

Vehicle for inclusion or costly illusion? A critical policy analysis of the Special Needs Assistant scheme in Ireland

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The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme has been in existence in Ireland, in various different iterations, since 1979. This article presents a critical policy analysis of two iterations of the scheme, operational between 1998 and 2014, using a hybrid analytical framework. It highlights the contextual factors influencing those iterations, presents an interdiscursive analysis of the key policy texts and highlights the scheme's many consequences using secondary data from two key Irish Government agencies. It is postulated that cyclical analytical frameworks are most effective at evaluating iterative special education policies, like the SNA scheme, because they allow sufficient scope to demonstrate that the consequence of one iteration ultimately becomes the context for the next. This article also shows that, while the provision of inclusive education for children with special educational needs in mainstream classes may have been an objective of the scheme, the extent to which that was realised is arguable.

Key words: Special Needs Assistant, policy analysis, inclusion, mainstream class, special class

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'I would not have finished primary school without the help of my SNA ... Having an SNA put me on a level playing field with my classmates, simple as.'

(Jessica Ní Mhaoláin, student with visual impairments, quoted in Kearns, 2016)

1. Introduction

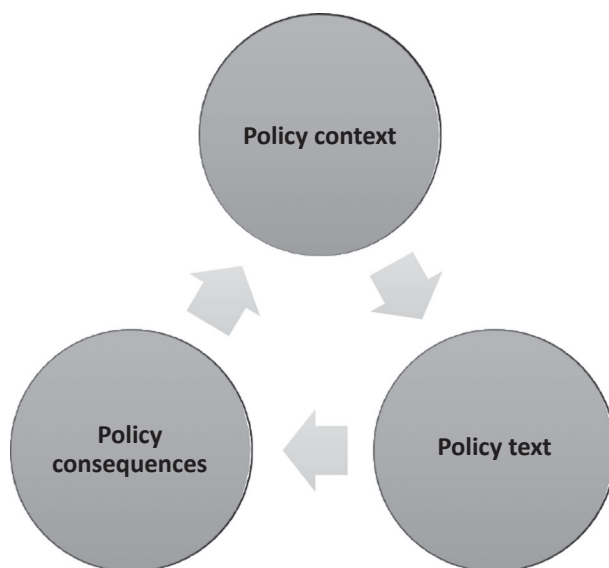
Special education policy in the Republic of Ireland has evolved considerably over the last half century (Rose et al., 2017), with an emphasis on inclusive learning environments for children with special educational needs now a system-wide priority (Banks et al., 2016; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Winter & O'Raw, 2010). Reviewing the evolution from a macro systematic perspective misses the point that the achievement of inclusive classrooms is envisaged through the enactment of a bricolage of policies, not just one (Rose et al., 2010). Ireland's national policy for allocating special needs assistants (SNAs) is one aspect of that bricolage, as the provision of paraprofessionals has been identified as a key ingredient in facilitating inclusive education for children with special educational needs (Giangreco et al., 2010; Logan, 2006; Moran & Abbott, 2002; Suter & Giangreco, 2009; Webster et al., 2010). The role of SNA is not unique to Ireland, and many other countries in Europe, including the UK, have seen a significant proliferation of similar roles (Webster & Boer, 2019).

This article will interrogate the SNA scheme as a functional element of inclusion in the Irish context, from a post-modernist perspective, and demonstrate that notwithstanding the objectives of the scheme, its outcomes are more nuanced. To present this analysis effectively, the article is split into a number of sections. Section 2 details and justifies the research approach. Sections 3–5 present a critical policy analysis of the SNA scheme; while Section 6 gives an overview of the implications of this analysis for future special educational needs provision.

2. Research approach

Policy analysis is a 'complex and multi-layered' endeavour (Hill, 2005, p. 4), for which many theorists have suggested competing analytical frameworks (Ball, 1990, 1994; Bell & Stevenson, 2015; Laswell, 1970; Taylor, 1997, 2004). While a discussion on the merits of the often inalienable conceptual underpinnings of each framework might prove enlightening, that is not the purpose of this endeavour. Instead, to aptly assess the SNA scheme

Figure 1: Analytical tool - adapted from Taylor (1997) and Bowe et al. (1992)



in a way that captures the subtleties of the Irish context, this article rejects ‘any tight categorisation of theoretical positions’ (Taylor, 1997, p. 25) and proposes a hybrid analytical tool, broadly based on Taylor’s (1997, 2004) framework. This approach takes account of contextual elements, facilitates an interdiscursive examination of how discourses and linguistic features are mediated in policy texts, and how the interpretation of these can be contested and consequential (Taylor, 2004).

Analytical framework

The efficacy of Taylor’s (1997, 2004) three domains for policy analysis – namely, policy contexts, policy texts and policy consequences – is well established (Diem et al., 2014). However, drawing upon scholarly thinking from other policy theorists (Bowe et al., 1992), this article extends Taylor’s (1997) framework, by proposing that it is most effective when interpreted cyclically (Figure 1). At a basic level, it is proposed that the consequences of one policy may result in a new context requiring a policy change, to cope with the new set of circumstances caused by the initial policy’s interpretation by different actors. This cycle approach differs slightly from that proposed by Bowe et al. (1992), in that it eschews the notion that policies often do not have an

‘identifiable beginning’ (Bell & Stevenson, 2015, p. 147). While this article acknowledges that the SNA scheme has been implemented iteratively, it will expressly identify it as having a clear starting point.

Desk-based research

Desk-based research was used to garner statistics aimed at demonstrating the consequences of the SNA scheme. This approach was appropriate, because the scale of this project was such that collecting valid and reliable primary data independently would have proven difficult within a short timeframe (Cohen et al., 2018). For this reason, unless otherwise stated, statistics relied upon in section 5 of this article are drawn from two sources only – namely, the *National Council for Special Education – statistics* (Government of Ireland, 2019a) and the *Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme* (Government of Ireland, 2011b). While other statistics are available, both of these publications draw from the same central Government source, which ensures consistency and improves accuracy.

Iterations for analysis

The first iteration of the SNA scheme was initiated in 1979 and there have been four further iterations since then (see Table 1). To facilitate an in-depth evaluation, the analytical tool theorised in this article has been applied to the timeframe broadly correlating with the second and third iterations (shaded in Table 1), as this is the period for which data are most plentiful.

3. Application of analytical framework: policy context

In the late 1990s, the number of SNAs employed in Irish schools began to increase rapidly, from a figure that had not exceeded 300 during the preceding 20 years (Government of Ireland, 2011b). The causal factors for this increase, at the beginning of the second iteration of the scheme, were largely contextual (Meegan & MacPhail, 2006).

The global ‘inclusion’ discourse

A series of reports in the 1990s from national committees and supra-national organisations were influential in configuring the SNA scheme (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011). In 1993 the landmark report from the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) advocated that ‘appropriate education for all children with SEN should be provided in ordinary schools’ (Government of Ireland, 1993, p. 20). The report’s underlying narrative was unequivocal that the effective inclusion of these children could not materialise without ‘additional Special Needs Assistant posts, funded by the Department of Education’ (Government of Ireland, 1993). The Salamanca Statement and

Table 1: Iterations of the SNA scheme

Iteration 1 1979–1998	The first iteration of the SNA scheme was instituted in 1979 when the Minister for Education, in a letter to special schools, informed Boards of Management (BoMs) of a new <i>Child Care Assistants Scheme</i> aimed at aiding children with exceptional difficulty (Government of Ireland, 2011b).
Iteration 2 1998–2002	The second iteration came in 1998 when the DES announced the expansion of the scheme and provided for the ‘automatic entitlement’ to care support in school for children with special educational needs (Government of Ireland, 2011b).
Iteration 3 2002–2014	The third iteration was introduced in 2002, when the term SNA was used in official DES policy documents for the first time (Government of Ireland, 2002).
Iteration 4 2014–2018	The fourth iteration came in 2014 when the DES modified the arrangements for the allocation of SNAs and introduced the ‘quantum of support’ concept (Government of Ireland, 2014).
Iteration 5	The fifth iteration is currently at its inception, with a recommendation to amend their prescribed title from SNA to ‘Inclusion Support Assistants’ being considered (Government of Ireland, 2018). This amendment has not yet been formally introduced by a DES circular.

Framework for Action crystallised the findings of SERC, in its demand that governments provide children with special educational needs ‘whatever extra support they may require’, to facilitate their inclusion in mainstream schools (UNESCO, 1994). As Ireland was a signatory to the Framework, this development had a ‘profound influence on policy and practice’, because, as Griffin and Shevlin (2011, pp. 83–84) note:

‘The inclusion agenda became firmly established in international consciousness and debate focused ever more clearly on the question of how best to include children with disabilities and/or special needs rather than whether, when or why this should be done.’

An expansion of the SNA scheme would go some way towards addressing the ‘how’ question, by providing support to those children who were unable to access mainstream education without help.

Rights-based litigation in education

In tandem with the global inclusion discourse, the 1990s saw parental groups begin to pursue a determined ‘litigation strategy ... in an attempt to compel what was perceived as an indifferent political system to devote more resources’ to children with special educational needs (Whyte, 2015, p. 177). The courts found that the State’s obligation to provide free primary education appropriate to the needs of all children extended to those with complex disabilities (*O’Donoghue v. Minister for Health*, 1993) – a finding which resulted in the immediate provision of approximately 200 additional SNAs to schools (Whyte, 2015). Five years later, a further decision of the High Court (*Sinnott v. Minister for Education*, 2000) resulted in more special educational needs resources, with the Government introducing a package of measures, including the doubling of SNA provision in the school system at that time (Whyte, 2015). It can be argued that litigation such as this influenced Ireland’s *Education Act* (1998), *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (2004) and *Disability Act* (2005), because the State could not ignore the courts’ interpretation of the Constitution (Glendenning, 2012) and the public reaction was such that it would have been politically imprudent to do so (Holland, 2001; O’Toole, 2000). The fact that this litigation was occurring against the backdrop of international research, highlighting the need for additional resources to support children with special educational needs (Government of Ireland, 1993; UNESCO, 1994), added to the sense that something needed to be done.

Parental choice

The growing move towards inclusive education systems internationally, and judicial support for providing appropriate resources to children with special educational needs in the Irish context, heralded political momentum for ‘parental rights in education’ (Perry & Clarke, 2015). The *Education Act* (1998) underscored the prerogative of parents to enrol their children in a school of their choice regardless of special educational needs, and placed a statutory requirement on all Boards of Management (BoMs) to ‘use the resources provided to the school ... to make reasonable provision and accommodation for students with a disability’ (Section 15(2)(d)). While the final decision in the allocation of SNAs to schools was outside the Board’s control, it is reasonable to deduce an obligation on the part of BoMs at least to apply for an SNA, as opposed to directing the parents to alternative settings where such support may already have been available. This new development was transformative because for the first time an Act of the Parliament had been passed which enshrined the right of parents to appeal to the Department of Education and

Skills (DES) if their child was refused enrolment on the basis of a perceived lack of resources concerning a special need.

4. Application of analytical framework: policy text

Codd (1988, p. 237) argues that policy texts ‘are obvious instances in which language serves a political purpose, constructing particular meanings and signs ... that produce real social effects’. The documents that outlined the SNA scheme exemplify Codd’s (1988) assertion, because the way they were interpreted, and the enactment of that interpretation, determined whether or not a child accessed a valuable resource. Two policy texts are relevant to any analysis of the second and third iterations of the scheme:

1. A ministerial press release from 1998 announcing the expansion of ‘child care support for all children with special needs’ (Government of Ireland, 1998);
2. *Department of Education Circular 07/2002 (Applications for full-time or part-time Special Needs Assistant support to address the special care needs of children with disabilities)*, introduced four years subsequent to the press release (Government of Ireland, 2002) reaffirming the Government’s commitment to the SNA scheme.

This section of the article will demonstrate how discourses and linguistic features were utilised to construct varying narratives, and will highlight evidence to suggest a change in message in the second text, concerning the so-called ‘automatic entitlement’ to an SNA, promised in the earlier text (Government of Ireland, 1998, p. 2).

Text 1: ministerial press release (1998) – second iteration

The ministerial press statement announcing the expansion of the Child Care Assistants Scheme in 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998) was presented in what Taylor (2004, p. 444) would describe as a ‘hybrid genre’, where elements of policy were interwoven with a message that was overtly political. The language used was sensational, with an eye-catching headline, presented over two lines. It was clear that the statement had been crafted with the voter in mind, insofar as it endeavoured to ‘sell’ the reforms and achievements of the Government (Taylor, 2004, p. 433). The first line – ‘Major Initiative in Special Education Services’ – outlined the scope of what was being proposed and prefaced a quotation from the Minister for Education, reinforcing the scale of the scheme to encompass ‘all children with special needs’. The statement was clear that the initiative would ‘extend across the entire spectrum

of special needs' regardless of 'location or disability', in order to ensure that children received the support required 'to participate fully in the education system'. The sense of universality in the text was palpable.

The statement tapped into the 'change' discourse in its commentary that the scheme marked 'a breakthrough for integrated education' and provided 'the first ever automatic supports for many children with disabilities'. The break with the past was underscored in the explicit acknowledgement of the 'reactive and entirely unsatisfactory manner' in which supports had been afforded to children hitherto. Attention was also drawn to parents who, in the past, had 'to campaign tirelessly to give their children the chance to participate in and benefit from education'. This perhaps was an implicit reference to the *O'Donoghue v. Minister for Health* (1993) case and to other similar cases that were progressing through the courts at that time (*Sinnott v. Minister for Education*, 2000). Elements of the 'social democratic' discourse could also be discerned insofar as the scheme was, in some ways, presented as a form of redress for past inadequacies in the system.

Linguistically, the statement was presented in an informational and persuasive style. Bullet points were used to identify two other special educational needs initiatives that were being introduced with the SNA scheme, to present a package of special education measures. Bullet points, according to Fairclough (2001), allow for the intended message to be distilled more clearly, to facilitate easier interpretation for the reader. Curiously, the label 'special needs assistant' was not used in the press release and the new personnel were still referred to as 'child care assistants', in the same vein as the 1979 iteration. While this may appear to have undercut the 'change' narrative, the choice of language was significant. It anchored the role in the care domain which, to a certain extent, tacitly conflicted with the assertion that all children with special educational needs would have an automatic entitlement to an SNA. It can be inferred from this that only those with a care need would be entitled to access the support – a small proportion of children with disabilities (Griffin & Shevlin, 2011).

Text 2: Circular 07/2002 – third iteration

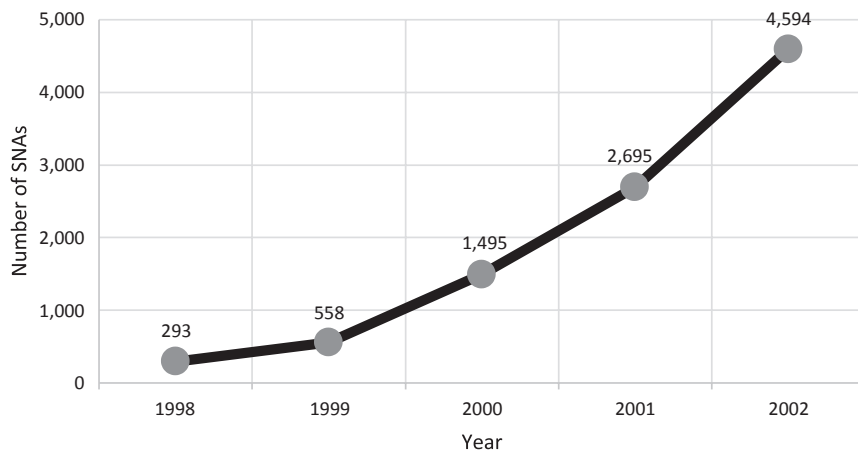
Circular 07/2002 marked the first occasion that the label 'special needs assistant' was used in official Department of Education correspondence to schools (Government of Ireland, 2002). The tone of the circular was markedly different from that of the press release issued four years earlier – indicative, perhaps, of the fact that it was geared towards BoMs and principal

teachers, as opposed to voters. The circular was directive and outlined clear procedures for when SNAs could be applied for. The discourse of ‘accountability’ was prominent in the circular – SNAs would only be granted when specific criteria were met, and when the application was accompanied by signed certification from the ‘professional who diagnosed the child’s special **care** need’ (Government of Ireland, 2002). There was no reference whatever to an automatic entitlement, and the circular went some way towards restricting that entitlement in stating that the ‘existence of a disability or syndrome does not necessarily mean that the pupil has a special care need’ (Government of Ireland, 2002).

While some scholars have suggested that the duties outlined in the 2002 circular were ‘an exact reiteration’ of those published in 1979 (Lawlor & Cregan, 2003, p. 86), these analyses do not take account of two subtle, but important, additions. The 2002 schedule of duties included the stipulation that an SNA could not ‘be left in sole charge of a class’ (Government of Ireland, 2002) – a phrase conceivably included to address explicitly the emerging trend of SNAs being deployed to manage ‘activities of an educational nature’ (Lawlor & Cregan, 2003, p. 87). The 2002 schedule also featured an additional point insisting that duties ‘should be modified to support the particular needs of the pupil concerned’ (Government of Ireland, 2002). The inclusion of this point was indicative of the international debate about a needs-based approach to learning, which was prominent at that time (Balshaw, 1999).

The 2002 circular, presented in blue ink on DES headed paper, contained a number of interesting semiotic features. The word ‘care’ was emboldened seven times, emphasizing for the reader the importance of the child having a care need in order to receive SNA support. The word ‘significant’ was emboldened twice, to emphasise the threshold of need required to receive support. This further curtailed the scope of the scheme. The phrase ‘non-teaching’ appeared three times and was emboldened on each occasion to stress the fact that the role of the SNA was limited to providing care support. Interestingly, in outlining the duties that an SNA could undertake, point seven of the appendix stated that the role of an SNA involved ‘accompanying individuals or small groups who may have to be withdrawn temporarily from the classroom’. This phrasing was identical to that found in point seven of the appendix in the 1979 letter, with one subtle addition – the word ‘temporarily’ was underlined in the newer document. This was indicative of the broader, global narrative prevailing in education at the time, that any additional support

Figure 2: Number of SNAs (primary), 1998–2002



Source: Government of Ireland (2011b).

should be provided to a child in the inclusive context of their own classroom (McNally et al., 2001).

5. Application of analytical framework: policy consequences

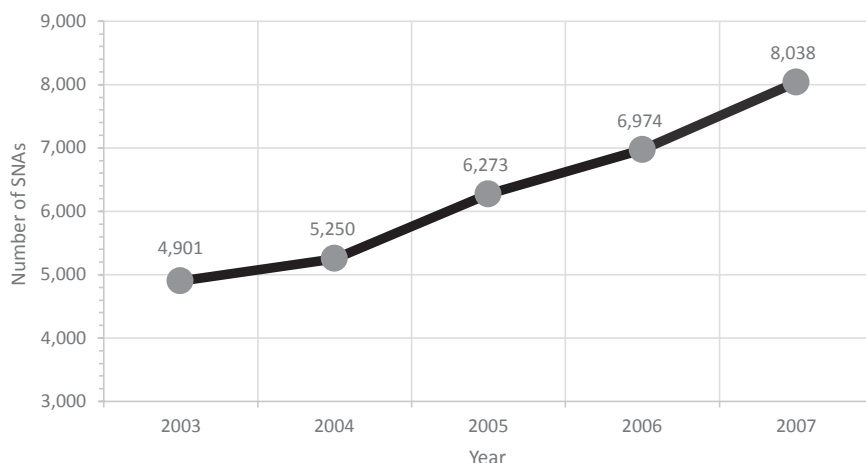
The extent to which the second and third iterations of the SNA scheme facilitated inclusive education is difficult to quantify fully. This section of the article probes that question and analyses the broader policy consequences of both iterations of the scheme.

Rapid increase in number of SNAs

An immediate consequence of the ministerial announcement in 1998 was a dramatic increase in the number of SNAs in the education system. In the first five years alone, the number increased by over 4,300 (Figure 2). Between the first and second year, the number of SNAs doubled; between the second and third year the number almost trebled; and overall in the first five years of the scheme, the number of SNAs in the system was increasing at an average rate of 107% year-on-year. The budgetary implications of this were significant and by the end of Year 5, *Circular 07/02* was issued, heralding the beginning of the third iteration.

The five-year period following the introduction of *Circular 07/02* saw further increases in the number of SNAs, as Figure 3 demonstrates. Crucially,

Figure 3: Number of SNAs (primary), 2003–2007

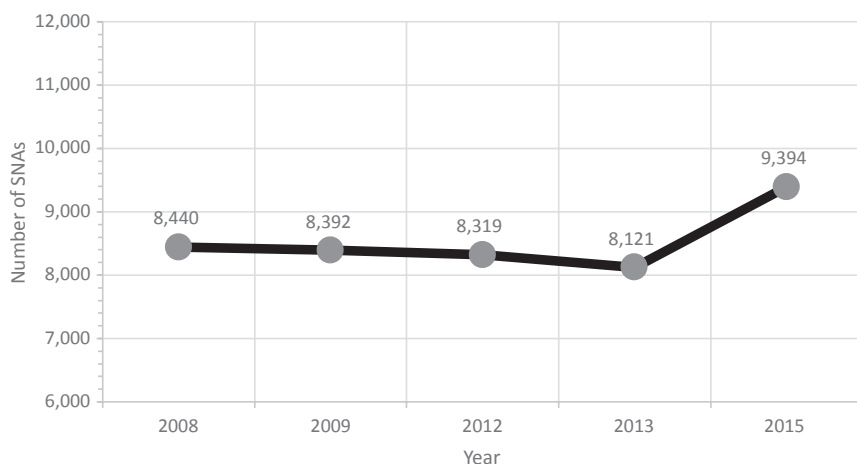


Source: Government of Ireland (2011b).

however, the annual rate of increase dropped almost eight-fold, to 12%. While there may be many reasons for the reduced rate of increase, it can be argued that the 2002 circular was a contributory factor. The full extent of its influence can only be hypothesised, because a precise figure could only be quantified when the annual number of applications for SNA support are measured against those that were granted, and compared to the previous five-year period. These figures are not publicly available. This comparison would provide stronger evidence to support the assertion that the criteria outlined in *Circular 07/02* were responsible for curtailing the increasing rate at which SNAs were being granted, which was the context for the circular's introduction.

Figures for two of the years in the third five-year period have not been published, but Figure 4 captures the next five years for which figures are available, and illustrates a modest reduction in the number of SNAs employed in primary schools up until 2013 – a statistic perhaps explained by the financial difficulties that Ireland was experiencing at that time. In 2011, a cross-sectoral cap of 10,575 was placed on the total number of SNAs employed across all levels in the school system (Government of Ireland, 2011a). This emphasises the extent to which economics can impact on policy enactment (Ball, 1998), and also raises ethical questions concerning provision. At this point the Government had already committed to allocating SNAs to children who

Figure 4: Number of SNAs (primary), 2008–2015



Source: Government of Ireland (2011b, 2019a).

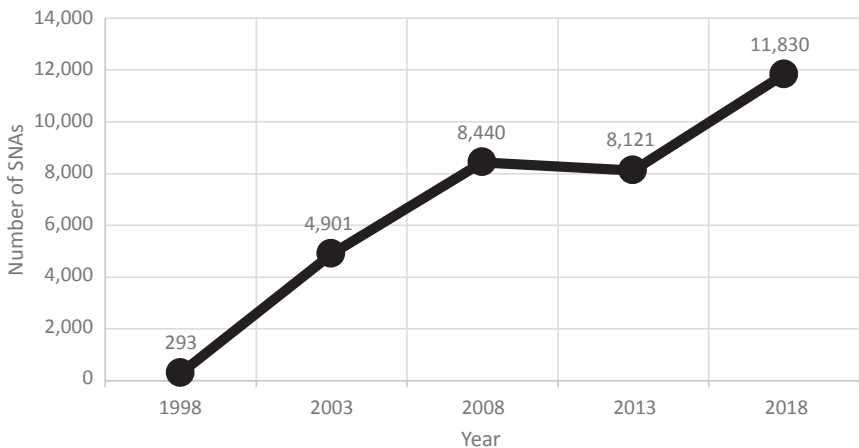
had significant care needs, but the cap in the number did not allow for Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) to grant additional SNAs over and above the cap, regardless of the care needs that arose. This decision allows for the plausible conclusion that the criteria for SNA allocation were based on which children's care needs were more severe, as opposed to the presence of a significant care need *per se*.

An overall examination of the figures in respect of SNAs within the primary education system (Figure 5) shows that the number has increased from 293 SNAs employed in 1998, to 11,830 employed in 2018. That represents a 4,000% increase over 20 years, the implications of which will be discussed later in this article.

Cost–benefit dilemma

There was an immediate financial outlay as a direct result of the ministerial announcement (Government of Ireland, 2011b). In 1998 the spend on care assistants was just over £3 million (€3.8 million). By the time *Circular 07/02* was introduced, the cost of the scheme had soared to over €67 million and was increasing year-on-year at an average rate of 120%. The 2002 circular did not halt the increase, but it did slow down the rate to an annual average of 28% in the five years following its introduction. This illustrates the power of policy texts to have significant consequences on provision. Notwithstanding this, by

Figure 5: Number of SNAs (primary), 1998–2018



Source: Government of Ireland (2011b, 2019a).

2014 the special education financial allocation accounted for 15% of the annual education budget – a statistic for which the burgeoning number of SNAs can claim considerable responsibility. This prompts the question as to whether the scheme was cost-efficient. A national *Value for Money Audit* concluded that it was not because, in its varying interpretations, the scheme departed from the original objectives, and modifications were required to reduce its unforeseen financial outlay (Government of Ireland, 2011b). This accords with the assertion of many theorists that policy texts are often recast in unintended ways, which can result in unanticipated consequences (Ball et al., 2011). These consequences ultimately became the context for the fourth iteration of the scheme.

Facilitating inclusion

One of the aims of the second and third iterations of the SNA scheme was to facilitate the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream (Government of Ireland, 1998, 2002). The extent to which this was achieved is difficult to quantify fully. While there is some evidence to suggest that the number of children with special educational needs in mainstream classes increased (Banks & McCoy, 2017), departmental statistics show that the percentage of pupils attending special schools only marginally reduced from the beginning of the second iteration to the end of the third iteration of the scheme, as Table 2 illustrates. Even at that, it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which the SNA scheme contributed to this slight reduction, because the international drive towards inclusive education (Ainscow & César, 2006;

Table 2: Percentage of primary school pupils in special schools

Year	Total primary school population (including special schools)	Special school population	Special school pupil population as a percentage of primary school population
1998	452,533	7,386	1.63
1999	444,310	7,228	1.63
2000	439,560	7,124	1.62
2001	441,065	6,982	1.58
2002	443,720	6,807	1.53
2003	446,029	6,718	1.51
2004	449,298	6,621	1.47
2005	457,889	6,627	1.45
2006	477,078	6,578	1.39
2007	490,838	6,619	1.35
2008	501,448	6,653	1.33
2009	510,460	6,905	1.35
2010	514,852	7,178	1.39
2011	521,677	7,420	1.42
2012	531,973	7,665	1.44
2013	540,232	7,755	1.44
2014	548,542	7,949	1.45

Source: Government of Ireland (2019c).

Ferguson, 2008), a greater understanding of special educational needs from a teaching perspective (Brownell et al., 2010; Leung & Mak, 2010) and the impact of ‘disability visibility’ within society generally (Harma et al., 2013, p. 312) are also likely to have contributed to the increased placement of children with special educational needs in mainstream.

Complicating the statistics further is the fact that the number of mainstream schools offering special classes increased significantly during the third iteration of the scheme (Banks & McCoy, 2017). This gets to the crux of a contentious debate, about which there is little consensus (Banks et al., 2016). Are special classes in mainstream schools one of the many representations of inclusion, or are they a mere illusion of inclusion (Stevens & O’Moore, 2009), where children with special educational needs ‘are not included at all ... [and] suffer all the pains of the permanent outsider’? (Warnock, 2005, p. 45). If the standpoint is adopted that, in some instances, these classes represent an alternate manifestation of segregation (Banks & McCoy, 2017), then it must at least be considered that the SNA scheme did not facilitate inclusion to the

extent envisaged, despite the dramatic increase in their number. It is more likely that the scheme was a contributory factor in allowing children with special educational needs to be educated in mainstream schools, as opposed to facilitating their inclusion in mainstream classes. The implications of this debate are significant, given that there are more children in special classes in Ireland today than there were at the beginning of the second iteration in 1998, irrespective of whether those classes are in mainstream or special schools (Banks & McCoy, 2017).

6. Implications

This policy analysis raises a number of questions – both practical, in terms of the SNA scheme itself, and theoretical, with regard to the framework utilised to analyse it here. This section of the article will explore those questions using a broad lens and anticipate how they might influence thinking in the future.

The SNA scheme: where we are now

Department of Education Circular 30/2014 represents a new iteration of the SNA scheme, despite the wording's attempts to cast the changes as a restatement of the original objectives of *Circular 07/2002*. The 2014 circular underscores the fact that any automatic entitlement that may have been there pre-2002 is now completely eliminated (Government of Ireland, 2014, p. 5):

'It should not be assumed that all children who have special educational needs or who have been diagnosed as having a disability, require access to SNA support ... The purpose of the SNA scheme is to provide for the significant additional care needs which some pupils with special educational needs may have.'

In addition to strengthening the language concerning the provision process, the 2014 document introduces the 'quantum of support' concept, whereby schools are allocated a set amount of SNAs to share among 'qualifying children' (Government of Ireland, 2014). While allowing schools autonomy to allocate 'access' depending on the needs of the children concerned might appear to increase teacher agency (Government of Ireland, 2014), in reality it adds further evidence to the argument, made in Section 5, that SNA support has become dependent on the comparative severity of children's care needs, as opposed to the presence of care needs *per se*. The difference now is that schools, in addition to the SENO, have a role in determining whose needs are greater.

The 2014 circular also provides an insight into sectors that are prioritised for resources. For example, the document outlines that schools will be subjected

to an ‘annual review’ (Government of Ireland, 2014). However, it expressly states, in bold print, that ‘**the minimum SERC recommended ratios of SNA support in special schools and classes**’ would be maintained, regardless of any review (Government of Ireland, 2014). If the stance is adopted that special classes are a manifestation of segregation, then, as an extension to that, it can legitimately be argued that the 2014 iteration of the policy undermines the effort towards inclusion outlined in 1998, by favouring special schools and special classes over mainstream classes for resource retention. If parents or schools believe that their children will have more resources available in specialist settings, then it is not unreasonable to deduce that they might favour special classes over mainstream classes in enrolment. This could be construed as a clear bias towards special settings on the part of policy makers. The consequences of this are clear, in the proliferation of special classes in mainstream schools, the number of which have doubled in Ireland in the period between 2011 and 2017 (Banks & McCoy, 2017).

The SNA scheme: lessons for policy analysis

The various iterations of the SNA scheme give credence to the validity of the hybrid cyclical framework for policy analysis, presented in Figure 1, that formed the basis of this article. It is clear that the consequence of the ministerial announcement in 1998 (second iteration) led to a significant increase in the number of SNAs in the primary education system. This became the context for the introduction of *Circular 07/2002* (third iteration), which reduced the rate of increase. However, the number of SNAs was still increasing and the duties that they were engaging in began to digress from their original care role (Logan, 2006), despite the 2002 circular’s guidelines. The sustainability of this twin set of circumstances, given the scheme’s increasing cost during an economic recession, was called into question (Government of Ireland, 2011b). This period of uncertainty heralded the beginning of another new policy cycle, the context for which was a national *Value for Money Audit*, which gave credence to those who were questioning the viability of the third iteration of the scheme (Government of Ireland, 2011b). The results of this audit fed directly into the revised policy text presented in *Circular 30/2014* (fourth iteration), as is acknowledged in the document itself (Government of Ireland, 2014). There is a tacit acceptance in the 2014 circular that it was brought about by unintended consequences of the previous iteration, in the admission that ‘the deployment of SNAs in schools had in practice moved away from the objectives originally envisaged’ (Government of Ireland, 2014). This exemplifies precisely the reality of policy formulation and enactment presented in the hybrid analytical framework that is utilised in this article.

This cyclical framework is a highly potent tool for analysing special education policies in Irish and international contexts, because the evidence presented in this article shows that very often such policies are implemented iteratively – such is the evolutionary nature of special education. A mere cursory look at Ireland's Special Education Teaching (SET) scheme (Government of Ireland, 2017), in its various iterations, demonstrates that it follows the same stages outlined by Taylor (1997), in a number of different cycles. This framework allows the complex context for education policy formulation, with its various competing factors, to be captured effectively. Furthermore, it allows for policy iterations to be analysed separately, while at the same time situating them in a broader context where the policy landscape is continually evolving, as a result of each individual iteration and 'wider developments in the political and economic arena' (Bowe et al., 1992, p. 6).

7. Conclusion

As the education system is currently at the commencement of a putative new cycle of the SNA scheme (Government of Ireland, 2018), the policy analysis presented here will be a useful reference point. It has highlighted a number of important trends – specifically, in relation to the SNA scheme and inclusive practice, and generally, in relation to the policy development process. In the first instance, it has demonstrated that policy pronouncements in the political arena can have significant (and often unintended) consequences, which impact on the policy landscape for decades. Second, it has shown how policy texts can often curtail policy consequences, albeit with varying degrees of success. Third, it has highlighted the impact that jurisprudence can have on policy initiation, particularly where there is contestation on the part of the various policy actors, in relation to the constitutional rights of individuals or groups of individuals. Fourth, it has established that while SNAs can be a huge resource in facilitating inclusive education (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Logan, 2006), in the Irish context the growth in special classes attached to mainstream schools raises many questions about how inclusion is defined (Banks & McCoy, 2017). A recent policy advice document, on the future role of special schools and special classes, from Ireland's National Council for Special Education, has begun a debate on that topic (Government of Ireland, 2019b).

Finally, the article has underscored the efficacy of a hybrid analytical framework for policy analysis. In particular, it has highlighted the effectiveness of adopting a cyclical approach to Taylor's (1997) framework and has shown that such an approach takes cognisance of policy circumstances that are often unique to the education sector. Going forward, greater consideration

should be given to analysing other special education policies in this way, and in particular those that have been enacted in different iterations.

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