with her before and yet she said that to me straight up. So sometimes you have to look behind the curtain (Janice).

However, participants also referred to the responsibility of disseminating information relating to individual students. They recognised the importance of informing teachers of the needs of students but acknowledged that there were some issues relating to confidentiality that seemed to directly conflict with the need of teachers to know. Achieving that balance was perceived to be the responsibility of the support teacher. Linked to this theme is the fact that interviewees also felt they had the responsibility of interpreting formal reports such as psychological assessments for subject teachers. One interviewee commented:

I suppose [I am] a bearer of knowledge and a sharer of knowledge. I think maybe interpreting reports for staff ... sometimes I literally photocopy the recommendations and leave those in a folder for people so you are disseminating information ... I'd also liaise with the principal as well (Sharon).

Six participants also spoke of their role in upskilling subject teachers in relation to teaching strategies and the need for subject teachers to be able to adapt teaching strategies to meet the needs of their pupils. While one participant discussed particularly good practice in the maths department in her school in relation to inclusion of pupils with SEN, the overriding viewpoint was that subject teachers

were struggling to effectively include these children in their lessons. In terms of upskilling subject teachers the heavy emphasis was on showing/modelling how differentiation could be achieved in the classroom particularly in relation to the differentiation of materials and resources:

Sometimes they'd [subject teachers] ask me a question – 'What should I do in that case?' – and I'd say, 'Well try this and come back to me and let me know how you got on' ... One group of students I had for withdrawal ... their priority was English so I did up a study pack for ... the Easter holidays ... and I gave a copy to the teacher ... and he ended up giving it to the whole class and he was really delighted with it ... I kind of modelled it for him slightly. And then actually they said to me, the students, 'Oh Mr. X is actually doing that with us now (Samantha).

Three of the participants spoke of their responsibility to find the best way of approaching the upskilling of subject teachers and that part of their role was to identify that path, with one of the participants feeling that it was her role to source appropriate training outside the school for teachers if necessary.

Supporting Teachers

Participants also spoke of their role in terms of providing moral support and encouragement to subject teachers as well as often responding to requests for help from teachers. Five participants referred directly to their role in providing feedback to subject teachers in terms of their teaching and the importance of encouraging teachers. This could take the form of praising good practice, sharing resources, providing in-class support, giving input into their schemes of work in a particular subject and so on. One teacher commented:

A bit of positive feedback [for subject teachers] ... I like to go back and say, 'Look, it made a difference' or 'She said she really liked it when you x, y or z ... I know you have really differentiated so much...' and there are a couple of teachers I think really go beyond the call and I'll go and say 'Super'. And they are so pleased and maybe there is not enough of that (Sharon).

Continuing Professional Development

The participants expressed a range of opinions in relation to their own continuing professional development (CPD) needs, including new developments in special education, teaching methodologies, assessment (both formal and diagnostic), individual education plans and interpretation of psychological assessments. The two areas that were identified by most participants were categories/characteristics of SEN and administration.

And I suppose special needs is a very live area and every few years it changes and there are different ways of thinking about things and I think there really should be some sort of upskilling or in-service every few years like there is for English teachers as the course changes. I mean, if you look at special needs as a subject, every few years there would be different thinking on the best teaching methodologies for students with autism or whatever ... And every few years as these issues arise, they [support teachers] should be upskilling in them (Samantha).

Generally, there was no overwhelming agreement on their CPD needs. What is interesting is that, given the heavy emphasis placed by the participants on their role in relation to supporting subject teachers, CPD needs for this leadership aspect of their job were hardly mentioned.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings above arise from eleven interviews which is a relatively small sample. Having said that, the length of the interviews and the probing nature of the interview schedule elicited a wealth of rich data from a group of people that had a lot of experience in the field, most of whom were working with pupils with SEN for at least half their timetable and seven of whom were in co-ordinating roles in relation to SEN. It must be remembered of course that this group of eleven people may not be typical of all teachers in such roles. They had completed a twenty-hour course voluntarily over a Christmas period; subsequently took the time to complete and return a questionnaire; and, volunteered to take part in interviews thereby giving of their time and demonstrating a willingness to share their experiences. Therefore, it could be said that they are a particularly diligent group of people and that they may take more on board than others in the same role. However, this diligence may allow us to infer that this group of teachers think deeply about and reflect upon their practice. In that context, a number of implications can be extrapolated from these findings.

Firstly, at school level, the collaborative nature of the support teachers' work with other teachers in the school needs to be acknowledged and taken into consideration when outlining the role within the school and, possibly, when appointing teachers to this position in the first place. Influencing subject teachers, providing support and encouragement when required, enhancing teachers' skills and abilities in the classroom, acting as advocate for pupils with SEN, making critical decisions around dissemination of information and addressing resistance on the part of some teaching staff necessitates a set of skills on the part of the support teacher above and beyond the actual teaching role. This may be further complicated if there is a large number of subject teachers providing small amounts

of resource/learning support as was the case with many of the participants and is illustrated by Fionnuala's comment above.

Secondly, the impression gleaned from the participants was that the burden of responsibility for the successful inclusion of pupils with SEN rested with the support teachers and, while some did acknowledge in other parts of the interviews that there was a whole school approach to SEN, this was not evident when they considered their role. Both researchers sensed a certain amount of stress on the part of the interviewees in relation to the demands of their role. Again, the diligent nature of this cohort of research participants, as described above, may give rise to the level of responsibility taken on by the interviewees themselves. However, deep reflection on practice was evident throughout and therefore, the importance of their perceptions must be acknowledged by school authorities. It would seem that some of this sense of responsibility for upskilling teachers needs to be shared or, at the very least, actively facilitated.

Thirdly, the perception of these interviewees has implications for all providers of CPD courses and programmes for this group of teachers. Similar to the findings of O'Gorman et al. (2009), when asked directly about their CPD needs, a range of areas was articulated that were based on the immediate needs of themselves and/or the school at the time. However, while O'Gorman et al. found that "professional development sought by teachers is generally based on the teacher's current role" (p. 90), this could not be extrapolated from this study. In this case, there was a mismatch between the key aspect of the role identified by the participants (upskilling and supporting subject teachers) and identification of their own CPD needs in relation to that aspect of their role. CPD programmes for support teachers in post-primary schools need to include input into managing others, influencing practice, facilitating development of staff and leadership. According to this group of teachers, it is what they think of first when they are asked to describe their role and any CPD programme should enable them to develop this aspect of their work. Further, there is evidence of this group of teachers using a range of approaches and strategies to support teachers and to encourage them to change their practice in order to effectively include pupils with SEN, demonstrating, in practice, a creative approach to inclusion in their schools.

Fourthly, it is worrying that all of the participants had concerns regarding the ability of subject teachers to meet the needs of pupils with SEN in terms of differentiation of lessons, materials and resources. These concerns raise the issue of provision of good CPD programmes for subject teachers in relation to effectively including pupils with SEN in post-primary schools. Further, there are similar implications for initial teacher education programmes.

CONCLUSION

The role of the support teacher in Irish post-primary schools is a complex one and the experiences of those as recorded in this research reflect some of the challenges identified in the literature. Support teachers clearly take on a lot of responsibility in terms of shaping and maintaining SEN provision in their schools. Their supportive role in relation to other teachers needs to be acknowledged, both by the school itself and the education system in terms of CPD and initial teacher education provision.

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