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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 article 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 the teaching assistant in England and the special needs assistant in Ireland, both play a distinct and essential role in the development of inclusive schooling. The article 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). A significant increase in the numbers of adults playing supportive roles in schools has led to a range of different models of support being developed, 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 et al, 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 & 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 & 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 10-year period from 1997 to 2006 (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). 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 et al, 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 et al, 2003; Groom, 2006). This change, whilst being greeted in positive terms by many within the English education system (Lacey, 2001a; 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 et al, 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 that 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?' This difficulty stems, in part, from the wide variations of tasks undertaken by TAs and the inconsistency with which the role is interpreted across schools. They did conclude, however, that the presence of a TA in the classroom often assisted in maximising the students' attention to 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 prerequisite to learning.

Black-Hawkins et al (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 requiring 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.

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Special Needs Assistants and Inclusion in Ireland

In Ireland in the past 10 years there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of adults recruited to support students with special educational needs in schools and this mirrors the expansion which occurred in England. In 1992 there were just 251.5 full-time equivalent SNAs working in special schools and special classes attached to mainstream schools. By 2007 this number had risen to 8646 working in primary, secondary and special schools. During the 1990s, as the education policies of successive Irish governments followed the international trend towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools, SNAs were identified as one of a range of supports essential for students with special educational needs in mainstream settings (Department of Education [Ireland], 1993). Throughout that decade, the model of allocation was one of individual support to named students. The danger of this kind of support becoming an impediment to inclusion is identified by Ainscow (2000) and Rose (2000). Where such provision is poorly used there is the potential for increasing student dependency and fostering situations where they may not be able to work effectively without additional adult support. The efficacy in terms of use of resources has also been queried by Logan (2003), who believes that there is a need to consider whether the employment of SNAs within existing models provides good value for money. A review of the allocation of SNA support undertaken by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 2005 introduced some flexibility by allowing one SNA to be deployed to support a number of named students. This review also introduced some flexibility in deployment within schools, allowing SNAs to move between classes, and it is this revised model that pertains at present.

In outlining the role of SNAs in Irish schools the DES states that they are recruited to 'assist schools in providing the necessary non-teaching services to pupils with assessed special educational needs'. The non-teaching element is given further emphasis through the statement that SNAs may not act as substitute teachers and 'in no circumstances may they be left in sole charge of a class or group of children' (DES, 2005). The appropriate duties described by the DES relate largely to the care needs of students and to assisting the teacher with supervision and activities relating to classroom organisation (DES, 2005). The question that arises when examining the Irish model is whether the role and method of allocation, which appear to have limited scope, impede or support the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms. To date, all published research relating to the work of SNAs in Ireland has highlighted a discrepancy between the role as described in the duties outlined by the DES, and the actual work undertaken by SNAs in schools. Findings reported by Lawlor & Cregan (2003), Carrig (2004), Elliott (2004) and Logan (2006) all indicate that SNAs are involved in care duties as envisaged, but they also identify the fact that SNAs are engaged in activities that support the education and learning of children. There is general agreement also in this research that teachers and principals appreciate this work and view it as being appropriate to the role of the SNA. Another common finding within research reported in Ireland is the fact that although SNA support is allocated to named individuals, SNAs do in fact work with other children individually and in small groups (Lawlor & Cregan, 2003; Elliott, 2004; Shine, 2005; Logan 2006).

In relation to the perceived benefits of SNA support to students with special educational needs in mainstream schools, research conducted by Logan (2006) in primary schools and Shine (2005) in secondary schools in Dublin produced similar findings. Secondary principals welcomed the deployment of SNAs and identified encouragement, support and reporting observations to the teacher as benefits to the student. Teachers in the same study identified 'someone to support your work' as a priority for them (Shine, 2005 p. 125). Parents of primary school students perceived that SNA support had a positive impact on their child's learning, behavioural and social interactions (Logan, 2006) and principals and teachers in both studies welcomed the deployment of SNAs in their schools and classrooms. In addition, research conducted by Daly et al (2007) found that students with physical disabilities in post-primary schools believed one-to-one SNA support to be invaluable to them.

While perceived benefits resulting from the deployment of SNAs are reported in Irish research, similar challenges to the most effective use of this support are also identified. These relate most particularly to difficulties with effective collaboration, communication and access to training (Lawlor & Cregan, 2003; Carrig, 2004; Shine, 2005; Logan, 2006). Effective collaboration in the classroom has already been cited as one of the essential conditions that support inclusion. The

development of such collaborative partnerships requires clear understandings of role and effective communication (Lacey, 2001b). Findings in Irish research to date suggest that schools have found DES policy relating to the role of SNAs inefficient in terms of fulfilling their needs and also that a lack of training opportunities for teachers and SNAs has hindered the development of collaborative partnerships.

Methods

A questionnaire was completed by a purposive sample of TAs in England (*n* = 74) and SNAs 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:

1. personal information related to their working experience, the type of school in which they were employed and the pupils with whom they worked;
2. the activities in which they engaged as part of their job;
3. access to and participation in professional development related to their job;
4. 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 students' 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 coding and thematic analysis of the questionnaire data, interview schedules were devised and semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of TAs in England (*n* = 17) and SNAs 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 further analysed through a reductive process (Gillham, 2005) which endeavoured to identify commonalities and patterns within the working lives of the interviewees in order to obtain illustrative examples of the roles played by TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland. The semi-structured nature of the interviews encouraged respondents to express themselves freely and to tell the tale (White, 1987) of their own experiences. 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, Lawlor & Cregan, 2003; 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 TAs in England and SNAs 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 or her 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. In seeking information about the working patterns of the adults in supportive classroom roles, the questionnaire specifically asked TAs and SNAs 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. Indeed, in the English sample there were no TAs who reported that they never took groups of pupils.
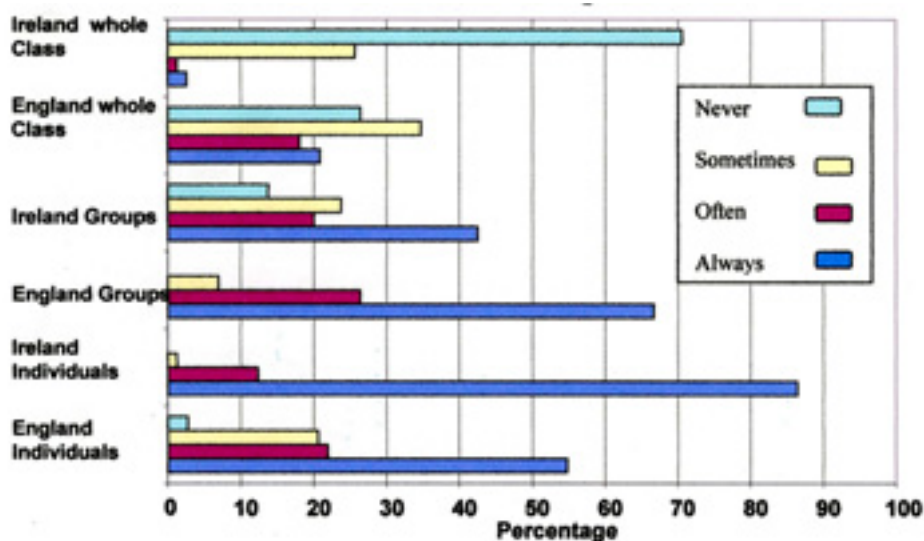

Figure 1. Working patterns of TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland.

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 [allocated] hours for 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 may 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)

SNAs did, however, report that their work had changed significantly since they started in this role. Much of what they described related to an acceptance into school life and a clear role in the school community. They also reported what they felt was an improved understanding between themselves and teachers, with the latter apparently more willing to direct their work and expand their role in the classroom.

> It is a totally different job to when I started ... My job was to sit beside the child all day long which I found could be boring ... So gradually it evolved that we were not to sit with one child at a time only when as needed ... It is definitely a learning curve for everybody. (SNA, Ireland)

Some SNAs describe working supporting named children for part of the day or for particular subjects and then working in a general capacity in junior classes or in their own base class. Some, however, 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 eight 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)

Teaching and support roles are distinctly different for some SNAs.

> I'm happy doing what I do and I'm happy not to go any further into the teacher's domain if you know what I mean. I'm happy supporting the child. (SNA, Ireland)

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 counterparts. Some 69% of TAs reported involvement in planning lessons compared to 31% in Ireland, whilst 40% of TAs were involved in assessment of students' 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)

SNAs in this sample were more likely to be involved in supporting the work of teachers. They talk about their involvement in reinforcing work carried out by the teacher, keeping students on task, selecting appropriate concrete materials to enable students to complete tasks and supporting children with literacy and numeracy.

In examining the findings of this research and their possible impact on inclusion, it is important to consider concerns expressed by Giangreco & Doyle (2007) relating to deployment of the support personnel and the teaching of students with special educational needs. They report that the literature is 'devoid of convincing arguments that it is educationally sound to deploy the least qualified personnel to provide primary instruction to students with the most complex needs' (p. 432). The survey data indicates that TAs function more independently than their SNA counterparts by working alone with groups and classes and also that they are more likely to be involved in planning lessons. The precise level of collaboration with teachers in these activities could not be measured from the data gathered. Some interviewees in the TA sample were explicit about their involvement in teaching groups and classes. Some also indicated that they have engaged in professional training related to teaching, and this is reported below. The data does not, however, indicate that all TAs involved directly in planning and teaching have appropriate training for this, though professional development opportunities for these colleagues in England are considerable. The survey data indicated a very low level of involvement in training toward Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status or teacher training. The findings relating to the SNA sample are also interesting in that they describe involvement in what would have been described in the literature as 'learning support' activities (Clayton, 1993; Logan, 2006). These involve supporting, assisting and encouraging behaviours that are described by Clayton (1993) as teaching behaviours. While there is a high level of SNA and teacher interaction reported in the interview sample, the degree to which the activities described are defined and supervised by teachers cannot be measured from the data gathered and it is possible that when supporting literacy or numeracy SNAs may be involved in making decisions about what is taught.

While it is to be expected that national policies outlining the role of support personnel in classrooms impacts directly on the models of support that emerge, the differentiation of responsibility between TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland may also be related to the availability of personal professional development. Once again this research identified considerable discrepancy between the two samples.

Moyles & 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 et al (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 efficacy 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; see Figure 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 practices. 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.

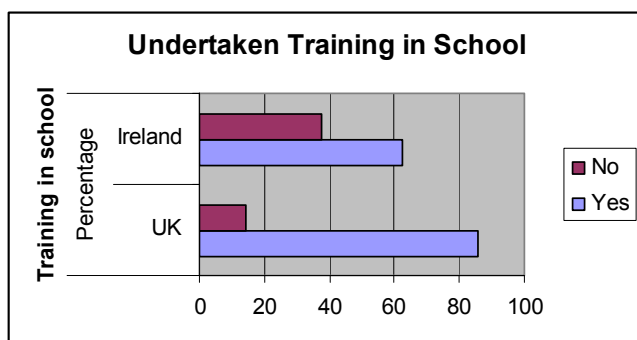**Undertaken Training in School**

Figure 2. In-school training undertaken by TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland.

Training towards externally validated qualifications is 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. A significant number of these colleagues had participated in courses leading to a qualification (see Figure 3).

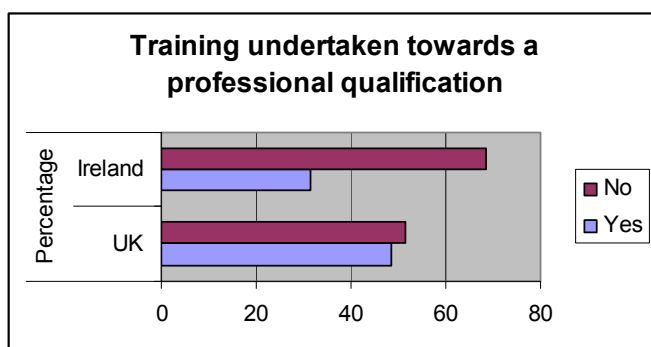**Training undertaken towards a professional qualification**

Figure 3. Accredited professional development, TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland.

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 it's 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)

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 (see Figure 4).
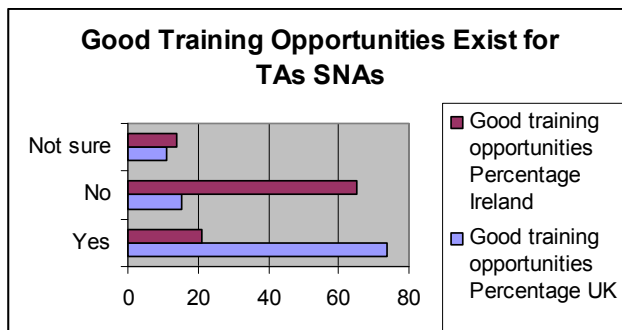

Figure 4. Opportunities for professional development, TAs in England and SNAs in Ireland.

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 have 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 & 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 United Kingdom this is more readily recognised than within the Irish approach. Overall the SNAs interviewed found it difficult to envisage a career path for themselves. Job insecurity appeared to impinge on their view of career development. Training was linked to career development by some but no clear overall vision of how a career structure might develop emerged and only two SNAs linked progression to teaching in any way.

> Maybe if I was younger I could train in special ed teaching, but here and now there is a course in Cork which is in special education at the university there. (SNA, Ireland)

> That's it you know we are not teachers, we haven't gone to college to train as teachers so I don't know what would be there for us. You know we are SNAs, teachers are teachers, and you can't just swap from SNAs. (SNA, Ireland)

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 TAs. Such demands have led to the implementation of new opportunities for TAs to increase their status through acquisition of nationally recognised qualifications or assessment against national standards such as the Higher Level Teaching Assistant status (Bland, 2005). 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.

However, as Griffin & Shevlin (2007) indicate, there is evidence that the role of SNAs has already expanded beyond that originally intended and that in common with all school procedures this change is likely to continue in the near future. 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 evolved 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 et al, 1998; Rose, 2001) indicate a clear perception that TAs 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 article 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 counties 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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