

SCOTENS

**THE STANDING CONFERENCE ON
TEACHER EDUCATION, NORTH AND SOUTH**



Teacher-Assistant Partnerships in Special Schools in Ireland and N.Ireland

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Project Aim:

- ▶ To investigate the nature of teacher-assistant partnerships in special schools from the perspective of the assistant.

Education Policy North and South

- ▶ In Northern Ireland:
 - ▶ Review of special education and inclusion
 - ▶ Introduction of SENDA (2016)
 - ▶ Greater co-operation between education and health
 - ▶ Reduction in time to complete a statutory assessment
 - ▶ Reduction from 5-stage to 3-stage process
 - ▶ Capacity-building training for the range of school staff and Boards of Governors
 - ▶ Some changes have been more welcome than others

Education Policy North and South

- ▶ In Ireland:
 - ▶ EPSEN Act (2005)
 - ▶ Establishment of NCSE
 - ▶ Nationwide network of special educational needs organisers (SENO)
 - ▶ Other key provisions have yet to be enacted
 - ▶ Assessment
 - ▶ Individual education planning
 - ▶ Provision of services

Why Focus on Assistants?

- ▶ A response to changes in inclusive educational policy
- ▶ Number of assistants in Ireland and Northern Ireland has grown significantly over recent years
- ▶ Employed to support pupils with SEND, to aid teachers in interacting with these pupils and to collaborate with other professionals

Special School Profile

Northern Ireland		Ireland	
Schools	39	Schools	135
Pupils	5,735	Pupils	8,114
Assistants	2,012	Assistants	2,466

Why Focus on Assistants?

- ▶ Reviews of SEND North and South have identified assistant role as a key issue:
 - ▶ Spend versus value for money
 - ▶ Effective management and deployment
 - ▶ Lack of evaluation at strategic level
- ▶ Ambiguity prevails in relation to variations around:
 - ▶ Identity and status
 - ▶ Roles and responsibilities
 - ▶ Teacher collaboration and training
- ▶ A notable research gap on the working relationships between assistants and teachers, particularly from the perspective of the assistant.

Methodology

- ▶ A convenience sample of twelve special schools across Northern Ireland (n=6) and Ireland (n=6)
- ▶ Focus group approach employed
- ▶ Data collection undertaken between January - April 2018
- ▶ A total of 81 assistants participated in these focus groups: 36 assistants in Northern Ireland and 45 assistants in Ireland
- ▶ All interviews recorded and transcribed in full
- ▶ Thematic analysis applied to identify emerging themes
- ▶ Ethical approval from UU and DCU

Findings

- ▶ Findings can be broadly summarised as:
 - ▶ Skills, duties, responsibilities
 - ▶ School relationships : teachers and pupils
 - ▶ Characteristics of good relationships
 - ▶ Challenges to collaboration

Duties of the Assistant

- ▶ Wide range of knowledge, skills and expertise beyond the job description
- ▶ Considerable overlap in CA and SNA duties but also some contrasts in duties undertaken eg personal care and medical support:

“You would in fairness, girls disagree with me if you wish, but you will find sometimes that you are a not just a Special Needs Assistant, you are also a Physio and a Speech Therapist, rather than the carer and a counsellor.”

(SNA 2)

Skills/Attributes

- ▶ A range of educational and medical skills as well as core personal characteristics, including 'parental' skills, sense of humour, specific medical skills, alternative communication:

“I think students like a bit of craic, it’s too structured. Remember who you’re working with and the kind of kids especially coming to school. The kind of kids you’re working with. If you want to teach mainstream children, go to a mainstream school. These are not mainstream children, but they need a bit of light heartedness, they need a little bit more comfort or whatever. Just don’t be too rigid or structured with your ideas, because you’re going to fall flat on your face.”

(SNA 3)

Relationships with Teachers

- ▶ Generally positive examples of good relationships, with class teacher identified as the determining character in establishing good working environment:

“Well my teacher at the minute is very approachable, you could literally go to her about anything, you could say ‘this is all falling apart’ and she’ll work with you.”

(CA 10)

Relationships with Pupils

- ▶ Personal relationships with pupils were paramount:

“... it’s very one on one. You find when they’re taken to somewhere on their own and there’s not the distraction of the classroom, you’d have more of an interaction with them. Like, you’d see them do things. We had one of the kids yesterday doing, ‘if you’re happy and you know it’, and he was clapping his hands, but he’d never done that inside of the classroom. He won’t do that in a circle, but he did that you know on a one to one.”

(SNA 7)

Relationships with Pupils

- ▶ Consistency and level of their day-to-day contact was identified as giving assistants greater insight to, and familiarity with, individual pupils' needs:

“And that’s the benefit of having classroom assistants because we know each child’s weaknesses and strengths so we know we can be there for them if they’re having a difficulty with a particular subject or topic.” (CA 1)

“I think it’s a more personal relationship than the one between the student and the teacher, so, they would often come to you to say something before they would approach the teacher. It’s a more approachable role.” (SNA 4)

Characteristics of Collaborative Relationships

- ▶ A range of core practices were identified:
 - ▶ Team work
 - ▶ Collegiate support
 - ▶ Good communication
 - ▶ Opinion and input
 - ▶ Respectful relationships

Teamwork

Often defined in terms of inter-dependence, shared expertise and joint effort:

“In our situation because we’re working together, our teacher will say right, ‘what are we going to do today?’, and the ‘we’ sets the tone, and you know that you’re part of that team ... and you’ll say, ‘right I’ll do this’, and you’re full of ideas.”

(SNA 1)

- ▶ *“I really feel part of a team, if something happened, the teacher would contact you outside of school hours to check you’re ok and how you’re feeling so I think it’s more than just, they do value and think about you.”*

(CA 2)

Collegiate Support

Often informal but a consistent and necessary feature of classroom practice:

“It’s ongoing, you always come together at the end of the day, there’s always something being discussed...and there’s a real sense of teamwork because of all the information is being passed between us all the time.” (CA 3)

“Like if you have a problem there and then you can say it to the teacher and she would say to me...like if there was a child and there was an issue you’d say it on the spot.”

(CA 4)

Communication

Consistency in communication and opportunities for daily dialogue:

“Well, we kind of have an ongoing communication with our teacher, as of things happen, you kind of consult with your teacher, this and that, maybe this way and maybe that way, but it’s ongoing communication through the day. If something happens at the end of the day, you have a bit more chat about it, what happened and why and how to deal with it maybe next time.”

(SNA 9)

Opinion and Input

Teacher acknowledgement of individual and shared expertise:

“Some teachers would say... ‘What do you think of this?’ For example, ‘do you think this would suit him or her?’ Yes we have been brainstorming this year, any ideas, it’s quite good, they ask our opinions which is quite nice. With a challenging group I find we sit and say right what didn’t work today, what did, we’ll try this tomorrow... It would be very rare that a teacher would make a decision without consulting us really.

(CA 1, 2, 3, 4)

Respectful Relationships

Associated with teacher acknowledgement of status and identity:

“And respect has a lot to do with it as well, because we are SNAs, but it’s a profession and we’re not recognised as professionals, so words that I have heard you know is ‘little slaves’, you know. It’s not necessarily the respect that you might give out, might not necessarily be given back, but then that is to do with individuals themselves.”

(SNA 3)

Challenges to Working Relationships

- ▶ Main challenges identified as:
- ▶ Poor communication
- ▶ Professional tensions
- ▶ Professional compromise
- ▶ Lack of time
- ▶ Limitations in teacher training

Poor Communication

Manifested in information not shared or lack of direct contact with assistant:

“... you could be in a room where it’s like you’re not even there because you get told nothing and you don’t get included on small things like messages or information that’s meant to be shared within the group ... and you’re like, sorry ‘why was I not told’, do we not all need to know that information together? That’s just the way it works.”

(CA 9)

Professional Tensions

Professional tensions were similarly attributed to poor classroom management:

“I’ve been working with a child and a teacher working with another child and the teacher has stopped to ask me to go and get a tissue to wipe that child’s nose.” (CA 1)

“They don’t want to accept that maybe your little bit of input might solve that problem, they would go around the houses for a month before they come to the realisation ‘okay, you know’. I think everybody has experienced that to some degree.”

(SNA 6)

Professional Compromise

Most commonly related to professional expectations placed upon assistants:

“We work more and above than SNA’s really. Don’t we? We do. Sometimes when the teacher’s out or has a course day, we’re not covered and I’m not complaining or anything, but we’d take over the role. One of us would decide who’s going to be in charge today, and we’d take over the role as a teacher. I don’t think that’s right, do you know what I mean?”

(SNA 2)

Lack of time

“Well we have planning meetings together, they’re quite informal and mostly just five minutes here and there ... You really don’t have much time when you’re not with the kids.”

(CA 1 and CA 3)

Limitations in training

Deficiencies in teacher training that left NQT and substitute teachers particularly unprepared:

“Some people who have come in as subs ... and you know, they look at you like ‘I don’t need you’ then they find out, well actually, I do! Their attitude towards you changes completely, after originally sitting you to the side of the class they the try to involve you, ‘aren’t you coming?! I think when they see maybe ten kids coming they think this is wee buns but then 5 minutes later suddenly realise it is not.”

(CA 1 and CA 2)

Conclusions

- ▶ Assistants play a unique role in facilitating the education of pupils with SEND in the education system, yet there is huge diversity and ambiguity in their role, status and deployment. A comprehensive review of these posts should be implemented in order to standardise the assistants' role within a classroom and whole-school basis.
- ▶ Understandings of the assistant role in the classroom on an all-island basis is still an unexplored aspect of collaborative practice in school and further research exploring the interactions with teachers and pupils is called for.
- ▶ The particular knowledge and expertise that assistants possess needs to be fully exploited eg. Radical review of collaborative practice between teachers and the assistant workforce; dedicated training on classroom management within ITE and CPD.