

Critical Issues Affecting Special Needs Assistants in the Irish Education System

More than 18 000 special needs assistants (SNAs) are employed in Irish schools. According to the Department of Education (DE), their primary function is to support the care needs of students with additional needs, assist teachers, and ensure that students can access education. Recently, SNAs have been campaigning for greater recognition of their contribution to the Irish education system. This campaign has highlighted several critical issues that impact SNAs working in Ireland, including entry-level training and qualifications, ambiguity regarding their role and responsibilities and a need for access to ongoing professional development.

Recognising the genuine contribution of SNAs to the Irish education system and addressing some of the known inequities they experience is of particular interest to the author of this paper. The author works in a special education setting where forty-one SNAs comprise 80% of the staff. Hiring graduates for the role and investing heavily in their professional development has been transformative for this school. The contribution of SNAs in this setting is extensive and has enabled the school to thrive whilst serving a student population with highly complex learning and behavioural needs. This paper begins with a brief examination of the history and current interpretation of the SNA scheme. This is followed by a critical analysis of some of the key issues concerning the employment of SNAs and a consideration of how SNAs are uniquely recruited, deployed, and supported in the author's setting. It is argued that by addressing the critical issues impacting the current SNA scheme, we can advance the broader cause of inclusion in the Irish education system.

Keywords: Special Needs Assistant (SNA), special school, qualifications, continuous professional development, supervision, collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

Ainscow (2020) advises that a move towards inclusive education must be focused on increasing the capacities of all schools to support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse range of students. He describes this movement as an ‘inclusive turn’ and cautions against interpreting inclusion as simply integrating vulnerable students into existing arrangements. The role of teaching assistants or TAs (TA is the term widely used in the literature concerning paraprofessionals working in education) in facilitating inclusive education has been widely endorsed and pursued, with many other countries engaging the services of paraprofessionals in their school systems (Logan, 2006; Rose and O’Neill, 2009; Keating and O’Connor, 2012). The role of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) was a central consideration of schools in Ireland as they reformed to deliver more inclusive learning environments (Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2021). The number of SNAs working in the Irish education system has grown from 8390 posts in 2006 (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2018) to 18 050 in 2022 (DE, 2023). While the number of SNAs employed in Irish schools has rapidly increased, their contribution is still relatively unexplored (Logan, 2006; Keating and O’Connor, 2012). This article begins with an examination of the history and current interpretation of the SNA scheme. This foregrounds a review of some of the critical issues concerning SNA deployment, including roles and responsibilities, qualifications, and professional learning and supervision, in tandem with consideration of how SNAs are uniquely recruited, deployed, and supported in the author’s setting. Implications for policy and practice are identified, and it is argued that addressing the critical issues impacting the current SNA scheme can advance the broader cause of inclusion in the Irish education system.

HISTORY AND CURRENT INTERPRETATION OF THE SNA SCHEME

This first iteration of the SNA ‘scheme’ came into effect in 1979. It was initially introduced to support students who attended special schools and were considered to have exceptional difficulty and complex medical needs (DES, 2011). These employees were then known as child-care assistants, and their deployment was small in scale, numbering in the low hundreds. Following the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report (DES, 1993), there was a move away from segregated educational provision and a greater focus on inclusive education. The development of this inclusive practice required additional staff to support students with additional educational needs (AEN) to attend mainstream schools. In 2002, to reflect the redefined objectives of the role, the title was changed from child-care

assistant to SNA (Morrissey, 2020). Two key DE circulars (07/2002; 30/2014) clearly state that the role of the SNA is to deliver personal care support to enable students with additional care needs to attend school (DES, 2002; 2014). A clear emphasis on school attendance evident in these circulars arguably promotes the situation Ainscow (2020) advises against, where the inclusion of students with AEN is defined by their physical placement in schools rather than their experience whilst there.

REVIEW OF THE SNA SCHEME

In 2018 the NCSE published the ‘Comprehensive Review of the SNA Scheme’. This report is the most far-reaching analysis of the deployment of SNAs in Ireland to date (NCSE, 2018). One of the most apparent findings from the consultation process was that all education stakeholders highly valued the SNA role (Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2021). The overarching case made in the report is that access to an SNA is not sufficient to support the meaningful inclusion of all students with additional needs. Many other researchers in the area agree that TA support should not be viewed as a panacea when addressing the appropriate inclusion of students with additional needs (Webster, 2010; Butt and Lowe, 2012; Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2021). The authors of the NCSE report warned that the SNA scheme had developed into a “blunt instrument to deal with a wide variety of needs” (NCSE, 2018, p.21). One of their key recommendations to remedy this was making a broader range of support options available to schools, including developing ten regional multidisciplinary support teams. The report also identified and made recommendations to remedy some of the critical issues and inequities inherent in the current formulation of the SNA scheme. These matters will be discussed with reference to the broader literature within the following paragraphs.

CRITICAL ISSUES AFFECTING SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANTS

This section of the paper focuses on some of the critical issues that affect this cohort of school staff and discusses how these issues are addressed in the author’s context. Some issues are unique to Ireland; others are recurrent in international research concerning school-based paraprofessionals.

Role and Responsibilities

The most prevalent finding emerging from the research concerning TAs is that the role is “plagued by confusion, ambiguity and lack of clarity” (Giangreco, Doyle

and Suter, 2014, p.695), a theme which is common across the literature (Logan, 2006; Butt and Lowe, 2012; Webster and De Boer, 2019). The SNA role has been repeatedly clarified across departmental circulars (DES, 2002; 2014), outlining the care duties inherent to the role and stipulating non-teaching responsibilities (Keating and O'Connor, 2012). Despite this, multiple researchers and the NCSE review found that many SNAs are engaged in tasks of a teaching nature (Logan, 2006; Rose and O'Neill, 2009; NCSE, 2018). It is not surprising, therefore, that research demonstrates that the ambiguity associated with the TA role may contribute to the misinterpretation of TAs' associated duties and the inappropriate assignment of responsibilities.

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. This misinterpretation has seen many TAs performing tasks of a pedagogical nature, which are outside of their remit and may be beyond their professional qualifications (Webster et al., 2010; Butt and Lowe, 2012). While other SNAs have reported that their skill sets were under-utilised and that schools assigned them tasks such as cleaning, clearing lockers and making tea for teaching staff and school visitors (NCSE, 2018).

The NCSE (2018) recommended that SNAs be renamed 'Inclusion Support Assistants' to reflect that the role is primarily concerned with promoting independence and inclusion. However, five years on, the title has yet to be adopted in any official DE circular or documentation, and many schools have, in the interim period, adopted alternative titles, such as 'Additional Needs Assistant' (Educate Together, 2020). Stating SNA duties must be entirely non-teaching whilst indicating their function is to promote independence is arguably somewhat contradictory. SNAs, in the author's context, whilst providing care needs, are also tasked with supporting students to become as independent as possible around these needs. To achieve this, SNAs follow individualised task analyses, offering systematic prompts when necessary to encourage students towards independence and ultimately, where possible, fading themselves out of the situation. In this instance, SNAs are technically engaged in teaching practices. The promotion of greater independence patently requires those providing care to engage in the teaching of functional skills for daily living. Approaching the deployment of SNAs in this way is arguably a better use of resources and more in keeping with the central goals of inclusion (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD] (2006). While providing solely for the care needs of

students with AEN may facilitate their physical inclusion within a school, teaching students skills that promote their independence can remove barriers that exist in the first instance.

Qualifications

SNAs working in Ireland have mobilised via their union Fórsa, launching a media and lobbying campaign to gain recognition and respect for the role (Fórsa, 2022). Fórsa represents two-thirds of all SNAs employed in the state, and their campaign titled ‘Respect for SNAs’ is lobbying for new minimum qualifications to be introduced. The DE in circular 0051/2019 lists the minimum education requirements for employment as an SNA as a Level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) or three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate (DE, 2019). This qualification requirement has remained unchanged since 1979 and is linked to the original childcare assistant scheme. Researchers discussing the qualifications required for the post of SNA point out that, as it stands, a person as young as 16 or 17 years of age, with no training in the field, could theoretically be supporting a student with AEN (Keating and O’Connor, 2012). The Level 3 qualification stipulation does not align with the international standards required for comparable roles (Kerins *et al.* 2018). For example, Finland has operated a one-year certificate programme for teaching assistants (TAs) since 1995. TAs in Malta must complete a state-organised, 140-hour course before being registered as ‘Learning Support Assistants’. In Singapore, all ‘allied educators’ are trained in special education during a mandatory one-year diploma programme (Giangreco, Doyle and Suter, 2014).

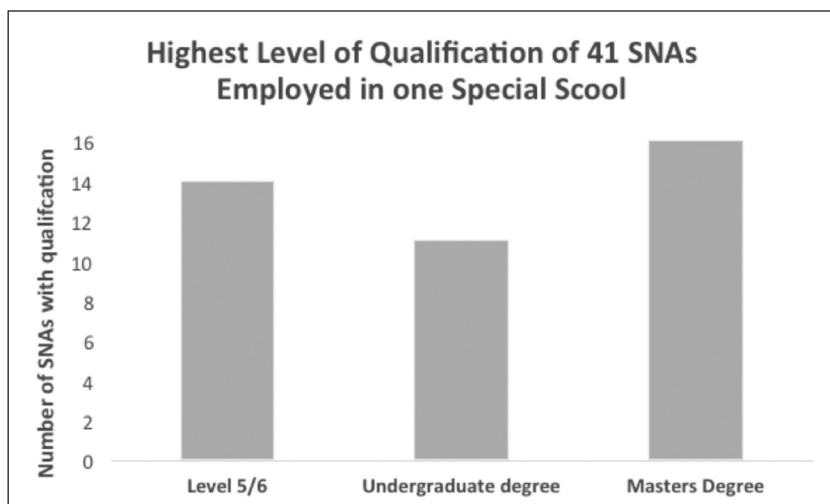
Fórsa, on behalf of its members, is seeking to have an appropriate NFQ Level 6 qualification be recognised as mandatory criteria for schools employing new SNAs (Fórsa, 2022). They maintain that the current educational requirements do not reflect the complexities of the role. SNA and Fórsa representative Linda O’Sullivan, speaking at an online seminar as part of the ‘Respect for SNAs’ campaign, stated, “The official belief that the current level of education is sufficient is insulting and misrepresents the educational standard of most SNAs across the country” (Ibid, 2022). The NCSE’s review of the SNA scheme supports this assertion (NCSE, 2018). The report’s authors found that many SNAs were highly qualified and “had undertaken further training and qualifications in their own time and at their own expense” (NCSE, 2018, p. 20). The NCSE review team recognised the need for improved entry criteria and recommended introducing a national training programme for SNAs (NCSE, 2018). The ‘Certificate in Inclusive School Support’ commenced in 2021 at University College Dublin (UCD, 2021). After initial delays and disagreements on how the course would be accredited, it was recently

designated at Level 6 on the NFQ (Fórsa, 2022). Despite this, the DE wrote to Fórsa stating that the current educational requirements do not need to be changed. They claimed that individual schools could dictate if further qualifications were required (Fórsa, 2022). The contradiction between funding a Level 6 course whilst stating a Level 3 qualification is sufficient may relate to concerns the DE has about pay claims that could arise from any professionalisation of the role.

SNAs working in the author's setting would not be equipped for the role with only a Level 3 qualification. SNAs in this school, under the leadership of the class teacher, are expected to follow guidelines set out in their student's learning and behaviour support plans and implement these recommendations throughout the day. The students attending this school have primary diagnoses of autism and co-occurring intellectual disabilities (ID) in the moderate to profound range and, in many cases, additional mental-health-related diagnoses. Most students join the school after first attending special autism classes within mainstream schools, but unfortunately, these placements have broken down. To effectively serve a student population presenting with multiple complex learning needs and often co-occurring behaviours of concern, the school has actively sought to recruit graduates for the role of SNA and deployed them in a way that utilises their skillsets and qualifications. Since 2010 the school has collaborated with a range of higher education institutions, creating opportunities for third-level students to avail of professionally supervised internships and work placements. Annually, the school hosts between twelve and fifteen students on long-term placements from six higher education institutions. These students are enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Psychology, Social Care, Applied Behaviour Analysis, Education Studies, and Early Childhood Education. Reaching out in this way enabled the school to attract highly motivated supernumerary volunteers. In addition, these arrangements have led to an academy whereby these individuals train in volunteer roles but later take up paid SNA contracts at the school. As a result of this recruitment approach, the school has attracted a highly qualified team of SNAs (see Figure 1).

The only additional human resources available in this school is their SNA staff; additional Special Education Teachers (SET) are not sanctioned in autism-specific special schools. With such highly qualified employees amongst the SNA staff, it has always made sense to engage them in *supporting* the education of students. The experience of this school is that SNAs, under the direction of the class teacher and with regular structured support and supervision from senior staff members, are capable and proficient at supporting individualised interventions as stipulated in their students' education plans. This experience would be in keeping with the

Figure 1: Highest qualification level of 41 SNAs employed in one Irish special school



findings of Farrell *et al.* (2010) and Haakma De Boer, Van Esch, Minnaert, and Van Der Putten (2021), who found that TAs can positively impact student attainment when explicitly trained and supervised to carry out targeted interventions grounded in evidence-based practices. A recent review of the research concerning the training of paraprofessionals also aligns with the experiences of this school. The authors stated that “the efficacy of paraprofessional support is only limited by the degree to which paraprofessionals have been trained to implement evidence-based practices” (Brock and Anderson, 2021, p.718). By enacting these arrangements, the school has certainly strayed from Circular 30/2014 description of the role of an SNA (DES, 2014). This departure from the circular guidelines has been made in plain sight and with the student’s quality of life at the centre of the decision. Whilst the experiences of this school suggest that SNAs can positively impact the learning outcomes of the students they support, it is acknowledged that the school is an outlier, both in student profile and the educational attainment level of the SNAs employed.

Professional Learning and Supervision

Inadequate training and insufficient or non-existent supervision are fundamental issues affecting TAs in their roles (Webster *et al.*, 2010; Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero and French, 2011, Logan, O’Connor-Bones and Shannon, 2019). The literature

concerning the need for training paraprofessionals such as SNAs is unequivocal, insisting that these school staff require ongoing training and supervision to advance inclusion goals (Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero and French, 2011). Rose and O’Neill (2009) investigated differences in the working conditions of TAs in the English system and SNAs working in Ireland. One area they examined was the training opportunities for each group; only 21% of SNA respondents agreed they were afforded good training opportunities compared to 74% of TAs. The researchers attributed the significant disparity in responses to English-based TAs increased pedagogical responsibilities (Ibid, 2009). Kerins *et al.* (2018) examined the continuous professional development (CPD) needs of SNAs working in Irish post-primary schools. The need for greater access to CPD was confirmed by both the SNA and principal respondents, with CPD related to behaviour support identified as a critical need. However, these highlighted CPD needs are at odds with the official position on the role of the SNA to provide solely for the care needs of students with AEN. This is yet another example of the contradiction between the stated requirements of schools concerning SNAs and the view of the DE regarding their function. Noting the disparity between the official position on the role of the SNA to provide solely for the care needs of students with AEN and calls by SNA and principal respondents, Kerins *et al.* (2018) highlight the need for a national policy on continuous professional development for SNAs.

The 2018 review of the SNA scheme made recommendations regarding ongoing training for SNAs advising that SNAs should be required to attend further training in line with the needs of students in their schools. The report does not specify whether this training should only apply to care needs. It recommends that school-specific training be provided to whole school teams, stating that “joint training opportunities will enhance the development of an inclusive school culture” (NCSE, 2018, p. 56). This would suggest that the report authors see a benefit in joint training for teachers and SNAs in topics unrelated to care needs. SNAs are currently not permitted to register for CPD available through the NCSE. There is no mechanism on the DE online claims system (OLCS) to excuse an SNA from work to attend training opportunities.

The issue of ongoing supervision is not addressed in the NCSE report. The report does mention that SNAs should work “under the direction of and in collaboration with teaching staff” (Ibid, 2018, p.92). However, no explanation exists for how this collaboration should be developed and nurtured. The research in this area supports formalised supervision and confirms that it positively influences TA performance (Giangreco, Doyle and Suter, 2014). This has been the experience in the author’s context, where formalised supervision of SNAs is embedded into

the practices of the school. SNAs are supported by the school's behaviour analyst, teachers and other senior SNAs as part of the school's in-house staff training policy. SNAs receive instruction-based induction training and ongoing in-class observations with built-in modelling and feedback. They also attend monthly group supervision sessions, covering various topics related to their work. Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero and French (2011) found that positive collaborative working relationships contribute to more significant and meaningful inclusion. Despite the evidence that paraprofessionals are more successful in their work when supervision is embedded, research has shown that most teachers do not have assigned planning or feedback time with the support staff they work alongside in their classrooms (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009; Logan, O'Connor-Bones and Shannon, 2019).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE POLICY AND PRACTICE

A review of the literature concerning TAs indicates that additional classroom support is a critical factor in promoting inclusion (Rose and O'Neill, 2009). The literature also shows that the richness of that inclusion can be enhanced when TAs are considered partners and led by teachers committed to collaboration (Farrell and Ainscow, 2002; Logan, O'Connor-Bones and Shannon, 2019). It must be cautioned that expecting our teachers to nurture these collaborative relationships will require preparation in people management skills and supervision models (Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou and Bassett, 2010). Future research will need to determine what initial teacher education and ongoing professional learning teachers will require to prepare them for providing formalised supervision to SNAs. There are evident tensions between policy and practice concerning the role of the SNA in Irish schools. The NCSE report was explicit that their function is restricted to supporting only the care needs of students with AEN (NCSE, 2018). This decision was brought about by reviewing the practices in Irish schools and through a review of international research, indicating that students can be adversely affected when schools rely too heavily on TAs to support students with AEN (Giangreco, Doyle and Suter, 2014). The research is unanimous; for inclusion to be successful, every member of the staff must be responsible (Giangreco, 2021).

This literature review may be of interest to practitioners educating students with complex needs and for schools in which SNAs represent the majority of staff. When a large proportion of a student's support plan is focused on promoting functional communication and daily living skills, it is unsurprising that special schools rely on SNAs to reinforce students' learning goals. Whilst there is undoubtedly a need for further research in this area (Webster and De Boer, 2021), there is an argument

for re-evaluating the duties of SNAs supporting those with the most significant needs and perhaps expanding their role in specific contexts. Four new autism-specific special schools have been established in Ireland in the past two years, and others are being asked to expand (DE, 2022). Many students joining these schools will have multiple diagnoses, complex learning and behavioural needs, and may have previously attended special classes within mainstream schools. The special schools they enrol in must have something additional to offer these students. The author's experience of hiring graduates for the role of SNA and providing them with ongoing training and supervision leads them to believe that there is scope to develop the SNA scheme into something more ambitious and fruitful than what is currently in operation.

CONCLUSION

The grassroots union campaign 'Respect for SNAs' has highlighted that SNAs are calling for greater recognition of their contribution to the Irish schooling system. This call for respect could be achieved by policy changes that raise the minimum qualification level, provide greater access to ongoing professional learning and supervision, and issue clear guidelines to schools regarding constructive collaboration. Whilst a broader range of school supports promised by the NCSE may decrease schools' reliance on assistants in the future, SNAs or 'inclusion support assistants' are here to stay. Providing the employees who have the "least amount of power and agency in the education system" (Webster and De Boer, 2021, p. 296) with equitable access to training opportunities is an obvious way for the DE to model the kind of inclusive culture we are trying to foster in our schools. In addition, encouraging formalised collaborative practice between teaching and SNA staff may help facilitate the 'inclusive turn' promoted by Ainscow (2020) and further develop our education system's capacity to support an increasingly diverse population of students.

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