Teachers and Special Needs Assistants in Irish Classrooms: An Evaluation of a Model of Reflective Teamwork

This article describes research undertaken in two mainstream primary schools in which a Model of Reflective Teamwork, designed by a team of educational psychologists in the United Kingdom to support teachers and teaching assistants, was implemented, evaluated and adapted for use, over an eight week period with five teacher-special needs assistant pairs. The results obtained indicated that this model was valuable in supporting teamwork between teachers and special needs assistants, and helped to identify various recommendations for effective teamwork. The results also highlighted specific changes that the model requires to make it more effective for use in Irish primary schools.

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BACKGROUND

Recent developments in inclusive education have dramatically altered the face of classrooms in schools in Ireland, in that special needs assistants (SNAs) are increasingly working alongside classroom teachers, supporting the diverse needs of these students. In Ireland, the role of the SNA addresses the special care needs of children arising from disabilities. This contrasts with practices in different countries. For example in the UK, the role of the teacher assistant (TA) involves activities of an educational nature. Figures obtained from the Department of Education and Science (DES) indicated that in 2005 there were over 5,500 SNAs employed in Irish primary schools. In 2008, this number increased to over 8,000. In spite of this increase very little research has been conducted in Ireland investigating how best to ensure effective teamwork between teachers and SNAs in classrooms. There seems to be an unfounded assumption that the personnel offering this support would slide effortlessly into the classroom. On the contrary, research has shown that classroom teams are equally affected by the pressures that affect teamwork in other organisations (Thomas, 1992).

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EFFECTIVE TEAMWORK

There are many factors that have been found to influence the effectiveness of teamwork in the classroom. Allocating time for teachers and SNAs to discuss classroom issues is one such factor. Jerwood (1999) found that this time provided opportunities for assistants to clarify issues that had arisen in the classroom with teachers. This in turn contributed significantly to teamwork and teacher-assistant co-operation. In spite of this finding, Lacey and Ranson (1994) highlight how time is rarely allocated to address teamwork in schools. Research investigating additional adults working alongside teachers in classrooms supports the importance of defining the roles of team members for effective teamwork (Clift, Cleave and Griffin, 1980, cited in Thomas). It has highlighted that lack of clarity about one's role can lead to a range of difficulties in the classroom (Thomas; Clayton, 1993). Rose (2000) also found that teachers saw the need for assistants to be involved in planning the lessons, with a particular emphasis on identifying key tasks that would enable the assistants to support pupil participation. Furthermore, ineffective communication practices have been identified by principals, teachers and SNAs as impeding effective teamwork in the classroom (Logan, 2006).

Collaborative Training
In America, in the 1990s, many researchers felt that there was a growing need for more emphasis on collaborative training between teachers and assistants. Morgan, Ashbaker and Forbush (1998) identified a training programme that was specifically designed to address the collaborative skills of classroom team members, with a particular focus on factors associated with teamwork. This programme highlighted the potential benefits of collaborative training between teachers and ancillary staff, including enhancing the sense of being a team for the teacher and the assistant. In Ireland, Logan (2006) has also found that principals, teachers and SNAs rated a lack of training in collaborative skills as a barrier to positive working relationships between teachers and SNAs. In spite of these findings, there has been a failure to identify and research models of practice that could be used to support the unique needs of teacher and SNA teams working together in Irish primary schools.

Reflection
Reid (1993) describes reflection as "a process of reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyse, evaluate and so inform learning about practice" (p. 305). Boyd and Fales (1983) describe it as a process of "internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and which results in a changed

conceptual perspective" (p. 100). As a tool used by professionals to meet challenges in their work practices, reflection has been shown to have tremendous potential.

A Model of Reflective Teamwork

In England, Vincett, Cremin and Thomas (2005) investigated the effects of three models aimed at supporting teachers and TAs working together in classrooms. The three models are described as:

- **The Room Management Model**
- **The Zoning Model**
- **The Reflective Teamwork Model.**

In the Room Management Model the adults in the room are given a clear role, either the learning manager who supports individual students or the activity manager who supports the rest of the class. At a set time during the day the adults undertake their specific roles. The Zoning Model refers to a system of classroom management where adults take responsibility for different zones in the classroom. In the Model of Reflective Teamwork, the participants received training in skills based on teamwork, with a particular emphasis on effective communication. In addition over the course of the six weeks, the teacher and the TA were asked to plan and review their teaching sessions in equal collaboration on a daily basis (Vincett et al.). The effects of using this Model of Reflective Teamwork were investigated in two schools in England by recording the changes in children's level of engagement pre- and post-intervention. The teachers and the TAs were also interviewed. As the children's level of engagement in the classes where this model was implemented was already high, the differences between the pre- and post-intervention figures for this model were not significant. However, when compared to the Room Management and Zoning Models, the interview feedbacks reported by the participants implementing the Model of Reflective Teamwork were the most positive.

Currently in Ireland, there is a paucity of research investigating models of practice designed to support teachers and SNAs working together in classrooms. This in turn de-emphasises and undermines the difficulties associated with teamwork in classrooms. As the nature of the Room Management and Zoning Models conflict significantly with the prescribed role of the SNA in Ireland (DES, 2005), this study sought to implement, evaluate and adapt the Model of Reflective Teamwork. The study was conducted between December 2008 and March 2009 in two Irish primary schools, over an eight week period. It aimed to address two questions concerning the effects of this model:

- **What are the effects of teachers and SNAs applying a Model of Reflective Teamwork on teamwork in classes in mainstream primary schools in Ireland?**
- **Are there any changes that need to be made to this model to make it more effective for use in Irish primary schools?**

METHODOLOGY

The study involved a small-scale intervention and used a participatory action research approach which can be described as a collaborative form of enquiry (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 1994). The researcher worked alongside teachers and SNAs to search for solutions to issues relating to teamwork in the classroom. More specifically, the researcher facilitated teachers and SNAs to explore and reflect on their working relationship, share knowledge, make specific changes to their practices and then reflect upon these changes again.

Participants
Five teachers and five SNAs that worked together in two mainstream primary schools in Dublin city participated in the study. Three teachers had received between two and four hours input on working with SNAs in their initial teacher training. No teachers had received training in this area as part of continuing professional development. All of the SNAs had completed some form of part-time training on courses designed specifically for SNAs. Two of the SNAs were employed on a part-time basis and three on a full-time basis.

Intervention Programme
Over the course of the eight weeks, the teacher-SNA pairs and the researcher met for four one-hour sessions in School A (n=2) and also in School B (n=3). During this time, the participants engaged in training activities designed to enhance and improve the effectiveness of teamwork between teacher-SNA pairs. All of the training activities devised by Vincett et al. (2005) were used in the sessions. In addition, further training activities were identified by the teachers and SNAs during the sessions and these activities were also included. After the activities were completed, the participants were asked to evaluate their effectiveness and recommend any changes. Also, throughout the study, the teacher-SNA pairs were asked to meet two times per week for fifteen minutes and to follow a template to collaboratively plan and review two teaching sessions. The planning session began by reviewing the previous session (except the first meeting). Separately, the teacher and the SNA identified two things that went well, two things that could be improved, and how they were feeling by finishing this sentence, "I am

feeling...because...". After this, each team member practised the communication skills from the training sessions and summarised what the other team member had said. Then the pairs brainstormed objectives and activities for the next lesson and wrote up the lesson together. After using this structure, the participants were also asked to evaluate it, and identify and apply modifications in the sessions that followed.

Data Collection
Each of the four training sessions that took place in School A and B were recorded. The recordings were used by the researcher to note down additional evaluative information communicated by the participants. Five teachers and four SNAs were interviewed individually (one SNA was unavailable for interview) after the eight week intervention. The participants received the interview schedule a week prior to the interview to provide time for their responses to be thought about in advance. These interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed. This data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

RESULTS

Key areas of commonality emerged from the thematic analysis of the individual participants' interviews and the information that was obtained during the fortnightly sessions. These key areas are organised into two main themes and further subthemes. The first theme looks at the different effects that the model had on teamwork. The second theme presents the recommended changes to the model identified by teachers and SNAs in order to develop and enhance the model's effectiveness in Irish primary schools.

Effects of the Model on Teamwork
One of the purposes of the intervention and research was to identify the effects of using the Model of Reflective Teamwork on the participants' practice. For clarity, this theme has been divided into five subthemes which emerged:

- **Improved communication**
- **Developing a positive working relationship**
- **Role clarification**
- **Issues relating to time**
- **Positive implications of reflective practice.**

Improved Communication
The participants highlighted the benefits associated with the activities undertaken during the four training sessions. In particular, improved communication between the teachers and the SNAs was identified as a significant benefit as illustrated by the following comments:

> *During the time that we spent with you, that's really been the only opportunity we have had to communicate in any meaningful way at all (Teacher 1).*

> *I find that I feel comfortable talking to her now, whereas before I wouldn't say very much to her (SNA 3).*

In addition, there was also agreement relating to the effectiveness of the activities based on listening. In particular, participants described how their awareness of how well they actually listened increased:

> *These [activities] do make you listen more and take on board what the person's saying (SNA 2).*

> *I would have been a bit more conscious of giving someone...undivided attention when someone wanted to talk to me (Teacher 5).*

Developing Positive Working Relationships
The participants expressed how the implementation of the model resulted in the teachers and the SNAs spending more time talking together, discussing issues and planning, which had a positive impact on the nature of their relationship in the classroom:

> *I would have seen the main benefit of the whole workshop scenario would have been the building of relationships between myself and the SNA (Teacher 4).*

> *I just felt more relaxed talking to the teacher...I got to know her because we were having these conversations (SNA 3).*

Role Clarification
All of the participants highlighted the benefit of engaging in the role clarification activity. The participants indicated that it was the first time that they had engaged in this type of activity and commented on its effectiveness:

[Teacher 1] was able to ask me to do more stuff...before she wasn't sure what she could ask you to do (SNA 1).

It just got you...at the very beginning to think about what each person should be doing...I thought it was really good because sometimes the roles might get blurred (Teacher 2).

In addition to this, the participants also highlighted how clarification of roles in the lesson planning and reviewing sessions resulted in more effective classroom organisation:

We were able to establish that it was fine for [SNA 1] to be there with the group...it made for very smooth running (Teacher 1).

We decided during the time that it was a good idea if I had the other weaker children at the table (SNA 3).

Issues Relating to Time
All of the participants indicated that finding the time to meet to implement the intervention was very challenging. They highlighted that time is not allocated for teachers and SNAs to meet at any stage during the school year:

It was hard to find the time to do it, I don't know if you would be able to do it all of the time (Teacher 2).

It's next to impossible because once the day starts at ten to nine, that's it, you're finished at half two and gone by twenty-five to three (SNA 2).

Positive Implications of Reflective Practice
During the interviews, all of the participants identified the positive effects of reflective practice. The following comments highlighted how it provided opportunities to think about how one could improve one's practice:

It actually makes you think about what you do...you might think to yourself, now that didn't work well for me today, I'm going to change that, now maybe next time that'll work for me (SNA 1).

The fact that we had to do it [reflect] probably gave us a chance to say what actually did go well...as a teacher you go from one lesson

to another, you are conscious yourself of what went well and you incorporate that, maybe unknown to yourself into the next lesson. This gives the other person [SNA] the chance to give their opinion (Teacher 4).

The SNAs also highlighted how the reflecting and reviewing part of the sessions provided a secure environment, in which they could express their opinion:

If you can plan a session where the teacher is saying 'I shouldn't have done that', it leaves an opportunity for somebody to safely say what they really think (SNA 5).

The reflecting part keeps you informed that your opinion is being taken on board and listened to (SNA 2).

Adapting the Model of Reflective Teamwork to Irish Primary Schools
During the training sessions and the interviews, changes that would improve the Model of Reflective Teamwork and make it more effective for use in Irish primary schools were identified by the participants. For clarity, this theme was further divided into four sub themes:

- **Lesson planning**
- **Training activities**
- **Allocation of SNAs to individual children in Irish primary schools**
- **Whole school approach**.

Lesson Planning
As a result of the data analysis of information obtained during the intervention and also during the interviews, various changes were made to the planning and reflecting template. Both teachers and SNAs clearly expressed that they felt it was the job of the teachers to plan the curriculum content of the lesson and not that of the SNA. They also commented that joint planning of the objectives of the lessons was a waste of valuable time. Instead, the participants recommended that the teacher go through the lesson objectives with the SNA. After this, the teacher and the SNA would use an oral checklist to plan aspects of the lesson relating to resources, allocation of tasks or role clarification.

Training Activities
Throughout the study, the participants identified areas in the training activities that could be improved and a revised version of the training activities was produced at

the end of the intervention. The teachers in the study identified how it was important for teachers and SNAs to discuss different issues that might arise in their classroom, such as discipline or working with parents. All of the participants highlighted the importance of exploring the role of the teacher and the SNA in the classroom, using the circular that defines the role of the SNA (DES, 2005). The participants also identified and recognised the benefits of engaging in activities based around communication. There was also an underlying theme that all of the activities needed to be adapted so that they fully reflect the working relationship between the teacher and the SNA in the classroom:

> *I would refine it, really pare it down to apply it to the teacher SNA context (Teacher 4).*

Allocation of SNAs to Individual Students
In mainstream primary schools, SNAs are recruited specifically to address the needs of individual students with disabilities. During the interviews, the participants felt that design of the Model of Reflective Practice failed to consider this over-arching characteristic of the SNA's role. Teacher 4 emphasised the need to do this in the planning and reflecting sessions:

> *It probably should have been focusing on the activity for the child, the SNA is there to work with...how we might improve the lesson for that particular child, did the child get the most he or she could have got from that lesson, if not why not and how can we change that for him, not for the whole class.*

A Whole School Approach
Some of the participants identified the importance of school principals being involved in the implementation of this model, to ensure that the model is introduced at a whole school level:

> *It does need to be a whole staff policy decision and worked out how it will operate... the principal would have been involved... and would have had an understanding of what it's about (Teacher 1).*

Summary of Changes Recommended for the Irish Context
The participants identified changes needed to adapt the Model of Reflective Teamwork for use in mainstream primary schools in Ireland. Their suggestions may be summarised as follows:

- **For the model to be effective, it needs to be introduced at a whole school level**
- **The model needs to address the defined role of the SNA within the Irish context, i.e. allocated to a specific child or children with SEN**
- **The teacher should plan the lesson independently, and then briefly describe the objectives of the lesson to the SNA. After this, the teacher and the SNA should use an oral checklist to plan aspects of the lesson relating to resources, allocation of tasks or role clarification**
- **In relation to the training sessions, the participants felt that the activities needed to relate more specifically to the teacher and the SNA in the classroom**
- **The training sessions needed to involve more activities based on the development of communication skills**
- **The exploration of the teacher and SNA roles in the classroom should be addressed using the circular that defines the role of the SNA (DES, 2005)**
- **Pre-designed scenarios based on various classroom issues should be used to facilitate discussions between teachers and SNAs.**

DISCUSSION

Role Clarification

During this research, evidence presented by the teachers and the SNAs indicated that prior to engaging in the intervention there was a lack of clarity relating to teacher and SNA roles in the classroom, which had lead to certain difficulties. This concurs with evidence from Thomas (1992) who highlighted how difficulties can be encountered when there is a lack of clarity surrounding one's role in the classroom. The results also found that prior to the intervention, the need to clarify roles in the classroom had not been considered. The participants also indicated that the training activities and the planning and review sessions resolved certain issues relating to role clarification. This in turn had positive effects on teamwork in the classroom. These results supported the evidence of DeVault, Harnischfeger and Wiley (1977) and Clift, Cleave and Griffin (1980), cited in Thomas who identified the importance of defining roles for effective teamwork. In addition, in clarifying roles in the classroom, both the teachers and the SNAs felt that it was solely the role of the teacher to plan the curricular content of the lessons. The participants maintained that teacher and SNA planning time should involve looking at their particular tasks during the lesson, with a particular emphasis on the child to whom

the SNA is assigned. This evidence supports the findings of Rose (2000), who found that teachers in a primary school in the UK saw the assistant as having a contribution to make during the planning process, with a particular emphasis on identifying key tasks that would enable the assistant to support pupil participation.

Time

Lacey and Ranson (1994) have identified how time is rarely allocated to address teamwork in schools. This view is supported by evidence from this study, in that the results indicated that apart from engaging in this intervention, the teachers and SNAs working together did not have the opportunity to meet outside of class time at any stage during the school year. It also indicated that although it was difficult to arrange the time to meet over the course of the intervention, it was valuable in supporting teamwork between teachers and SNAs. This concurred with research from Jerwood (1999), who found that the facilitation of time for teachers and SNAs to meet outside of the classroom made a significant contribution to both teamwork and also co-operation between teachers and assistants.

Skill Development

In his research, Galagan (1986) presented several premises that he identified as forming the foundation for effective teamwork in a technology company. He argues that the premises can be used to support teams in any type of organisation. It includes a premise that identified the importance of having an awareness of how well team members listen to one another. In this Model of Reflective Teamwork, there is a commitment to this type of skill development and the findings indicated that the participants consistently agreed as to the effectiveness of this type of training. Other evidence presented in this study also identified the benefits this type of skill development has in relation to more effective communication. Galagan's research, the findings from the current study and research undertaken with principals, teachers and SNAs (Logan, 2006) have indicated that ineffective communication impedes effective teamwork. This further highlights the need for a commitment to this type of skill development for teachers and SNAs in schools.

Collaborative Training

Evidence was presented in the study that highlighted how training with teachers and SNAs helps to support the development of positive working relationships in the classroom. This supports findings from Morgan, Ashbaker and Forbush (1998), who highlighted one of the benefits of collaborative training programmes between teachers and SNAs as enhancing the actual sense of being a team. The results of this study also concur with findings from Logan (2006) who identified the benefits of a collaborative skills training programme.

Reflecting on and Reviewing Practice

Reid (1993) maintains that as a process, reflection can be used to inform learning about practice. This idea implies that in using the process, practitioners have the potential to learn from their own practices. In this research, the findings indicated that as a result of engagement in a reflective review of their practice, changes were made to classroom practices, and opportunities for equal involvement were presented to both the teacher and the SNA. This evidence not only supports the view presented by Reid, it also supports the positive effects that reflective practice had in empowering individuals to bring about changes to their own practice.

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

Although many schools were contacted and invited to participate in this study, only five teachers and five SNAs in two schools consented to participate. This may indicate the prior commitment of these schools to supporting teamwork between teachers and SNAs, and may not be representative of schools without such a commitment. The relatively small sample size may have also affected the outcomes of this study.

At the same time, this participatory action research generated knowledge and theories about effective teamwork between teachers and SNAs which can be used by other researchers and teachers and SNAs working in mainstream primary schools. More specifically, it provided an opportunity for teachers and SNAs in two particular schools to contribute equally in looking for ways to improve teacher and SNA teamwork in the classroom. In identifying these improvements, both teachers and SNAs were motivated, engaged and empowered to bring about change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the outcomes of this study, the following recommendations have been identified:

- **Investigate the impact of effective teamwork between teachers and SNAs on pupil progress**
- **Ascertain whether or not team leadership skills were developed for teachers**
- **Facilitate time for teachers and SNAs to plan together**
- **Provide opportunities for teachers and SNAs to collaboratively clarify their roles in the classroom**
- **Adopt a whole school approach to address effective teamwork between teachers and SNAs**

- **Facilitate the joint participation of teachers and SNAs in skill development addressing teamwork with a particular emphasis on communication.**

The findings of this study concur with other research in this area which has argued that "effective support in the classroom is more difficult to achieve than one might anticipate" (Vincett et al., 2005, p. 5). In light of this argument and in consideration of the need for the profession of educational psychology to move beyond the limitations of operating at the level of the individual (Swan, 2004), it is reasonable to maintain that this Model of Reflective Teamwork would be valuable for educational psychologists to support teamwork between teachers and SNAs in schools. At a systemic level, it is envisaged that educational psychologists will support and empower teachers and SNAs to develop skills that are necessary for successful teamwork, the benefits of which will extend to pupils in classrooms (Vincett et al.).

CONCLUSION

All of the teachers and SNAs in this study clearly highlighted how this intervention was the first opportunity for them to work in collaboration, and they welcomed the opportunity. They also expressed a commitment to use the adapted version to support teamwork in the classroom. These findings support the outcomes of other research in reinforcing the need for future research to investigate effective ways of providing support to teachers and SNA teams working together in primary schools in Ireland.

Further information on the Model of Reflective Teamwork and associated training materials is available from elainenibhrian@hotmail.com

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