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ARTICLE

Paraprofessional support in Irish schools: from special needs assistants to inclusion support assistants

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ABSTRACT

Paraprofessional support to enable access to education has developed in differing directions in a range of countries. In Ireland, the role of the special needs assistant has focused on supporting the additional care needs of children with special educational needs to ensure their participation in lessons. The role of the special needs assistant (SNA) was considered crucial as Irish mainstream schools adapted to delivering more inclusive learning environments. Support provision has been recently reconceptualised and within this model special needs assistants are now designated as Inclusion Support Assistants with a very specific care role excluding any teaching activity.

This research draws on data from a longitudinal study of SEN provision with a specific focus on the role of SNAs within Irish schools. Findings indicated that the contribution of special needs assistants was highly valued by education stakeholders. It is suggested that the evolution of the SNA role in Ireland can support schools in adopting a flexible approach to create inclusive learning environments.

Introduction

Internationally policymakers and administrators concerned to improve learning opportunities for students with special educational needs have endorsed models advocating the use of paraprofessional support in schools. Whilst these paraprofessionals are to be found under a broad range of titles, including teaching assistants, learning support assistants, classroom aides, paraeducators and special needs assistants, they are considered to be essential to the management of classrooms where students of diverse needs are educated together (Takala 2007; Giangreco and Doyle 2007; Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2013).

Within Ireland, the use of special needs assistants (SNA) is sanctioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) a semi-autonomous body established by the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Oireachtas, 2004) to oversee support provision in mainstream and special schools for children and young people who have disabilities and/or special educational needs. The SNA scheme emphasised the provision of support for the additional care needs of children and young people who otherwise might not be able to attend school. It was stated that the role of the SNA is to

provide personal care support as distinct from having a teaching role Department of Education and Science Circulars (07/2002; 30/2014).

SNA provision is explicitly targeted at enabling students with additional care needs to attend school. Care needs are many and varied and include personal care, mobility, respiratory difficulties, complex medical and/or physical needs. In addition, other students may also be supported by SNAs including those who are deaf/hard of hearing, those who are blind/visually impaired and those who have challenging behaviour or severe communication difficulties (National Council for Special Education 2018).

Background to SNA provision in Ireland

Current Irish policy for children with special educational needs is based on principles of inclusion that have been developed from the 1990's through the first decades of the current century. Educational provision and support for children with disabilities and/or special educational needs rapidly expanded from the late 1990s onwards and this expansion was mandated through enabling legislation (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, 2004). This landmark legislation and subsequent policy initiatives were clearly underpinned by a state commitment to establishing inclusive learning environments in mainstream schools. The role of the Special Needs Assistant was considered crucial as Irish mainstream schools adapted to delivering more inclusive learning environments. However, the rapid expansion of support provision (resource teachers/ special needs assistants) often outpaced government efforts to regulate how this provision should be conceptualised and effectively delivered to benefit children with disabilities and/or special educational needs. Special Needs Assistants were often perceived as a panacea to address the many and complex needs experienced by the children of concern. As a result, at school level many practices emerged such as special needs assistants engaging in pedagogical activity which was explicitly prohibited in Department of Education Circulars on the role of Special Needs Assistants.

The Department of Education and Skills in Circular 30/2014 provided much needed clarity about the role and functions of SNAs. The Circular stipulates that while the SNA can assist the teacher in enabling students to access education the role of the SNA does not encompass additional tuition which is the remit of qualified teachers whether classroom, subject or support teachers.

The SNA scheme forms an essential component in this support infrastructure alongside support teachers, therapeutic professionals and increased training for prospective and current teachers. SNA provision has expanded rapidly in recent decades with 23% growth from 2006 (8,390) to 2011 (10,320); 35% increase from 2011 (10,320) to 2017 (13,969). Consequently, the number of students receiving SNA support increased by 56% over the time period 2011 to 2017 from 2011 (22,284) to 2017 (34,670). The number of students supported by SNAs as a percentage of the overall school population increased from 2.5% (2011) to 3.7% (2017) (National Council for Special Education 2018).

At government level, it is recognised that SNA provision has been effective in enabling pupils with special educational needs to attend school and has been particularly successful in meeting the additional care needs of younger pupils (National Council for Special Education 2018). The consultation process on the role revealed that SNA support is highly valued by pupils, parents and schools (National Council for Special Education 2018).

Recent policy advice and implementation has focused on addressing significant gaps in existing support provision by creating a resourced continuum of support including regional support services comprising therapeutic professionals, nursing staff and educational psychologists (National Council for Special Education 2018). Within this reconceptualised model of support special needs assistants are now designated as Inclusion Support Assistants assigned to attending to additional care needs and not straying into any pedagogical or therapeutic activity as had occurred in the past.

Irish research

Irish research on the role of paraprofessionals in supporting children with special educational needs has been relatively limited when compared to jurisdictions where the paraprofessional role has been an established feature over many decades. Irish research has tended to focus on the parameters of the SNA role as defined in government policy in contrast to the actual role as it operated in schools.

Kerins and McDonagh (2015) suggest that confusion caused by a lack of clarity in the role and purpose of the position of SNAs is a matter of some concern as Ireland embraces an agenda intended to support the development of inclusion. Reporting survey data from a sample of 318 SNAs they found them to be engaged in three distinctive forms of student support, these being care needs, school planning and collaboration, and pedagogical/teaching duties. However, a clear departure from the original intention of the SNA scheme and defined by Kerins and McDonagh (2015) as providing support of a pedagogical/teaching nature included tasks such as planning work for pupils to do in class, teaching small groups of students with SEN and correcting students' work.

The research reported by Kerins and McDonagh (2015) reinforces the findings from Rose and O'Neill (2009) and Keating and O'Connor (2012) who observed that the interpretation of the role of the SNA was a matter of inconsistencies and that there are important questions to be asked about the professional boundaries between SNAs and teachers. The authors of both these research studies suggest that the perception of the role of the SNA varies from school to school and this has an impact upon both the perception of para-professional duties and the relationships established between teachers and support staff. Keating and O'Connor (2012) propose that SNAs have a critical role to play in assisting with the appropriate participation of pupils with SEN in all school activity in mainstream settings. Furthermore, the close relationship established by many SNAs with individual pupils places them in a strong position to ensure effective support (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2013). Continuing professional development for SNAs is recognised as essential for delivering high-quality support for pupils who have special educational needs (National Council for Special Education 2018). This professional development was regarded as critical when SNAs were working with pupils who had behavioural difficulties or pupils on the ASD spectrum (Kerins et al. 2018).

Project IRIS

Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools) was a 4-year longitudinal study of the provision made for children and young people with special educational needs. Data were collected to ascertain the quality of provision made by schools and support services, the

effectiveness of policy, the experiences of students, teachers and families and the learning outcomes for students in schools across the country (Rose et al. 2015).

Methods

Adopting a mixed methods approach, a national survey gained an overview of how special educational needs issues were being addressed across the country. This was followed by the development of focused case studies utilising qualitative data obtained through interviews, focus groups, document scrutiny and observation, which enabled a more detailed analysis of how educational policy and school provision impacted on the learning experiences and outcomes for children with special educational needs. This paper reports mainly on the findings obtained from interviews conducted with primary school principals, teachers, SNAs, students and their parents. A detailed discussion of the methods and analysis of the quantitative data has been reported elsewhere (Rose and Shevlin 2014).

Identifying research questions, establishing research instruments and selecting a sample

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) identified seven research questions to be addressed through the study. Two of these questions demanded insights into the ways in which the curriculum was delivered and support provided to pupils with special educational needs, these being:

- How is the curriculum applied and delivered to these pupils/students?
- How does the school use special educational resources and other support services to provide an inclusive education?

The specific research questions adopted for this study comprised:

- What is the contribution of special needs assistants to including children with disabilities and/or SEN in mainstream classrooms?
- How do education stakeholders perceive the role of special needs assistants in supporting children who have disabilities and/or SEN?

An initial review of Irish and international literature (Rose et al. 2010), enabled the research team to identify four themes (Policy, Provision, Experience and Outcomes) which were used throughout the research process in order to ensure coverage of issues related to these research questions and to inform the development of case studies (Rose and Shevlin 2014).

A case study model was developed based upon a multi-respondent approach collecting data through interviews, focus groups, observation, document scrutiny and a national survey that sought to ensure that the views of stakeholders and providers of provision would be respected and compared, in order to ensure a trustworthy and in-depth understanding of the phenomena being investigated (Bassey 1999). At the centre of the model is the school and around this, the four areas investigated by the researchers in order to gain a holistic view of how each school was responding to the needs of pupils with special educational needs. By interrogating these areas using data collected from respondents identified in the vertical

boxes to the sides of the model, the researchers were able to gain an understanding of the influences of policy and provision upon the sample population and to understand the experiences of children and families and the outcomes of the procedures deployed in schools. The model allows for fair comparison across data providers (e.g. parents, teachers, therapists) and across schools. It is further strengthened through multi-source triangulation and multiple methods triangulation as advocated by Patton (2001).

Flyybjerg (2006) asserts that case studies can provide illuminative narratives giving unique insights into the complexities and contradictions of real-life situations. This, he suggests is a method that has advantages over many others used in social sciences research when the cases generated are based upon well-structured and transparent systems of data collection and analysis. The approaches to data collection and interpretation within Project Iris were piloted prior to implementing the field work pathway described below.

During field work the research team visited 10 primary schools, 10 post-primary schools, and four special schools. As SNAs have been involved in primary school education for a considerable period it was decided that this paper should focus on this sample of schools in order to trace the evolution of the role more succinctly. All 10 schools were selected randomly, using national databases to identify school variables from DES and NCSE. Within each case study school, a group of students were identified with the assistance of school principal and resource teachers, to ensure representative coverage of all categories of SEN identified within national assessment documentation. These sample students (N = 77) were followed throughout the project's duration.

All 10 case study schools were visited twice, in order to gain a picture of how SEN provision was allocated to support children with special educational needs and to understand the sample students' learning experiences and outcomes.

The case study approach provided a framework throughout the research process for data collection during different phases of school visits. Using this approach, data were collected through classroom observation, school document scrutiny and semi-structured interviews with a full range of service users and providers. This paper is primarily concerned with the support provided by primary school SNAs in addressing learning needs for children with special educational needs within case study schools.

The conduct of the research was monitored by the University of Northampton ethics committee which scrutinised examples of data collection instruments and other documentation to ensure the work adhered to clear ethical guidelines. All researchers involved had completed Garda clearance or in the case of UK-based researchers Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) clearance.

Semi-structured interviews

A pilot study was conducted with a sample of service users and providers, to verify the appropriateness of research instruments and establishing interview schedules (Malmqvist et.al 2019). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a broad range of professionals, sample pupils and their parents in each case study school over the course of two school visits. The project code of ethics and an information sheet describing the purpose of the research was given to all participants including students, who were also asked to complete an interview consent form. All interviews with students took place in the

Table 1. Individuals interviewed in each case study school (N = 538).

	Parents	Pupils	Teachers	Resource/Support teachers	Principal/Deputy principal	SNAs	Other professionals
Primary schools							
1	18	2	3	6	1	3	0
2	5	7	7	2	2	3	0
3	7	6	5	3	1	5	0
4	6	7	8	5	1	6	0
5	8	8	12	1	2	4	0
6	3	4	3	4	1	3	0
7	4	2	4	4	1	2	0
8	2	6	3	0	1	2	0
9	6	4	6	4	1	5	0
10	6	6	4	1	1	3	1
Total	**65**	**52**	**55**	**30**	**12**	**36**	**1**
Special schools							
11	4	3	6	2	2	4	2
12	6	6	5	4	1	0	1
13	4	4	1	3	1	2	1
14	6	7	4	2	2	1	0
Totals	**20**	**20**	**16**	**11**	**6**	**7**	**4**
Post-primary schools							
15	5	7	4	3	2	2	2
16	3	5	5	4	2	3	4
17	3	3	3	1	1	2	0
18	6	6	5	5	1	2	0
19	4	5	3	5	1	1	2
20	4	5	2	1	1	2	2
21	7	1	4	0	2	4	3
22	5	5	3	0	2	4	1
23	1	5	3	1	1	4	2
24	3	6	4	0	1	4	0
Total	**41**	**48**	**36**	**20**	**14**	**28**	**16**
Total – all schools	**126**	**120**	**107**	**61**	**32**	**71**	**21**

company of a known adult. The pupils appeared to engage very freely with the researcher and did not refer to the known adult for clarifications so the influence of the known adult on pupil responses appears to have been minimal.

A total of 251 interviews (see Table 1) were conducted in ten case study primary schools over the course of the two school visits.

Coding and analysis

All data were analysed by research team members. Data from interviews conducted with all professionals students and parents were coded using criteria established under three of the four themes to allow the research team to make comparison of school provision, learning experiences and outcomes for individuals with special educational needs across schools. For the purpose of data collection to answer the two specific questions being addressed in this paper, questions related to policy were not asked as the focus was upon work at school level, rather than national level. These codes were established based on an early scrutiny of data from previously conducted focus groups, survey, interviews with a range of professional and parent groups and of school documentation. An analysis of transcripts from the

early data collected as part of the larger project enabled codes to be derived and refined. Transcripts were blind coded by two or sometimes three researchers who initially devised codes related to each research question. These analysts then compared the codes and looked for areas of common agreement before applying them definitively as part of the analysis process. Where there were disagreements regarding the allocation of codes, these were discussed. If consensus was not achieved after these discussions, it was agreed that the allocated code may not be secure and this part of the data was therefore discarded.

A system of code management established a framework of commonalities, whereby recurrent themes that were representative of a majority of responses obtained across the full sample of respondents (service users and providers) was regarded as trustworthy (Bassey 1999) and a fair indication of the tenor of the data obtained. Where a majority of the overall sample had not provided evidence of a common response, these were considered to be exceptionalities (Rose and Shevlin 2014) and were therefore deemed unrepresentative as indicators of typical support provision. While exceptionalities can at times be useful in the identification of innovative or unusual practices in providing classroom support, in this instance, the researchers had been asked to provide evidence of those strategies and approaches commonly used in providing classroom support.

This process of multi-researcher triangulation achieved through a process of blind coding has been commonly used when conducting research of this nature (Patton 2001) where an extensive data set is to be analysed.

Findings

Findings were defined according to themes that arose whilst clustering codes related to the research questions. The researchers then returned to the transcripts to identify examples of what had been said during interviews. It was decided that quotations from these would only be used if they were verifiable across interviews from each of the respondent groups (parents, pupils, SNAs, teachers). In this way, the researchers were able to provide examples that may be described as typical of the responses obtained.

The interview data from SNAs, parents and pupils indicated that the role of the SNA was complex and multi-dimensional. The findings are reported under two key components of the case study model: Provision & Experience. The 'Provision' section comprises physical caretaking, organisational support, managing behaviour, promoting independence, collaboration between SNAs and teachers and perspectives of school professionals about SNA role. The Experiences component includes pupils' attitudes towards SNA support and parent's attitudes towards SNA support.

Provision

Physical caretaking

Physical caretaking, the original rationale for the SNA role, was deemed essential, especially for pupils who had severe physical disabilities. One eight-year-old pupil, for example, is totally reliant on SNA support for basic daily living activities such as toileting and eating as recounted by his SNA:

> ... when he came to school he had never eaten anything at all, whereas now he has a small lunch ... he has to do mouth exercises, for biting, because his food at the moment is pureed and now, we're trying to introduce lumps, so he has to kind of practice, to build up the muscles.

Furthermore, a Deputy Principal from a case study primary school evaluated the contribution from SNAs regarding daily caretaking for children with SEN:

> If you have a child that has toileting needs as part of a disability that can be very difficult, you can rely very much on an SNA who is comfortable with that sort of thing,

Likewise, another principal from a case study primary school indicated that SNAs provided care support for children in their school, which made the school run successfully:

> I think that the SNAs we have are very good and very caring towards the children, and I would hope that they would see the role as pastoral as much as anything else.

Organisational support

Organisational support for specific pupils was evident enabling an eight-year-old pupil with Down Syndrome to get ready for his schoolday:

> Well it's really to keep him on task and to sort him out in the morning when he arrives here, make sure he hangs his coat up ... and get him to get himself sorted and get his books organised out of his bag and his pencil case out of his bag.

Furthermore, a class teacher of an eight-year-old boy on the autism spectrum indicated that support from his SNA helped in keeping him on task:

> So when he's on his own doing the test he could daydream there for ever, if he got stuck on one, he wouldn't cop on to go on the next one, you know, he'd stay stuck and he wouldn't even ask me, the SNA is generally there for O, to keep him on task.

Likewise, a principal from another case study primary school mentioned that she coped well with students and her work because of SNAs' organisational support:

> The SNA is an integral part of the set-up, because with that amount of children in the class with needs ... she would always keep me tuned in to what was happening, I mean without an SNA in the room, it would be very difficult to cope.

Managing behaviour

A ten-year-old boy with behavioural difficulties was offered support in a discreet fashion to avoid embarrassing him as one parent observed:

> Now we're lucky we got an SNA, that made an absolute huge difference ... the school, they didn't make it out that this is C.'s SNA, they incorporated it into the classroom, like he doesn't think that he has 'oh I have a special helper.

This approach to support was evident in another primary school as the SNA assigned to a ten-year-old girl who had behaviour difficulties commented:

> I'm the SNA with R. for years, and R. I would say still doesn't even know I'm her SNA . . . I just keep a distance, always keep a distance from her, that she would never be aware that she has a minder or whatever!

Promoting independence

SNAs were aware that pupils should not become over-dependent on their support and conscious that support should not become overpowering as reported by an SNA in a primary school:

> I don't think any of the kids here in the school mind having SNA's, like, we're kind of part of the room, and we don't sit and make them feel that I'm here to help you . . . you go away and let them do it and if they're doing it wrong you give them a hand, rather than sit beside him and make him feel uncomfortable, you know. You'd kind of move and go back and move and go back.

A resource teacher from another case study primary school believed that too much support would hinder the pupil's attempts to become more independent:

> Particularly because if you have a child with a lot of needs, the SNA is nearly like an extra mum, and they nearly anticipate too much, and they, we don't want the Velcro system, they all work under that policy to let the kids be as independent as possible, so we kind of feel that if you chop and change a little bit, maybe twice, or three times through their school life, it works to their advantage.

Collaboration between SNAs and teachers

Collaboration between SNAs and teachers in supporting children experiencing difficulties was dependent on the teacher perspective on the role of the SNA. The SNA who supports John, an eleven-year-old who has severe dyslexia, observed that her role could be expansive or restricted depending on the attitude of the classroom teacher:

> I've found, my job is, it's the strengths and skills of SNA's are only incorporated into a class as much as a teacher will allow. . . . I think the SNA even just with paired reading, going over maths lessons that they've done already with the teacher, I think the SNA should be utilised a lot more than they are, rather than, I've been in other classes where you sit. And it's an awful waste of resource.

School professionals' perspectives regarding SNAs' support

Enabling pupils to engage in positive social interactions was considered a vital element in the SNA role as demonstrated in the seating plan intervention designed by a teacher and SNA to include a ten-year-old pupil who was on the ASD spectrum:

> . . . she (teacher) kept changing who she sat next to, until there was a combination where there was a group of kids around her that would be chatty in a nice way, and one day teacher almost had to tell her to be quiet, which would have been a first, it was lovely

While her SNA encouraged the interaction and as a result can: '. . . step back and see her enjoying herself and starting to mix.' In another primary school, playground activities

were adapted to include everyone: '. . . we had a few different break time problems, so we made up loads of different playground games, so there's a different game every break time, the whole classroom has to play, and they all love it, and the children who found it difficult to join in, there's a few of them in the classroom, are all joining in, and they've come on heaps.'

A primary school principal indicated that SNA support was necessary for children with special educational needs in helping and encouraging them in positive social interactions at school, especially when they experienced transition between year groups:

> . . . because I see the bond that is built up with putting a child with the SNA, I thought that would help the child to relax, the children are very nervous, very, very tense children . . . when the SNA could move on with the child, and she would know somebody in the school up along.

Likewise, a support teacher from another primary school mentioned that SNA support was essential during the transition progress for children with SEN, and transition could be less stressful in social interactions with the continuous SNA support:

> Well what we've just changed recently now is that our SNA's would have maybe changed in September when the teacher changes, but now this year that we have brought in that the SNA will change at mid-term in February, so that when they go to their new class, at least they'll be bringing their SNA with them, and they'll be able to give you an overview on what the child's like.

Experiences

Pupils' attitudes towards having SNA support

The experiences of pupils and parents in relation to the support afforded to them by SNAs provide insights into the efficacy of this provision and the perceptions of service users. It was evident from the observations conducted in schools that SNAs were allocated tasks by teachers that aimed to provide support for pupils in a number of areas.

Pupils often spoke positively about the support that they received as was the case of a pupil with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in a post primary school:

> I have an SNA that definitely helps, especially in like the big class, you know. Because like you could just ask the SNA like, instead of always asking the teacher.

Others were able to discriminate when they needed SNA support, stating for example that they may need assistance in maths lessons, but not at other times.

However, pupils did not always appreciate the support offered by an SNA and some resisted support as reported by an SNA regarding a nine-year-old boy who had difficulties in learning:

> . . . they don't want to be singled out and made different, so you have to be very careful how you approach them. Because that's why I make it so obvious that I'm helping others, . . . I can see he gives me looks sometimes, so I have to pretend that I'm working with A. beside him as well!

A twelve-year-old boy, appeared to resent having to rely on SNA:

> He, J. is a challenge in a way, in that he does not want an SNA. He doesn't like the fact that he needs one, because he's a very bright boy, but he's very severely dyslexic, and doesn't like others to know that he finds things difficult, because he likes to be very good, and he likes to be the best at everything.

J.'s class teacher describes how support can be diversified to minimise J.'s discomfort:

> … he (J) hates having the SNA sitting beside him … and other days then, she'll just go round and say, 'are you sure you have your capital letters', and she'll do it to several of them all around him, so that he doesn't feel too particular, because he's at an age now where he doesn't want her he recognises that P. (SNA) makes him different.

Parents' attitude towards SNA support for their children

Interviews with SNAs and parents, it was apparent that while SNAs carried out traditional caretaking there was increased emphasis on adopting a pedagogical role. The delivery of the curriculum and the support provided by SNAs are closely interlinked, with suggestions that curriculum access and the progress made by pupils is often dependent upon the interventions of paraprofessionals in the class. Evidence from the interviews with both parents and pupils suggests that the work undertaken by SNAs includes support for academic activity. The comment from one primary school pupil (ten-year-old boy who had specific speech and language difficulties) was typical of many responses.

> She helps me with my writing, and, she helps me with my speech and my work.

Parents were aware that their child could require specific SNA supports for maths instruction to enable learning to occur as illustrated by the following comment from the parent of an eight-year-old boy who has ASD:

> … his SNA comes up and sits beside him, mainly during maths I think … not for the whole of the classes, it's mainly maths that would be a struggle.

This point was reinforced by the parent of a nine-year-old girl who has ASD:

> … she has a helper in the classroom now, C. (SNA), and she's there, she helps her, and even C. says how she's coming on well with the maths.

This structured SNA support was directed by the class teachers. Parents appeared to be content that SNAs adopted a role in the specific planning of specialist interventions. The SNA took responsibility for employing social stories (which requires a degree of pedagogical understanding) to support a child on the autism spectrum focused on improving his personal and social skills. His parent commented that

> Yes, we've done social stories and I know his previous SNA used to actually write them for him, she was brilliant. On one occasion again, he didn't want to get his hair cut, and she wrote a lovely social story about getting your hair cut, … it's trying to tap into ones that would be appropriate to the stage he's at.

Another parent reported that her child who has a hearing impairment had benefitted from the structured SNA support for developing language skills:

I mean she struggled in junior infants with, they were doing phonics, and she was struggling with the hearing and the pronunciation, that's all come together this year, so we can see a massive difference to last year . . . her SNA, the resource teacher, they've just been brilliant . . . . . . and like she's doing fantastic in school and every report we've had has been good.

Emotional reassurance

Providing reassurance to pupils constituted another critical aspect of SNA work as recounted by one parent whose child had ADHD and required focused emotional support as he tackled classroom tasks:

. . . if there's something that involves him reading and then doing a little bit of writing, he has a tendency to get frustrated and start actually huffing and puffing in the class, and she's also trying to reassure him that, just take a deep breath, you'll be fine, let's work on one and see how we get on, and then we'll move on to the next one, and sure if you don't get them all today, at least you tried your best and so on.

A class teacher of a five-year-old boy with physical disabilities reflected that he normally could not cope alone when she dealt with other children in class; however, his SNA provides emotional support:

. . . well the Special Needs Assistants are a great support because you know, they would have been with R. from the beginning, so I suppose she has a special relationship with him, and I actually found it quite difficult to teach R. myself, as in to do the exercises, because he might tend to push me away, whereas he knows that E. (SNA) will help him through

Another class teacher of an eight-year-old boy with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties observed that the SNA was able to understand and manage this boy, and provide him with emotional support, enabling him to work well at school:

Sometimes he has to put his head down on the table mid-way through an assignment, but I have an excellent classroom assistant, and she is very good at knowing when she can put pressure on him to lift up his head and pushing him on.

Discussion

It is worth noting that there was consistent agreement across the respondent groups (parents, pupils, SNAs, teachers) about the impact of SNA provision on the school lives of the pupils being supported. The findings from this research strongly support the contention that the special needs assistant role is an essential element in ensuring that children and young people with disabilities and/or SEN can meaningfully participate in the school environment.

The findings clearly indicate that the core elements of the SNA role continue to be focused on physical caretaking and organisational support, which are essential prerequisites for the meaningful participation of these children in ordinary classroom activities. To some extent, the significance of this core SNA activity has been overlooked in the debate about the quasi-pedagogical activities often observed in classrooms (Kerins and McDonagh 2015). While inconsistencies in how the SNA role was implemented across schools have been reported (Rose and O'Neill 2009; Keating and O'Connor 2012) there was a high level of consistency among the case study schools in their emphasis on the

importance of physical caretaking and organisational support offered by special needs assistants in their schools.

Enabling pupils to manage their behaviour in classrooms was considered an essential element of the SNA role and was highly valued by teachers, school principals and families. Supporting pupils to manage their behaviour is a complex activity requiring high levels of expertise. SNAs were very aware that they had received comparatively limited training in how to effectively manage pupil behaviour and were concerned that this limited their ability to fully support the pupils they supported. This finding aligns with recommendations from the National Council for Special Education (National Council for Special Education 2018) review and research from Kerins et al. (2018) that emphasised the urgency of providing appropriate training for SNAs to undertake the newly conceptualised Inclusion Support Assistant role (National Council for Special Education 2018).

The findings indicate that there were high levels of collaboration between SNAs and teachers and this is considered essential in ensuring consistent support for pupils. However, research has indicated that even where there are clear lines of management, it is not unusual for para-professionals to be operating autonomously, making decisions about instruction, delivering pedagogical support and recording pupil performance (Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle 2010). There was strong evidence in this study that SNAs were perceived to be an essential element in the school support team and collaboration in designing appropriate classroom support was highly valued.

School professionals perceived that SNA support was essential in enabling pupils to engage in appropriate social interactions with their peers and their teachers. This support was deemed to be critical in ensuring that pupils could manage the many transitions experienced in primary schools. The importance of SNA supporting transitions was also highlighted in recent research on transition processes in Ireland (Scanlon et al. 2019).

The findings related to the experiences of pupils, parents and teachers in respect of the support provided by SNAs reveal a number of important issues.

There appears to be an element of security on the part of parents who believe that their children will be better included in learning when SNA support is present. While this perception is reinforced by both teachers and pupils, there are occasions when SNA support is seen by pupils in particular to inhibit social interaction with their peers and be a cause of anxiety that they may be singled out as different. Many pupils within the study valued the support provided by SNAs but were also concerned that this should be delivered in as unobtrusive a manner as possible.

Both parents and pupils valued the support provided by SNAs not only in terms of support for personal needs but also for that related to curriculum content. This support focus differs from that expected by para-professionals whose brief is one of a care giver rather than an educational professional and is an indication of the changing role of the SNA status. This situation, far from raising concerns on the part of parents, is generally regarded as a positive development through which pupils are more readily enabled to access learning and be maintained in classrooms alongside their peers.

Teachers acknowledge the changing role of SNAs and regard them as essential partners in pedagogical enterprise. For those pupils who have physical needs, the care role continues to be an important focus of the SNAs' work. However, teachers recognise that the support provided for pupils with more general learning difficulties, being able to

utilise their skills in working on curriculum activities under their direction is a critical means of ensuring pupil inclusion in learning.

Conclusion

It is very evident from this study that SNAs are viewed as an essential element in establishing inclusive learning environments by all the major participants in the education system. Participants particularly valued the quality of the SNA commitment to supporting students to be fully included in classroom learning and social interaction. Policymakers have attempted to narrowly define their role as caretaking though this policy stance has shifted and there is an implicit recognition that SNAs are involved in supporting peda-gogical activity, though under the direction of the class teacher. The recent re-designation of SNAs as Inclusion Support Assistants is a clear indicator that their role is highly valued in creating inclusive schools though with the caveat that their role does not encompass an explicit teaching dimension. Perhaps, it can be argued that this approach avoids the pitfalls experienced in other jurisdictions where teaching assistants were increasingly expected to cater to the learning needs of students with special educational needs.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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