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Classroom support for inclusion in England and Ireland. An evaluation of contrasting models

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Abstract

When reporting on those conditions, which they perceive as necessary for the inclusion of students with special educational needs, teachers often refer to the importance of additional adult support in the classroom. The deployment of teaching assistants in England and special needs assistants in Ireland has been regarded as an important factor in supporting national policies for inclusion in both countries. This paper reports on research which through survey and interview methods investigated the working practices of these colleagues and discusses the different approaches to their deployment in schools. It is suggested that whilst there are clear distinctions between the operations of teaching assistants in England and the special needs assistant in Ireland, both play a distinct and essential role in the development of inclusive schooling. The paper considers how two distinctive models of classroom support have emerged and the different ways in which they impact upon inclusion. Consideration is given to the changes, which are taking place in the development of classroom teams, and the ways in which this may impact upon current and future inclusion agendas.

Introduction

In England and Ireland the use of additional classroom support has been seen as an important factor in the promotion of inclusive schooling (Roaf 2003; Logan 2006; O'Neill & Rose 2007). A significant increase in the numbers of adults playing supportive roles in schools has led to a range of different models of support, few of which have been subjected to critical scrutiny. The literature in this area suggests that the tasks undertaken by those in supportive roles vary not only from country to country, but also within countries. It is further suggested that an understanding of what constitutes the most effective forms of support is yet to emerge (Farrell, Balshaw & Polat 2000; French 2001; Giangreco & Doyle 2007). An examination of current roles is an important step in understanding how adults are being utilised in the classroom. Such studies can provide insights, which with further analysis may help in

developing an understanding of those functions that are most efficacious in support of inclusion. The research described in this article set out to explore the lives of teaching assistants (TAs) in England and special needs assistants (SNAs) in Ireland as a means of gathering data, which can be further deployed in a discussion of how these roles may be developed for the promotion of inclusion. In 2002 in a thought-provoking chapter, Farrell and Balshaw asked “can teaching assistants make special education inclusive?” In examining this issue they concluded that classroom support could certainly be a critical factor in the promotion of inclusion, particularly when supportive adults were valued as partners within classroom teams led by teachers who were committed to collaboration. However, inconsistency in respect of the definition of supportive roles was perceived as a likely obstacle to the achievement of the effective inclusion of students with special educational needs. Six years on from Farrell and Balshaw’s work it is timely to revisit the functions undertaken by adults in supportive roles in order to ascertain whether we are nearer to understanding the relationship between classroom support and inclusion.

Teaching assistants and inclusion in England

The number of full time teaching assistant equivalent posts in schools in England increased from 61,000 to 162,900 over a ten year period from 1997 to 2006 (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). This increase was generated, in part by a concern to provide additional support for students described as having special educational needs and others who were considered to be at risk of exclusion (Smith, Whitby & Sharp 2004). In 1997, less than a year after coming into power, the Labour Government issued a document (Department for Education and Employment 1997) indicating a belief that an increased deployment of adults in supportive classroom roles was an essential condition for promoting inclusive schooling. Furthermore, there was a recognition that simply providing additional adults in classrooms would not, in itself reap rewards unless this was accompanied by opportunities for accredited training and the establishment of a framework of good practice. A subsequent expansion in professional development opportunities has seen a gradual professionalisation of the TA position with a consequential movement away from a focus upon care and ancillary support for teachers, to one of additional responsibility in relation to classroom pedagogy (Cremin, Thomas & Vincett 2003; Groom 2006). This change, whilst being greeted in positive terms by many within the English education system (Lacey, 2001; Groom & Rose 2005) has also met with some concern because of a perceived lack of enquiry into the effectiveness of TAs or their

impact upon efforts to increase inclusion (McVean & Hall, 1997, Marks, Schrader & Levine 1999).

A number of studies have been conducted into the role of TAs in English schools. Blatchford *et.al* (2007) reporting research into the deployment of TAs in classes for students aged 9 to 11 found that teachers were often uncertain about the benefits which students gained from this form of support. Of a total of 379 teachers in their questionnaire survey only 78 teachers indicated a direct link between the support of TAs and the progress made by students. However, the same respondents did indicate other benefits, including increased student confidence, improved on-task behaviour and time spent by TAs in reinforcing learning. Blatchford and his colleagues suggest that it is not possible to give a definitive answer to the question 'how effective are TAs in relation to student learning performance?' They did conclude, however, that the presence of a TA in the classroom often assisted in maximising the students' attention on their work and in many instances fostered greater individualisation of learning by the teacher. These factors may well be significant in respect of the promotion of more inclusive classroom practices. Several writers (Cooper *et.al.* 2000; Ainscow 2007) have indicated that a lack of classroom engagement is a significant barrier to inclusion and thereby inhibits learning. The findings of Blatchford *et.al.* tend to suggest that TAs may be playing a critical role in encouraging students to become greater participants in classroom activity, which may be seen as an essential pre-requisite to learning.

Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse (2007) found that teachers in their study of both primary and secondary schools perceived the role of TAs as critical not only in respect of ensuring student participation, but also in raising attainment. They additionally indicate that the effective deployment of TAs was seen by teachers to have a positive impact not only upon those students described as having special educational needs but on most students. An interesting observation made by these researchers concerned the variety of roles, which TAs played. In some instances their work was focused upon the specific needs of individuals who had been identified as needing particular support to enable them to engage with learning. On other occasions the role was more generally focused, working with groups of students to support subject focused learning or playing a roving brief which enabled them to pick up those students who they saw as being in need of extra assistance at various points during a lesson.

What is clear from evidence in English schools is that the direct involvement of TAs in processes of teaching, learning and assessment has increased considerably in recent

years. However, the role continues to be characterised by its fluid nature and is likely to vary according to location and the discretion of teachers and school managers.

Special Needs Assistants and inclusion in Ireland

Methods

A questionnaire was completed by a purposive sample of teaching assistants in England (N= 74) and special needs assistants in Ireland (N=82). Both the English and Irish samples comprised colleagues working in schools who had demonstrated a commitment to their own professional development through participation in training related to their jobs. The questionnaire used requested information related to four aspects of the lives of the respondents these being:

- i. personal information related to their working experience, the type of school in which they were employed and the pupils with whom they worked;
- ii. the activities in which they engaged as part of their job;
- iii. access to and participation in professional development related to their job;
- iv. their views on future developments in the provision of classroom support

Both open and pre-coded questions were presented enabling the researchers to extract specific information related to participation in classroom activities, such as lesson planning or checking student's work, but also affording respondents an opportunity to elaborate upon their own ideas and perception of their roles. Data from the questionnaires were entered into a database, which allowed categorical interrogation and enabled comparisons to be made both within the English and Irish Samples (for example according to school type) and between these.

Following analysis of the questionnaire data interview schedules were devised and semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of teaching assistants in England (N=17) and special needs assistants in Ireland (N=13) who had indicated their willingness to participate through the initial questionnaire. The interviews were used both as a means of verification, whereby information obtained through the questionnaire survey could be expanded through the provision of more detail and to gather in-depth personal accounts of the lives of the research participants. Data from the interviews were coded according to categories established on the basis of emerging themes and issues, which had been identified through the analysis of questionnaire data. These were then analysed in order to obtain qualitative and

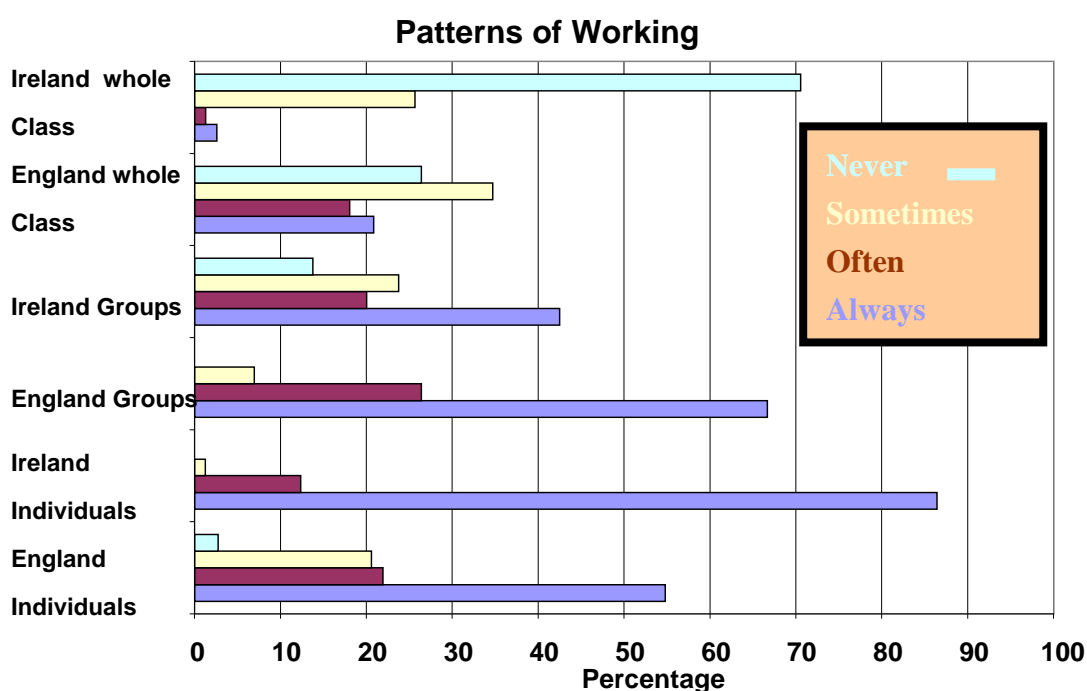
illustrative examples of the roles played by teaching assistants in England and special needs assistants in Ireland. The data obtained were considered alongside the literature from other research studies conducted both in England (for example Butt & Lance 2005; Kerry 2005) and Ireland (for example Carrig 2004; Logan 2006) and internationally (for example Giangreco & Doyle 2007; Rose & Forlin 2009) in order to identify common and emergent themes for discussion in relation to the developing inclusion agenda.

Findings and discussion

In any discussion of research of this nature it is important to recognise and to take measures to minimise the limitations of comparative study. The English and Irish education systems, whilst having similarities differ considerably in many respects. The tensions that exist between global and local priorities within education systems have been well documented (Phillips & Economou 1999; Crossley & Watson 2003). Such priorities have for example led to the development of significantly different models of curriculum within the English and Irish systems and to singular approaches to staffing in order to support curriculum delivery. The function of teaching assistants in England and special needs assistants in Ireland are certainly not identical and it is not suggested that comparisons between these two roles are made in order to measure one against the other. However, a leading global influence upon school provision in both countries has been the inclusion agenda which has led to the development of legislation and procedures in both countries with an intention of improving learning support for students with special educational needs. International studies of inclusion (Artiles & Dyson 2005; Jha 2007) have demonstrated how similar issues in respect of the development of inclusive classrooms are being tackled in many countries and that a sharing of information may be valuable in informing current debates. Umbrella statements such as The Salamanca Statement and Framework on Special Needs Education (UNESCO 1994), have increased the focus of researchers upon identifying those aspects of providing effective pedagogy and classroom support structures which may advance the inclusion agenda. The comparative research here reported is justified in considering how two distinctly different models of support have emerged and the ways in which these are impacting upon the provision of more inclusive schooling. Through studies of this nature it is anticipated that we may learn about systems which are supporting students with special educational needs at a local level whilst gaining opportunities to consider what might be transferable from one system to another.

TAs and SNAs were asked about their patterns of supporting students in classrooms. The literature suggests that the ways in which they work may be important in contributing to the development of inclusive classrooms (Rose 2000; Moran & Abbott 2002). Rose (2000, 2001) suggests that where support is wholly focused upon the individual student this may inhibit opportunities for inclusion by isolating the student from his peers. Furthermore, attention focused upon the individual may make other students reluctant to engage in a situation where they too may become the focus of greater, and possibly unwanted attention from an adult. The questionnaire sought information about the working patterns of the adults in supportive classroom roles. Specifically they were asked to indicate the extent to which they supported students through individual working, the management of small groups or taking the whole class. The data presented in figure 1 indicate that there is a significant difference of working pattern between the TAs working in England and their Irish SNA counterparts. Whilst a considerable amount of time was devoted to working with individual students by respondents in both samples, TAs in English schools were far more likely to work with groups or even take whole classes in lessons.

Figure 1



When questioned in interview English TAs indicated significant changes within their roles in recent years. Many had originally been employed to work in a general supporting role to teachers. Their work included general classroom maintenance,

preparation of teaching materials and some administration, tasks with which SNAs are still identified. Their current role had shifted significantly towards one which involves working directly not only in support of individual students but in many instances taking groups or whole classes.

I originally started there covering hours of a statemented child, so the child had 15 hours and that was what I was employed to do, I worked one to one with the child... I now do general TA duties in year 5 and year 6, I teach literacy to what we call a focus group.

I teach my own English classes now. I'm part of a team doing sex education so I take those classes by myself now.

(TA England)

It is noticeable how often TAs in the sample have begun to describe part of their activity as teaching. It is evident from the data that many now perceive themselves to be part of a teaching partnership engaged in collaboration with teachers on a range of pedagogical activities. This contrasts significantly with the SNA sample from Ireland where even working with an individual student appears to be on a controlled basis and at the discretion of the class teacher.

I am assigned to one child and with the permission of the teachers working with this child if she actually needs help or whatever. You know, with the teacher's direction.

(SNA Ireland)

Some SNAs within the Irish sample clearly felt that their skills might be better utilised and indicated that they would be pleased to assume more responsibility for working with individuals.

When I get a chance to be in the classroom and work with the kids individually, that is the most rewarding.

(SNA Ireland)

We are all capable to do loads more and we are willing to learn loads more. It's just where we are at the moment.

(SNA Ireland)

By contrast many of the TAs from England had seen a significant broadening of their responsibilities away from a focus upon individuals towards assuming what they saw to be a teaching role under the direction of the class teacher.

I still do that (working with an individual student) but now I have a year 6 group. There are only 8 children in it. I plan, prepare and deliver all of their literacy.

(TA England)

Reflecting on their changing role some TAs have seen a significant progression away from what they perceived as a care model for an individual student to one in which their responsibilities are much more aligned to those of teachers.

It (the role) really, really changed. I started out supporting three children with a statement of special educational needs. I was there specifically to enable these children to stay in a mainstream school...Now I teach whole classes. I teach year 3 art and design, I teach year 5 geography and history. I run an environment club and an eco squad which is to do with the government's focus on sustainable development and schools becoming sustainable.

(TA England)

Along with an increase in direct teaching activity has come the devolvement of a range of further responsibilities to TAs in English schools. When questioned about their participation in activities such as assessment and lesson planning, English respondents appear to be assuming a greater role than their Irish counter parts. 69% of TAs reported involvement in planning lessons compared to 31% in Ireland, whilst 40% of TAs were involved in assessment of student's academic performance as compared to 16% of SNAs.

I do an awful lot more planning now, with teachers. I'm involved with review meetings with parents as well, which I've never been allowed to do before.

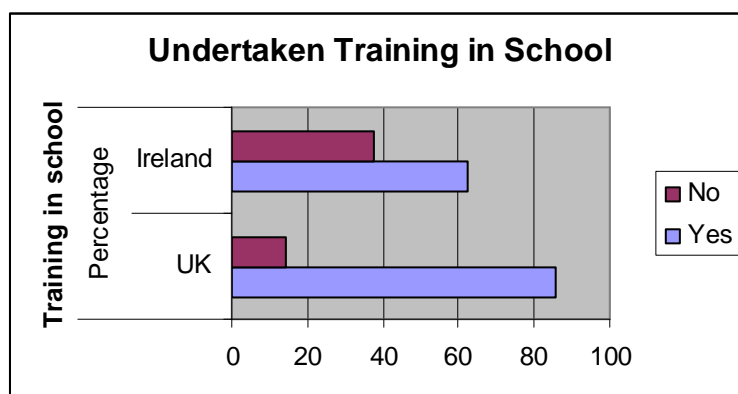
(TA England)

In part, this differentiation of responsibility between TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland may be related to the availability of personal professional development where again there is considerable contrast between the two samples. Moyles and Suschitzky (1997) emphasised the importance of professional development in enabling adults working in supportive roles in classrooms to establish their own professional identity.

A commitment to professional development was seen by these writers as an essential factor in recognising the importance of the service offered by individuals and of acknowledging the impact they could have on the quality of learning. In respect of the development of inclusive classrooms the provision of training which recognises the complementary roles of teachers and support staff may be critical. Pearson, Chambers & Hall (2003) provide evidence of how challenging support staff to re-evaluate their roles can enhance the confidence of teachers in their ability to utilise their skills more effectively. This may be an essential factor if schools are to develop practices which enable them to become more inclusive. Giangreco & Doyle (2007) suggest that there is a need for schools that employ adults in a range of supportive roles to re-evaluate their utilisation of what they see as potentially critical individuals for the development of inclusive practice. The disparity of support which currently exists, they suggest makes for some difficulty in assessing the effectiveness of such support and there remains a need for further research in order to assess the effectiveness of supportive role models.

The majority of the respondents from both countries in the research here reported had undertaken some professional development in their schools (86% England 62% Ireland Fig 2). A close examination of the nature of this professional development indicates a broad range of issues addressed. Both TAs and SNAs have experienced an eclectic mix of training related to care and educational issues. For TAs a focus upon pedagogical matters was a regular feature of the in-school training provided with respondents reporting that they had undertaken courses in such aspects as literacy development and precision learning and mentoring. Whilst some SNAs had also received training in similar areas, more of the Irish sample reported that their training was focused upon care activities and child safety issues.

Figure 2.



Training towards externally validated qualifications are available to both TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland and many respondents reported that they were keen to undertake courses which would provide them with greater professional recognition (Fig 3). Several respondents commented on the increased confidence which they had obtained from professional development.

I have started the Foundation Degree in Learning and Teaching this year and it's really helped me in my role. I feel more confident to be able to give my opinions and ideas because I feel its not just based on my thoughts and opinions but I feel like I now have knowledge to really back that up.

(TA England)

However, at times frustration was expressed when the training obtained was not acknowledged in school.

The training I have had, I did at the college and I loved every minute and I would do it again... We don't get to use it, so it feels a bit of a waste of time.

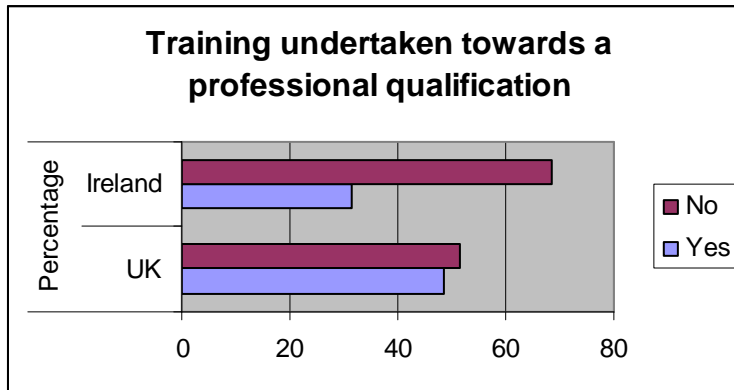
(SNA Ireland)

The nature of accredited training varies considerably with several of the interviewed TAs seeing the opportunities for professional development as being within a clear career development pathway.

Personally it's (the role) changed since I've become more qualified. I started out going into education having been in a factory job previously, so I went in with no experience at all...I've had Higher Level Teaching Assistant status for three, maybe four years...Obviously since I've had that qualification I've been given cover classes. Basically my responsibilities have increased as I have gained experience and qualifications...I will probably go on to try and get fully qualified teacher status.

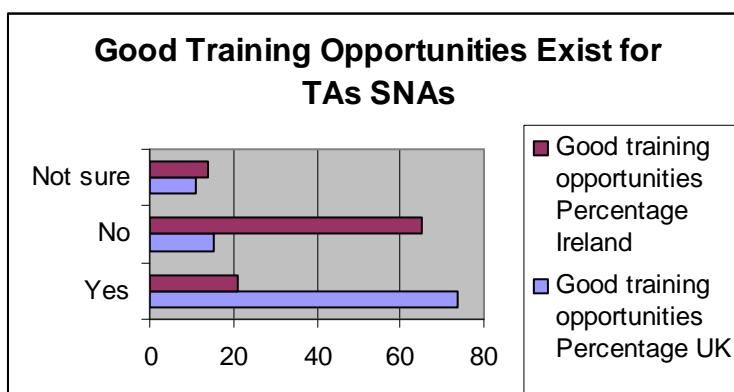
(TA England)

Figure 3



Despite the fact that many of the research respondents had undertaken some form of professional development there was still a disparity between the perception of training opportunities in England and Ireland. The majority of TAs (74%) believed that opportunities were good, whilst only 21% of the Irish sample agreed (Fig 4). In part this disparity may be related to the different ways in which the roles of TAs and SNAs have developed. In England, where increased responsibilities for the management of students has been devolved to TAs there may be an increased recognition that this will not be successful unless appropriate training is provided. As the role of the TA has shifted from one of care to a position which involves increased pedagogical support, so has there been an increase in the provision of accredited professional development courses. The perception of low availability of professional training by SNAs may be related to a less clearly defined role and a lesser recognition of the impact which courses may have upon the development of the position. Swann and Loxley (1998) indicated that adults in supportive roles are more likely to engage in professional development when they can see that this may be associated with career enhancement. Within the UK this is more readily recognised than within the Irish approach.

Figure 4



Implications for the development of inclusive schooling

Whilst there is a consensus that the use of additional classroom support may be a critical factor in the development of inclusive schools, it is less clear what form this support should take. At a time when the governments of England and Ireland have both declared a commitment to the promotion of greater inclusion, they have pursued different approaches to the deployment of classroom support. In England, a focus upon support for teachers in delivering the curriculum and managing classroom groups has influenced a demand for increased professional development and career enhancement for teaching assistants. In Ireland the deployment of SNAs has retained a different focus, which whilst continuing to be supportive of teachers is less concerned with pedagogy and the management of groups of learners. In both countries it is acknowledged that the support provided enables students with special educational needs or from other marginalised groups to be retained within mainstream classrooms.

The studies conducted by Blatchford *et al.* (2007) and by Black-Hawkins and her colleagues (2007) suggest that classroom support, when well deployed can be a critical factor in enabling students to engage with learning. In England as policies of inclusion have been pursued so has there been an increase in the employment of adults in supportive classroom roles. With time, the tasks undertaken by these adults have changed and with this change has come a demand for improved training opportunities and recognition through professional standards and qualifications. Surveys of teachers in England (Thomas, Walker & Webb 1998; Rose 2001) indicate a clear perception that teaching assistants are essential for the maintenance of students who are perceived to be difficult to teach in mainstream classrooms. It is also proposed (Hunter & O'Connor 2006) that the lack of provision of adequate training for both teachers and support staff may be a major obstacle to the development of more inclusive schools.

Within the two countries discussed in this paper conditions in schools vary considerably. Inevitably each country has established its own educational priorities based upon socio-economic and political factors which are different within the two states. Whilst it is suggested that there is much that can be learned about approaches to the promotion of inclusion by studying practices in schools in both countries, we do not propose that a single strategy for the deployment of classroom support would be effective in both environments. Indeed, in both countries an understanding of inclusion and the influence which classroom structures and staffing may have upon its

successful development continues to emerge. Researchers working in this area are well advised to exercise caution when undertaking studies into the conditions necessary for inclusion. It is not the case that one size fits all, and our understanding of those influences which determine the ability of schools to address diverse learning needs remains as a topic in need of further investigation.

The research here reported has demonstrated significant differences in the ways in which classroom support is deployed in two countries. Internationally research is indicating that whilst the deployment of adults in supportive roles may be a critical factor for the promotion of inclusive schooling there is as yet no single model for effective provision. The need for further research is evident and it is to be hoped that the sharing of practices along with a discussion of their underlying *raison d'être* may assist in informing educational policy makers in the continued development of supportive roles in schools.

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