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Capacity Building for Inclusion:
The Role and Contribution of
Special Needs Assistants and
Classroom Assistants in Ireland
and Northern Ireland



Preface

This thematic Report is the fourth in a Special Report Series addressing the rights and well-being of children and youth in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Report corresponds with three key UNESCO aims: to strengthen awareness of human rights; to act as a catalyst for regional and national action in human rights; and to foster co-operation with a range of stakeholders and networks working with, or on behalf of, children and youth.

The terms 'children' and 'young people', as used in this Report, refer to those under the age of 18. The focus on children and young people in the Report reflects the age range corresponding to the definition of a child in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The Children and Youth Programme adopts a rights-based approach to policy development and implementation, with the intention: to have an all-island focus; to retain academic independence; and to ensure the voice of children and youth is present. The Special Report Series of the Children and Youth Programme will be the primary output of this approach. The objectives of the series are to:

1. focus on a topical issue considered to affect the well-being of children and youth;
2. examine the impact of selected policy and practice interventions on human rights and well-being;
3. gain an understanding of the processes of implementation;
4. share learning that will enable duty holders to better meet their commitments to children's rights and improved well-being;
5. share learning that will enable rights holders to claim their rights.

A common theme which permeates the special thematic reports is education. The right to education is firmly established in international law and is crucial for the exercise of other rights. Education reinforces, integrates and complements a variety of other Convention rights and cannot be properly understood in isolation from them. In doing so, the Report reflects the UNESCO position that education is a universal inalienable human right which plays a critical role in the development and empowerment of every child, regardless of their gender, age, race and mental and physical abilities.

The authors are responsible for the choice and presentation of views contained in this Report and for opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organisation.

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1

Introduction

This thematic Report from the Children and Youth Programme (CYP) focuses on capacity building¹ to support the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN)² within the mainstream school sector³. The issue is explored specifically in relation to the role of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in Ireland and the Classroom Assistant (CA) in Northern Ireland.

The Report will adopt a rights-based approach to examining the provision of education for children and young people with SEN in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Using the General Measures of Implementation⁴ as an elementary tool for good policy (CYP, 2011), together with the principles of best interests⁵ and voice of the child⁶, the objectives of the Report are to:

1. identify the right to education for children and young people with SEN in Ireland and Northern Ireland with reference to policy and legislation;
2. analyse provision for SEN within a framework for inclusion;
3. consider research evidence in relation to the role and function of the SNA and CA;
4. identify good practice to inform the capacity-building potential of SNAs and CAs to support the rights of pupils with SEN and make recommendations for policy development and implementation.

The legal and policy landscape for the education of children with SEN in Ireland and Northern Ireland has undergone a series of significant reforms in recent years that have been influenced and shaped by international child rights instruments.

- 1 In the context of this Report, capacity building refers to inclusive measures taken by schools to meet the diversity of pupil needs.
- 2 For the purposes of this Report, SEN refers to pupils identified under the framework pertinent to his/her jurisdiction.
- 3 This Report focuses on the mainstream school sector but the authors acknowledge the inclusive nature of special schools in welcoming pupils with diverse needs.
- 4 United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) General Comment No 5 (2003) General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 5 Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
- 6 Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

The fundamental right to an education on the basis of non-discrimination and equal opportunity is intended to enable the development of a child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to his/her fullest potential (CRC, 2006a; 1989). Inclusion within mainstream education is now widely endorsed as the default option for the majority of pupils in both jurisdictions (NCSE, 2011a; DE, 2009, 2005a; Government of Ireland, 2004), reflecting international standards (UN, 2011; UNESCO, 1994). Effective inclusion within schools is dependent on a series of inextricably linked cultural, social and pedagogical factors which collectively create communities of practice (Koliba and Gajda, 2009; Buysse *et al.*, 2003). By definition, collaboration between such communities maximises the capacity of schools to ensure all pupils have access to a full educational experience (Flatman Watson, 2009).

The support provided through classroom assistance⁷ is a cornerstone of inclusive practice in schools (DCSF, 2009; Takala, 2007). To date, the contribution of these posts has been relatively unexplored in Ireland and Northern Ireland (Abbott *et al.*, 2011; Logan, 2006). Where evidence is available, it suggests a role of much potential but also one that has evolved contrary to job specifications, with implications for the educational rights and inclusion of children and young people with SEN (*ibid*).

The Report comprises five further sections. Section 2 briefly outlines the relevant rights instruments and standards for the education of pupils with SEN; Section 3 provides an overview of provision for SEN in Ireland and Northern Ireland; Section 4 considers the policy and practice of inclusion; Section 5 documents the nature of classroom assistance in Ireland and Northern Ireland; and Section 6 draws concluding messages for policy in relation to capacity building to support the education of pupils with SEN.

7 Throughout the Report 'classroom assistance', 'classroom support' and 'support staff' are used interchangeably to describe the work undertaken by SNAs and CAs.



2

The Right to Education

Historically, the basic right to education has been a recognized assumption for children in Ireland⁸ and Northern Ireland⁹. For pupils with SEN, this has been a more ambiguous process, where the language, policy and legislation of education provision has alternately strengthened and diminished their educational options (Prunty, 2011; Logan, 2008; MacGiolla Phadraig, 2007; Lundy and Kilpatrick, 2006). National¹⁰ and international¹¹ instruments which advocate the principles of non-discrimination, equality of opportunity, respect for difference, recognition of the evolving capacity of children and full participation within an inclusive environment have undoubtedly strengthened the right to an effective education (UNESCO, 2011; UN, 2006; CRC, 2006a). Nonetheless, the premise of children with SEN as rights holders and the extent to which the State and the school system fulfil these rights is subject to ongoing debate (CRA, 2012; CDSA, 2012; Haydon, 2008; Logan, 2008; Lundy and Kilpatrick, 2006).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child¹² (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities¹³ (UNCRPD) have established the rights of children and young people with SEN, including the right to an effective education.

8 The Constitution of Ireland (1937), Article 42 (Government of Ireland, Department of the Taoiseach).

9 The Education (Northern Ireland) Act (1923).

10 In Ireland, for example, The Education Welfare Act (2000); The Equal Status Act (2000-2004); The Education Act (1998); The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004); The Disability Discrimination Act (2005).

In Northern Ireland, for example, Education Act, Order (1996); The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (1998); The Special Educational Needs and Disability Order (SENDO) (2005).

11 For example, The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994); A human rights-based approach to education for all (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2007).

12 Ratified by Ireland in 1992 and by Northern Ireland (UK) in 1991.

13 Signed by Ireland in 2007 and ratified by Northern Ireland (UK) in 2009.

Although the UNCRC does not relate exclusively to education or to SEN/disability, many of its provisions relate to realising the full potential of children and young people¹⁴, providing a clear benchmark to assess the extent to which the fundamental human rights of all children and young people with SEN are met (CDSA, 2009). The UNCRPD has ‘... opened a new chapter of legal regulations, policy and practice in inclusive education’ (Inclusion Europe, 2009, p.2). Although not child-centred like the Convention, the UNCRPD contains provisions relating to access to education for children with disabilities¹⁵, including a requirement on States to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels that is based on non-discrimination, equality of opportunity and appropriate support to maximise academic and social development. No definition of inclusive education is given in the text of the Convention but the obligations to State Parties are consistent with the goal of full inclusion (Inclusion Europe, 2009).


2.1 The Rights of Children and Young People with SEN in Ireland and Northern Ireland

In Ireland, legislative educational provision for SEN is currently enshrined in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) (EPSEN) (Government of Ireland, 2004) which is intended to confer new statutory rights on this group of children (NCSE, 2006). The Act is not intended to operate in isolation and additional constitutional, educational and equality legislation¹⁶ are seen as integral to its implementation. The provisions outlined in the EPSEN Act were to be introduced over a five-year period (2005-2010); this time line has significantly slipped and as yet there is no timetable for renewed implementation (CRA, 2012). This impeded affective progress of the inclusive educational environment it purported to deliver, impacting negatively on the educational rights of pupils with SEN (CRA, 2012; Logan, 2008).

14 For example, Articles 2, 3, 12, 23, 28 and 29.

15 For example, Articles 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 12 and 24.

16 For example, The Education Welfare Act (2000); The Equal Status Act (2002); The Disability Act (2005).



There is prevailing criticism that government and the education system has not accorded children with SEN full enjoyment of their rights.

In Northern Ireland, legislative provision for children with SEN is contained in the Education (NI) Order (1996) and in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order

(2005a) (SENDO). The SENDO strengthened the rights of children with SEN to attend mainstream schools and introduced disability discrimination laws to the whole education system in Northern Ireland for the first time. Although the Order created a presumption in favour of inclusion, it is arguable that this may be compromised or denied where, for example, access to resources (including classroom assistant support) is not met¹⁷. Recent campaigning¹⁸ for changes to disability equality legislation (including SENDO) has sought to strengthen the rights for those with a disability; this includes an additional duty on schools to provide services and auxiliary aids.

Although the legislative framework in the two jurisdictions reflects some of the related recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 2008; 2006b), there is prevailing criticism that government and the education system has not accorded children with SEN full enjoyment of their rights (CRA, 2012, 2011; Logan, 2008; NICCY, 2008; Haydon, 2008; Lundy and Kilpatrick, 2006). This includes limitations in children's access to educational, as well as, health and social services (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009; NDA, 2007; Kinsella, 2005). Other evidence has suggested that the educational rights of children with SEN in Ireland have been compromised in several areas, for example, enrolment practices (Flatman Watson, 2010), provision of supports (Barnardo's, 2011), the nature of provision (Kilkelly, 2002), the extent of children's participation (Logan, 2008) and limited co-ordination between education and health services (CRA, 2012). In Northern Ireland, similar criticism has been directed towards the intricacy of overly bureaucratic SEN policy (O'Connor *et al.*, 2005), limited accessibility for some pupils (Doherty, 2012; Gray, 2009) and insubstantial training for teachers and classroom assistants (Haydon, 2008).

17 Once the child is in a mainstream school the duties of the school to include them are set out in Article 8 (2) of the Education (NI) 1996 Order. This duty is to ensure the child engages in school activities with their peers 'so far as is reasonably practical'. The duty is also subject to qualifications: (paraphrasing) Article 8 (2) 'it applies only in so far as ... is compatible with ... (b) the provision of efficient education for the children with whom he will be educated, and (c) the efficient use of resources.'

18 Strengthening Protection for Disabled People Proposals for Reform (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2012).

Challenges have been undertaken on behalf of children and their parents in both jurisdictions. In Ireland, informal and formal mediation options on matters of access, assessment and provision of appropriate education are provided in the EPSEN Act and include appeal to the independent Special Educational Appeals Board (SEAB) or to the Minister for Education and Skills before recourse to the Courts (NCSE, 2006). Provisions for the appeals process have not yet been implemented under the EPSEN Act (CRA, 2012) although the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (OCO) has challenged decisions relating to extended educational provision for certain pupils, the best interests of the child and concessionary school transport (Kilkelly, 2011).

In Northern Ireland, under the provisions of the SENDO, educational decisions can be appealed informally through the Dispute Avoidance and Resolution Service (DARS) or more formally through the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST) and judicial review. The law on SEN has been used to contest the obligations of Education and Library Boards (ELBS) in matters of educational provision (SENAC, 2009). For example, the Children's Law Centre has been actively involved in challenging a range of decisions pertaining to issues such as early intervention, inappropriate sharing of classroom assistance and non-admission of a pupil with SEN to a mainstream school (CLC, 2012). It should be noted, however, that progress has been made in both jurisdictions, for example, support to the public sector to engage effectively with children and young people through the Participation Network (CDSA, 2009), the development of an inclusive education framework and capacity building guidance for schools (DE, 2011; NCSE, 2011a), increased allocation of SNAs within the mainstream environment (CRA, 2010) and consultation on an Action Plan for Speech, Language and Communication Therapy (SLCT) (DHSSPS, 2010).


2.2 Participation

The common principles that inform a rights-based approach include the accountability of duty bearers to meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil rights and the participation of rights holders to claim their rights without discrimination (UNESCO, 2007). The rights of children and their parents are integral to inclusive education.

The right of children and young people with SEN to be involved in decision-making concerning their education (CRC, 2006, UN, 2006) is an important element in the development of a more inclusive system (Prunty *et al.*, 2012; CDSA, 2012; Logan, 2008; Shevlin and Rose, 2008; Bourke and Mentis 2007; Beveridge 2004). Any understanding of inclusive education demands an understanding of pupil experiences, yet there are no legal underpinnings requiring listening to and respecting the child's voice (CRC, 2008; Lundy and Kilpatrick, 2006) and tendencies towards tokenistic participation (Collarbone 2007) and limited decision-making persist (NICCY, 2008; Logan, 2008; Cajkler *et al.*, 2007).

Research evidence has highlighted variable participatory experiences amongst pupils with SEN. This ranges from positive peer social networks (Guralnick, 2010), increased autonomy (Pavey, 2003), and active involvement in learning (NatSIP, 2012; Lawson, 2003) to participation that is constrained by low teacher expectations (Rose and Shevlin, 2004), limited differentiation and academic engagement (McCoy and Banks, 2012; Rock *et al.*, 2008), tokenistic involvement (Lawson, 2010), exclusionary practice (MacCartney and Morton, 2011) and peer isolation (Koster *et al.*, 2010). Other studies have illustrated that whilst children value the support provided by classroom assistance (Tucker, 2009; Fraser and Meadows, 2008; NDA, 2007) they also crave independence and freedom to interact with peers (Prunty *et al.*, 2012). It has also been noted that pupils with SEN could identify good practice, particularly where the support was appropriate, well-timed and facilitated independent learning (Rutherford, 2012). In contrast, several studies have identified less positive experiences, where some pupils distanced themselves from classroom support, not wanting to feel singled out or followed (Rutherford, 2012; Logan 2006).

Data on the voice of children and young people in relation to SEN has been limited but there has been progress in this regard and some quantitative and qualitative information is available in the two jurisdictions. The Growing up in Ireland Study¹⁹ is a longitudinal study intended to build a complete picture of children in Ireland.



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Data on SEN is gathered from teachers and parents although children are asked about long term illness, disability or medical conditions. Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools)²⁰ is another longitudinal study on inclusive and special education in Ireland that incorporates the views of pupils with SEN from across the school sectors, and pupil voice is similarly represented in other research studies (Motherway, 2011; O’Keefe, 2011; Travers *et al.*, 2010). In Northern Ireland, Barnardo’s 6th Sense, the Disabled Children and Young Person’s Participation Project (DCYPPP)²¹, facilitates the involvement of children and young people who have a physical, sensory or learning disability or prolonged condition which impacts on their daily living, in children’s services planning. The project is currently located in one Health and Social Care Board although it is a model that could be replicated across Northern Ireland. Elsewhere, individual organisations and coalitions have actively worked to improve the inclusive participation of children and young people through informing and influencing policy (for example, CDSA)²² and in relation to particular issues, including disabilist bullying (for example, MENCAP)²³ and specific conditions²⁴ (for example, NDCS).

In both jurisdictions, the rights of parents have been similarly strengthened in policy and legislation (DE, 2005a; Government of Ireland, 2004) which includes protocols to decide an educational placement of their choice as well as to challenge and/or appeal any decision made on the assessment, provision for and placement of their child (*ibid*). However, there is some concern that the proposed changes to special education provision in Northern Ireland will mean that many parents will lose their right to appeal education and/or ELB decisions (CLC, 2012).

Parents’ voices have been an under-represented dimension of special education research (Cajkler *et al.*, 2007; DE, 2005b). Existing evidence suggests an isolated experience that is frequently frustrated by the intricacies of bureaucracy (O’Connor, 2008) and poor communication (Radahan, 2006) and where professional presumptions take precedence over parental expertise, leading to a loss of confidence in the special education process (DCSF, 2009; Kenny *et al.*, 2005).

20 www.projectiris.org/

21 www.southernareacsp.n-i.nhs.uk/DCYPPP.htm

22 www.ci-ni.org.uk/working_in_partnership.aspx?dataid=330491

23 www.mencap.org.uk/campaigns/take-action/our-other-campaigns/dont-stick-it-stop-it

24 www.ndcs.org.uk/family_support/how_ndcs_can_help/ndcs_projects/bridging_the_gap_programme/index.html

With regards to classroom assistance, research suggests mixed opinions. Although there is evidence that parents welcome the support provided in terms of therapeutic assistance and positive impact on their child's learning (DES, 2011a; NCSE, 2010; Cajkler, 2007; Logan, 2006), uncertainties remain about the exact nature of the role and its deployment in the classroom (NCSE, 2010, DCSF, 2010; Egilson and Traustadottir, 2009; Cajkler, 2007; Giangreco and Broer, 2005).

Key Messages

- Policy and legislation in Ireland and Northern Ireland has strengthened educational provision in mainstream schools for children and young people with SEN.
- The extent to which children and young people with SEN have full enjoyment of their educational rights is variable in both jurisdictions.
- Delays in the full implementation of the EPSEN Act in Ireland have impeded fulfilment of an inclusive education system.
- The education of children and young people with SEN in both jurisdictions has been compromised in several areas, including the nature and type of provision and recruitment of staff who are not fully trained in SEN.
- There is limited data on the voice of children and young people with SEN. However, there are examples of good practice from each jurisdiction that could be replicated or developed further.
- Parents are unsure about the management and deployment of classroom support.



3

**Provision for SEN
in Ireland and
Northern Ireland**

Nationally and internationally, provision of education for children and young people with SEN is variable (Inclusion Europe, 2009). Whilst some countries, such as Italy promote a fully inclusive system, other countries, including Germany and France maintain a special school system (*ibid*). Ireland and Northern Ireland have parallel systems of provision; this incorporates inclusion in mainstream classrooms, units attached to mainstream schools and special schools. Reducing the distinction between the mainstream and special sectors is increasingly encouraged as a tool for inclusive capacity building (NCSE, 2011b; DE, 2009) with, for example, specialist classes in mainstream settings, shared teacher expertise and special schools as resource centres, reinforcing special education as a service not a place (Zigmond *et al.*, 2009; Ware *et al.*, 2009; Kauffman and Hallahan, 2005).

3.1 Policy and Provision in Ireland

Policy and provision for SEN in Ireland has been both a cautious and reactionary process as governments sought to negotiate financial considerations and educational principles with high profile litigation and growing parental advocacy (Keating, 2010; MacGiolla Phadraig, 2007).

The most significant policy developments for special education provision in Ireland began during the 1990's, with a series of reports²⁵ that charted government intentions and responses to special education, including recognition of the right of access to,

²⁵ Including, for example, The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993); The Comprehensive Initiatives for Assessment and Delivery of Special Needs Education (1998), The Education Act (1998).

and participation in, education, the nature of support for children with SEN, and the relationship between the mainstream and special school sectors (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007; Whyte, 2002). Collectively, these reports illuminated the dearth of legislation for children with SEN (NCSE, 2011b; Carey, 2005) and provided shifting definitions on its nature. They highlighted that the right of children with SEN to an appropriate education involved a continuum of services and support, an automatic entitlement to resource provision that included SNAs, parental involvement in decision-making and the centrality of children's individual needs.

Whilst the EPSEN Act has changed the educational landscape for children with special educational needs (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007) and made a stated commitment to inclusive education, it is argued that provisions do not guarantee right of access to mainstream schools (MacGiolla Phadraig, 2007) and as such remains 'systems-centred rather than child centred' (CRA, 2009, p.17). In addition, whilst the more inclusive definition of SEN in the Act has been generally welcomed (NCSE, 2011b; MacGiolla Phadraig, 2007), concerns have been expressed about the impact of a broad definition on the allocation of resources (NCSE, 2011b). Some notable advances have been made; particularly the establishment of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), expansion of the National Education Psychology Service (NEPS) (CRA, 2010) and increased allocation of SNA support (CRA, 2010). There has also been governmental commitment for supports to follow the child from primary to second-level and greater integration of special-needs related services (CRA, 2012). More recently, a strategic review of special education²⁶ is likely to have significant impact on special education provision in Ireland.

3.2 Policy and Provision in Northern Ireland

Policy and provision for SEN in Northern Ireland has been described as an overly bureaucratic process (Kearns and Shevlin, 2006), designed by professionals for professionals (O'Connor *et al.*, 2005). Historically, provision for children and young people with SEN was the domain of the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) until

the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order (1986) brought provision under the preserve of the Department of Education. Legislation on special education is outlined in the Education (Northern Ireland) Order (1996) as amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order (2005) (SENDO) and supported by guidance documents including a Code of Practice for the identification and provision for pupils with SEN (DE, 2005b; 1998). Both legislation and guidance outline what schools and ELBs, as well as health and social services agencies, must consider when making a decision on provision for children with SEN. Originally, the Code of Practice was intended to standardise provision in terms of procedures and timescales and reflected provision in England and Wales. This included identification of the educational resources needed to provide equal opportunities for learning, as well as financial requirements, to provide those resources (Howie, 2010). Since then, provision for SEN in other jurisdictions of the United Kingdom has become more individualised: in England proposals for a revised, streamlined system are under review²⁷, whilst provision for pupils with SEN in Wales²⁸ and Scotland²⁹ is located within a broader inclusive framework of Additional Learning Needs and Additional Support for Learning respectively.

In Northern Ireland, the ongoing review of SEN and inclusion may radically alter provision and support for pupils in mainstream schools with a series of proposed significant policy changes. The review is wide-ranging and is intended to ‘... ensure that the child is placed firmly at the centre of the processes for identification, assessment, provision and review’ (DE, 2012, p.2). Integral to this is a commitment to early intervention, reduced bureaucracy, transparency and accountability for resources and outcomes, and capacity building within schools to ensure the support needs of pupils are met (*ibid*). The review drew an overwhelming response from a range of respondents, including schools, parents, voluntary and community

27 media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/s/support%20and%20aspiration%20a%20new%20approach%20to%20special%20educational%20needs%20and%20disability%20%20progress%20and%20next%20steps.pdf

28 wales.gov.uk/dcells/publications/publications/circularsindex/2006/inclusionandpupilsupport/inclusionpupilsupport-e.pdf?lang=en

29 www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/welfare/ASL

groups, as well as human rights, equality and other statutory bodies. Some of the proposed changes have been welcomed, for example, the reduction of the statutory assessment and statementing process from five stages to three, as well as proposals for early intervention teams and transition arrangements. However, concerns have been expressed that the proposed changes could effectively regress the rights of pupils with SEN to an inclusive education (CLC, 2012), particularly the impact of revisions to the statutory statementing process (for example, the introduction of a new category of Multiple and Complex Needs), the introduction of Co-ordinated Support Plans, and access to classroom assistance (CLC, 2012; CDSA, 2009). The Department of Education has addressed some of these concerns and at the time of writing the proposals are yet to be finalised.

3.3 The Identification of SEN

It is generally accepted that up to 20% of children will experience some barrier to learning during their time at school, of whom up to 5% will require specific educational and/or other support. This estimate³⁰ has been a relatively consistent feature of SEN provision both nationally and internationally, encompassing children on a continuum of need, ranging from mild learning difficulties that can be addressed by the school, to more complex and/or severe conditions that require additional support and/or interventions. A statutory system for the classification and identification of children with SEN is a core feature of special education policy in both jurisdictions. Identification of SEN is undertaken via a staged approach, albeit in two slightly different formats. In Ireland, a three-staged approach is applied for pupils experiencing difficulties³¹. Northern Ireland currently follows a five-staged approach which may or may not lead to the issue of a statutory statement³².

Due to variations in data collection in the two jurisdictions, it is not possible to provide comparable figures on pupils with SEN in mainstream schools. In Ireland, data on SEN provision is

30 This estimate was first identified in The Warnock Report (DES, 1978).

31 DES Circular SP ED 02/05.

32 A condensed three-stage approach is proposed in the current review of SEN and Inclusion (DE, 2012).

collected from a range of sources³³ for administrative use and/or resource allocation. Deciphering precise numbers of pupils with SEN is constrained by limited information on principals' interpretations of data for annual school returns, changes in the system of resource allocation, and variations in the disaggregation of data (NCSE, 2011b). Information available suggests that in 2010, the numbers of pupils allocated additional teaching hours by the NCSE was 17,512 in primary schools and 16,629 in post-primary schools (NCSE/SEAS, 2010). The number of pupils allocated SNA support for the same period was 3,135 in primary schools and 9,881 in post primary schools (*ibid*). In Northern Ireland, data for mainstream schools in 2011-2012³⁴ indicated that the numbers of pupils with SEN was 32,696 (21%) in primary, of whom 4,671 (3%) of pupils were statemented, and 28,025 (18%) of pupils were non-statemented. The total number of pupils with SEN in post primary schools was 26,414 (18%), of whom 5,870 (4%) of pupils were statemented and 20,545 (14%) of pupils were non-statemented.

In Ireland, the EPSEN Act defines SEN as '... a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition' (Government of Ireland, 2004, p.6). The categorisation of SEN distinguishes between high and low incidence disabilities (Appendix 1). The terms 'high' and 'low' incidence are not referenced in the EPSEN Act, although they continue to be used as benchmarks for the general allocation of additional teaching, SNA support and other resources to schools (NCSE, 2011b).

In Northern Ireland, legislation defines a child as having special educational needs '... if he/she has a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made' (DE, 2005a, p.2).

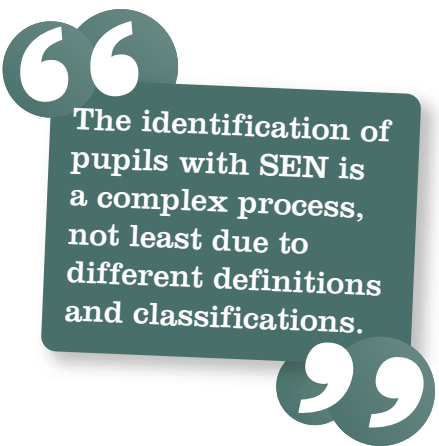
33 This includes the Department of Education and Skills (DES); the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the Special Education Administrative System (SEAS) which is a purpose-designed computer system for NCSE use.

34 www.deni.gov.uk/index/facts-and-figures-new/education-statistics/32_statistics_and_research-numbersofschoolsandpupils_pg/32_education_and_library_board_level/statistics_and_research_elb_data_1112.htm

A child has a learning difficulty ‘... if he/she has significantly greater difficulty learning than the majority of children his/her age; a disability which prevents or hinders use of educational facilities’ (*ibid*). Identification of pupils with SEN is based on a common set of areas and categories (DE, 2005d). The seven broad areas and associated categories (Appendix 2) provide standardised guidance for all schools and ELBs and are intended to ensure consistency in recording ‘... the numbers of pupils with SEN for whom educational provision is being made’ (DE, 2005d, p.1).

The identification of pupils with SEN is a complex process, not least due to different definitions and classifications (NCSE, 2011b; Inclusion Europe, 2009). The classification of SEN through the application of a category or label automatically confers another identity onto a child and can shape expectations of what he/she can achieve (Howie, 2010; Florian and McLoughlin, 2008).

It is arguable that such categorisation is a necessity since it is a fundamental indicator by which educational provision and resources are decided, although tendencies to place emphasis on deficiency limits the full enjoyment of educational rights and does not align with the principles of inclusion.



The identification of pupils with SEN is a complex process, not least due to different definitions and classifications.

Key Messages

- Policy for SEN has been characterised as reactionary in Ireland and bureaucratic in Northern Ireland, each with implications for the delivery of special education in mainstream schools.
- The review of SEN and Inclusion in Northern Ireland will radically alter SEN provision and may impact on the rights of children with SEN to an Inclusive education.
- Categorisation of SEN that places emphasis on deficiency does not align with the principles of inclusion.



The background features a collection of overlapping circles in two shades: a dark teal and a navy blue. Thin, white dotted lines are scattered across the light gray background, some connecting the circles and others floating independently. The overall composition is abstract and modern.

4

Inclusion

The philosophy and practice of inclusion is endorsed nationally and internationally as the optimum basis for the full enjoyment of rights (UN, 2011; UNICEF, 2007; Ainscow and Cesar, 2006; UNESCO, 1994). In its broadest sense, inclusion has heterogeneous roots, encompassing issues of gender, religion, social status, ethnicity and health. Its premise, based on a philosophy of entitlement to opportunities and services, is underpinned by the rights of citizenship (WHO, 2011; Armstrong *et al.*, 2010; O’Gorman and Drudy, 2010; Ruijs and Peetsma, 2009; Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006), with an emphasis on equal access, participation and achievement (UN, 2011; EADSNE, 2009; Thomas and Vaughan, 2004; UNESCO, 2001). The discourse of inclusion encompasses alternative and sometimes conflicting social, cultural, historical and political interpretations (UN, 2011; EADSNE, 2010; Inclusion Europe, 2009; Barton and Armstrong, 2007), making an unambiguous definition difficult to achieve.

Historically, the promotion of an inclusive education framework called on ‘... governments to adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise (UNESCO, 1994, p.ix). Underpinned by a commitment to ‘Education for All’ this manifesto has influenced national and international policy, although its ideology has been similarly subject to variable implementation due to shifting interpretations, expectations and practices (Ruijs and Peetsma, 2009; D’Alessio, 2007).

The origins of inclusion lie in a vocabulary of integration, with its reliance on 'readiness' and the expectation that the child would 'fit in' to the regular classroom³⁵ (Thomas and Vaughan, 2004). However, its application was queried for a perceived reliance on traditional approaches to special education, its implicit devaluation of difference, a lack of detail on the nature and quality of educational provision, and its indirect affirmation of segregation (UN, 2011; MacGiolla Phadraig, 2007; Meegan and MacPhail, 2006). In contrast, the language and practice of inclusion has been shaped by the principles of advocacy, accountability, social justice, equality, anti-discrimination and human rights³⁶ (WHO, 2011; Oliver and Barnes, 2010; Powell, 2010; Stevens and O'Moore, 2009). Its transmission, from international directives into national educational policy and practice, has reinforced the premise of inclusion as a process rather than an event and endorsed it as a legal and administrative concept (Thomas and Vaughan, 2004).

Whilst both the right to an effective education and the principles of inclusion have been widely endorsed, the inter-play between both is less clear cut, not least the argument that an absolute inclusive stance is one-dimensional and over-simplified (Ravet, 2011; Norwich, 2008) and does not accommodate the subtleties of 'differences among differences' (Kauffman and Landrum, 2009, p.177). It is an enduring and unresolved debate. For some, the unanimous transfer of all pupils to mainstream schools is a necessary progression (CSIE, 2011), since incomplete or ineffective inclusion means that '... the mainstream of education remains unchallenged ... and the potential of education as an agent for transformation and change in society ... is ignored' (Lloyd, 2008, p.233). For others, this represents the loss of educational options (Hardiman, Guerin and Fitzsimmons, 2009; Lindsay, 2007; Low, 2007), not least the consideration that pupils with SEN should be placed in the school environment that best responds to their needs (Kauffman and Landrum, 2009; Warnock, 2005; MacKay, 2002; Hegarty, 2001).

36 For this reason, inclusion is strongly associated with the social model of disability.

4.2 Implementation of Inclusion Policy in Ireland and Northern Ireland

Research confirms that many countries have sought to make their provision of mainstream education more inclusive (Inclusion Europe 2009; OECD, 2005). Effective inclusion involves initiating change, reforming administrative (system-wide) structures and mobilising resources (UN, 2011) if schools are to fulfil their capacity to effectively meet the needs of children and young people within current legislative frameworks (DES, 2011a; DE, 2011).

In Ireland, inclusion has been most recently defined within the auspices of the EPSEN Act (2004) as a process of ‘... addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities and removing barriers within and from education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school’ (Winter and O’Raw, 2010: 39, cited in NCSE, 2011a, pp.13-14). In Northern Ireland, the management of inclusion is framed around the development of ‘... cultures, policies and practices to include pupils’ (DE, 2011, p.5). This reflects the codes of professional conduct (Teaching Council, 2007) and core teaching competencies (GTCNI, 2007) in both jurisdictions which recognise that the learning needs of pupils are best achieved through mutual support and collaboration from all educational partners. In Ireland, an Inclusive Education Framework, designed as a school development planning tool, has been developed to assist schools in the planning, implementation and review of their inclusive policies and practices (NCSE, 2011a). Notably, this includes measures for the effective deployment of school resources, training for all staff and the presence of SNAs in any core planning team (*ibid*). Similarly, in Northern Ireland, guidance material on capacity building for inclusion has been produced (DE, 2011). Teachers are expected to be trained in the management of classroom assistants, including identification of roles and responsibilities, collaborative planning, and effective deployment. It is advocated that, where possible, CAs will be included in any

professional development provided to teaching staff in relation to SEN and inclusion and that they will develop specialised expertise to meet the individual needs of the pupils they support (*ibid*).

Notwithstanding progress towards more effective inclusive practice, there is some debate that SEN provision in Ireland and Northern Ireland has focused unduly on an unhelpful interpretation of inclusion as a place rather than on what the pupils are enabled to experience, suggesting a narrow perspective with implications for inclusive practice (Oliver and Barnes, 2010; Meegan and MacPhail, 2006). Research generally has suggested variable standards in inclusive school provision (Pugach and Blanton, 2009; Inclusion Europe, 2009; UNESCO, 1994), a trend that has been noted in the two jurisdictions, where incomplete practice and provision risks compromising pupils' learning experience and future options (Ware *et al.*, 2009; Drudy and Kinsella, 2009; Ferguson, 2008; Winter, 2006). Any endeavour, therefore, rests on '... the principle that the school changes to meet the needs of all the children it serves and provides a framework within which they are valued equally' (MacGiolla Phadraig, 2007, p.291). Implementation of inclusive education policy is '... resource sensitive at multiple levels' (Flatman Watson, 2010, p.278), requiring a combined effort of commitment and change from schools, school staff, parents, representative bodies, education and health administrators and professionals of other statutory agencies (Abbott, 2007).

Contrasting perspectives on inclusive practice are reflected in both jurisdictions where research has highlighted a series of challenges, *inter alia*, limited teacher training (Winter, 2006), limited specialised support (Ferguson, 2008; Abbott, 2007), poor academic progress (O'Donnell, 2003); variable teacher expectation (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010; Scanlon and MacGilloway, 2006), poor co-ordination of services (Flatman Watson, 2010), parental frustration (Nugent, 2007; Kenny *et al.*, 2005), as well as imperatives for the retention of special schools and special classes (Ware *et al.*, 2009). Literature on the benefits of inclusion has demonstrated a range of positive outcomes that include social and educational acceptance (Staff Commission for ELBs, 2010; Drudy and Kinsella, 2009); the promotion of positive attitudes (Meegan and MacPhail, 2006; NDA, 2006) and increasing options for teacher education (O'Gorman, 2007).

Key Messages

- The principles of inclusion advocate that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society.
- The inter-play between education and inclusion has been incomplete and variable practice exists in both jurisdictions.
- Limited teacher training, specialised support and allocation of services have undermined effective inclusion in schools.
- The benefits of inclusion for pupils with SEN in educational, emotional and social terms should inform inclusive policy development.
- Guidance on inclusive practice developed in both jurisdictions identifies the contribution of SNAs and CAs and advocates options for training.



The background features a light blue gradient with several large, overlapping circles in dark blue and teal. Faint, white dotted lines form a web-like pattern across the lower half of the page.

5

Classroom Assistance

As the number of pupils with SEN has increased in mainstream classrooms, there has been a corresponding and unprecedented increment in the number of support staff (Radford *et al.*, 2011; Gray *et al.*, 2007). It is a growth pattern reflected in other countries (Mackenzie, 2011; Giangreco *et al.*, 2011; Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Giangreco and Doyle, 2007; EOC, 2007). In Ireland, the numbers of SNAs have increased exponentially in line with education policy and funding³⁷, with a capped figure of 10,575 posts across mainstream and special school sectors. Allocations for 2012-13 indicate a total of 8,154 SNA posts in primary and post-primary schools³⁸. In Northern Ireland, there has been a slower but gradual growth in the numbers of CAs for pupils with SEN in primary and post primary schools. Figures for 2011-2012 indicate a total of 4,215 SEN CAs in primary and post-primary schools³⁹.

Research has highlighted the particular contribution of support staff in enhancing inclusiveness in the classroom (NatSIP, 2012; Rutherford, 2012; DCSF, 2009; Alborz *et al.*, 2009; Giangreco and Doyle 2007; Groom, 2006; Logan, 2006; Moran and Abbott, 2002). Analysis of the terminology used to identify support staff employed in mainstream schools to work alongside teachers reflects the heterogeneous evolution of non-teaching roles over time (Adolphson, *et al.*, 2010; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007), with variable development internationally (Maensivu *et al.*, 2012; Rutherford, 2012; Sosinsky Stout 2011; Stewart, 2009; Bourke and Carrington, 2007).

37 The SNA scheme increasing by 922 per cent between 2001 and 2009 (SEN Circular 0006/2011).

38 www.ncse.ie/statistics/national.asp

39 Figures received by CYP from the Education and Library Boards.

5.1 The Profile of Classroom Assistance

Professional identity is integral to capacity building for inclusion since it has implications for the tasks undertaken. In Ireland, the post of SNA has been defined in a series of Circulars⁴⁰ which outline the care duties of assistants in the classroom (Appendix 3), with the clear distinction that they are of a non-teaching nature (Keating, 2010; Logan, 2006). Recruitment to the post is specifically to assist schools in making suitable provision for pupil(s) with special care needs arising from a disability in an educational context. Schools can apply for an SNA post for a pupil with a disability who also has a significant medical need, a significant impairment of physical or sensory impairment or where their behaviour is such that they are a danger to themselves or to other pupils. Allocations are made on a full-time or part-time basis and can be shared by pupils for whom support has been allocated.

In Northern Ireland, specifications for the post of CA are defined by individual ELBs⁴¹ (Appendix 4). Pupils with SEN who do not have a statutory statement can be supported by a general CA within the resources of the school, whereas those with a statutory statement can be allocated support through an identified CA (SEN) who may be shared by other pupils. The job description for this post similarly places an emphasis on care and support, although there is an expectation that understanding of the specific SEN of the child will be developed. Research evidence suggests some variation in professional remits elsewhere, underlining its contribution in directly supporting individual pupils' needs in a way that is not always possible for a class teacher. For example, in the United Kingdom, the teaching assistant provides support to teachers by assisting in curriculum delivery and classroom management (Rose and O'Neill, 2009). Internationally, in Finland special needs assistants are employed to enhance the accessibility of education by assisting pupils with SEN in their studies and with various situations at school (Takala, 2007) and in New Zealand, the teacher's aide supports a child's classroom teacher to include a child in everyday classroom learning and activities⁴².

40 Including: SP ED 07/02; SP.ED 24/03; SNA 15/05; SP ED 0009/2009; 0021/2011; 0071/2011.

41 Information received by CYP from ELBs.

42 www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/SpecialEducation/ServicesAndSupport/TeachersAide.aspx

5.2 Qualifications and Training

The post of SNA and CA each has a prescribed minimal qualification, with implications for the nature of support they provide pupils with SEN. In Ireland, the minimum required standard of education for appointment to the post of Special Needs Assistant is a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications or a minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate or equivalent (DES, 2011b). In Northern Ireland, specification for the post of Classroom Assistant identifies a minimal qualification of NVQ Level 2 in Children's Care, Learning and Development⁴³. Overall, this means that a person as young as sixteen or seventeen years of age and with no specific training could be assisting a child with SEN (Keating, 2010; Watson and Robbins, 2008; Lawlor and Creggan, 2003). Criteria of classroom assistance elsewhere are similarly variable, ranging from no qualifications to vocational study and apprenticeships (Butt and Lowe, 2012; Mäensivu, *et al.*, 2012; Stout Sosinsky, 2011; Takala, 2007). Research confirms that the qualifications held by classroom support staff in Ireland and Northern Ireland are an eclectic mix that ranges from basic child care certification to graduate degrees (Abbott *et al.*, 2011; Keating, 2010; ETI, 2006; Moran and Abbott, 2002). However, it has also established that few held an entirely appropriate qualification for supporting children and young people with learning difficulties, while others had no formal qualifications but had become experienced by virtue of long service working alongside informed teachers.

Inevitably, there has been some debate on the tension between qualifications and level of support, with implications for the inclusion of pupils with SEN (Rutherford, 2012; Maensivu *et al.*, 2012; Blatchford *et al.*, 2009; Lindsay, 2007; Cajkler *et al.*, 2007; Groom and Rose, 2005; Giangreco and Broer, 2005). Research in both jurisdictions indicates that the role of the SNA and CA has evolved contrary to established job specifications and that classroom support staff frequently are engaged in a range of pedagogical, behavioural management and therapeutic duties under the direction of the class teacher (Abbott *et al.*, 2011; Rose and O'Neill, 2009; Logan, 2006; Carrig, 2004; Lawlor and Creggan, 2003).

43 Collated information received by CYP from ELBs.

“Given the paucity of SEN relevant qualifications amongst classroom support staff, it is logical to conclude that some kind of training is required.”

It follows, therefore, that delegation of unqualified staff to pupils with SEN whilst teachers focus on the rest of the class compromises pupils' right to an equal and inclusive educational experience (Blatchford *et al.*, 2007) since it allocates '... the least powerful staff to the least powerful students ... perpetuating the devalued status of both groups' (Logan, 2008, p.8).

5.3 Professional Development

Given the paucity of SEN relevant qualifications amongst classroom support staff, it is logical to conclude that some kind of training is required (Rutherford, 2012; Howard and Ford, 2007). Recognised, relevant and accredited training to acquire the skills that enables support staff to carry out their work effectively, safely, and professionally is a recurrent observation (Butt and Lowe, 2012; NatSIP, 2012; Abbott *et al.*, 2011; DCSF, 2009; Howard and Ford, 2007; ETI, 2006; OFSTED, 2006; Pickett *et al.*, 2003; Balshaw and Farrell, 2002; Riggs and Muller, 2001). Targeted training directed towards the needs of pupils is core to capacity building for inclusion (Ofsted, 2010); whilst there is evidence of a positive effect on pupils' progress where teaching assistants are effectively trained to deliver specific support programmes, the deployment of teaching assistants is still patchy (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009). It is recognised that challenges remain in raising professional standards (NatSIP, 2012; Burgess and Mayes, 2009), not least in relation to its variety, co-ordination and effectiveness (Tucker, 2009).

In Ireland, there have been recurrent calls for useful and appropriate professional development opportunities for SNAs. Training for SNAs is accessible through a range of providers, although some research has suggested that this can be cost-bound, with SNAs sometimes self-funding (Keating, 2010). It is important to note, however, that a fully funded National Induction Programme for SNAs ran for several years and a series of follow-on DES-funded Certificate Courses have been delivered by a number of Higher Education Institutes⁴⁴.

44 www.sess.ie/professional-development/professional-development-relevant-special-needs-assistants-snas

Requests for training have highlighted a range of preferences that include supporting the care needs of pupils, specific types of SEN, effective collaboration and teamwork and the school curriculum (DES, 2011a). Other evidence suggests that options that are modular, progressive and accredited are considered most useful (NCSE, 2011a; DES, 2011a; Logan, 2006, 2001). Undoubtedly, the increased allocation in SNA numbers has had a significant impact on the provision of resources for pupils with SEN. Their efficacy has been queried in the absence of any accompanying directive on the issue of inclusion in mainstream classes (MacGiolla Phadraig, 2007), although recent guidance for schools identifies good practice for all staff involved in supporting pupils with SEN (NCSE, 2011a). However, a recent review of the cost-effectiveness of the SNA scheme found that it had been ‘... compromised by the general misinterpretation of the role of the SNA ... and the involvement of SNAs in duties beyond those envisaged by the objectives of the Scheme’ (DES, 2011a, p.93).

In Northern Ireland, training is commonly provided by the ELBs who offer a range of general courses (for example, behaviour management, administration of medication) as well as tailored sessions for an identified training need (for example, Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Speech and Language Disorder). A Career Development Framework (CDF)⁴⁵ for school support staff has been introduced for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with a qualifications and credit framework (QCF) enabling learners to create and build up units. Although access to relevant, co-ordinated and accredited in-service training has been advocated (ETI, 2006), evidence has similarly highlighted a shortfall in the number of CAs who have received training. Research has suggested that as well as inconsistencies in the quality and regularity of training options and attendance at personal cost, support staff feel particularly disadvantaged if the class teacher also has limited training (Abbott *et al.*, 2011; Moran and Abbott, 2002). The value of well-trained support staff has been noted, not least since they often are best placed in schools to have insight into the pastoral and emotional needs of pupils. As such ‘... the capacity should be developed to feed their professional knowledge into school organisation and planning, enabling senior management and teachers to use this expertise’ (Abbott *et al.*, 2011, p.229). Research in Northern Ireland has confirmed that CAs welcomed the opportunity for further

45 webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120203163341/http://tda.gov.uk/support-staff/developing-progressing/career-development-framework.aspx

knowledge and skills training but stressed their professional development should be recognised amongst teachers and by the wider school community (Abbott *et al.*, 2011; Moran and Abbott, 2002).

“Classroom assistance is a key factor in promoting the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms.”

5.4 A Changing Role

Classroom assistance is a key factor in promoting the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms (DCSF, 2010; Forlin *et al.*, 2008; Mistry *et al.*, 2004; Farrell, 2002; Moran and Abbott 2002). However, it is a role characterised by contradictions, tensions and ambiguity about its status, function and deployment within schools (Mackenzie, 2011; DCSF, 2010; Webster *et al.*, 2010), requiring greater clarity from policy makers and educators (Goddard and Ryall, 2002). Arguments for a re-definition of the role emphasise the contribution of this role in supporting the educational rights of pupils with SEN. However, in Ireland, Departmental guidance has continued to reiterate the non-teaching nature of the post (DES, 2009)⁴⁶. In Northern Ireland, the role of the CA has evolved from one of the ‘housekeeping’ to more ‘educational duties’ (Moran and Abbott, 2002, p.163) and guidance endorses the involvement of CAs in whole school professional development through the acquisition of specialised expertise and active involvement under the direction of the class teacher (DE, 2011).

The evidence suggests there is a clear role for SNAs and CAs in capacity building for inclusion. If children and young people are to enjoy a full educational experience, particular attention should be directed to key dimensions of the role, namely professional identity; professional development; and collaborative practice.

5.4.1 Professional Identity

The shifting of professional boundaries has been a recurrent observation in the research (Butt and Lowe, 2012; Mackenzie, 2011; Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Blatchford *et al.*, 2009; Liston *et al.*, 2009; Butt and Lance, 2009;

46 Circular SP ED 0009/2009.



Harvey *et al.*, 2008; Howard and Ford, 2007; Groom, 2006), resulting in a blurred professional identity. Whilst this could be perceived as positive endorsement of well-trained and competent support staff, the predominant view is that it represents a 'de-professionalisation' of teachers' work and an unrealistic imposition of pedagogical and behavioural responsibilities on support staff (Giangreco *et al.*, 2011; Takala, 2007; Thompson, 2006).

In this context, perceptions of being undervalued have been reported amongst classroom support staff. This is often attributed to limited understanding of the role within schools, with staff having little say in how they should be deployed, and a tendency to be excluded from discussions on the children about whom they have particular knowledge (Mackenzie, 2011; Symes and Humphrey, 2011; Hammett and Burton, 2005; Balshaw and Farrell, 2002). It follows, therefore, that the capacity of a school to become more inclusive requires acknowledgement of their perspectives as significant stakeholders (Mackenzie, 2011; Symes and Humphrey, 2011; Blatchford *et al.*, 2011; Bourke and Carrington, 2007). Integral to this is recognition that CAs and SNAs, operating within a clear remit, have a knowledge and skills set to benefit children with SEN; in addition, they are often part of the local community and so are ideally placed to develop links between in-school and out-of-school learning (Logan and Feiler, 2006).

By association, explicit and up to date job descriptions that clearly establish the parameters of responsibility to both teachers and support staff (Butt and Lowe, 2012; Alborz *et al.*, 2009; Giangreco, 2003; Balshaw and Farrell, 2002; Riggs and Mueller 2001) is vital to clarify occupational boundaries (Mackenzie, 2011; Groom, 2006). For example, the National Sensory Impairment Partnership (NatSIP) has recently produced guidance for the effective working with Teaching Assistants in schools. Although developed for children with a hearing impairment, detail on specific job descriptions and case studies of good practice could be applied to other SEN. Acknowledgement of CAs and SNAs as professionals in their own right can be demonstrated through a more strategic position in schools, for example, where classroom assistance is a member of a core and/or senior management team

(NSCE, 2011a; DE, 2011; DCSF, 2010). The development of a career pathway to assist in the ‘professionalisation’ of the role is essential if CAs and SNAs are to gain insight into the environment in which they operate and acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to be effective (Rhodes, 2006). It is worth noting that in England and Wales, there is now a career progression route from teaching assistant to Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA)⁴⁷. This is an option that enables support staff to access training, development and career opportunities as professionals in their own right (WAMG, 2004), including professional standards derived from the standards for Qualified Teacher Status (TTA, 2007; TTA, 2003a; TTA, 2003b), meaning that they can carry out educational duties as part of their day-to-day duties under the direction of the teacher. In Scotland, the introduction of a professional development award⁴⁸ has led to many local authorities now specifying this award as a pre-requisite when appointing classroom staff (Stewart, 2009).

The evidence clearly connects the professional identity of classroom assistance with capacity building (Mäensivu *et al.*, 2012; Abbott *et al.*, 2011; Bourke and Carrington, 2007) and in doing so, strengthens pupils’ right to education. For this reason, the role should ‘... be developed to feed their professional knowledge into school organisation and planning, enabling senior management and teachers to use this expertise [making them] professionals in their own right’ (Abbott *et al.*, 2011, p.229).

5.4.2 Professional Development

Although it is recommended that classroom support staff ‘... have a useful role in supporting teachers in classrooms; in working with teachers to support a wide range of children in their learning; in providing

Acknowledgement of CAs and SNAs as professionals in their own right can be demonstrated through a more strategic position in schools.

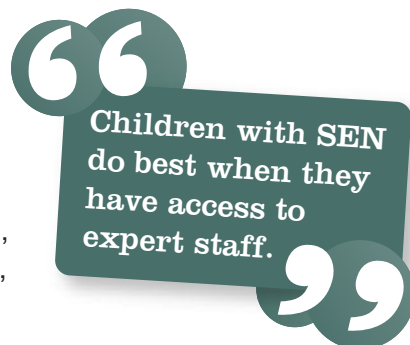
47 The role of HLTA was introduced in 2003 in order to recognise the role played by more senior teaching assistants. The idea was also to provide them with targeted training so as to reinforce and also improve their skills. This would also allow them to increase their contribution to improving standards in schools. HLTAs work alongside teachers acting as specialist assistants for specific subjects or departments, or help lesson planning and the development of support materials. In order to get HLTA status an individual has to undergo a training and assessment programme with support from their school.

48 2000 Professional Development Award: Classroom Assistants.
www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2002/04/14534/2764

targeted interventions for individuals and small groups of children, under the direction of a teacher, and on programmes and interventions for which they have been trained' (DCSF, 2009, p.28), the extent to which this is reflected in the job specifications in Ireland and Northern Ireland is variable. Research confirms that contradictory perspectives alternately advocate that support staff should be more involved in organisation and planning of classroom activity (Butt and Lance, 2005) or stress the unique pedagogical role of the teacher in delivery of the curriculum (Radford *et al.*, 2010). The involvement of support staff in any kind of instructional interaction requires careful deployment since any over extension into duties for which a person is not qualified may impact negatively on students with SEN (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009; Rouse and Florian, 2006; Etscheidt, 2005).

Children with SEN do best when they have access to expert staff (NatSIP, 2012; Alexander, 2009; DCSF, 2009b; Ofsted, 2006) so the recruitment of classroom assistance requires careful consideration of qualifications and/or training needs if they are to assume a pedagogical role in supporting students with SEN. Evidence suggests that support staff have felt under prepared for this role, often relying on observation of the class teacher to develop a range of instructional skills (Radford, 2010; Blatchford, Bassett *et al.*, 2009; Alexander, 2009). Research has highlighted a range of concerns in this practice, including lack of co-ordination between the teacher and assistant (DCSF, 2009); assistant time being used to substitute for teacher time (Blatchford, Bassett *et al.*, 2009), the effectiveness of instructional support provided by non-teaching staff (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009), impact on academic outcomes (Webster *et al.*, 2010), unproductive and/or inaccurate intervention by untrained personnel (Radford *et al.*, 2011), the prospect of interference with peer interaction (Giangreco and Doyle, 2007) and unnecessary dependency (Rose and Forlin, 2010).

Research has also highlighted the benefits of training for classroom assistance and the students they support (NatSIP, 2012; Alborz *et al.*, 2009; Wilson and Bedford, 2008; Black-Hawkins *et al.*, 2007; Blatchford, Bassett *et al.*, 2011; Howard and Ford, 2007; Cobb, 2007).



Continuous training in various forms have been advocated, but particularly pertinent is training which has a practical impact in the classroom, which links to professional standards for teachers and which draws on an understanding of what improves outcomes for pupils with SEN (Radford *et al.*, 2011; DCSF, 2010; Blatchford, Bassett *et al.*, 2009). For example, in New Zealand resource packs are provided as an induction or early in-service training option in school (Ministry of Education, 2002); in the United Kingdom yearly evaluations are undertaken by some local authorities (Ofsted, 2010), and in the USA mentoring programmes have provided informal but valuable in-house support (Trautmann, 2004; Riggs and Mueller, 2001).



Research has highlighted the benefits of different levels of training.

A range of evidence (Butt and Lowe, 2012; DCSF, 2010; Liston *et al.*, 2009; AASE 2007; Bourke and Carrington 2007; Trautman, 2004) has also advocated three levels of training for classroom assistants: in-service or 'on the job' training; regular ongoing skills-based training as a means of keeping up to date with best practice; and career pathways such as traineeships or university courses at both pre-service and in-service levels. The advantages of this approach lie in the range of options available to classroom support staff at each stage. These might include, for example, specific programmes on child welfare and protection; programmes on school policies and procedures relating to behaviour management, emergencies and first aid, individual education plans, confidentiality and privacy policies; and home-school liaison (Butt and Lowe, 2012). On the job training offers an immediate and pro-active skills base in particular areas, such as specific types of SEN, alternative communication, inclusive practices, and the use of ICT, whilst a pathways approach offers an advanced career development through accredited third level courses.

Notwithstanding the increased knowledge and expertise this suggests, a degree of caution against the 'training trap' is recommended (Giangreco *et al.*, 2011, 2010) to ensure teachers do not rush to assign support staff to instructional duties for which they not fully trained (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009; Giangreco, 2003). Clearly a balance must be struck, with teachers maintaining the lead in instruction and informed support staff providing additional, secondary support (Butt and Lowe, 2012).

5.4.3 Collaborative Practice

As the numbers of classroom assistants have grown, teachers have had to assume a greater management role which demands skills in people management (Rubie-Davies *et al.*, 2010). Management training is an increasing imperative if inclusive practice is to meet the needs of pupils of SEN (DE, 2011; DCSF, 2010) but it is a role for which many teachers are typically not trained (Butt and Lowe, 2012; Rubie-Davies *et al.*, 2010). Research has identified that teachers and classroom assistants tend to work across a continuum of educational contexts ranging from inclusive (positive working relationship), assimilationist (confusion over roles) and exclusive (limited or no direction from teacher) (Rutherford, 2012). Whilst the ambiguity of job descriptions has undoubtedly been a contributory factor, teachers' limited access to management training at both pre-service and in-service levels has meant that team work between teachers and classroom assistants has been a less developed aspect of inclusive practice (Radford *et al.*, 2011; Riggs and Mueller, 2001). Given that some classroom support staff work in an instructional capacity, this is a significant gap in inclusive practice (Blatchford, Bassett *et al.*, 2009). There has been a renewed emphasis on management training for teachers in Ireland and Northern Ireland (DES, 2011a; DE, 2011). The guidance provided by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DE, 2011) represents a positive step in furthering good practice, highlighting a collaborative relationship with the class teacher but also endorsing the position of CA within the wider school community.

Studies have stressed the importance of shared commitment at macro and micro levels to build inclusive partnerships (Bignold and Barbera, 2012; Blatchford, Bassett *et al.*, 2011; Flatman Watson, 2010). These include the combined effort of schools, teachers, classroom assistance, parents and other statutory agencies to ensure the needs and rights of pupils are met (Butt and Lowe, 2012; Rutherford, 2012; Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Groom, 2006). This is something best achieved if there are clear definitions of roles and responsibilities (Mackenzie, 2011; Glazzard, 2011; Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Takala, 2007). Collaborative practice relies on good working partnerships (Abbott *et al.*, 2011) and can offset job dissatisfaction (Rhodes, 2006). It is generally accepted that the most effective schools have 'clear guidance for teachers and learning support assistants' (Ofsted, 2010, p.18) that involves sharing information about pupils targets, clear understanding of what was being taught, and collective feedback.

Key Messages

- The role of SNAs and CAs has evolved beyond original descriptions with implications for their deployment in schools.
- Current minimal qualifications mean that a person as young as sixteen or seventeen years, and with no specific training, could be assisting a child with SEN.
- There is a clear role for SNAs and CAs in capacity building for inclusion but opportunities for appropriate training and professional development are limited.
- The professional identity of SNAs and CAs is integral to their status within schools.
- Greater understanding of collaborative practice is essential if SNAs and CAs are to be effectively deployed to support the educational inclusion of pupils with SEN.





6

Conclusions and Key Messages

6.1 The extent to which inclusive education is realised has implications for the full education experience of children and young people with SEN. Inappropriate or limited classroom support constitutes a denial of educational opportunities to enable pupils to reach their full potential.

Adopting a rights-based approach has permitted the best interests of young people to be considered against provision of education for children and young people with SEN in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Recent and proposed reforms of SEN policy in both jurisdictions have been informed by children's rights standards but implementation often falls short of what is required by those same standards. Effective inclusion has been constrained by ambiguous interpretation of the role of classroom assistance and remains problematic.

Good policy can enhance the rights and provision of education for children and young people with SEN and help government in both Ireland and Northern Ireland to develop more inclusive outcomes for this group. Project IRIS represents notable progress in this area and there is scope to develop a similar initiative in Northern Ireland.

6.2 Dedicated training for SNAs and CAs is essential to realise the rights and educational needs of children and young people with SEN, both to improve inclusive practice and enhance educational experiences.

Children and young people with SEN are rights holders and entitled to be educated alongside their peers. The pivotal role of SNAs and CAs cannot be under-estimated and their input under the direction of the class teacher can demonstrably improve educational experiences.

Training for support staff is a recognised priority for effective inclusion. In Ireland and Northern Ireland few SNAs and CAs have an appropriate qualification to support pupils with SEN and there are variations in training options. Government in both jurisdictions should take steps to address the status of this post in schools to ensure that development pathways fulfil the educational, social and pastoral dimensions of inclusion.

6.3 The voice of children and young people with SEN is underdeveloped and needs to be progressed to inform inclusive educational policy development and implementation.

Access to quality quantitative and qualitative data can inform policy imperatives and provision for inclusion. There is relatively little monitoring of the lived experience of children and young people with SEN, including educational experiences. This is a crucial perspective in any planning for inclusion and should be incorporated into planning at micro (school) and macro (policy) levels to uphold implementation of the educational rights of pupils with SEN. The Disabled Children and Young Person's Participation Project illustrates how those with SEN, including complex needs, can have a voice in matters affecting their well-being. Options to learn from and/or develop the project further should be actively explored. The SNA, CA has an active role in supporting pupils with SEN to claim their rights and ensuring that the voice of the child is heard in the classroom.

6.4 Collaborative partnerships between teachers and SNAs, CAs are crucial to the effective inclusion of children and young people with SEN in mainstream schools

Adopting a collaborative approach between teachers and SNAs, CAs facilitates constructive use of evidence to support children and young people with SEN. A partnership approach, based on the acknowledged expertise of the teacher and the SNA, CA will undoubtedly enhance inclusive classroom practice.

Limitations in collaborative practice and in teachers' management of another adult in the classroom can have a detrimental impact on the education of pupils with SEN. Management training for teachers is essential for the effective deployment of SNAs and CAs in classrooms in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Teachers' access to dedicated training is minimal at pre-service and in-service levels. Options for management training of SNAs, CAs should be a more visible feature of teacher training in both jurisdictions, giving teachers the skills to collaboratively plan, prepare and support inclusion in the classroom. In addition, joint in-service training with SNAs, CAs should be explored further.

6.5 Other forms of expertise should be explored to inform and enhance inclusive education practice.

Whilst the role of the parent has been strengthened in policy and legislation, the extent to which parents feel partners in their child's education is questionable, with the balance of power seemingly in favour of professionals. Parents have a unique perspective on the needs of their child, so it is essential to harness the particular expertise that they can provide. A power-sharing relationship between children and young people, their parents, education and other providers should continue to be actively promoted at all levels of the education system.

Although not the focus of this Report, the role of special schools in advancing inclusive practice is increasingly recognised and there is evidence of greater collaboration to improve the educational opportunities of children and young people with SEN in the mainstream sector. Further options for SNAs, CAs and teachers from the two sectors to collaborate should be explored, including active networks that enable the mobilisation of resources.

6.6 Next steps

This Report has analysed how policy in Ireland and Northern Ireland has realised the right to, and provision of, inclusive education in mainstream schools for children and young people with SEN. It has reached five key conclusions, based on a wide range of research evidence. Using the General Measures of Implementation and other international legal instruments, allied to related examples of good practice, it provides a basis to help policy makers to make more informed decisions about the role of classroom assistance in the provision of inclusive education for children and young people with SEN.

Appendix 1

High Incidence and Low Incidence Disabilities in Ireland

High Incidence	Low Incidence
Borderline Mild General Learning Disability	Physical Disability
Mild General Learning Disability	Visual Impairment
Specific Learning Disability	Hearing Impairment
	Emotional Disturbance
	Severe Emotional Disturbance
	Moderate General Learning Disability
	Severe/Profound General Learning Disability
	Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorders
	Specific Speech and Language Disorder
	Assessed Syndrome along with one of the above low incidence disabilities
	Multiple Disabilities in primary and post-primary schools

(DES Circular SP.ED 02/05)

Appendix 2

Areas and Categories of SEN in Northern Ireland

SEN Area	Category
Cognitive and Learning	Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dyspraxia, Mild Learning Difficulties, Moderate Learning Difficulties, Severe Learning Difficulties, Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties, Unspecified
Social, Emotional and Behavioural	Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
Communication and Interaction	Speech and Language Difficulties, Autism, Asperger's Syndrome
Sensory	Severe/Profound Hearing Loss, Mild/Moderate Hearing Loss, Blind, Partially Sighted, Multi-Sensory Impairment
Physical	Cerebral Palsy, Spina Bifida and/or Hydrocephalus, Muscular Dystrophy, Significant Accidental Injury, Other
Medical Conditions/Syndromes	Epilepsy, Asthma, Diabetes, Anaphylaxis, Down, Other Medical Conditions/Syndromes, Interaction of Complex Medical Needs, Mental Health Issues
Other	Other

(DE, 2005d)

Appendix 3

Job Description For the Post of SNA (Circular SP.ED 07/02)

Circular to Boards of Management and Principal Teachers of National Schools.

Applications for full-time or part-time Special Needs Assistant support to address the special care needs of children with disabilities.

Role of the Special Needs Assistant

Their duties are assigned by the Principal Teacher in accordance with Circular 10/76: “Duties and responsibilities of Principal Teachers” and sanctioned by the Board of Management. Their work should be supervised either by the Principal or by a class teacher.

Those duties involve tasks of a non-teaching nature such as:

1. Preparation and tidying up of classroom(s) in which the pupil(s) with special needs is/are being taught.
2. Assisting children to board and alight from school buses.
Where necessary travel as escort on school buses may be required.
3. Special assistance as necessary for pupils with particular difficulties e.g. helping physically disabled pupils with typing or writing.
4. Assistance with clothing, feeding, toileting and general hygiene.
5. Assisting on out-of-school visits, walks and similar activities.
6. Assisting the teachers in the supervision of pupils with special needs during assembly, recreational and dispersal periods.
7. Accompanying individuals or small groups who may have to be withdrawn temporarily from the classroom.
8. General assistance to the class teachers, under the direction of the Principal, with duties of a non-teaching nature. (Special Needs Assistants may not act either as substitute or temporary teachers. In no circumstances may they be left in sole charge of a class).
9. Where a Special Needs Assistant has been appointed to assist a school in catering for a specific pupil, duties should be modified to support the particular needs of the pupil concerned.

Appendix 4

Generic Job Description For Post Of Classroom Assistant (SEN)

Responsible to:

The Principal through class teacher

Job Purpose:

Under the direction of the class teacher/outreach teacher/board office, assist with the educational support and the care of the pupil(s) with special educational needs who is/are in the teacher's care in or outside the classroom.

Main Duties and Responsibilities:

The precise duties of the post will be determined by the principal/outreach teacher/board officer.

1. Special Classroom Support

- 1.1 Assist the teacher with the support and care of pupil(s) with special educational needs e.g. enable access to the curriculum, attend to personal needs including dietary, feeding, toileting etc.
- 1.2 Develop an understanding of the specific needs of the pupil(s) to be supported.
- 1.3 Assist with authorised programmes (e.g. Education Plan, Care Plan), participate in the evaluation of the support and encourage pupil(s) participation in such programmes.
- 1.4 To contribute to the inclusion of the pupil in mainstream schools under the directions of the class teacher.
- 1.5 Assist with operational difficulties and non invasive medical/clinical difficulties pertaining to pupil(s) disabilities.
- 1.6 Support in implementing behavioural management programmes as directed.
- 1.7 Assist pupil(s) in moving around school and on and off transport.

2. General Classroom Support

- 2.1** Assist pupil(s) learn as effectively as possible both in group situations and on their own by assisting with the management of the learning environment through:
- clarifying and explaining instruction;
 - ensuring the pupils are able to use equipment and materials provided;
 - assisting in motivating and encouraging the pupil(s) as required;
 - assisting in areas requiring reinforcement or development;
 - promoting the independence of pupils to enhance learning;
 - helping pupil(s) stay on work set;
 - meeting physical/medical needs as required whilst encouraging independence;
- 2.2** Be aware of school policies, procedures and of confidential issues linked to home/pupil/teacher/school work and to keep confidences appropriately.
- 2.3** Establish a supportive relationship with the pupils concerned.
- 2.4** Prepare and produce appropriate resources to support pupil(s) and take care of material for play sessions.
- 2.5** Supervise groups of pupils, or individual pupils on specified activities including talking and listening, using ICT, extra curricular activities, and other duties, as directed by the class teacher/officer.
- 2.6** Under the direction of the teacher, and following an appropriate risk assessment, assist with off-site activities.
- 2.7** Provide continuity of adult care of e.g. supervising play and cloakrooms including hand washing, toileting etc.
- 2.8** Provide supervision/support including the administration of prescribed medicines and drugs for children who are ill and deal with minor cuts and grazes.
- 2.9** Ensure as far as possible a safe environment for pupils.
- 2.10** Report to the class teacher any signs or symptoms displayed which may suggest that a pupil requires expert or immediate attention.

3. Administration

- 3.1** Assist with classroom administration.
- 3.2** Assist the class teacher and/or other professionals with the implementation of the system for recording the pupil(s) progress.
- 3.3** Contribute to the maintenance of pupil(s) progress records.
- 3.4** Provide regular feedback about the pupil(s) to the teacher/officer.
- 3.5** Duplicate written materials, assist with production of charts and displays, record radio and television programmes, catalogue and process books and resources.

4. Other Duties

- 4.1** Attend relevant in-service training.
- 4.2** Assist work placement students with practical tasks.
- 4.3** Such other duties as may be assigned by the principal/outreach teacher/board officer within the level of the post.

It is acknowledged that the contents of this generic job description are not subject to appeal.

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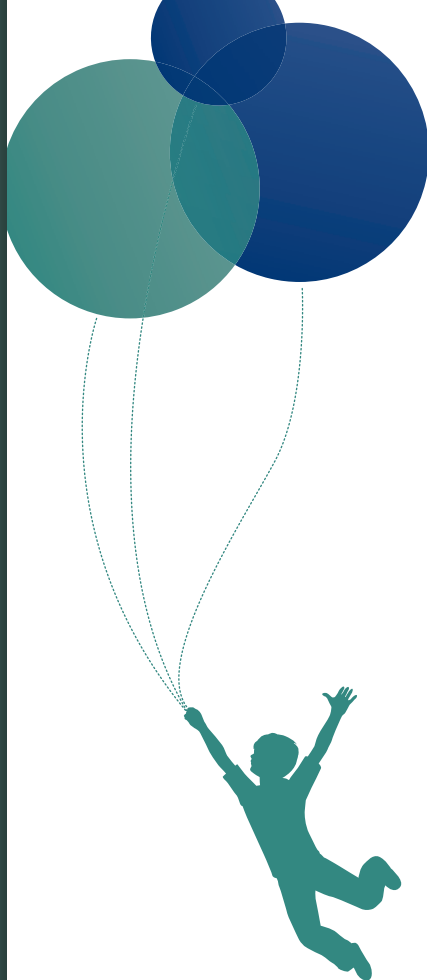
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