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Special Needs Assistants in Primary Schools: An investigation of the role, function, and expectations of this post in Ireland

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I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis for the award of Master of Arts in Education is entirely my own work except where otherwise accredited and that this thesis has not been submitted for an award at any other institution other than for the fulfilment of the award named above.

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Acronyms

AHEAD   The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability

ASTI   Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland

CPD   Continuing Professional Development

DES   Department of Education and Skills

EEC   European Economic Community

ESRI   Economic and Social Research Institute

EPSEN   Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs

IEP   Individual Education Plan

FETAC   Further Education and Training Awards Council

FORSA   Irish Trade Union for Public Service Staff

INTO   Irish National Teachers Organisation

SERC   Special Education Review Committee

SET   Special Education Teachers

SEN   Special Education Needs

SESS   Special Education Support Service

SNA   Special Needs Assistants

TA   Teaching Assistants

NDIS   National Disability Inclusion Strategy

NEPS   National Educational Psychological Service

NFQ   National Framework of Qualifications

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QQI   Quality and Qualifications Ireland

UNICEF   United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UNCRC   United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNCRPD   United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

UNESCO   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

WRC   Workplace Relations Commission

Abstract

This study aims to examine the role and function of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in Irish Primary Schools. The minimum requirement for a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) is three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate or an equivalent qualification. Existing research suggests that the role lacks clarity and has evolved to include taking on administrative, pedagogical, behavioral management, and therapeutic roles (INTO, 2017; Butler and Quinn, 2014; NCSE, 2011). This study explores the disparity between the SNA job descriptor to recognise the impact and importance of the SNA's role in the education system. This study is underpinned by the Bio-Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) which considers the child as a construct of their immediate surroundings and the larger beliefs of the society in which they reside, which in this study, encompass education, teachers and SNAs (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Across the Republic of Ireland, 595 respondents contributed via survey to this study, including 388 SNAs and 207 Primary School teachers. Notably, while the literature identified that the role of the SNA is specifically a non-teaching job, the SNA survey responses identified that 58% of SNAs supervise the whole class if the teacher is out (even for short periods). The results indicate that 17% of SNAs 'teach' whole classes if the teacher is absent (even for short periods). In addition, 93% of SNA's reported assisting pupils with classwork set by the teacher, and close to a fifth [19%] corrected or graded classwork. 56% reported that they supported teachers in preparing Individual Education Plans (IEP) for pupils, with a further 6% stating their involvement in developing IEPs independently. Nearly half asserted that they do therapeutic interventions for pupils and support the work of professionals in Speech and Language or Occupational Therapy [44% and 49% respectively]. Interestingly, only 0.5% of SNAs held the minimum qualification with 33% holding a Level 6 award. In addition, another 33% were qualified to Level 7 ordinary degree or higher [33%]; in fact, 47 hold an honors' degree [12%], and 27 have a master's degree [7%]. With such levels of over-qualification, it is not surprising that a resounding 92% want a career progression route.

This study indicates that the role/duties of the SNA has evolved way beyond the prescribed circular role, with SNAs taking on roles beyond the scope of their duties. Also, it appears that many SNAs hold higher qualifications than the minimum requirements, however they are not qualified to work as teachers, but many are expected to do so. This essentially means that children are being taught (even for short periods of time) by personnel who are not qualified to do so. To remedy some of these challenges, this study recommends that SNA role should be reviewed and expanded if possible. Also, this study further recommends a change in the minimum qualification for employment as an SNA to include a standardised SNA training programme, along with a suite of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses to ensure that the SNA has the essential knowledge and skills to work as an SNA. It is also recommended that an adaptable career progression path be designed explicitly for SNAs, leading to a professionalisation of the SNA workforce.

Keywords: qualification, training, special education needs, career progression

Chapter 1: Overview

1.1   Introduction

This research inquiry deals with evolution and misperceptions of the role of Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in Ireland from its introduction in the 1970s to its current state in 2021. SNAs play an essential role in providing support for children with Special Education Needs (SEN) (NCSE, 2018; NCSE, 2011). The Department of Education and Skills (DES) Circular 0030/2020 describes the role of the SNA as a non-teaching role. The purpose of the SNA scheme is to 'provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children who also have additional and significant care needs' (DES, 2020, p. 1). Nevertheless, in the past decade, studies show that the role of SNAs in the Irish educational system has evolved into an educational, resourceful, and supportive role (NCSE, 2018; INTO, 2017; FORSA, 2017; ASTI, 2015). Therefore, it is a matter of concern that the minimum educational qualification required for an appointment as an SNA remains a QQI (formerly FETAC) Level 3 major qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) or a minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate or Equivalent. A Comprehensive Review of the SNA Scheme (2018) conducted by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) reported ambiguity surrounding the scheme's delivery requiring a newer model. Ireland has 35,000 children with special educational needs (SEN) and 14,000 appointed SNAs (NCSE, 2018).

1.2   Aims of the study

This study explores the SNA scheme from the perspective of two cohorts (SNAs and Primary School Teachers). The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate the functional composition of the SNA scheme, and by extension, the ideal minimum qualification required for the appointment of an SNA. This study collates the voice, attitude and general outlook of both SNAs and Primary School Teachers as it applies to the role, job function and expectations of SNAs in Ireland. It seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What is the range of qualifications held by SNAs?
2. Are SNAs taking up roles that are beyond the original remit?
3. Does the State recognise/recompense qualifications above the State required benchmark?

4. In what ways can SNAs progress professionally?

1.3   Rationale and background

The research premise is that all children – particularly children with SEN – benefit from suitably trained and qualified SNA personnel (see Appendix 10). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Ireland (2016), the quality of staff in a school is arguably the most critical variable that can influence a student's achievement and overall performance. With the SNA scheme currently under review since 2018 at a national level, the NCSE concedes that upskilling school staff will provide better support and outcomes for SEN children (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2018). This upskilling is of particular importance based on the Irish Constitution, which gives all children and youth the right to appropriate education (Constitution of Ireland (last amended June 2004)). Additionally, the Education Act of 1998 directs authorities to ensure that all residents in the State are guaranteed 'a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person' (Irish Statute book, 1998, p. 10). By this Act, the Irish Government must ensure that pupils receive a certain standard of education (Children's Rights Alliance, 2020). Accordingly, children with SEN and complex disabilities retain the right, by the Constitution of Ireland, to access appropriate education provided by trained and qualified personnel.

The Irish State did not always give children with special educational needs (SEN) the same educational rights as their peers. Traditionally children were categorised as '*handicapped*', or '*normal*' if they had no obvious special needs and were educated based on these assigned categories (McCoy, Banks and Shelvin, 2017). With political

pressure from disability and parental advocacy groups, the view of children with SEN evolved to facilitate more inclusion; and would ultimately bring legislative changes to reform Special Education (NCSE, 2018; NCSE, 2010).

Policy and legislation changes at international and national levels support inclusion in education (Children's Rights Alliance, 2017). Part of this support includes suitably trained staff. This is an area of personal and professional interest, having been an SNA in mainstream and SEN schools and a Care Worker in Residential Care settings. However, the disparate levels of quality, the discrepancy between job descriptor and work carried out, often directly related to the individual's level of qualification and training, suggests a need for reform. Arguably, SNA is an outdated title for a role that has evolved beyond its original remit.

1.4   Structure time frame and chapter outline

This study has six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the role and function of SNAs in Irish primary schools and discusses the aim, its research questions, overall significance and structure of the study. Chapter 2 presents an extensive review of relevant literature and examines its underpinning theory: the Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Furthermore, this chapter explores the history of SEN provision in Ireland including legislation and policies that underpin special education provision for children with SEN in Ireland. Finally, a critique of the SNA scheme in Ireland is presented.

Chapter 3 explains the research methodology adopted for this study. This chapter explores the theoretical and paradigmatic framework alongside the associated assumptions used. In addition, it explains the ethical considerations, data collection and analytical methods deployed during the research. Chapter 4 analyses the study's primary findings under four themes: the respondent's profile; qualification and training; role and function; and career progression. The findings of this study are discussed in Chapter 5, drawing on a conclusion from the research to offer recommendations in Chapter 6. The list of recommendations refers to the role and qualifications of SNAs and for possible future research.

1.4(i) Time frame

Research Tasks	Date
Development of research topic	April 2018
Complete draft proposal	June 2018
Proposal summited	June 2018
Proposal accepted	September 2018
Complete literature review	September 2018–October 2020
Complete Methodology	January 2019–October 2020
Identify and clarify data materials	June 2019
Collect data	November 2019–April 2020
Analysing and interpretation of data	September 2020
Discussion	October 2020
Conclusion/recommendations	November 2020
Review and edit	November 2020
Finalise-Print-Bind Presentation	November 2020

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme plays a key role in supporting the inclusive practice of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) into mainstream education, special classes and special schools (Butler and Quinn, 2014). The right of the child to inclusive education – which has become the standard practice in most developed countries – is emphasized by international reports such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Dakar Statement (UNESCO, 2000). Equally, the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2007) by various countries is important because it requires participating countries to regularly submit report on process and implementation of inclusion (Shevlin *et al.*, 2009).

Consistent with international trends, Ireland has progressively moved towards inclusive education for children with SEN (Ireland, 2004). SNAs are allocated to primary, post-primary and special schools to facilitate the inclusion of pupils and address care needs of pupils with SEN (NCSE, 2011). They are important human resources to ensure that the diverse needs of students with SEN are adequately addressed. While there are perceived benefits to the SNA scheme, research indicates various challenges that have been identified in the scheme. These relate to a lack of training to meet certain needs and uncertainty over what an SNA's precise roles are (NCSE, 2018; NCSE, 2017; Butler and Quinn, 2014; Rose and O'Neill, 2009). Statistics from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that most of the additional support given to children with SEN in the learning environment is provided by learning support staff/classroom assistants (OECD, 2015).

The role of SNAs is strictly a non-teaching role according to DES (2020). However, this role and its duties varies widely and has evolved to include assisting with 'communication and curricular programmes' (Carrig, 2004, p. 121). Therefore, the importance of SNAs in the Irish Education system cannot be understated.

A review of existing literature on this topic was guided by the research questions and its aims and objective. Moreover, the literature draws on existing Irish research (DES 2021; NCSE, 2018; FORSA, 2018; NCSE, 2017; INTO, 2017; Butler and Quinn, 2014; DES, 2014; NCSE; 2011; DES, 2010) in addition to landmark reports and treaties such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the Dakar Statement (UNESCO, 2000), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2007). This chapter begins with an examination of the Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) which forms the theoretical framework of this study. Next, it examines the historical account of special education in Ireland, followed by an exploration of the policies, legislations and regulations that underpin special education. Additionally, it examines the SNA scheme in Ireland including the role, job descriptor, function, qualification and training. Finally, it explores best/good practice of support staff internationally.

2.2 Background to the SNA scheme

The changing role of SNAs in the Irish education system is evident in a growing number of studies, notably the Comprehensive Review of the SNA Scheme (2018), the Review of SNA Scheme submission on behalf of the Irish National Teachers Organisation

(2017), the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection Report on the Role of the SNA (2016) and the value for money review of expenditure on the SNA scheme (2011). The role of SNAs, as designated by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), has consistently been to provide the care needed by children with SEN (DES, 2020). Nonetheless, in the last decade, the role of the SNA has steadily evolved with research indicating a lack of clarity of the role/duties (NCSE, 2018).

Studies like Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant (2011); Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (2018); Professionalisation for Special Needs Assistants: Research from Fórsa Trade Union (2018) show that the role of the SNA has expanded to a broader extent from what is outlined in DES circulars. The Value for Money Review of the 'Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme', published in 2011 by the DES, concedes that the meaning of the term 'care needs has been stretched beyond what was intended by the scheme and this has meant that both parents and schools now expect that the role of the SNA is to carry out a much broader range of duties than originally envisaged' (NCSE, 2011, p. 94). Similarly, the findings from a Comprehensive Review of the SNA Scheme (2018) claim that SNAs are awarded a teaching remit by some schools which deviates from the method of operation described in DES circulars.

Whilst the role of the SNA has evolved with SNAs taking up greater responsibilities than expected, the low qualification benchmark for SNAs remains. SNAs across the country are much more highly qualified than the minimum qualification requirement

for the role, that is, a QQI Level 3 major qualification on the national framework of qualifications or a minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Cert or Equivalent (NCSE, 2018; FORSA, 2018; NCSE, 2017; INTO, 2017).

In light of the growing international use of teaching assistants (TAs) and the evolving research surrounding their use in inclusive classrooms, there is a need to re-examine the roles, efficacy, training and experiences of TAs based on more recent research and from an international perspective (Egilson and Traustadottir, 2009). As the presence of TAs has grown in popularity, there has been an emerging research base addressing their professional roles, efficacy, training and experiences.

2.3   Theoretical framework

The shifting role of SNAs in Irish primary schools impacts the level of care and education children with SEN receive in the learning environment. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) which views child development underpins the study, particularly the interactions between the child and different aspects of the environment such as SNAs. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) argues that at the centre of the immediate setting is the developing person. This setting can either be the classroom, home or the wider community. Events that occur in each of these settings are considered to be central to the development of each child. For instance, a child's ability to learn in school may be dependent on the way he or she is taught.

Hence, throughout his theory, Bronfenbrenner (1994) emphasized the critical role the different environmental systems play on human development (Ettekal and Mahoney,

2017; FORSA, 2018). Based on these, the importance to clarify the role of SNAs in the education system cannot be overemphasized. In 2018, the National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) 18-month review determined that SNAs are perceived as a *catchall* to tackle a multitude of needs, therefore, a major change was necessary. Consequently, this independent review of the role of SNAs in the primary education system is incredibly timely considering the ongoing overhaul of the SNA job title and descriptor at State level. Furthermore, the Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) identified five interconnected environmental systems which are the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, *macrosystem* and *chronosystem*. The microsystem is the most proximal level of the Bronfenbrenner Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). In this study, the *microsystem* comprises of the child, parents, and educators at special schools. According to Rupper (2016), a pupil's ability to access appropriate education can be directly influenced by the microsystem factors in school. Individuals in the microsystem of the school who can affect the child's access to appropriate education include SNAs, Special Education Teachers (SET), multidisciplinary team and peers. SNAs can have a direct impact on the education needs of pupils with SEN especially when they are involved in the decision-making process (Rose, 2020).

Factors such as the SNA's qualification, the uncertainty of the role and high turnover rates are the criticisms often associated with the SNA scheme in Ireland (NCSE, 2018). The *mesosystem* – which is the second level of interconnected environmental system identified by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) – involves processes that occur between the multiple microsystems of the child. Within the context of this study, the mesosystem consists of the parents and

schools. Research on families highlights the importance of coordination across settings. Parental interactions with SNAs in the child's school, for example, could impact the level of education and care the child receives (Ashiabi and O'Neal, 2015).

Conversely, the *exosystem*, which is the next outermost level of the system, is made up of features that may impact the development of the child by interacting with a few structures in the microsystem. The exosystem consists of social structures, events and processes that the child may not be involved in, but which may indirectly affect the child in their microsystem. Which means that events happening within the school environment, i.e. the interpretation of the SNA's role by principals and teachers, can directly affect the child's learning opportunities (Ibid). The *macrosystem*, is the set of overarching beliefs, values, and norms, reflected in the cultural, religious and socio-economic organisation of the society. According to Ettekal and Mahoney (2017, p. 5), the macrosystem 'influences development within and among all other systems and serves as a filter or lens through which an individual interprets future experiences'. In the context of this study, the macrosystem involves policies and legislations that encompass the SNA scheme, the policymakers, i.e. Department of Education and cultural beliefs and ideology. The last layer, which is the *chronosystem,* is concerned with historic changes and how these changes can impact the child's developmental outcome. The evolution of the special education system was reviewed as part of the study and will be discussed in the next section.

2.4 Historical context of special education in Ireland

Prior to the early 1990s, mainstream and special education operated as separate parallel systems of provision within Ireland. The education and care of children with SEN was

– to a large extent – provided by religious institutions. This meant only few policies and legislations on special education were enacted in Ireland. This led to children with SEN being excluded and marginalised from education as a result of their identified needs or disability (McCoy, Banks and Shelvin, 2017). They were then categorised within the educational system as either '*handicapped*' or '*normal*', with separate educational provision made for each category. This categorisation of children based on their challenges, and subsequent segregated education was considered to be essential since '*handicapped*' children were perceived to be incapable of understanding ordinary methods of teaching (Walsh, 2017). In addition, the categorisation of students met the special education needs of the minority of children while safeguarding the efficient education of the majority (NCSE, 2010). During this time, education for children with SEN was supported by the medical model which views the barriers to learning as being within the child. This model is often viewed as detrimental because it focuses heavily on the disability rather than understanding the underlying factors of disability (Rees, 2017). As the medical model facilitates exclusion and segregation, a majority of the children were sent to live in hospitals, asylums or religious institutions (Walsh, 2017).

The emergence of the worldwide civil rights movement in the 1960s brought the issues of inequality in special education to the forefront. As advocacy groups and parents of people with disability began to speak up against the discrimination and stereotyping brought on by segregated education method, the need for equal access to education gained more traction and attention (NCSE, 2010). This led to an increasing awareness among parents, teachers and professionals about the inadequate educational provision for children with SEN (Swan, 2013). Following the publication of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap in 1965, there was significant expansion

in the provision of education for children with SEN. The 1965 report recommended that special classes in mainstream schools be established for children with mild general learning disabilities. Consequently, educators sought ways to support children with SEN in mainstream education, thus leading to the enactment of new policies and legislation for children with SEN (Walsh, 2016).

By the mid-1980s there was a worldwide consensus regarding the integration of children with special needs into mainstream school (Ibid). McCoy *et al*., (2016) argue that this period is regarded as the 'Era of Inclusion' and is modelled against the social model of disability. All forms of disability were therefore viewed as a societal problem rather than an individual problem. This reflects an understanding that people with SEN could benefit from changes to attitude and beliefs in the society. In 1995, the white paper on education reinforced the right of children with SEN to participate in the education system, regardless of their personal circumstance. This was an important development considering Ireland's ineptitude in protecting the rights of children as evidenced in the high number of abuse cases reported (Ward, 2017).

2.4 (i) Children's rights in Ireland++

One of such reports is the 2009 Ryan Report to Inquire into Child Abuse. According to the report, Irish children who were placed by the State in residential institutions in the 1930s often experienced severe abuse from the operators of the institution (Ibid). The reported abuse ranged from that of a physical nature to a more sexual abuse. Similarly, the Roscommon Child Care Inquiry (2010) highlighted the failure of the State to uphold the rights of the children involved in such abuses. Children with special needs, who were considered to be one of the most vulnerable within the society, were not treated

any better. The Ferns Report (2005), the McCoy Report (2007), the Murphy Report (2009) and the Ryan Report (2009) have all detailed the extensive abuse of vulnerable children in Catholic-operated institutions in the early 1900s. During this period, the most prevalent occurrence of abuse was the abuse of children with intellectual disability in institutions originally designed to care for and protect them (Byrne, 2016).

It can be argued that the descriptive language used, the understanding of, and the perception of children with SEN has evolved significantly in the last two decades. These could be as a result of Ireland migrating from a medical model to a social and more inclusive model (NCSE, 2017), leading to social and behavioural changes towards people with SEN. Arguably, a major influence in such change was Ireland's membership of the European Union (originally the European Economic Community or EEC), thus being compelled to uphold the rights of children within the national and international society (Children's Rights Alliance, 2020). All of these positive changes contributed to the Irish Government's decision to sign the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, ratified in 1992.

Following the ratification of the Convention agreement, Ireland would commit to respecting, protecting and fulfilling the rights of children. However, international treaties such as the UNCRC do not automatically become law until they have been incorporated by the Oireachtas. Certain principles of the Convention have been partially incorporated into Irish law in several areas affecting children with SEN (Ombudsman, 2017). In Ireland, the Children's Rights Alliance uses the United Nations Convention

as a foundation to create policies, services, as well as change laws so that all children in the Republic of Ireland will be empowered, protected and nurtured.

Some of the most notable legislative developments Ireland has made since ratifying the UNCRC include the Education Act 1998; the Children Act 2001 and its subsequent amendments; the Education for Persons with Special Needs Act 2004; the Adoption Act 2010; the Child and Family Agency Act 2013; the Children First Act 2015; and the signing into law of the Thirty-First Amendment of the Constitution Act 2012 in early 2015 (Duggan, 2016). In addition, more policies on children's rights have been enacted in Ireland such as the publication of the National Children's Strategy in 2000; the establishment of the National Children's Advisory Council in 2001; the appointment of Ireland's first Ombudsman for Children in 2004; the development and strengthening of child participation and consultation mechanisms, including Dáil na nÓg (youth parliament) and Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils); the legislative reforms of the youth justice system in 2011, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures in 2014, the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making in 2015 and the ratification by Government of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in March 2018 (Children's Rights Alliance, 2020).

Even though Ireland can be seen to make progress in identifying and providing for the needs of children, children's rights in Ireland continue to be an uphill struggle. Not only because issues that affect children seem to be addressed through a welfare-based approach rather than a rights-based approach per the UN Convention, but commitment

made by the Irish Government to uphold policies are hardly ever met (Children's Rights Alliance Report Card, 2015). Remarkably, such negligence is most commonly found in services and policies regarding Child Protection (Ibid). It can be argued that the reason for negligence in this regard stems from the partial implementation of the UN Convention, which means that its inherent principles and provisions have not yet been incorporated into the Irish Domestic Law (Children's Rights Alliance, 2015). In January 2016, the UNCRC examined Ireland's children's rights record for the first time in almost 10 years. While the UNCRC acknowledged that Ireland had implemented a number of recommendations issued in 2006, the UN Committee expressed concern over 'Ireland's lack of a comprehensive strategy for the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education and the encouragement of their autonomy' (Children's Rights Alliance, 2020, p. 7). Consequently, the Committee recommended that Ireland 'adopts a human rights-based approach to disability, train and employ sufficient number of specialized teachers and professionals in order to provide special needs education support' and establish 'a clear and objective framework to ensure that children with disabilities are provided with reasonable accommodation for their education needs' (Children's Rights Alliance Report Card, 2020, p. 27). Logan (2008, p. 107) pointed to the role of SNAs regarding children's right to be heard saying 'it is hoped to critically analyse how SNAs might have a role in facilitating children with SEN in exercising this right'.

2.5   Special education legislations and policies

Provision of educational needs of children with SEN needs has evolved from educating children in distinct categories, to a more inclusive model due to changes in policies and legislations. Evolution in policy of this nature is credited to a combination of factors at

national and international levels (Children's Rights Alliance, 2017). On the international level, the rights-based principles enshrined in the United Nations, the European Community, UNESCO and the OECD has led to the re-evaluation of the educational needs of children with SEN (Shevlin, 2016). On the national level, the last decade has witnessed a crescendo in educational initiatives which have contributed to changing the way that special education is delivered. These initiatives range from changes in structure and administration, school management and school curriculum. The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), an independent non-profit organisation working to endorse full access and inclusivity, notes that there are four key legislations that address the educational rights of individuals with disability (AHEAD, 2019). These include the Education Act 1998, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN), the Equal Status Act 2002–2004 and the Disability Act 2005. Beyond these four key pieces of legislation, policies devised to create significant impact have also been implemented. The following timeline presents policies and legislations that underpin special education practices in Ireland.

Figure 1 Rights of the child 1992–2018
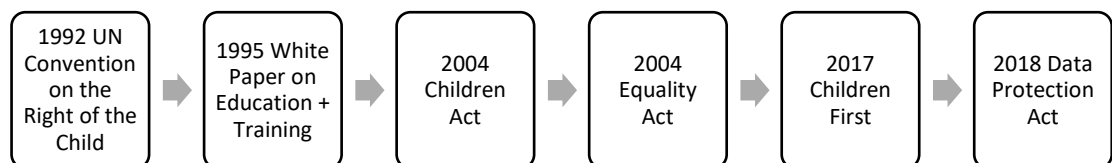
Figure 2 Special Education 1993–2019

1993: Report of the Special Education Review Committee	2014: NCSE Policy Advice Paper:	2018: Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme
1998: Assessment of Special Educational Needs	2011: The Future Role of Special Schools in Ireland	2019: Progress Report – Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes
1999: School Transport for Children with Special Needs	2001: Task Force on Autism/Dyslexia	

Figure 3 Education Reform 1994–2005

1994 - The Statement placed educational reform firmly within a broader social agenda that included health, social welfare and vocational training and employment.

2005 - DEIS Action plan The Action Plan focuses on addressing the educational needs of children from disadvantaged communities (3–18 years).
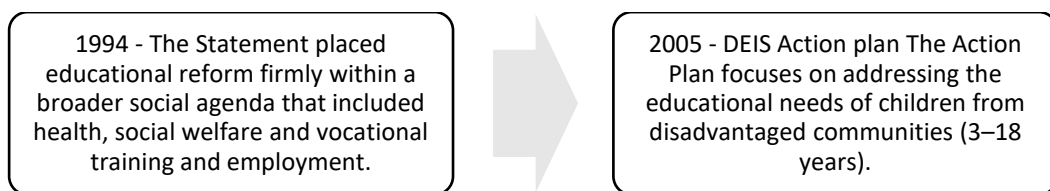
2.5 (i) Education Act 1998

The Education Act was signed into law in 1998 which ensured provision for persons with disabilities or other special educational needs. It provides a legal framework for the education process of children in first and second level schools, and individuals continuing education and vocational training in Ireland. The Education Act of 1998 also gives practical power to the constitutional rights of children, including children who have a disability or who have other SEN (NCSE, 2015). Under the Act, schools are required by law to ensure that the education needs of children with SEN are identified and catered for (the Act):

> *provides a framework for the development of a supportive and dynamic working environment for teachers and school managers and promotes the development of partnership in education at school level and at national level, providing for consultation with teachers, parents, school patrons, and Boards of Management on a wide range of issues* (ASTI, 2015, p. N/A).

Through the Education Act 1998, parents of students with special needs can access the school records of their children. In addition, the Board of Management are required by

law to: (1) publish enrolment policies; (2) establish procedures for informing parents on matters concerning the operation and performance of the school; and (3) prepare the school's objectives (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2015). Following the Education Act 1998, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 was enacted as a reformation of the previous 1998 Act. It is characterised by a legal framework through which issues about the educational welfare of children with SEN can be addressed. The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 makes further provision for children who were educated outside of the mainstream school system and ensures that the structure of education provided to these children is aligned with their constitutional rights (House of Oireachtas, 2020). Known simply by its acronym, EPSEN 2004, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act was enacted in July 2004. It 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* (NCSE, 2014, p. 10).

2.5 (ii) Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN)

The EPSEN Act 2004 covers people with special educational needs aged between 0 and 18 and outlines how education should be provided for persons with special educational needs. It can be referred to as a ground-breaking piece of legislation since it is crafted to implement a system that allows people with SEN retain the same rights and benefits as their peers who do not have SEN. One of the most fundamental impacts from the implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004 is the recognition of the benefits and rewards inclusive education has for people with SEN. Similarly, other impacts resulting from the EPSEN Act 2004 are the establishment of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the assignment of functions to the Minister for Health and Children

and Health Board and the establishment of an Appeals Board (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, 2015). Since 2004, when the EPSEN Act was enacted, government administrations have invested in developing more sophisticated support infrastructures within mainstream schools including but not limited to additional specialist teachers, SNAs, establishment of special classes and inputs from external agencies such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (Ibid).

An important characteristic of the EPSEN Act 2004 is that it was not created in isolation from other notable developments, neither does it operate independently. Rather, the Act fits into the legislative framework of other relevant legislations such as the Education Act 1998, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, the Equal Status Act 2000–2004, the Disability Act 2005, the Irish Constitution and international agreements and Human Rights provisions including the UNCRC and Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, 2015). While researchers, experts and some SEN advocates have applauded the EPSEN Act 2004 as a step forward in the right direction, it is not entirely flawless and rid of significant issues.

In January 2018, during a Dáil Éireann Debate, Richard Bruton – the Minister for Education and Skills – admitted that, in the 14 years since the enactment of EPSEN Act, crucial aspects of the legislation were not implemented (House of Oireachtas, 2018). These included an educational assessment for all children with SEN, the development of a statutory individual education plan (IEP), the delivery of detailed

education services and an independent appeal process for students with SEN (O'Halloran, 2016).

2.5 (iii) Equal Status Act 2002–2015

The Equal Status Act prohibits the discrimination of persons and promotes equality in education, employment, vocational training, advertising, collective agreements and the provision of goods and services for individuals with disability in Ireland (AHEAD, 2019). It governs the enrolment processes of schools and sets out the ways individuals with disability can access available educational programmes. Under the Equal Status Act 2002–2004, schools have a legal obligation to meet the needs of people with disability (Shevlin and Griffin, 2017). It protects anyone who attends or manages a pre-school, school, college or other educational establishments. The Disability Act was enacted in 2005 and adopted into law by the Department of Justice in Ireland. Under this Act, disability is defined as 'a substantial restriction in the capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment' (National Disability Authority, 2020, p. N/A).

2.5 (iv) Disability Act 2005

The Disability Act 2005 places statutory obligation on public service providers to assess the educational and health needs of people with disabilities. It gives individuals with disability access to: independent complaints and appeals procedures; public buildings and public service employment; and individual service statements which are crafted to communicate what services people with disability should expect (AHEAD, 2019).

2.5 (v) Equality and Inclusion policies/regulations

In Ireland, people with disabilities are considered to be equal citizens irrespective of their disability. In September 2004, the National Disability Strategy (NDS) was launched by the Irish government to promote the participation of people with disability in Ireland. The strategy was devised to correspond with other relevant legislations and policies, and to encourage inclusion and equality of people with all forms of disability (National Disability Authority, 2014). The NDS was in effect from 2013 to 2015. In 2017, it was replaced by a novel National Disability Inclusion Strategy (NDIS) that would cover 2017 to 2021. The NDIS consists of eight themes which are equality, choice, joined-up services, education, employment, health, well-being, person-centred disability services and transportation (Department of Justice and Equality, 2019).

It underpins all inclusion/equality policies in the educational provision of all children with SEN. In a 2019 review of the NDIS 2017–2021, significant progress was noticed across the themes. Namely, the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) by the Irish Government in March of the previous year. The UNCRPD states the key rights for people with disabilities which allows them to be treated equally, to be consulted actively on policies and to have autonomy in life's choices and decisions.

Another notable milestone under the education theme is the inclusion of a copy of student's Personal Pupil Plan detailing the students identified needs in all new SNA applications (Department of Justice and Equality, 2020). SNAs play a huge part in the

inclusion of children with SEN in the education system. Their pivotal role, in addition to their input, can demonstrably improve educational experiences for children with SEN.

2.6   Special Needs Assistants in Ireland

At the core of the discussion on the concept of the SNA scheme is the question: Who are SNAs and what role do they play in an education system? SNAs play an important role in schools in Ireland. They are employed in primary or post primary settings to support children that are either in special or mainstream settings. They are allocated to schools to assist teachers with the care needs of children and they work under the direction of the principal and teachers. SNAs may provide one-to-one support (depending on the needs of the child) or support to a whole class. Also, SNAs may be employed on a part-time or shared basis (DES, 2018).

2.6 (i) Historical context of the SNA scheme in Ireland

The SNA scheme is not an entirely new concept in the Irish education system. The origin of this scheme can be traced back to the 1970s in which SNAs were referred to as 'Childcare Assistants'. The scheme was designed to aid students in special schools and specifically, to provide physical care to children. Class assistants were initially approved by the Department of Finance during the school year 1979/1980 where 70 childcare assistants were allocated to recently established special needs schools (DES, 2011). Nonetheless, an embargo was placed on public sector recruitment in the 1980s, hence the number of appointed assistants remained unchanged for a decade. It was not until the 1990s that the number of sanctioned assistants began to rise (Ibid).

By 1998, across Ireland 293 SNAs were employed in special settings only (Irish Government Economic and Education Service, 2016). Following the ratification of the UNCRC by Ireland in 1990, and the shift in international ideology regarding the segregation of children with SEN to a more inclusive model, there was the need for more staff to support children in mainstream schools. These are children that were previously educated in special schools or had no educational provision at all (Banville, 2019). In September 1991, the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) met for the first time to deliberate on the whole area of special education. At the time, it was typical for children with SEN placed in mainstream classes to have no assistant to support them. This was not only difficult for teachers in terms of classroom management but not ideal for children with SEN and their peers (NCSE, 2015). At the end of the consultation, a range of recommendations were made by SERC. The committee proposed the need for special education initiatives at national, regional, and local level. One of the most important proposals that was made at the school level was the recommendation of support for children with SEN. Mainly, the appointment of SNAs to mainstream and special classes (a term created by SERC to replace Childcare Assistants) to assist with the care needs of children with SEN (Irish Government Economic and Education Service, 2016). It is, however, important to note that most of the recommendations by the SERC were not implemented in the following years because the late 1990s was a time of significant financial constraints. Nonetheless, in November 1998, Micheál Martin – the Minister of Education and Science – announced an initiative which ensured automatic entitlement to support for children with SEN. This resulted into a dramatic increase in SNAs in Irish schools. Since then, the number of SNAs has continued to grow and, as of 2020, it was projected that there will be a

record of 15,950 special needs assistants allocated to support about 37,500 pupils across Irish schools (DES, 2020).

2.6 (ii) Timeline of SNAs employed in Irish primary schools

The number of SNAs employed in schools across Ireland has significantly increased since the 1990s with numbers doubling between years. Not only does the increase indicate the importance of the scheme, but it also indicates how successful it has been especially as more children are being diagnosed with some form of SEN. To gain an insight into how significant the number has grown, just 70 SNAs were employed to support children in special settings across Ireland in 1990 (DES, 2011). From the 1980s to the 1990s, the Irish government placed an embargo on public sector recruitment. By 2001, when these restrictions were lifted, there were 2988 SNAs employed to special and mainstream settings across Ireland, indicating a 100% increase. Conversely, this number doubled in 2002 to 4,979 and has steadily increased since then (Ibid). In 2005, there was a change in the way SNAs were allocated to schools. This meant that instead of students being issued specific SNA contracts, SNAs could be allocated according to the number and needs of students. This led to an increase of 24% from the previous year (DES, 2005). The numbers of SNAs employed continued to rise from 2006–2010, representing a 56% rise between the years. However, in 2011, a cap was imposed on hiring SNAs, this was part of financial measures by the state to combat the recession. Despite the cap on SNA numbers set at 10,575, the number still rose to 11,924. From 2011/2012, the number of students accessing SNA support increased by 34% from 22,284 to 29,953 between 2011/2012 and 2015/2016 (Ibid).

The largest proportionate increase within each of the cohorts was in special schools where the number of students increased by 67% from 3,286 to 5,472. The number of students in mainstream increased from 12,150 to 16,874 indicating a 39% increase and the number of students in special schools increased by 11% from 6,848 to 7,607 (Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, 2016). As of 2020, it is expected that 15,950 SNAs will be assigned to support about 37,500 pupils in special and mainstream settings (DES, 2020). The significant growth in the number of SNAs employed signifies the important role they play in the education provision of children with SEN.

2.6 (iii) Importance of the SNA scheme

With over 17,000 SNAs allocated in 2021 and a further increase in the allocations due for 2021/2022, the SNA scheme is viewed by policymakers as valuable as evident in the continued investment in its expansion (DES, 2020). The success of the SNA scheme can be attributed to the dedication of the SNAs who work with students with additional needs, improving student experiences and enabling inclusion (FORSA, 2016). The NCSE (2016) report on the review of the Special Needs Assistant scheme found that, in 2016, there were more children with intellectual disability enrolled in mainstream classes. This, in part, can be attributed to more resources, i.e. increased appointment of SNAs to support pupils with SEN which in turn enabled more children with disabilities to access mainstream education (NCSE, 2011). Evidently, SNAs are essential for the successful integration and inclusion of children with additional needs in mainstream education.

2.6 (iv) The role of the SNA

The role of the SNA is a reoccurring theme throughout this study. In the last decade, the number of children diagnosed with some form of SEN has significantly increased. Consequently, the number of SNAs appointed to support children within the educational system has grown (DES, 2020). The role of an SNA as described in various circulars is that of a non-teaching nature. Circular 07/02 (p. 2) describes the duty of an SNA as being of 'a non-teaching nature' only. Conversely, the duty of an SNA as stated in Circular 0030/2014 is to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate their attendance at school and to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills. Additionally, the SNA scheme has been a key factor in ensuring the successful inclusion of children with SEN into mainstream education, and with providing care support to pupils who are enrolled in special schools and special classes (NCSE, 2018). This means that SNAs are primarily employed to meet the care needs of children in an educational context and, therefore, do not have a teaching/pedagogical role. Hence, it would not be appropriate for pupils with special needs to be taught by unqualified personnel.

Circular 0030/2014 explicitly states that, though the SNA can provide useful assistance to the teacher in ensuring that the pupil is able to access education, the role of the SNA is not to provide additional tuition, as this is the role of qualified learning support/resource teachers who may assist the teacher to provide additional teaching to pupils with SEN. Nonetheless, over the years, the role of the SNA seems to have evolved and SNAs are now taking on some sort of teaching role. There have been

debates on the changing role of SNAs and studies have shown that the SNAs duties have evolved way beyond the prescribed circular role ((Logan *et al.*, 2018). According to Keating and Connor (2012), the deviating role of SNAs can be attributed to poor understanding of the role of SNAs amongst schools, parents, other professionals and SNAs themselves.

A 2014 study by Gail Ferguson of the Technological University Dublin, called *Including Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Education: An Exploration of the Challenges and Considerations for Parents and Primary School Teachers*, found that parents and teachers expressed significant gratitude for the job carried out by SNAs.

> *There's never been anything but being enabled to be independent and to move on, and ... being pushed when a push was needed ... and I put that down to the quality of SNA support he's had, and the person behind them, that they didn't just see it as a job (Parent 2) The particular SNA I had in my room. She is excellent ... She nearly has things done before I'd even ask her to do something or think of doing something (Teacher 4) They just do so much and they are so good with them and so good with the kids, and they know them inside out (Teacher 2).*

Nonetheless, the same study also found that work carried out by SNAs, in reality, goes far beyond the terms of the job description, where officially they are employed to look after a child's physical care needs, such as feeding, or toileting needs. 'Like we try our best where we can, but only for the backup, again the SNA doing the work, the role of the teacher, which isn't necessarily what she should be doing, but in reality, it's the only way' (Teacher 1).

In May 2018, under the directive of the then Minister of Education, Richard Bruton, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) carried out a Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme. The main reason of this review was to

identify what was working within the SNA scheme and to make recommendations and adjustments where possible. The NCSE found that while the SNA scheme is greatly valued by parents, teachers and the school, there was frustrations among the stakeholders regarding the scheme's narrow focus which they suggested should be expanded. For example, to enable SNAs to meet student learning, emotional and social needs; and/or to include students without a diagnosis of disability but who have additional needs; and to deliver speech and language and/or occupational and/or physiotherapy programmes.

Even so, the NCSE decided that there was insufficient evidence at the time to recommend the introduction of teaching, or education assistants to support students with special educational needs (NCSE, 2018; Butler and Quinn, 2014). The Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme also determined that SNAs were undertaking medically complex and invasive procedures and supporting students with extremely challenging behaviours without adequate training and supervision being provided (NCSE, 2018). At the end of the review, many recommendations were made. One of the proposals made by the NCSE is the renaming of SNAs to 'Inclusion Support Assistants' (ISA) (Ibid).

The NCSE (2018) further suggest that SNAs should be allocated to schools according to size and other factors rather than only those diagnosed with a disability being able to get access to support (Murry, 2018). Overall, the NCSE concluded that a better model of support is required as SNAs are seen as the 'answer to everything' and work within a scheme that is 'a blunt instrument' to address a wide range and variety of needs

(NCSE, 2018). With the evolving role, new behaviours being identified and emerging changes in best practice for handling children with SEN, the need for consistent continuing professional development (CPD) and change in the qualification level is evident (FORSA, 2018).

2.6 (v) The qualification of the SNA

The qualification required to be an SNA as set out by the DES are a QQI Level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications or a minimum of three D grades in the Junior Certificate or equivalent (DES, 2020). SNA Courses are available in various colleges, institutions and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). However, there is only one DES recognised training programme at Certificate Level 7 provided by St Angela's College, Sligo. SNAs are not obliged by the DES to gain additional certification. It is up to the SNAs employed to gain a new level of certified qualifications. However, they are obliged by the DES to get continuing professional development.

A 2018 report on Training and Supports for Providers of Special Needs Education in DES Schools found that although many SNAs have a higher qualification or are undertaking a qualification above the required level, there is no requirement by the DES for SNAs to do so (House of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills, 2018). It is worth noting that, in 2019, FORSA submitted a claim to the Education Department, seeking revised educational requirements for all new SNA posts. According to FORSA, entry requirements for SNAs have not been revised since 1979, when the assistant childcare scheme was introduced. Hence, the education requirements to become a SNA should be revised to reflect the fact that the skills and experience

required in the role have increased in recent years (FORSA, 2019). Nonetheless, schools offer training opportunities for SNAs in their employment and training offered will typically be in line with the ethos of individual schools.

Unfortunately, not all training offered to SNAs is funded by the DES, hence the burden falls on schools thereby creating strains on the overall school budget (Logan *et al.*, 2018). As part of their membership, the SNA branch of the FORSA trade union provides training sessions for SNAs which is in line with their membership. Typically, training offered focuses on assisting SNAs in their role. Certified training includes working with children with autism, practicing mindfulness and handling challenging behaviours (FORSA, 2018).

A 2017 survey conducted by FORSA found that out of the 2,688 SNAs surveyed, 242 SNAs had an honours level degree, 30% of respondents had a leaving certificate level or an equivalent QQI course and just 3% had the minimum required qualification of a Junior Certificate. The same survey found that a further 27% of respondents had QQI Level 6 and 44 SNAs surveyed had a master's degree. More than 80% of SNAs surveyed indicated that they would like the option of completing further training in areas like health and safety and managing challenging behaviours.

Overall, throughout the survey, it was clear that the SNA workforce is qualified above and beyond the low benchmark required at policy level. In addition, the survey indicated a lack of ongoing professional development in the SNA field (Power, 2018). According to a 2018 report on Training and Supports for Providers of Special Needs

Education in DES Schools, the lack of ongoing professional development for SNAs can be attributed to funding. There is a wide range of training available for teachers from the SESS such as manual handling, first aid, child protection, risk assessment, fire safety, use of ICT for pupils with SEN, FEDS (Feeding, Eating and Drinking), intimate care, challenging behaviour/positive behaviour, education related training in the areas of autism and SEN. However, although all these training opportunities are available for teachers, it is not the same for other staffs such as SNAs and bus escorts. Staff in special schools and classes may need to refresh their training every two years. Unfortunately, this is very expensive for schools as this is an ongoing cost for schools that currently needs to be met through capitation funding or fundraising.

Another study conducted by the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection (2016) on 2,500 SNAs indicated that although the level of qualification held by SNAs vary, a large majority of the respondents were qualified well beyond the qualification benchmark set by the DES. Also, it was evident in the survey that while SNAs undertake further training throughout their careers, the training is usually at their own expense. Interestingly, the same study indicates that SNAs are seeking out additional training in order to better understand their role as SNAs and what is expected of them in terms of supporting and understanding students with SEN.

Constraints regarding SNA training are highlighted in a 2017 study by Kerins *et al.* The study found that SNAs and principals were asked to identify potential barriers or challenges to pursuing training. Over two-thirds of principals (68.4%) in the study indicated that there were challenges for schools regarding training of SNAs. Almost

two-thirds of SNAs (61.1%) and 5.3% of principals identified financial constraints as the main barrier to training. Lack of information on courses was highlighted by 38.8% of SNAs and over a quarter of principals (26.3%). Approximately one quarter of SNAs (25.5%) and principals (26.3%) identified lack of access to courses as a barrier. Also, 24.4% of SNAs and 36.8% of principals identified lack of time to pursue training. While 7.7% of SNAs and 5.3% of principals identified lack of competency in information communication technology (ICT) skills. This brings us to a comparative analysis of support staff in other developed counties including the way their role and responsibilities are defined in different countries.

2.6 (vi) International practice: the growth of Teaching Assistants (TAs) worldwide

In the last two decades, there has been a remarkable growth of support staff in many OECD countries (Webster and Blatchford, 2013). As educational policies have gradually moved towards the provision of inclusive education for children with SEN, many of these countries have adopted models which advocate the use of Teaching Assistants (TAs) also referred to as Para-professionals, Special Needs Assistants, Teachers' Aides, Classroom Assistants, Learning Support Assistants, Special Support Officers, Inclusion Support Aides or Para-educators (Rose, 2020; NCSE, 2018; Butt, 2016; Douglas *et al.*, 2016; Radford *et al.*, 2015; Butler and Quinn, 2014; Keating and O'Connor, 2012; Egilson and Traustadottir, 2009; Logan, 2006).

Although title, role and qualification requirements of TAs vary among different countries, a study caried out by OECD indicates that TAs in most of these countries 'have experienced an increase in their responsibilities and tasks, from helping teachers with routine and non-teaching tasks to engaging in pedagogical activities with students'

(OECD, 2015, p. 15). Interestingly, the same study shows that issues highlighted in the Irish context, i.e. ambiguity regarding roles and responsibilities remains widespread in many of these countries. Unfortunately, TAs have almost become the singular way, rather than a way, to support students with SEN (Giangreco, 2017). Another research conducted on 11 countries (United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Canada, Cyprus, Finland, Iceland, Italy and Norway) by Sharma and Salend (2016) indicates that the use of TAs in these countries does not always reflect best practice and is consistently characterised by unclear roles, inadequate training and limited communication between teachers and TAs. Moreover, some studies claimed that over-reliance of underqualified and unsupervised TAs in some OECD countries has led to some pupils being supported/instructed by less qualified personnel (Sharma and Salend, 2016; Giangreco, 2013; Lee, 2007). The lack of role clarity and inadequate training is similar to SNAs in Ireland. Nonetheless, numerous studies advocate the use of TAs as a necessary mechanism to support inclusivity in the classroom (Rose, 2020; NCSE 2016; Sharma and Salend, 2016; OECD, 2015; Butler and Quinn, 2014; Giangreco, 2013). Considering the growing international use of TAs in classrooms, as well as the evolving research surrounding their use to promote inclusivity, this section examines the role, efficacy and qualification of TAs in some OECD countries starting with our nearest and historically closest influence, England.

England: In England, TAs account for a quarter of the workforce in mainstream schools and are the 'the preferred means for facilitating the inclusion of pupils with SEN' (Blatchford *et al.*, 2012, p. 15). The contribution of TAs to teaching and learning in England has been noted by several studies (Sharma and Salend, 2016; Giangreco, 2013; Blatchford *et al.*, 2009; Lee, 2007). Evidence suggests that TAs who are suitably trained and use appropriately – as a supplement not a replacement can have a positive effect on pupils' overall academic progress (Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2016). Nonetheless, little evidence exists on how schools actually allocate and deploy TAs, what TAs are doing in and out of the learning environment and what informs the decisions on how TAs are deployed in schools (Ibid).

Regarding role and qualification, most TAs in England have no pedagogical role. However, they can gain higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) status which allows them to undertake greater responsibilities including covering classes and planning and teaching lessons (Navarro, 2015). Qualifications and experience requirements for TAs in England are set by the local authority and schools. This contrasts with Ireland where the requirements for SNAs are determined by the DES (Brussino, 2020). Like Ireland, the qualification requirement for a TA is a GCSE qualification in English and Maths – the equivalent of the Junior Certificate in Ireland. Remarkably, HLTAs in England can become qualified teachers through combining existing experience with an online development programme called 'Straight to Teaching' (Graduate Prospects, 2018; Navarro, 2015). This study advocates this measure for SNAs in the Irish system, especially SNAs who have higher qualifications (i.e. Level 8 qualifications).

Italy: In Italy, TAs collaborate with the curriculum; support teachers; participate in meetings; plan and monitor educational interventions; and meet with parents (NCSE, 2018). The main role of TAs in Italy is to develop individual educational plan for pupils in collaboration with the SEN teacher, a role mainly reserved for teachers in Ireland and England (Devecchia *et al.*, 2012). Unlike England and Ireland, TAs in Italy must hold either the qualifications required to become teachers or a master's degree. Also, they must undertake additional postgraduate training beyond their initial training in pedagogy, didactic psychology and child neuropsychiatry. In addition, a specialisation in teaching assistance is required (Brussino, 2020; Troeva, 2015).

Australia: In Australia, the role of TAs differs according to regions and settings. For instance, TAs in mainstream settings do not have a pedagogical role, however, they support children in areas such as phonics, handwriting, language and modifying specific activities (NSCE, 2018). In their analysis of the efficacy of TAs in Australia, Gibson, Paatsch and Toe (2016) found that TAs are held in high regard by teachers because they have detailed knowledge of the pupils they support. In terms of qualifications, people appointed as TAs in Australia do not need a specialist qualification and, like Ireland and England, receive their initial training only after securing their post (Rose, 2020). Similar to Ireland, Butt (2016) reports that many students with disabilities in Australia are supported by TAs with no specific qualifications.

United States: Like England, the United States 'have almost doubled the average ratio of support staff to achieve a ratio of 15.5 teacher aides and teaching/research assistants

per 1,000 students' (Navarro, 2015, p. 38). Similar to most countries, the growth in the use of paraprofessionals (the US equivalent of teaching assistants) in the United States is partly due to policies of inclusive education (Burton and Goodman, 2011; Ward, 2011; Bourke, 2009; Takala, 2007). The requirement for TAs varies across the United States, just like Australia and New Zealand. Most school districts require applicants to have completed at least two years of college coursework or have earned an associate degree (US Bureau of Labour Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2018). Unlike Ireland, TAs in the United States who have acquired higher qualifications can often gain higher salaries than their peers (Rose, 2020). Research also indicates that TAs in the United States have assumed teaching roles for some pupils with disabilities in addition to taking part in curricular planning and decision making (Giangreco, 2010; Blatchford *et al.*, 2009).

2.7 Conclusion

Studies (Rosenberg and Jackson, 1988; Odom *et al.*, 2005; Ashiabi and O'Neal, 2015) highlight the importance of a theoretical base in researching special education. Accordingly, this chapter began with an examination of the theory that underpins this study, the Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (2007). The Bioecological Systems Theory (2007) holds that development reflects bidirectional influences of several interconnected environmental layers over time. Hence, this chapter sought to understand factors that could influence the developing child in their microsystem. This was followed by an investigation of special education provision in Ireland. This led to an outline of events that occurred in the provision of special education including how children with SEN were viewed and treated. This chapter also explored legislations and policies that underpin special education provision for children with SEN. It identified

four key pieces of legislation that provide statutory support for education policy and provision for children with special educational needs. Namely, the Education Act 1998, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, the Disability Act 2005, and the Equal Status Act 2002–2004. Furthermore, this chapter continued with an examination of the SNAs scheme in Ireland.

Research indicates SNAs play a vital role in meeting the care needs of children with SEN, helping them access the curriculum and meet their learning goals (FORSA, 2018; NCSE, 2018; INTO, 2017; NCSE, 2017). Nonetheless, through the years the role of SNAs has evolved from that of a non-teaching nature in Ireland. SNAs are presently taking up teaching and medically complex roles. Yet, the minimum qualification of an SNA is no more than a Junior Certificate. The issue of training was also cited in this chapter in two ways – insufficient for the post or unrecognised – that is to say, not recompensed qualifications that exceed the requirements. An analysis of SNA training revealed that presently, training opportunities available for SNAs are insufficient even though many SNAs are willing to undertake further training. These aforementioned factors have far reaching implications for children with SEN. Looking at international best practice the results are mixed, from unclear roles and lack of training to requiring two years of college coursework or an associate degree (Sharma and Salend, 2016; Giangreco, 2013; Lee, 2007).

Overall, the lack of consistency is a significant issue. Perceptions of the role and function of SNAs and TAs differ widely and there are no agreed best practice to speak of currently. Therefore, as the need for specialised education is growing steadily, and

the fact that the rights of children with SEN are increasingly being recognised, it is in the interest of children that this demand be met with suitably qualified and experienced staff. The next chapter presents the methodologies used to gain insight into the role/duties, function and qualification level of SNAs in Ireland.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the chosen methodology. It begins with a description of the research design followed by an explanation of the paradigmatic approach and the theoretical framework that underpins this study. Furthermore, this chapter highlights the methodological tools, method of data analysis and the associated rationale for methods used. Included in this chapter is an outline of participants and pilot study. Ethical issues relevant in this study such as consent, deception, right to withdraw, confidentiality and protection from harm are examined and discussed. Lastly, this chapter provides the summary of the methods and approaches used in this research. Bearing in mind that the framework of methods and techniques – in other words, the research design – provides insights about how to conduct research and how to combine various components of research in a reasonably logical manner, this chapter summarises the procedures for conducting a study, including when, and under what conditions, the data will be obtained (Bhat, 2019; Hassan, 2014).

In the past two decades, the number of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) employed in Irish primary schools has increased exponentially. 1990 saw the inception of the SNA scheme with a grand total of 70 SNAs employed to support children with special needs, the scheme has expanded and evolved, therefore the complexity of the scheme merits consistent examination and clarity. The fundamental aim of this study is to collate the voices, attitudes, opinions and outlooks of SNAs and of Primary School Teachers on the matter of the position's role and function, as well as contribute to the discussion on the minimum qualification and training required for SNAs. Knowledge collected is from a wealth of literature in the special education field which include policy and legislation in special education, history of special education in Ireland, current best

practice guidelines including an overview of international practices. Moreover, the research draws from, and is informed by, stakeholders including the Teaching Council of Ireland, FORSA Trade Union and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE).

3.2 Research paradigm

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016) argue that the research design is like an onion with several layers that need to be understood before undertaking the research process. The identified aspects that make up a design include philosophies, approaches, strategies, choices, time spans, data collection and methods of analysis. The research design applied in this study is based on: (1) the nature of the study; (2) the research questions posed; and (3) the type of information to be collected as a response to the research questions. It was therefore considered essential to use a cross-sectional model due to its design simplicity, effectiveness in population-based surveys, and compatibility in finding out the prevalence of a phenomenon, problem, attitude, or issue (Setia, 2016). A Cross-sectional model of data collection collects data from people at a single point in time and is typically quantitative in nature. This study used a quantitative, or number based, research tool that sought individuals to take part in a one-off survey.

An online population-based survey was conducted with two group sets: Special Needs Assistants (SNA) and Primary School teachers from 250 schools across Ireland. Schools were selected through a simple random sampling method from the Department of Education's database. Responses were gathered from 595 participants whose input provided insight into understanding the qualification, role, and function of SNAs in

Irish primary schools. Based on the Bioecological Systems Theory (1994) which
suggest that child development is influenced indirectly and directly by interactions and
elements within the child's environment (Oppenheimer, Agosto and Soto, 2016),
factors that may affect children in their micro systems such as legislations, policies,
best practice and cultural factors were considered in framing the survey questions.
Figure 4 is a visual representation of the bioecological systems framework.

Figure 4 Bioecological Systems Framework (2007)
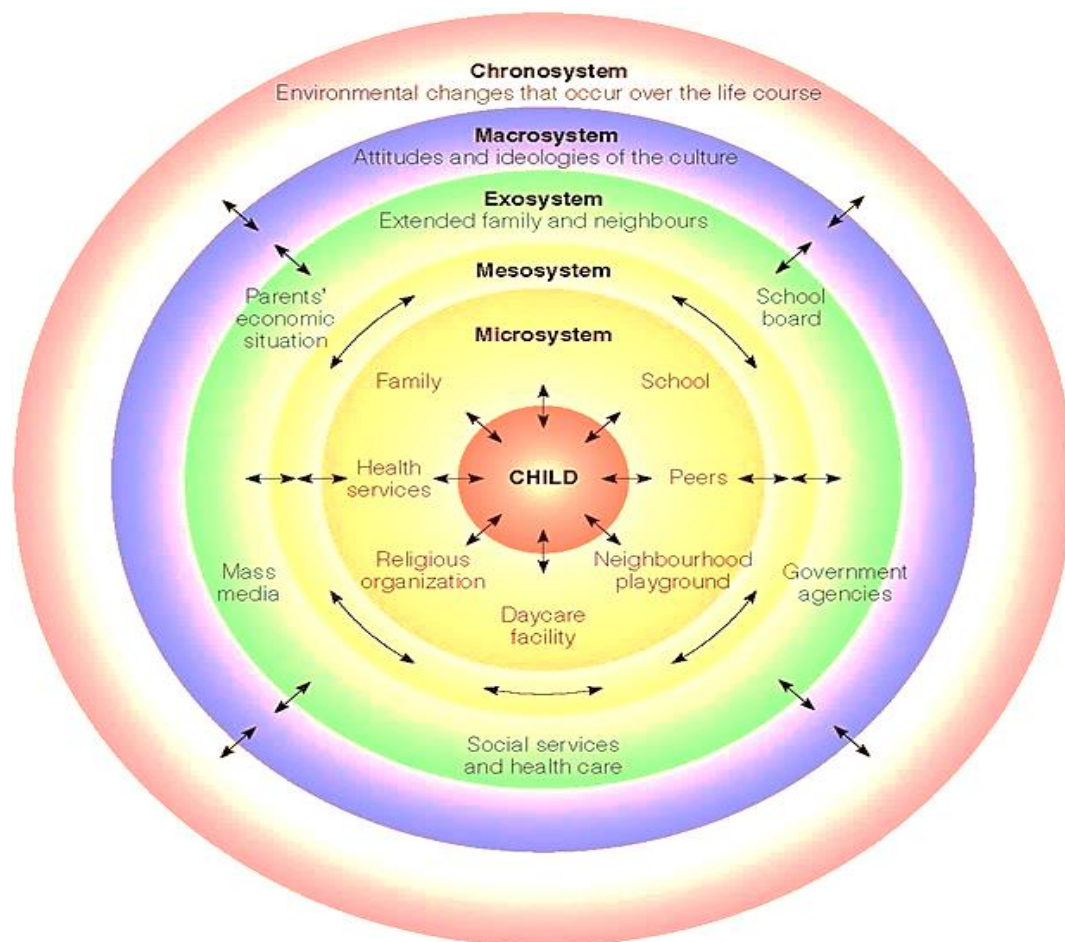
(Guy-Evans, 2020)

While this study is rooted firmly in the theory according to Bioecological Systems
Theory (2007) and its application, its originality is derived from the author's intrinsic

experiences, and tested against systematically collected and analysed data. The Bioecological Systems Theory (2007) asserts that children generally are enmeshed in different ecosystems, which could be from their immediate setting to the larger school setting and then the wider community. Each of these systems inescapably interact with and can affect all aspects of the child's life indirectly or directly (Murphy, 2020). Therefore, factors that could affect children in their immediate settings, such as government policies, cultural and social factors and so forth must be considered when exploring the qualification, role and duties of SNAs as these may affect the level of care and education which children with special education receive in schools. Beyond the theoretical framework, the data gathering process is based on a constructivist approach whereby the very process of gathering information impacts the gatherer and effects a change (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). The constructivist approach adheres to the belief that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. It is based on the 'analogy or basis that people form or construct much of what they learn through experience' (Adom, Hussein and Agyem, 2016, p. 2).

From an ontological perspective, the nature of reality can be seen either objectively or subjectively or, as Macintosh and Gorman (2015, p. 2) put it, 'as seen through the lens of the individual'. On the one hand, an objective perspective is where there is one truth which does not change, and which can be generalised to other situations. On the other hand, a subjective perspective looks at reality as made up of the perceptions and interactions of living subjects. Manus, Mulhall and Ragab (2017) posit that the reality of the world is made up of underlying physical and bioecological systems and inhabited by individuals whose opinions are based on their values. So, whilst acknowledging the

factual data objectively, in terms or policies, job requirements and so forth, the subjective approach is used when the research requires the views and perspectives of SNAs, including an exploration of their values and beliefs and of the Irish society and culture over the years in relation to children with diverse needs and abilities. A constructivist researcher, therefore, views themselves as part of the research, is value bound and is subjective in their way of thinking (Dudovskiy, 2019). To address the axiology – or the value and ethics of the researcher – one must consider the human value of everyone involved in the research.

In that regard, this consideration should be facilitated by the following questions: What values will you live by or be guided by as you conduct your research? What ought to be done to respect all participants' rights? What are the moral issues and characteristics that need to be considered? What cultural, intercultural and moral issues may arise and how will I address them? How shall I secure the goodwill of participants? How shall I conduct the research in a socially just, respectful and peaceful manner? How shall I avoid or minimise risk or harm, whether it be physical, psychological, legal, social, economic or other? These questions lead in nicely into the ethical considerations taken into account in this study.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were crucial to this study. Data was collected in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018). The following section discusses the strategies applied to protect privacy and reduce risk of harm to research participants. Assessment of any possible harm that research may cause participants (e.g.

psychological distress or repercussions of legal, political and economic nature). To minimise the risk, phrasing and vocabulary of questions presented to participants in this research are reviewed before its use. In addition, all participants are informed of the pros and cons of taking part in the research. All participants in this study are informed of its title and are presented with an information sheet with detailed information about the research before participating in the study. Participants will typically only be willing to volunteer information if it is anonymous and if the researcher agrees to hold such information in confidence. The anonymity of participants is protected by not using their real names in the research. Information gathered through participants is confidential and inaccessible to other participants and the public.

In carrying out this study, no misrepresentation is made to get information from participants. Participants are informed of all they need to know about the research before questionnaires were distributed. Also, proof of identity of the researcher was presented to all participants before participation. Research participants were informed about their right to withdraw at any stage in the research process, in other words their participation was voluntary. In no way, shape or form were participants coerced to continue with the research. According to Kanpur (2018, p 1), 'an important objective in any estimation problem is to obtain an estimator of a population parameter which can take care of the salient features of the population'. Accordingly, a simple random sampling method was applied in this study. By applying a simple random sampling technique in the primary school database of the DES – a database consisting of 3,254 primary schools in Ireland according to figure from the 2017–2018 list – the sampled group included teachers and SNAs from 250 schools including mainstream classes and special classes in both mainstream and special schools.

The data is analysed via the SurveyMonkey software, taking advantage of its secure online survey management system, advanced data analysis and reporting features. This sampling method was considered appropriate because it is used when population is heterogeneous, i.e. every element of population does not match all the characteristics of the predefined criteria. It involves dividing a population into smaller groups – called strata. The groups or strata are organised based on the shared characteristics or attributes of the members in the group (Nicolas, 2020; Alvi, 2016).

3.4 Participants

The total sample population in this study (n = 595) comprised of two groups: SNAs (n =388) and primary school teachers (n = 207). Sample population were chosen randomly from 250 primary schools across Ireland. SNAs and teachers who participated in this study work in diverse environments including mainstream primary school, special needs school, special class/unit attached to mainstream primary, working with individuals/groups in mainstream primary school. The minimum level of qualification for SNAs and teachers surveyed was a leaving certificate or the equivalent and a Bachelor Level 8 degree, respectively. The largest age cohort of SNAs surveyed is 45–54, while 35–44 was the largest group of teachers. SNAs with 10 or more years of experience account for 50% (n =194) whilst 39% (n = 82) of teachers have worked more than 10 years in their role. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from SNAs and teachers.

3.5 Thematic Analysis

Clarke and Braun (2016) define Thematic Analysis as a technique used to identify, organise, and explain the themes or patterns across a range of data. Thematic Analysis is applicable for exploring a set of data and efficiently interprets shared experiences. In other words, Thematic Analysis is applicable in making sense of the commonalities in the study, providing a theoretical freedom and flexibility which can be adapted for other studies. However, while Thematic Analysis is flexible, it can also lead to inconsistencies and a lack of coherence (Lorelli *et al.*, 2017). Bearing in mind the need to support consistency and coherence, data for this study is grouped into themes. The themes are profile of participants in the sample, their qualification, training, job role and job function, as well as their career development.

3.6 Data collection methods

Quantitative research gathers data in numerical form which can be put into categories, or in rank order, or measured in units of measurement. It is the systematic empirical investigation of observable phenomena via statistical, mathematical or computational techniques (Mahony, 2018). According to Regoli (2019), one of the key advantages of using this method is that it enables data to be collected from a larger pool of participants via surveys and experiments. Also, collection of data using this process is quick and fast, therefore minimising delays.

Additionally, this method gives research participants the option of remaining anonymous. This is important because it minimises the risk of people giving false data or information as some participants may not be honest with their answers if there was

no anonymity. A questionnaire was the main tool of data collection in this study. According to Abawi (2004), a questionnaire is a data collection instrument consisting of a series of questions and other prompts to gather information from respondents. Questionnaires are particularly useful in providing a quick and easy means to collecting objective information from a large group of people where responses are gathered in a standardised way (Milne, 2017). Data collection spanned across a six-month period giving abundant time for participation. To address the research questions, questionnaires (questionnaire protocol ap) were distributed to primary schools with two surveys one for teachers and one for SNAs. Closed and open-ended questions were used for both questionnaires because they are easy to analyse and interpret. Open-ended questions were analysed by categorising participant responses (Milne, 2017). Table A is a distribution of qualification for SNAs and teachers surveyed.

	SNAs		Teachers
QQI Level 3 (QQI	0.5%	Bachelor of Arts – Level 8	9%
QQI Level 4 (QQI)	0.3%	B.Ed. in Primary Teaching	34%
Jnr Certificate or equivalent	7%	Higher Diploma (SEN)	19%
QQI Level 5 (QQI	23%	Postgraduate Doctorate Level 10	1%
QQI Level 6 (QQI	33%	Other	26%
BA (Ord) Degree Level 7	14%		
BA (Hons) Degree Level 8	12%		
Masters/Diploma Level 9	6%		
Other	4%		

3.6(i) Pilot Study 1, Pilot Study 2 and sampling

'A pilot study is the first step of the entire research protocol and is often a smaller-sized study assisting in planning and modification of the main study' (Junyong, 2017, p. 1). The aim of the pilot study in research is to examine the feasibility of the research approach, the validity of results and the understanding and interpretation of the questions by different target population (Ibid). In the context of this research, the pilot

study approach was of particular importance as it enabled preliminary testing to identify potential problems that may arise in the research procedure before embarking on a full-scale study of the role, function and expectations of SNAs in Irish primary schools (Teijlingen, 2014). Before scaling the research process, two pilot studies were initiated with four SNAs and three primary school teachers, all carried out in different settings. All participants were female, and their qualifications varied from Leaving Certificate or equivalent, to QQI Level 6, Level 8 Degree and Postgraduate Masters/Diploma Level 9. Likewise, the second pilot study was undertaken with three primary school teachers in three different settings. Participants were also female and educated up to a Level 8 degree or a Postgraduate Master's degree.

Participants were deliberately selected to satisfy the different categories of qualification. At the end of both pilot studies, it became apparent that not only are SNAs qualified above and beyond the low benchmark required at policy level, SNAs are presently taking up roles that are way beyond the prescribed circular role. Basically, SNAs are considered to be the overall provider of all necessary care. There was a general perception among all SNAs in the pilot study that some teachers did not quite understand the fundamental job function of an SNA, and some of the tasks assigned to them were considered to be quite disrespectful. In addition, the SNAs were of the opinion that the guidelines from NCSE did not provide clarity hence the need for more discussions and understanding between NCSE/DES and SNAs. A further concern that came to light from the pilot study was the issue of career development and advancement among the SNAs. When asked if there should be a path for SNAs with years of experience to become qualified SEN teachers, one of the SNAs responded with: 'Definitely, most teachers have no experience of students with SEN. It is not part of

their training, SNAs who wish to undertake further training would have a much better understanding of the whole area.' In general, the pilot study signalled the urgent need to focus on qualification, training, and role of SNAs, the pilot study necessitated a shift of focus in the literature review.

3.7 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter provided an overview of the methodology used to study the role, function, and expectations of SNAs in Irish primary schools. First, the research design which espoused a cross-sectional design with an overtone of the Bioecological Systems Theory (1994) was elucidated upon. This was followed by a description of the theoretical and paradigmatic framework and its associated assumptions. Ethical consideration and its implication to the overall study were examined. Details relating to the participants, sample, data collection and analysis approach and pilot study were addressed. Finally, the time frame and work done were outlined. The findings of the study are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to collate the germane voices, opinions, and outlooks on the role and function of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in primary schools, as well as contribute to the discussion on the minimum qualification and training required for SNAs. This chapter presents the data that emerged from this study and attempts to address the research questions of the study which asked:

- What is the range of qualifications held by SNAs?
- To what extent, if applicable, are SNAs taking up roles that are beyond the original remit?
- To what extent does the system recognise/recompense qualifications above the State required benchmark?
- In what ways can SNAs progress professionally?

The Bioecological Systems Theory (1994), which underpins this study, was considered in the framing of all questions taking into account factors that can influence the level of care and education which children with SEN receive in the learning environment. With the help of SurveyMonkey, a cloud-based survey software tool, questionnaires were distributed to participants via their institution's email address. Each mail content consisted of a cover letter and two options to access the survey either through a digital link or a Quick Response (QR) barcode which redirects the user to the relevant questionnaire, either as an SNA respondent or Primary School teacher respondent.

4.2 Findings and themes

To gain meaningful comprehension of the participant's perspective, the thematic analysis approach was adopted to organise and highlight key responses from the data. 'Thematic analysis identifies patterns within the data enabling the researcher to have a detailed understanding of the research data' (SAGE Publications, 2019, p. 1). Hence, collected data was organised into topics and themes thereby assisting the examination of the data sets. According to Bradley (2019), data grouping streamlines the emergence of developing themes or patterns and helps the researcher focus on important subgroups. To facilitate proper analysis, data was grouped into respondent's profile, qualification, training, role and function, and career progression. The questionnaire respondents comprised of 595 participants with 388 SNAs and 207 Primary School teachers from 250 primary schools in Ireland. Completion rate was 68% and 59% for SNAs and Primary School teachers, respectively. Results of gender distribution for SNAs and Primary School teachers are presented in Table B.

4.2(i) Respondent's Profile

Table B Gender distribution for SNAs and Primary School teachers

	Special Needs Assistants		Primary School Teacher	
	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
MALE	9	2%	9	4%
FEMALE	377	98%	198	96%

Out of 388 SNAs surveyed, 98% were female and 2% were male. Similarly, of the 207 Primary School teachers surveyed, 96% were female and 4% were male. With regards to the age of the respondents, 86% of the SNAs were in the 35 years or older age bracket,

forming the majority age bracket. Similarly, 80% of the Primary School teachers were in the 35 years or older age bracket. Table C shows the age distribution of SNAs and Primary School teachers.

Table C Age distribution of SNA + Teachers

AGE GROUP	Special Needs Assistants		Primary School Teacher	
	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
18–24	11	3%	4	2%
25–34	45	12%	39	19%
35–44	100	26%	86	41%
45–54	162	42%	53	26%
55–64	69	18%	25	12%
65+	1	0.3%	1	0.5%

SNA		Mean	17	Median	15	Mode		**Range**	**42**
Primary		Mean	17	Median	26	Mode		Range	40

Table D Years of Experience

	Special Needs Assistants		Primary School Teacher	
	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Less than a year	24	6%	17	8%
1–3 years	81	21%	44	21%
4–6 years	64	16%	43	21%
7–9 years	23	6%	22	11%
10 years or more	194	50%	82	39%

SNA	Mean	20	Median	16	Mode	6	Range	44
Primary	Mean	20	Median	21	Mode	21	Range	31

4.2(ii) Qualifications and Training

In terms of knowledge and experience, only 6% of the SNA contributors had less than a year's experience, 72% had four or more years, with over half with more than 10

years' experience in the field. Similarly, 71% of Primary School contributors were four years or more in their role; of the 71%, 39% had over 10 years' experience in their role. Just 8% of participants had less than one year's experience. Findings relating to the level of qualification of SNAs and Primary School teachers are highlighted in Table E(i) and (ii).

Table E Qualification profile of (i) SNAs and (ii) Primary School teachers

(i) SNAs

QUALIFICATION	(f)	(%)
QQI Level 3 (QQI)	2	0.5%
QQI Level 4 (QQI)	1	0.3%
Leaving certificate or equivalent	28	7%
QQI Level 5 (QQI)	86	22%
QQI Level 6 (QQI)	126	33%
BA (Ordinary) Degree Level 7	54	14%
BA (Honours) Degree Level 8	48	12%
MA/Diploma Level 9	26	7%
Doctorate Level 10	0	0%
Others	15	4%

(ii) Primary School teachers

Qualification	(f)	(%)
Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Level 8	18	9%
B. Ed. in Primary Teaching Level 8	70	34%
Prof Master of Education (PME) Level 9	24	12%
Diploma (Special Education Needs) Level 9	39	19%
Postgraduate Doctorate Level 10	2	1%
Other (please specify)	55	26%

Based on Qualification Level 3–10

SNA	Mean	10	Median	7	Mode	7	Range	33
Primary	Mean	17	Median	16	Mode	–	Range	33

The level of qualifications presented in Table F (i) indicates that more than half of the SNAs (62%) have a QQI Level 5/6 or its equivalent. Less than 1% however, were qualified at a Level 4 or lower. Approximately a quarter (26%) of the respondents had either a Level 7 or Level 8 degree (14% and 12%, respectively). Responses indicated

by SNAs other than those specified totalled 15% and included: Registered Intellectual Disability nurse (Level 8), Diploma (in areas such as Special Education, Childcare, Social Care and Montessori Education). Considering that the qualification required to be an SNA as set out by the DES are a QQI Level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications or a minimum of three D grades in the Junior Certificate or equivalent (DES, 2020), findings suggests that SNAs are qualified either above or beyond the lower benchmark required by the Policy.

Regarding Primary School teachers, the assumption gathered from the data collected suggests that schools hire qualified teachers. As presented in Table F(ii), 34% of the teachers have a Bachelor of Education in Primary Teaching Level 8, while 9% hold a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Level 8. Less than half of teachers surveyed held either a Diploma (Special Education Needs) Level 9 (19%) or Professional Master of Education (PME) Level 9 (12%). Only 1% of teachers hold a Postgraduate Doctorate Level 10. This suggests that Primary School teachers have the required qualification as set out by DES to work with children with SEN. The concern resulting from this analysis is on the low qualification benchmark set for SNAs in Irish primary schools. Chart i shows that 67% of SNAs (n = 257) agree that the current qualification benchmark is inadequate whereas 32% (n = 125) concede that the low qualification benchmark is adequate.

Chart v Is the benchmark adequate?

Do you think that the current qualification benchmark for SNA role is adequate?

68%   32%   ■ Yes

Chart vi SNA Training

Did you undertake some sort of training in the area of special needs before commencing employment?

22%

78%

■ Yes
■ No
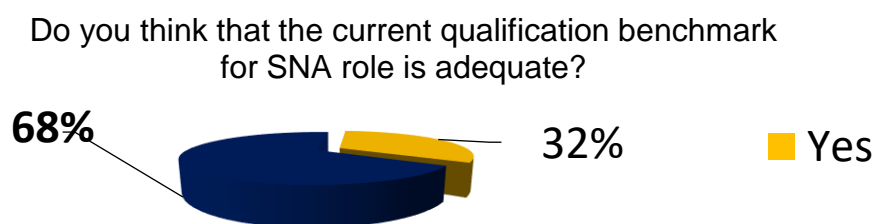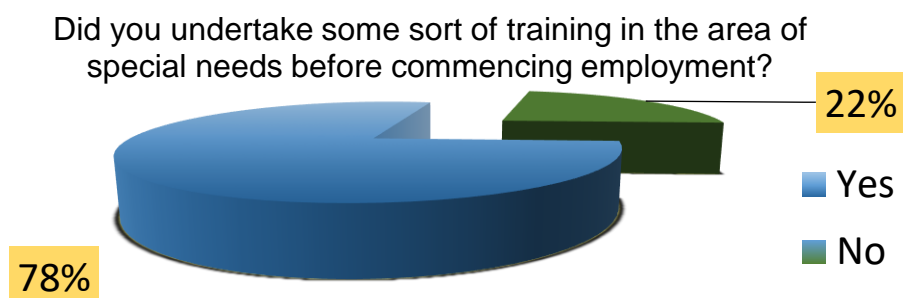
Findings relating to training indicate that the majority of SNAs received some sort of training before commencing employment. Chart ii suggests that out of 388 SNAs surveyed, 300 (78%) SNAs agreed that they received training before starting employment while 86 (22%) stated that they did not receive training. Table F illustrates the breakdown of training received by both SNA and Primary School teachers before commencing employment.

Table F Training received by SNA and Primary School teachers prior to employment

Training	SNA%	Teacher%
Role of an SNA	74%	–
Duties of SNA	68%	–
Role of SET	–	55%
Duties of SET	–	41%
Inclusion, equality, diversity	63%	50%
Children's rights	66%	34%
Challenging behaviour	64%	60%
Assistive technology	34%	38%
Child protection procedures	77%	75%
Physical disabilities	50%	25%
Intellectual disabilities	50%	40%
Learning disability	53%	49%

Social/emotional disorders	47%	43%
Mental illness/disorders	26%	15%
Visual impairments	26%	16.%
Hearing impairments	28%	26.%
Sensory disorders	47%	45%
First Aid Responder (FAR)	56%	38%
Health and safety	54%	34%
ICT	21%	44%
Individual Education plans (IEP)	29%	58%
Other	9%	15%

Out of the 78% of SNAs who claimed to have received some sort of training in Special Education before commencing employment, only 54% felt that the training they received adequately prepared them for the role of an SNA. When the same question was asked to Primary School teachers, Chart iii shows that 70% of teachers surveyed acknowledged that they had not received any training in the area of Special Education Needs before commencing employment whilst 30% indicated that they did receive some sort of training in Special Education.

Chart vii Primary School teacher training

Did you undertake some sort of training in the area of special needs before commencing employment?
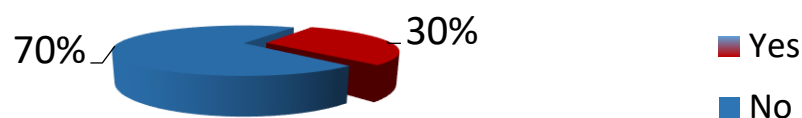
Nonetheless, data as indicated in Table H shows that SNAs and teachers would appreciate more training. For instance, 57% of SNAs surveyed indicated that they would like additional training in dealing with challenging behaviour, 46% would like more training in assistive technology, 44% in social/emotional disorders, 55% in mental

illness/disorders and 33% in preparing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for pupils. Similarly, findings also show that although teachers have received various trainings in their role, they would appreciate more training, particularly in dealing with social/emotional disorders and challenging behaviours. Fifty-six per cent of those surveyed indicated that they would like more training in dealing with challenging behaviours, 53% of teachers would welcome more help with teaching students with a wide range of disabilities, 57% in social/emotional disorders, 47% in sensory disorders, 49% in assistive technology and 39% in IEPs.

Table G Additional training for SNA and Primary School teachers

Training	SNA		Primary Teachers	
	F	%	F	%
Role of an SNA	43	12%	–	–
Duties of SNA	55	15%	–	–
Role of SET	–	–	64	31%
Duties of SET	–	–	66	32%
Inclusion, equality, diversity	82	22%	64	31%
Children's rights	62	17%	46	23%
Challenging behaviour	211	57%	114	56%
Assistive technology	168	46%	100	49%
Child protection procedures	67	18%	36	18%
Physical disabilities	94	26%	63	31%
Intellectual disabilities	102	28%	80	39%
Learning disability	101	27%	78	38%
Social/emotional disorders	164	44%	117	57%
Mental illness/disorders	204	55%	107	53%
Visual impairments	110	30%	56	28%
Hearing impairments	106	29%	52	26%
Sensory disorders	130	35%	96	47%
First Aid Responder (FAR)	115	31%	65	32%
Health and safety	94	26%	52	26%
ICT	113	31%	46	23%
Individual Education plans (IEP)	120	33%	80	39%
Other	37	10%	27	13%

4.2(iii) SNA role and function in primary schools

Based on primary and secondary data, pupils are presenting with more complex disabilities, thereby questioning whether or not SNAs assume more responsibilities

beyond that which is prescribed by the DES. Afterall, the equivalent role of SNAs as described in different circulars is that of a non-teaching role. According to DES Circular 0030/2020 the role of the SNA continues to be about the care needs of pupils, to assist classroom teachers and Special Education teachers and to ensure that the student is able to access education, as set out in Section 5 of DES Circular 30/2014. The role of the SNA is not to provide additional tuition, since – by design – this responsibility lays with a qualified SEN teacher (DES, 2020).

Further findings from this research suggest that more than half of SNAs (56%) support teachers in preparing (IEPs for pupils with 6% admitting that they have independently prepared an IEP. Fifty-eight per cent of SNAs also admitted to having supervised the entire class of pupils in the absence of their teacher, while 35% of SNAs indicated that they have assisted pupils with administration of their medication. Forty-nine per cent of respondents conceded that they support the work of outside professionals, such as Speech Therapists and Occupational Therapists, with 44% admitting that they have carried out therapeutic interventions for children with SEN. Findings also show that SNAs participate in parent teachers meetings (14%), build study assignments for pupils (15%) and teach classes in substitution for the absence of the teacher (17%).

Conversely, teachers were asked about their perception of the role of SNAs in the classroom. In the first instance, it was imperative to ask teachers if they have SNA support in their classrooms. Chart iv highlights the distribution of SNAs that support Primary School teachers. Findings indicate that 43% of teachers surveyed have full-time support of SNAs, 11% have part-time support, 15% have occasional support and 31% have no support at all.

Table H Overview of the role of SNAs when working with children with SEN

Role	Frequency	Percentage
Assist pupils with feeding/eating	162	42%
Assist pupils with administration of medication	134	35%
Assist pupils with toileting	229	59%
Assist pupils with general hygiene	223	58%
Assist pupils with typing or writing	274	71%
Assist children board/alight from school buses	165	43%
Assist pupils with class work set by the teacher	361	93%
Tidy classroom of pupil with special needs	272	70%
Help teacher prepare workspaces/materials for pupils	273	70%
Prepare workspaces and materials for pupils on your own	208	54%
Support teacher in preparing IEPs for pupils	215	56%
Develop Individual Education Plans on your own	24	6%
Correct/grade students' work	72	19%
Create assignments for students	58	15%
Plan lessons for pupils	47	12%
Supervise whole class if teacher is out (even short periods)	226	58%
Teach whole class if teacher absence (even short periods)	66	17%
Observe pupils as they work in the learning environment	249	64%
Assist on out-of-school visits, walks and similar activities	329	85%
Carry out therapeutic interventions for pupils	169	44%
Support the work of outside professionals, SL or OT	188	49%
Attend school/class planning meetings	163	42%
Attend Parent-Teacher meetings	56	14%
Other (please specify)	24	6%

Chart viii Distribution of SNA support in the classroom

Do you currently have SNA support in your class?

31%   43%   15%   11%

■ Yes full-time

■ Yes part-time
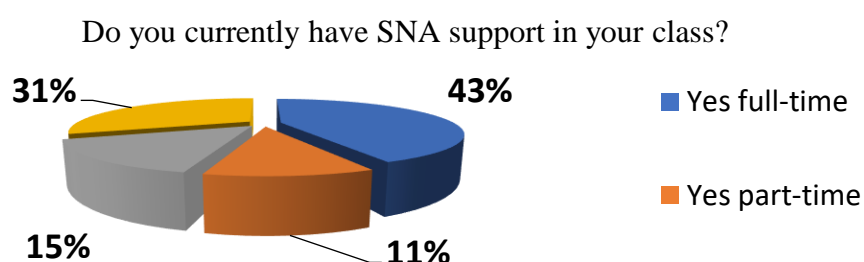
Teachers were further asked of the role of SNAs in the classroom. Table J shows that most of the teachers (58%) indicated that SNAs help with the assigned child's lessons, 38% agreed that SNAs help with class supervision, 36% of SNAs help with IEP

preparation, 49% help with checking the child's work, 26% help with the child's homework and 38% help with classroom management.

Table I Teacher perception of the role of SNAs in the classroom

Role	Frequency	Percentage
Help with IEP preparation	72	36%
Help with assigned child's lessons	116	58%
Help with checking assigned child's work	98	49%
Help with classroom management	75	38%
Help with assigned child's homework	52	26%
Help supervise class (even briefly leave room)	76	38%

Further to ascertaining the role of SNAs in the classroom, SNAs were asked if they have carried out duties that are not part of the designated SNA role. Chart v indicates that a staggering 79% of SNAs agreed that they have carried out duties that are not part of their designated SNA role, while 21% of SNAs indicated that they have not carried out duties that are not part of the designated SNA role.

Chart ix Designated SNA role

Have you carried out duties that are not part of your designated SNA role?

21%

79%

■ Yes
■ No
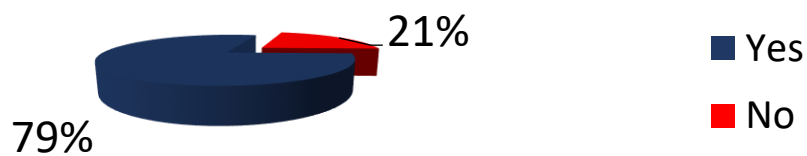
When asked to elaborate on their role/duties in the classroom, SNAs cited a range of duties that include teaching, care needs, administration, behaviour management, personal assistants to the principal and teachers, gardening, driver, medication management, caretaker, shopping, photocopying, yard duties, IEP preparation, occupational and speech and language activities, cookery, PE and arts (see Appendix 1 for SNA views/comments). It is evident from data collected from SNAs and teachers

that the role of SNAs has indeed evolved from its original remit as SNAs are taking up non-designated roles.

In addition, not only are SNAs taking up roles that are above the prescribed circular role, the role of the SNA from data collected is not defined. As indicated, SNAs are made to do a myriad of jobs that in most cases have nothing to do with the designated role of an SNA. Interestingly, SNAs believe that the way they are viewed might change with the government's plan to re-title SNAs. The term 'special needs' is outdated. When asked 'Do you think that changing the SNA title to "teaching assistant" will make a difference in your profession?' Data as shown in Chart vi indicates that a majority of SNAs 56% (n = 217) are optimistic that a change in title will make a long-awaited difference to the SNA workforce while 43% (n = 167) are less optimistic. Education Assistant (EA) has also been suggested as option (Butler and Quinn, 2014).

Chart x Change in SNA title

Do you think that changing the SNA title to 'teaching assistant' will make a difference in your profession?
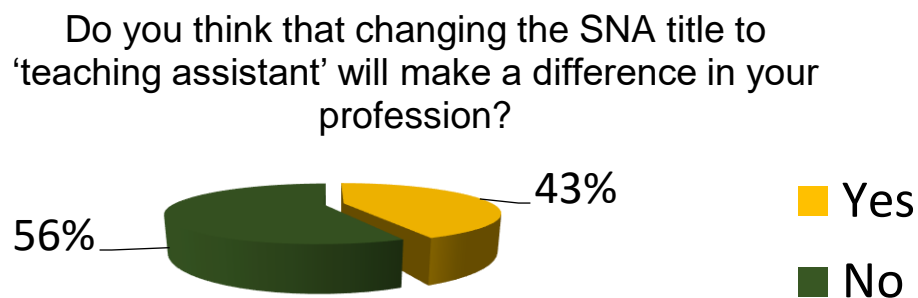
However, when given the opportunity to comment further about changing the SNA title, views differed. A large cohort of SNAs indicated that a name change would be great for children as sometimes, students do not like to be associated with needing assistance from a 'Special Needs' assistant. Better access to training and respect for the workforce was cited by many SNAs in support of a change of title. Additionally, many SNAs

believe that a change in title might lead to professionalising the workforce. Nonetheless, some SNAs argue that a name change will do little to change the way they are viewed. They believe that professionalising the SNA work force rather than a name change will make a long-awaited difference. (See Appendix 2 for SNAs comments/views when asked to expatiate on the topic of change in SNA title.)

Another factor that was evident in this study was the frustrations and the perceived lack of understanding and respect for their role and duties in the classroom. Findings show that SNAs are frustrated with the system in its present condition because of several issues. When asked if they faced any difficulties in carrying out their roles, SNAs cited the lack of clarity of the role/duties as a major obstacle in the workplace. SNAs are expected to perform multiple tasks at any given time irrespective of their capabilities. Strong emotions were expressed in the matter of respect with SNAs signalling a lack of respect for the SNA workforce from parents, principals, SENO, teachers, fellow SNAs and children. Their concerns were with regards to being perceived as just 'helpers' rather than professionals. They also articulated the general feeling of being treated as dispensable and unessential staff.

When asked about communication between the workforce, SNAs expressed the general lack of communication amongst all the parties involved which often leads to misunderstandings and disrespect. (See Appendix 3 for the views/comments of SNAs when asked if they faced any difficulties in carrying out their duties.) Amidst the concerns and issues raised by the SNAs about the SNA Scheme, the data pointed towards a shared passion for the job and the perceived importance of being a Special Needs Assistant. When asked to pick the reasons why they chose to work as SNAs,

findings – as indicated in Chart vii – show that 86% of SNAs indicated that they are passionate about working with children, while 61% quoted the unpredictability of the job as the reason.

Chart xi Reasons participants chose to become SNAs

Pick the top 3 reasons why you chose to become an SNA

Legend:
- the challenges / unpredictability
- Working with children is my passion
- It fits with my family life
- I have a child with SEN
- to jump start into another line of work
- Other (please specify)
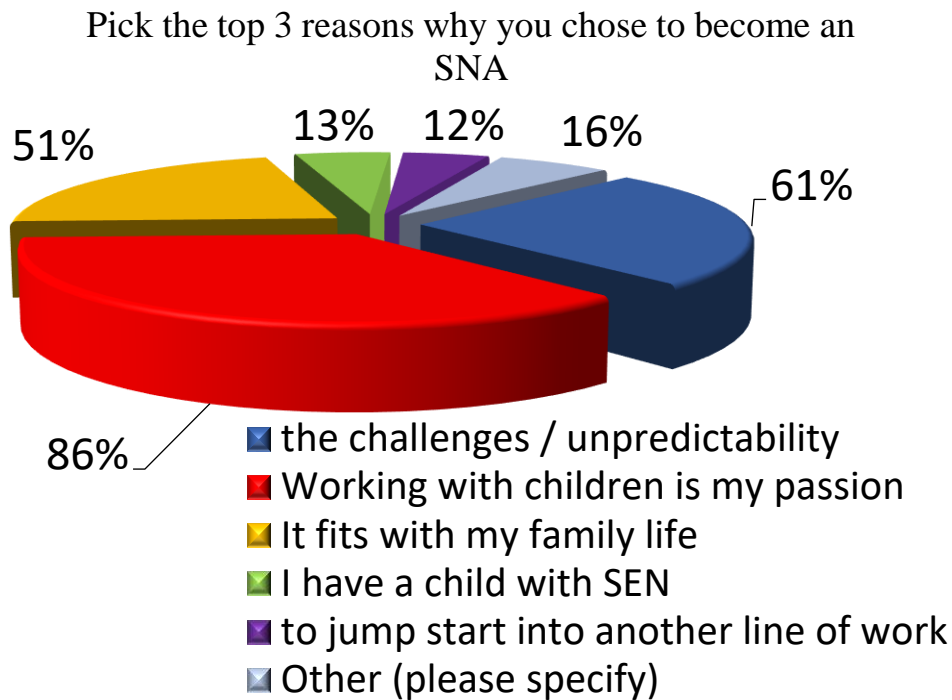
4.2(iv) Career Progression

One of the most important themes to arise from this study was the issue of career progression. As indicated in Chart viii, it was discovered that 92% of SNAs would welcome some level of career progression and only 8% were opposed to it. At the time of this research, there is no established path for SNAs to progress in their chosen jobs. It will appear that SNAs do not have any job security let alone a path to career progression. Most SNAs are hired in a substitute capacity, i.e. covering for maternity leave, sick leave, career breaks and/or job-sharing. Which means that their job offer can

be rescinded at short notice and, as McGrath (2018) asserted, the last SNA to be hired

would often be the first to be let go. A last-in-first-out methodology.

Chart xii Distribution of SNAs opinion on career progression

Do you think there should be a path for SNAs
with years of experience to become qualified
SEN teachers?

92%   8%

■ Yes ■ No
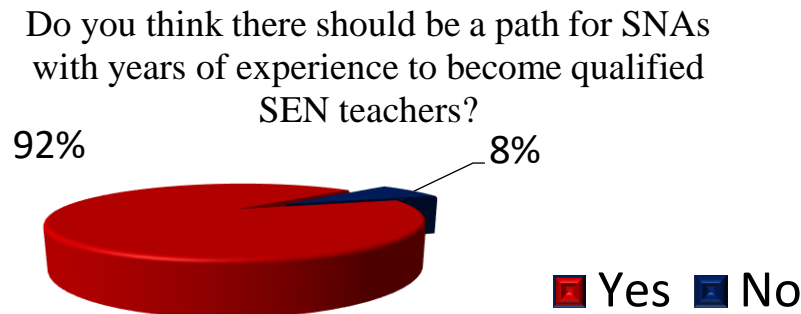
In England, however, teaching assistants (SNAs) with years of experience are often

awarded the opportunity to become higher level teaching assistant if they enrolled for

additional training courses (Graduate Prospectus, 2018; Navarro, 2015). Accordingly,

teaching assistants or unqualified Special Needs Teachers in SEN schools in England

can become qualified teachers through a combination of existing experience with a

blended in-school and online Qualified Teacher Status development programme called

Straight to Teaching (Ibid). When asked to comment further on the issue of career

progression, some of the SNAs agreed that some sort of career progression was

essential, particularly for SNAs with many years of experience including SNAs with

Level 8 and postgraduate degrees (see Appendix 4 for SNA views/comments on the

matter of career progression).

Towards the end of the questionnaire, SNAs were asked what could be done to improve

the work that they do with children with SEN. Respondents indicated the need for

clarity as it applies to their role. The data indicated that the role of the SNA is sometimes

left at the discretion of the principal or teachers. SNAs expressed that this meant that the translation and interpretation of their job function was fluid, discretionary, and might lead to intimidation and an abuse of authority in some situations. Another aspect of the role which the SNAs expressed a need for improvement was with regards to respect, or lack thereof. SNA respondents indicated that the DES, SENO, principals and teachers needed to appreciate the professional opinion of SNAs, and to actively involve them in the decision-making process. A recognition of the role that SNAs play in the learning environment was found to be lacking. SNA respondents expressed their displeasure in not being recognised by the school authority even in situations where they (the SNAs) had provided exceptional service.

On the subject of training, a further theme that came out of this study, the SNA respondents expressed the lack of training and continuing professional development (CPD) available to SNAs. According to the respondents, training/CPD is mostly available to teachers, while SNAs are expected to source for and independently finance their trainings. Additionally, pay, conditions of service and job security are other factors which the SNAs felt contributed to impeding their role in the classroom. SNAs argue for clarity on working hours, especially the unpaid hours regulation citing the possible infringement in the rules by some schools. In addition to the complexity of the working hours, SNAs argue that there is no job security in the working environment as they are only hired when a child has specific care needs within the school and, as such, can be fired at any time.

Contractual inequalities are highlighted by SNAs in this study. Presently, SNAs contest having different bereavement and health and safety leave compared with teachers.

While SNAs stressed that they are not minimising the work that teachers do, they feel that teachers and SNAs work together to care and educate children with SEN and hence should have the same entitlements. SNAs also stressed the importance of professionalism. Presently, SNAs are of the opinion that the role of the SNAs in Irish schools is not viewed as a profession and are not treated the same as other professionals in schools. They believe that the SNA career should be professionalised as that will afford SNAs the respect and job security they deserve (see Appendix 5 for SNA views/comments on what could be done to improve their work).

In summary, this chapter examined the data collected via online survey from 595 participants. Two hundred and fifty schools were chosen randomly from the DES primary school database of 3,254 primary schools in Ireland. Data collected indicates a gender imbalance amongst SNAs and teachers surveyed. Regarding qualification, data confirms the findings of the literature review which shows that the SNA workforce is qualified above and beyond the low benchmark required at policy level.

Data on training suggest that more SNAs than teachers received some sort of training in special education before commencing employment. Also, figures show that SNAs and teachers would like additional training in their role as SEN staff. The role of the SNA which is a reoccurring theme in this study suggest that SNAs are taking up roles above their original remit. In addition, evidence demonstrates a lack of clarity in the role of SNAs with duties being solely at the discretion of the principal and teacher. Hence, open to interpretation and abuse. Regarding professionalising the SNA career, statistics signify that a majority of SNAs are in favour of changing the SNA title to teaching assistant or education assistant. In relation to career progression, more than

half of the SNAs investigated would welcome a career path to become qualified teachers. Nonetheless, despite all the concerns cited by SNAs in this study, findings suggest that SNAs are passionate about the children they work with and enjoy the unpredictability of the role. Therefore, it is essential that this passion is matched with job satisfaction as children with SEN benefit from a passionate, highly motivated workforce. The next chapter presents an in-depth discussion of the findings of this research.

Key themes that emerged from findings are:

1. Participants' profile
2. Level of qualification
3. SEN training
4. Job role and function
5. Career development pathway

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Since its inception in the 1990s, the purpose of the SNA scheme has consistently been that of a non-teaching nature. The role of the SNA as reaffirmed in Circular 0030/2020 'is to support the care needs of students and to assist classroom and special education teachers, to ensure that the student is able to access education, as set out in Section 5 of DES Circular 30/2014' (DES, 2020, p. 4). Nonetheless, the role of the SNA has evolved beyond the 'official remit to include duties in pedagogy, administration, managing behaviour and therapeutic duties' (Butler, 2015, p. 12). Despite the evolution of the role, the minimal qualification of a QQI Level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications or a minimum of three D grades in the Junior Certificate or equivalent stays (DES, 2020). The value for money review of the SNA scheme in 2011 claimed that the role of the SNA is poorly understood by schools, parents and other professionals.

Nine years after the report, the 2018 comprehensive review of the SNA scheme reported that while the SNA support works well for younger children and for certain types of care needs – for example, mobility, toileting, eating – gaps were found in the delivery of the service needing a new and improved model. The gaps in the scheme which has been fiercely debated for years remains. Therefore, this study looks to contribute to the discussion on the role and minimum qualification and training required to become a Special Needs Assistant (SNA). Five hundred and ninety-five respondents across Ireland have contributed to the study via two online questionnaires. Of the 595 participants surveyed, 388 are SNAs and 207 are Primary School teachers.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) 2018 highlights the existing issues with regards to limited access to appropriate education, trained teachers, suitable learning support resources and facilities by children with SEN, and a national lack of understanding of their needs. In Ireland, the number of children with special education needs in schools has risen by almost 30,000 in almost two decades. It is estimated that one in four pupils now have a SEN with schools educating at least 200 or more children (Doyle, 2018).

According to the Government's Education Indicators for Ireland report (2018), the number of children in special classes rose from 3,816 in 2014 to 6,229 in 2018, while another 1,000 places were added for September 2019. The report also indicates that more than 13,400 special education teachers have been employed, whereas 15,950 SNAs were allocated to schools for the 2018/2019 academic session (Laverty, 2019). SNAs in the Irish education system play an important role in assisting the teacher to support students with special educational needs who have significant care needs. They are allocated to the school and work under the supervision of the principal/teachers (NCSE, 2020). This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of data gathered from the 595 online survey participants.

5.2 A change in the required minimum qualification for SNAs

The seemingly low qualification benchmark required to become an SNA has been the topic of debate amongst scholars and researchers (Rose, 2020; NCSE 2018; NCSE, 2016; Butler and Quinn, 2014). According to DES (2020), the minimum qualification level required for employment as an SNA is a QQI Level 3 major qualification on the

national framework of qualifications or a minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Cert or equivalent. However, NCSE (2018) argues, empirically, that the role of SNAs has expanded beyond that which was prescribed by the DES.

This study presents data to suggest that 33% of the 595 respondents are educated up to a QQI Level 6, and 22% are educated up to a QQI Level 5. Furthermore, 4% of the respondents either had a Certificate in Social Care and Special Education; a Diploma in Montessori, Social Care or Special Education; a Level 8 Nursing Registration in Intellectual Disability; or a Level 6 qualification as a Registered Behaviour Technician. Out of 595 respondents, only 7% had a Junior Certification as their minimum level of qualification. Considering that the respondents are from a sample systematically selected to represent the SNAs in Ireland, the data suggests that a high percentage of SNAs in Ireland hold a variety of qualifications that are beyond the minimum entry requirements.

These data are consistent with data collected in 2017 by FORSA where SNAs were reported to be qualified above the minimum level recommended for the role by the DES. Participants in the 2017 FORSA study were reported to have either a QQI Level 5 (30% of participants) or a QQI Level 6 (27% of participants). Only 3% of respondents reportedly had the minimum qualification of a Junior Certificate. Other answers given by respondents other than those provided totalled 8% overall and included: Diplomas (in areas such as Special Needs, Childcare, Family Studies, Montessori Teaching and Social Care Studies), Graduate Diplomas and BTEC qualifications.

Another similarity and data consistency relates to the 2018 Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme, where it was determined that in addition to being overqualified, many SNAs took on further CPD training and qualifications in their own time and at their own expense. The review claimed that SNAs participated in medically complex, and sometimes invasive, interventions including gastrostomy and jejunal feeding; tracheostomy care requiring deep suctioning in some cases; stoma care; infection control; vital signs monitoring; respiratory care; oxygen therapy; epilepsy management in severe cases; and catheterisation. In addition, it reported that SNAs were tasked with supporting students with emotional and behavioural difficulties despite not being required by the DES to be clinically trained or qualified in such categories. Based on these, the 2018 Comprehensive Review of the SNA Scheme recommended that the minimum level of qualification for employment as an SNA be a Level 5. Two years following that, data collected on qualification level of respondents from this study supports the recommendation given by the 2018 Comprehensive Review. Furthermore, in the 2017 review of the SNA scheme on behalf of the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), attention was drawn to the low minimum requirement for the role of SNAs even as children were experiencing a wider range of disability and complexity. The researchers argued against the qualification level of SNAs which was considered to be inadequate in addressing the complex needs of children with Special Education Needs (SEN). Based on findings from the review, the INTO recommended that the minimum qualification level of SNAs be increased to a standard FETEC Level 5 or FETEC Level 6. When asked about the adequacy of the level of qualifications for employment, 33% of respondents from this study agreed that the qualification benchmark for SNAs was adequate, while 67% disagreed with the

adequacy of the benchmark. In a strongly worded comment provided in the open-comment section of the survey, a respondent said:

> *I do not think it is acceptable enough that some SNA's have only a junior or leaving cert as their only qualification. It is not fair to have one SNA with a BA honours degree background and another with only a leaving certificate. It does not mean one is better than the other but to be recognised as a professional there needs to be a higher qualification benchmark.*

On the other hand, some SNAs believe that the low qualification benchmark for SNAs suits the DES better as they believe a higher threshold of qualification might lead to increased pay and professionalism.

> *Most of the SNAs are highly qualified, most starting at FETAC Level 5 and some right up to Bachelor levels. With the acknowledgment of our qualifications it would lead to a higher pay grade so the DES and NCSE will never allow it.*

Both opinions reflect the perception of SNAs with regard to the level of qualification, either as an employment requirement, or an intrinsic motivational factor in their role as SNAs. It could also lead to more research into whether or not a higher level of qualification as an SNA should impact policies on pay rise, promotion or other employment policy.

On the contrary, the DES sets a more appropriate minimum qualification for primary school teachers which is either a Bachelor of Education degree or graduate/Higher Diploma in Education (Primary) in combination with a primary degree at Level 8 or a qualification at Level 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications (Teaching Council, 2015). When asked to indicate their qualification, 34% of teacher respondents claimed they had a Bachelor's Degree in Education in Primary Teaching while 19% had a Postgraduate Diploma (SEN). If the DES sets the minimum qualification for employment as a primary school teacher at a considerably high level, it is equally crucial to upgrade the minimum level of qualification for SNAs especially as they are

required to work with children with SEN, take on more responsibility in the development of the children, substitute for teachers in the classrooms and administer clinical assistance to children with SEN.

5.4 The importance of making SEN training for SNAs a requirement

Another theme to arise from this study is on training. Data suggest that SNAs are seemingly more prepared to fulfil their role in different aspects of SEN prior to commencing employment than primary school teachers. Seventy-three per cent of SNA respondents claimed that they had received some sort of training in SEN prior to starting the job, whereas 22% of SNAs respondents admitted to having no training in SEN prior to employment. Of the 73% of SNAs that received training before employment, more than half (54%) indicated that the training they received adequately prepared them for their role as SNAs. On the other hand, only 30% of primary school teachers admitted to receiving some sort of training in SEN prior to employment, while 70% of primary school teachers admitted to having no training in SEN at all. In comparison to 54% of SNAs, only 34% of teachers agreed that the training they received prior to employment sufficiently prepared them for their role.

Likewise, both SNAs and teachers were asked if they have been adequately trained to support/teach children with a variety of needs. Thirty-seven per cent of SNAs strongly agreed that they were equipped to support children with a variety of SEN, while 24% of teachers strongly agreed that they were equipped to support children with a variety of SEN. These results are consistent with findings of the INTO 2014 report which concluded that over one third of teachers admitted that they had not received the

appropriate training to support the care needs of their pupils. In a follow-up report, the ESRI (2016) report found that teachers in charge of special needs classes did not usually have the relevant experience and training and would often be less equipped to meet the needs of their students (Murphy, 2016). Not only is the lack of training a disadvantage to the teachers and SNAs, but it could also put the children with SEN at risk when their primary carers in the classroom are not adequately trained to understand the needs of students in their care.

Even though the data in this study points to SNAs receiving adequate training to fulfil their roles and duties, many SNAs indicated that they would appreciate additional training to facilitate the work they do with pupils with SEN. Specifically, most SNAs suggested that additional training with challenging behaviours in pupils with SEN would improve their quality of work. Data suggests that 57% of SNAs would like more training with challenging behaviours while 55% of SNAs claimed that they would need more training on Mental illness/disorders. Other areas of training interest included sensory disorders (35%), social/emotional disorders (44%), IEP (33%) and assistive technology (46%). Similarly, 57% of teacher respondents indicated that they needed more training in social/emotional disorders, whilst 58% felt they needed more training in challenging behaviour. While SNAs would welcome more training, data suggest that SNAs pay for most of the training courses themselves. When asked what could be done to improve the work they do with pupils with SEN, data shows that SNAs want more free training:

> *The provision of free/subsidised and easy to access training geared to support the current needs of students/schools.*
>
> *The same entitlements as teachers receive on the job training. A lot of speech and language/occupational therapy courses are only available to teachers who then pass*

the information on to SNAs who are ultimately the ones left to implement these therapies just due to the time constraints on teachers.

This is consistent with the 2017 FORSA SNA survey and the 2018 NCSE SNA review which indicates that many SNAs undertake training at their own expense and within their own time.

Even though the role of SNAs as indicated in Circular 0030/2014 and reaffirmed in Circular 0030/2020 remains that of care and support, in the last decade, the nature and responsibilities of SNAs in Irish primary schools has evolved to include pedagogy, administration, behaviour management and therapeutic intervention (Value for Money Review, 2011; NCSE, 2018; Butler and Quinn, 2014). This consistency in the expectation versus reality of the SNA role in classrooms, breeds a lack of clarity and disconnect between the school administration, the teachers and the SNAs (Value for Money Review, 2011). In a follow-up Review by the NCSE in 2017 and 2018 found similar gaps.

In follow-up reviews by the NCSE in 2017 and 2018, the findings suggested that the care and support required in school continuously varied in complexity and severity, which broadens the scope of care and support needed from the SNAs by parents, teachers and children with SEN. The 2017 and 2018 Reviews concluded that there was a fundamental misunderstanding of the function of an SNA. A misunderstanding which stems from the disparity between what the DES official declaration is, and what the reality in the classrooms and school environments are. When asked whether or not they carried out tasks which are outside the DES expectation of their role as SNA, 79% of respondents in this study admitted to fulfilling tasks and assuming responsibilities that are beyond the official scope of work as an SNA.

To expand on what the additional responsibilities entailed: 71% of SNAs would assist pupils with typing or writing; 57% of SNAs prepare workspaces and materials for pupils; 51% of SNAs assisted teachers in preparing IEPs for pupils; 6% prepared IEPs unsupervised; 44% of SNAs performed therapeutic interventions for pupils; and 44% of SNAs supported the work of external professionals such as Speech Therapists and Occupational Therapists. Other tasks included teaching a class as substitute in a teacher's absence (17%), administering medication (35%), creating assignment for students (15%), attending parent-teacher meetings (12%), supervising whole class if teacher is out of classroom (58%) and planning lessons for students (12%). When primary school teachers were asked to identify the role of SNAs in the learning environment, 36% of teachers indicated that SNAs help with IEP preparation, 58% stated that SNAs help with assigned child's lessons, 49% help with checking assigned child's work and 38% help with classroom management.

5.5 SNA Job role and function

Clearly, the role of SNAs as suggested in findings of both surveys shows a deviation of the DES prescribed role of SNAs. Hence, it is a matter of contention why the low qualification benchmark for SNAs remains as this has far reaching implications for the level of care and education children with SEN receive in Irish primary schools. In 2016, the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection Report on the Role of the Special Needs Assistant found that the role of the SNA is in contrast from what is outlined in DES Circular 0030/2014. The survey responses by SNAs for the report indicates that the role of SNAs varied amongst schools and SNAs

are carrying out a broad range of duties to include administrative duties such as assisting with newsletters, book rental schemes, lockers, managing school trips, cleaning, gardening, banking and office work. Other responsibilities cited by SNAs in the survey include teaching students in small groups, working with children on a one-to-one basis outside of the classroom, reading, being in charge of the classroom when the teacher is out and working with students who have behavioural, mental health and social issues.

Findings in the 2016 Report mirror the duties carried out by SNAs in this present study. Given the opportunity to expatiate on their role in the learning environment, SNAs alluded to several duties including teaching, care needs, administration, behaviour management, personal assistants to the principal and teachers, gardening, driver, medication management, caretaker, shopping, photocopying, yard duties, IEP preparation, reading to children, correcting homework, occupational and speech and language activities, cookery, physical education and arts. As envisaged, SNAs were very forthright on the matter of their role/duties. Responses highlight the changing role of SNAs in primary schools.

> *I regularly carry out the following and think it should be included and acknowledged in the job description as the child receives a more fit for purpose education from an SNA and it makes our job more interesting and complete in helping a child become independent and should be acknowledged as what we actually do. Some as follows; find work suitable for child as they are way behind class. Simplify lessons for pupil. Breakdown concepts of learning with concrete materials. Teach groups including Sen Child so he can learn by modelling and social skills. Monitor behaviour set up reward systems etc. On average I have two children with access but usually another 3 I help who are waiting for assessment or have emotional behaviour and need help to avoid disturbing class.*

Findings also indicate that some SNAs with higher qualification have been used as substitute teachers:

> *Due to my level of qualification I have been used as a sub teacher although not paid as one. Cleaning, photocopying, preparing work in copies in core subjects, taking lessons such as cookery, art, and PE.*

Factors that contribute to the changing role of SNAs are highlighted in a study by Keating and Connor (2012). The factors identified in that study includes poor understanding of the role of SNAs amongst schools, parents, other professionals and SNAs themselves. The 2017 Review of the SNA scheme on behalf of the INTO names insufficient resources in their efforts to provide an inclusive education for children with SEN as a reason. Other studies like the 2016 Report on the Role of the Special Needs Assistant cites interpretation and communication of role and difficulties concerning school resources in both rural and urban schools as contributing factors. The 2017 and 2018 Comprehensive Review of the SNA Scheme attributes the shifting role of SNAs to a lack of clarity of the SNA scheme by schools while the 2015 ASTI Report on the Role of Special Needs Assistants in Post-Primary Schools identifies insufficient human resources to meet the social and legal requirements for inclusion as the cause. Factors that contribute to the shifting role of SNAs in this study were identified by survey contributors as a lack of clarity and interpretation of the role and lack of communication and respect.

> *Lack of understanding by some teachers of what our job is. Lack of respect by some. But also, the guidelines from NCSE are not workable. There needs be more discussions and understanding between NCSE/DES and SNAs. Also, I believe there is a total lack of respect from DES towards us, treating us almost like children.*

> *The lack of respect afforded to SNA's in the role by both children and teachers. Being referred to a 'just an SNA' or a 'helper'. This attitude seems to be commonplace within most settings and is ultimately down to senior management in schools to set a respectful working environment for all. Children will show respect when it is mirrored by adult to adult. We all are adults working together with the common goal of nurturing the children in our care. The sooner SNA are treated as work colleagues and treated respectfully as part of a team; the sooner children get the best support they need.*

This study also sought to understand what could be done to improve the role of SNAs in the learning environment. SNAs overwhelmingly suggested that clarity of the role,

clarity on working hours, job security, more training and respect would help improve the work they do in the classroom.

> *Explanation of the role of SNA to some teachers who dislike having another adult in the classroom.*
>
> *Job security. This must be the only government job where there is absolutely no security of tenure. You can lose your job at the drop of a hat at any moment. Even after having been years in the same school! Surely something could be done to address this. There is always a need for extra help in every school. Why not allocate a certain number based on pupil numbers and add temporary SNAs as needed? These could even be training posts and assign the more qualified SNAs to the most needed in that eventuality.*

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that although SNAs argue that their role is poorly understood by principals, teachers, parents and other SNAs, SNAs remain passionate about their role/duties in the learning environment. When asked to pick the top three reasons why they chose to become SNAs, SNAs overwhelmingly indicated that working with children is their passion (86%) while 61% chose the challenges/unpredictability of the job as a reason.

> *I started working in disability sector when a child started in my children's preschool. Loved it and found I was good at it. I am passionate about supporting students to reach their full potential and love to see them having a better quality of life when they are provided with appropriate support.*

These views are in line with findings in the 2018 review of the SNA scheme which found that SNAs reportedly love their jobs and derive great satisfaction from working with students with SEN and are totally dedicated to meeting their needs. Also, it found that the SNA scheme is 'greatly valued by parents, students and schools and there is evidence of an enduring loyalty and a strong attachment between many schools, students, parents and their SNAs' (NCSE, 2018, p. 3). However, with SNAs taking up unqualified or trained roles, coupled with the low qualification benchmark it might be concluded or argued that the children's rights under the Irish constitution and other international treaties has not been fulfilled in its entirety (Children's Rights Alliance

Report Card, 2015). It is a great relief that the same study found that while the SNA scheme works well for some pupils, 'radical changes' are needed to improve and maximise outcomes for all students (O'Brien, 2018). This is essential because without clarity in relation to their role, the paucity of qualifications and training and no clear path to career progression in SEN for SNAs, SNAs may not be able to adequately meet the needs of pupils who are in their care.

5.6 SNA career development pathway

Career progression was one of the most important issues to emerge from data collated. Most (92%) SNAs in the current study would welcome some sort of career progression, while just 8% of SNAs were opposed to it. Nonetheless, there is no pathway to career progression for SNAs employed presently in Irish primary schools despite the evolution of the scheme. Studies indicate that SNAs do not have job security which questions the validity of a possible career progression (FORSA, 2019). As indicated in the 2018 Comprehensive SNA review, there is no formal career path open to individuals filling SNA roles. Similarly, a 2017 report co-funded by the NCSE and the National Disability Authority found that there were no in-job opportunities for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) that would enable SNAs upskill and develop their careers. SNAs in this study overwhelmingly agreed with this assessment.

> *We have no career path at present and cannot progress into teaching, if desired, without higher level Irish, and without giving up our jobs to fit in teaching practice. There is also no further level career wise for those who would not have an interest in teaching but would like to specialise or progress in some area of special education.*

A 2013 submission on The Role of the Special Needs Assistant on behalf of the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education found that there was support amongst SNAs for career and job security as they progress in the workforce.

These findings are in line with results gathered from the SNA survey. Results suggest that SNAs would support a path to career progression.

> *SNAs spend more time with students than teachers do. They deal with children's meltdowns on a daily basis, they are assaulted regularly. If anyone has a full awareness of special needs children, it is an SNA and deserve the chance to better themselves by having the opportunity to become a SEN teacher.*

In terms of the framework for career progression, most SNA respondents agreed that a pathway to career progression would be beneficial for SNAs with a Level 8 degree and many years of service. This resonates with the 2015 Review of the SNA scheme on behalf of the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland which recommended that since SNAs have gained much experience working with young people through a variety of situations which require not just a physical care response, but also behavioural and therapeutic responses, it would make more economic sense for the DES to examine a career progression structure for SNAs. This recommendation is in line with the views of SNAs on structure of career progression.

> *Most definitely. I am working in the same school for 30 years. 20 as an SNA, plus have so much personal experience with Foster children etc, and it's a crying shame that I stay static now with nowhere to go, and on the same PayScale for the rest of my working life. Plus, I have so much more experience working with kids with various special needs than most of the current SEN teachers on the SET Team, and they NEVER ONCE look for my input or for any contribution from me. I find it very insulting, and stressful ON A DAILY BASIS.*

The same 2015 report indicated that with the increasing demand for SNAs, it would be counterproductive to limit SNAs to specific roles. Therefore, considering the evolution of the role of an SNA, the need for career progression, and the ongoing reassessment of the SNA Scheme in a national context, it is necessary to examine the discourse surrounding the expertise, competency and professionalism of SNAs.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and

Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This final chapter presents key conclusions for the study which are derived from the research findings and analysis. Arising from these conclusions, recommendations for the SNA scheme as well as for future research are delineated. This study aimed to identify the role and function of SNAs in Irish Primary Schools. In addition, it also sought to address the following research questions:

1.   What is the range of qualifications held by SNAs?

2.   Are SNAs taking up roles that are beyond the original remit?

3.   Does the State recognise/recompense qualifications above the State required

        benchmark?

4.   In what ways can SNAs progress professionally?

Furthermore, this chapter presents an overall conclusion to the study and identifies recommendations for the SNA scheme and for future research. It also identifies the strengths and limitations for the study.

6.2 Recommendations for future research

There are a number of areas ripe for research in this sector including the role and remit of an SNA in Ireland both at primary and secondary level. Presently the job description does not tally with reality. Also, an exploration of the requisite training for SNAs would also be beneficial to ensure that the needs of our most vulnerable children are met. Moreover, job security is a significant issue for SNA who are often appointed on a part-time or an hourly basis which leads to challenges for SNAs personally and professionally. Another area for research would be to review the role of the SNA in secondary schools. Correspondingly the language, vocabulary and lexis associated with SNA is out of line with international good practice

6.3   Recommendations

(A)   A clarification of the role of SNAs

Studies indicate that role ambiguity has consistently shown to have a negative influence on a wide range of beneficial employee dispositions, including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and job involvement (Şenturan, Cetin and Demiralay, 2017; Roesler and Rau, 2014). Presently, high turnover rates are criticisms associated with the SNA scheme, which could be as a result of the inability of school administrators to interpret the role of SNAs effectively amongst other issues (NCSE, 2018; 2017). To promote inclusion of pupils with SEN, this study recommends that the role/duties of SNAs be reviewed, expanded (if necessary) and SNAs should receive training to reflect these changes.

(B)   A change in the minimum qualification required for employment as an SNA

As indicated in the data analysed within this study, SNAs are sometimes required to execute complex clinical tasks including gastrostomy and jejunal feeding; tracheostomy care requiring deep suctioning in some cases; stoma care; infection control; vital signs monitoring; respiratory care; oxygen therapy; epilepsy management in severe cases; catheterisation and so on and also assume teaching roles irrespective of the minimum level of education required for employment as an SNA (NCSE, 2018).

The low qualification benchmark further contradicts with the concept of a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) which is currently confined to care needs such as toileting, mobility and feeding (NCSE, 2018; FORSA, 2018; NCSE, 2016). It should be noted that the qualification of all staff, teaching or non-teaching in schools has a direct impact on the performance of pupils with SEN. The OECD (2011) suggests that the quality of staff is arguably the most important factor in student outcomes. Consequently, the

recommendation from this study is for the DES to review and set the minimum qualification requirements for employment as an SNA at a Level 6, to reflect the changing role of SNAs in Irish primary schools. This can be done by way of expanding the current role which is currently limited to care needs such as toileting, mobility and feeding to roles which include the delivery of speech and language or occupational therapy (O'Brien, 2018).

(C)   Apply a Standardized SNA Continuing Professional Development and Training

Continuing professional development (CPD) and training are widely recognised as fundamental to the improvement of standards and skills for staff in the workplace (Day, 2015). The SNAs who responded to the surveys for this study are keen to gain further professional development and increase their capabilities in providing the needs of children with SEN. Rather than funding the training and development privately, a more systematic process should be implemented by the DES to support the SNAs. Training is a fundamental aspect in the quality of care and education received by children with SEN, therefore, standardised training programmes in guiding and supporting children who are presenting with difficult or distressed behaviour at national level should be available to SNAs.

(D)   A recognisable and adaptable career progression path should be designed for SNAs

Career progression opportunities give employees a sense of purpose and growth which, in turn, fosters loyalty. Data collected and analysed in this study have revealed the lack of a pathway to career progression for SNAs irrespective of the number of years of experience in the role, or the level of qualification attained. The issue of career progression was one of the most important issues to emerge from this study. Findings

in this current study suggest that SNAs would welcome career progression. Consequently, this study recommends that a training programme at National Level preferably online, is initiated for SNAs (with many years of experience and higher qualification) who want to become SEN teachers. This study recommends that the SNA title is renamed as the term 'special needs' is no longer considered appropriate and in line with the desires of the Disability Movement. Among the names discussed are 'Teaching Assistant' and 'Education Assistant', however, they must be developed in line with job role, training and scope of duties (Butler and Quinn, 2014).

(E) Professionalising the SNA workforce

Professionalisation ensures respect, recognition, specialised training and standardised level of practise. Studies indicate that SNAs would like to be afforded the same respect as other professionals in education (FORSA, 2019; INTO, 2017). Accordingly, this study recommends that the ongoing review of the SNA scheme include a national training programme (preferably online) with a view to professionalising the role of SNAs. This study advocates online training because its flexible, convenient, accessible and cost-efficient.

6.4   Professionalisation of the SNA workforce

Notwithstanding, the 2016 report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection on the Role of the SNA recommended the development and implementation of a mandatory training and standardised course structure for SNAs. This was based on the need for a clear and defined structure which would achieve further professionalisation of the role, set a minimum standard of qualification for all SNAs and provide the necessary skills needed at primary and post-primary to fulfil their

roles. Their findings suggested that SNAs would welcome professionalising the SNA workforce in areas of clarity of role, respect, better access to training/CPD and professionalism.

Similarly, the comprehensive review of the SNA scheme in 2018 examined the qualification and training levels of SNAs and recommended a change in title to 'inclusion support assistant' to reflect the role SNAs play in fostering independence and inclusion. In 2019, FORSA announced a voluntary national training programme to be introduced for SNAs. FORSA's expectation is for the first significant step towards professionalising the role of the SNA within the school sector to be made possible with the implementation of the national training programme (Ring, 2019). Therefore, as more children are being diagnosed with some form of SEN and the fact that inclusion and the adequate educational provision of pupils with SEN has taken centre stage, it is in the best interest of pupils with SEN to be met with a professional workforce that is adequately trained with standardised work practices. Although the qualification requirements for the post of an SNA has remained virtually unchanged, the role of the SNA has evolved from what the DES intended it to be. SNAs are taking up roles and responsibilities that include teaching, classroom management, therapeutic interventions, medication and behavioural management. With regards to training, SNAs supposedly have the relevant training prior to commencing employment, however, they would welcome additional training to support their competency in executing their tasks. They seek a similar structured CPD which is available to primary school teachers. One of the important topics that emerged from data collected in this study was the issue of career progression. SNAs do not currently have a pathway to career progression. This study found that the qualifications and/or years of experience of SNAs does not lead to a progression in their chosen role. This brings a lot of criticism from SNAs with higher

qualifications such as a Level 8 or postgraduate degree, who are displeased with the lack of career progression associated with the SNA Scheme.

6.5 Strengths and limitations

There are a number of strengths in the study including the use of a cloud-based survey tool, the number of participants, and the 'voice' of SNA's. SurveyMonkey subscription plan allowed for unlimited responses up to one thousand per month. The plan gave a wider choice of question types as well as number of questions allowed per survey when compared to the free version. It also had specifically designed and formatted surveys suited to mobile phones, for iOS and Android operating systems. This plan came with 24 hour email support service. It allowed for distribution in a number of ways including sending it via social media platforms, sharing a hyperlink or a QR codes (barcode – quick read) that phones can scan to directly access the survey. Obtaining statistically significant results depends on sample size. According to Minister of State with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion Josepha Madigan TD, the number of SNAs in 2020 is 16,969. A statistically significant number of surveys factors in the size of the population and the margin of error. Margin of error, otherwise known as a percentage, which shows how much the results from the sample may deviate from the views of the overall population. Naturally, the smaller the margin of error, the closer your data reflects the opinion of the population at a given confidence level (Cloud Research, 2021).

Population Size	10,000	100,000
Sample Size Based on ±3% Margin of Error	1,000	1,100
Sample Size Based on ±5% Margin of Error	385	400
Sample Size Based on ±10% Margin of Error	100	100

The total number of participants that responded to the survey is 595 including 388 SNA's and 207 teachers. The number of SNA responses falls in the ±5% margin of error for the population size. Although the population size of teachers is far higher than the number of responses (207) 'as a very rough rule of thumb, two hundred responses will provide fairly good survey accuracy under most assumptions and parameters of a survey project. 100 responses are probably needed even for marginally acceptable accuracy' (GreatBrook, 2022, p. 2). Moreover, the 'voice' of SNAs as well as teachers' perspective on SNAs is a valuable element of the research and can be used for more targeted research moving forward.

However, there are a number of limitations in this study including survey tool plan restrictions, sample size and selection method, and lack of depth regarding source of data as there was no input from DES, FORSA or policymakers. The SurveyMonkey plan did not offer custom HTML email invitations. It did not include features like advanced branching, block randomisation, response quotas or advanced piping where one could take respondents' answers from a previous question to individualise questions on a later page in the survey. Similarly, it did not include advanced comparisons across multiple questions, cross tabulation. The study could have been stronger if the sampling method targeted schools by type: mainstream, inclusive mainstream, added Special Education unit, SEN Schools. Moreover, it would have been more robust if the study had targeted teachers by type of environment, such as, primary school teachers working in mainstream with SEN children and primary school trained working in Special Education Schools, and Special Education teachers working in SEN

schools. In retrospect interviews with DES, FORSA or policymakers would have provided useful insight. Furthermore, the study did not take SNA salary into account. In 2020, the national minimum wage is approximately €19,900 (Department of Education, 2020). Whereas the SNA point 1 salary scale (entry level) in 2020 is approximately €24,600 (DES, 2020). The earning capacity has a growth scale based on years of experience up to approximately €40,000. No upskilling or qualifications required.

6.6   Concluding remarks

This study sought to identify the range of qualifications held by SNAs working in Irish Primary schools while identifying if SNAs are taking up roles that are beyond the original remit. Moreover, it sought to identify if the State recognises/recompenses qualifications above the required benchmark. Finally, it attempted to identify the ways in which SNAs can progress professionally. As evident in the data collected, there is a wide variety of qualifications held by SNAs surveyed in Irish Primary Schools and the majority of SNAs have higher qualifications than the minimum required for the role of an SNA. Just as schools across Ireland are hiring overqualified personnel to fill the role of SNAs, the role of the SNA has evolved beyond its official remit. Fundamentally, the role of the SNA as stated in DES circulars (2002; 2005; 2014) is strictly that of a non-teaching nature, nevertheless, this study found that in practice, the role has evolved, without clear definition and proper training. Evidence points to a lack of clarity in the job description, with SNAs being expected to provide pedagogical support to individual students and whole class despite not being qualified to teach. Also, SNAs are expected to carry out a myriad of jobs that is not in line with the care remit set out by DES. Essentially, SNAs have become 'Jacks of All Trades' in most Irish schools. Most SNAs

contend that the disparity in the role of SNAs is because the role of the SNA is poorly understood by principals, teachers, parents and the SNAs themselves. It must be noted that even though most SNAs are overqualified for their roles and are taking up roles beyond their original remit, these changes are not recognised by the DES or even by schools. This study found that a large majority of SNAs are unhappy with pay and condition of service despite being overqualified and engaging in roles above their remit. Also, data points to a lack of respect and appreciation for the work SNAs do with children with SEN. Most SNAs feel undervalued and bemoan the lack of respect towards them within the working environment.

With Regards to training and CPD, data suggest that a large cohort of SNAs are suitably trained prior to working with children when SEN. Nonetheless, in terms of CPD, emphasis is more on the teaching staff and less on SNAs. Although most SNAs would like more training, the reality is that they have to source and pay for training themselves. Hence, the number of SNAs accessing DES training at any point in time is minimal. At present there are no ways for SNAs to progress professionally and for many this was deemed as disappointing. SNAs with higher qualifications and/or many years of service strongly believe that there should be a career progression path available to them. Some SNAs have indicated interest in becoming SEN teachers. Ideally, a large majority of SNAs would like the title of the SNA to be renamed as the term 'special needs' is no longer appropriate. Most SNAs feel that a change in title might lead to better access to training, respect and professionalising the workforce.

In conclusion, SNAs play an important role in assisting the teacher to support students with SEN. Their importance cannot be understated. Through the voices and opinions of

SNAs, this study brought to bear the issues that affect SNAs in the workplace. Although SNAs cited many issues of concern in working environment, this study found that SNAs are passionate about working with children with SEN and enjoy the unpredictability of their work. Therefore, it is important to match that passion with suitably trained staff. Hence, this study recommends the following. The need for continuing professional development to help SNAs meet the complex learning needs of students with SEN. Secondly, the term 'Special Needs Assistants' should be renamed as 'Inclusion Support Assistants' to reflect their focus on developing students' independence. Thirdly, the clarification of the role of the SNA by DES including expanding the current role of the SNA which is currently confined to care needs to help with therapeutic, teaching and behavioural function. Lastly, a recognisable and adaptable career progression for SNAs and professionalising the SNA workforce. Many SNAs are overqualified. Although just regarded as helpers, the role of the SNA is much more professional. SNAs spend a considerable amount of time with individual children, hence, the knowledge SNAs have on their students and their behaviours can sometimes outweigh the teachers. Therefore, professionalising the role and a path to career progression would ensure uniformity in the role in all schools across Ireland.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 SNAs comment further on their role in the classroom

COMMENTS – Perceptions of SNAs when given the opportunity to comment further on their role in the classroom
Teaching class when teacher on EPV days, dealing with multiple challenging situations with no clear plan from school, being asked to host afterschool art clubs/stage sets for Christmas (refused).
I regularly carry out the following and think it should be included and acknowledged in the job description as the child receives a more fit for purpose education from an SNA. it makes our job more interesting and complete in helping a child become independent and should be acknowledged as what we actually do. Some as follows: Find work suitable for child as they are way behind class. Simplify lessons for pupil. Breakdown concepts of learning with concrete materials. Teach groups incl Sen Child so he can learn by modelling and social skills. Monitor behaviour set up reward systems etc. On average I have two children with access but usually another three, I help who are waiting for assessment or have emotional behaviour and need help to avoid disturbing class.
Many duties!! Office work, cleaning, filing, mopping, cleaning bathrooms, supervising class alone, anything that has to be done.
Endless list I'm afraid. Sub teacher, secretary. Cleaner, general Dogs body until I stood my ground and the abuse from Management ended.
Where do I begin? I have done the job of secretary, sub teacher. I have done numerous jobs in school that are not specifically for SNAs.
In sole charge of class for the duration of a teacher training course (ranges from 1–5 days) teacher epv days, teacher absence etc. Doing the job of a caretaker also.
Supervising class, correcting student's work, cleaning, whole school photocopying, covering books, school pedestrian crossing, laminating for teachers, preparing homework copies for whole school, whole school reading, maintenance of school laptops.
Supervision of entire class, administrative duties for the whole school, organisation and distribution of lockers to entire student body (1,000 students).
Helping other children in the class that need help. There all lots of rules regarding what SNA should do and not do however if you work in a small school and a young child needs your help you are not going to say to that child sorry that's not my job. All adults working in schools are there to help and nurture a child but equally all adults should be treated equally. Just because I'm not a teacher doesn't mean I'm less of a person. I've seen teachers who aren't very good at their jobs being put on a pedestal because they are a teacher. I am very good at my job but I still feel people look down at me and put all the crappy jobs onto us!
Work is at the discretion of the principal who can abuse this. Photocopying & laminating thousands of pages and booklets to keep us in June in secondary. Grey area what is needed for Sen. Stuff left in boxes and never used.
Everything and anything. One thing I hate is that we are expected to supervise the entire class inside when it's raining, mostly alone except for a teacher popping his/ her head in the door maybe twice in half an hour.
On work placement supervising a class of 30 senior infants on my own while teacher was on lunch and was raining outside.
I do more than just care needs. I help students learn in and out of the classroom.
Teaching the children, I'm assigned to being in a classroom without a teacher present for the full day.
Therapy services implementing physio programmes.
In the past we were requested to clean windows in the school. Also requested to assist pupils washing teachers cars and gardening, moving furniture across school yard, driving the school bus during class time for class outings without any additional benefit, and expected to act as a SNA on arrival to destination. Class teacher wouldn't even thank you for doing this as it is expected and obviously doesn't understand the extra responsibility on me as driver for each student and

staff member on the bus. It has become expected of me to drive and how dare I complain if I felt uncomfortable driving for any particular reason, i.e.: weather conditions or if I was feeling unwell!
Supervision of a whole class when the teacher is out sick, supervision on yard duty, being left alone with a child who is exhibiting challenging behaviours (assaulted by same child on numerous occasions) filing, covering books.
Due to my level of qualification I have been used as a sub teacher although not paid as one. Cleaning, photocopying, preparing work in copies in core subjects, taking lessons such as cookery, art and PE.
Most of my duties would not be recognised by a SENO as being the role of an SNA
Ranges from photocopying and laminating for individual teachers, first communion art, going to church to hang it up bearing in mind Sen child wasn't in that class, overall SNAs are general dogsbodies left to their own devices to 'sort' SEN child. A lot of teachers do not take the time to even talk to these kids it's left for SNA to discipline any challenging behaviour. I have worked with many teachers and have the feeling that some not all are actually afraid of these children.
Teaching special needs class for two days in the absence of a teacher when no sub was called. Cleaning the school building. Plumbing. Bringing the principals laundry to the dry cleaners.
Washing children, OT activities, SLT activities, academic activities with children, leading lessons, supervising children, medication, behaviour management, running classrooms due to teacher being absent or course day.
Numerous. Office, cleaning, banking, shopping, supervision, first aid, list goes on and on.
Admin, teacher prep, photocopying, laminating, organising teachers' classrooms, libraries, supervising full class, taking groups to teach football/basketball teams.
School Admin. Stationary orders. A lot of admin for principal. Hanging up projects. Covering and counting books on school rental scheme. Updating medical information on children with medical needs.

COMMENTS – Breakdown of the views of SNAs when asked to expand on the topic of change in SNA title
I feel it would give us more assurance as to what we are doing as we sometime have to help a child with basic learning and this title can help us to continue to do this. I completed a year's course in classroom assisting and it is very basic help I would give a child and we as SNAs have some good ideas as to what could help a child cope with every day learning through our observations.
Teaching assistants in other countries have better access to training and education. I would hope that the same would be true in Ireland. This in turn would better able SNAs in their everyday work.
I would like it for the child, as special needs labels them, especially if they are older.
It is just a name change, still no permanency, poor pay, no professional recognition, still required to do jobs outside of remit, abuse of 72 hours, lack of respect from DES and NCSE
Students don't like to be associated with needing assistance from a 'Special Needs' assistant. The title of Classroom Assistant would eliminate that.
We need a change in the mindset of the power that be. Our jobs need to be protected; our hours protected. I find that we are not taken seriously by the DES or the NCSE and are viewed as being expendable.
Management will say that we are able to teach and will not send subs in just us ... plus we are NOT there for a teaching role even though we do it, name will NEVER be Teaching Assistants.
I feel it is more relevant to work we are doing. We are not teachers, but we are assisting in the education of children/young adults. It is so more inclusive as does not focus on special needs or specific students.
It changes from being a job primarily for the care, including emotional care, of children to a diluted teacher. Danger Sen children will be left behind.
Teachers will still lack respect for us, and the title is too broad and open to misinterpretation.
It will generalise the position and create blurred lines. The focus will no longer be on the specific children we are assigned to but on the classroom in general.
Titles don't change people it's how they are treated in the workplace by all other professionals and the department showing the same support for SNAs would be welcomed appropriately.
No, I do not think it would make a difference because it would not change the nature of the duties and care carried out and provided every day. The only change that would make a difference is clarification of our role to all our employers.
It would make a difference, but I'm not sure it'd be a good one. This would link our jobs more to the educational side of things but the children already have a teacher to look after that. The title of SNA is fine but there needs to be a recognition of the extra needs that are not 'just' care needs. We act as OT assistants, PT assistants, DLT assistants, therapists in the emotional sense of the word, the list goes on, it is NOT 'just' care needs we assist with.

Appendix 3 SNAs – difficulties in carrying out their duties

COMMENTS – The views of SNAs when asked if they faced any difficulties in carrying out their duties
The lack of respect afforded to SNAs in the role by both children and teachers. Being referred to a 'just an SNA' or a 'helper'. This attitude seems to be commonplace within most settings and is ultimately down to senior management in schools to set a respectful working environment for all. Children will show respect when it is mirrored by adult to adult. We all are adults working together with the common goal of nurturing the children in our care. The sooner SNAs are treated as work colleagues and treated respectfully as part of a team, the sooner children get the best support they need.
These duties are not in line with the role of an SNA. If we don't carry out duties, we risk disciplinary action.
We are trusted to do certain duties when it suits the school and when it does not then we are told oh that's a teacher's job.
Being asked to do duties outside of contract.
Oh, so many. Lack of communication between all parties involved with each child, i.e. parents, principal, SET team and other SNAs. Crossover between kids and SNAs and also all SNAs trying to use sensory room, computer room, games room all at same time as no timetable involved. Sensory room supposed to be 'as required' but more often than not, we all use it at same time every day with same kids ... Some teachers, esp. newly permanent, think you are their skivvy and know better than you and all your years of experience. 'Tell you' what to do and say 'you have to do what I tell you' ... Teachers and their snobby, haughty attitude are my worst daily difficulty. I also find that I am NOT EVER included in student educational plans, even though we as SNAs know our student's capabilities better than any of their teachers. We are not taken seriously.
Little or no support from management. SNA grievances are not considered.
Lack of understanding by some teachers of what our job is. Lack of respect by some. But also, the guidelines from NCSE are not workable. There needs be more discussions and understanding between NCSE/DES and SNAs. Also, I believe there is a total lack of respect from DES towards us, treating us almost like children.
Teacher treating me as personal assistant to teacher so not having time to carry out duties.
Teachers occasionally won't let me do my job and try to deploy me to do their job, e.g. preparing whole class work packs for when they are on EPV day, art displays, doing resource teachers job with slow learners.
Lack of support and respect from teachers, lack of clarity in relation to areas such as dealing with violent behaviour.
Croke Park hours which are totally unnecessary and misused and abused by Principals.
Lack of understanding on the part of mainstream teachers on the role of the SNA.
More support needed when dealing with children with challenging behaviour.
Lack of understanding about what is appropriate to ask the SNA to do. Wording of circulars and contracts allow a lot of discretion for the principals and as a result some SNAs are treated as general dog's body's around the school and asked to do highly inappropriate work.
Job getting much harder. Split between too many kids and I cannot give 100% to anyone. I think the kids suffer not to mention our mental health.
Sometimes would like heads up re curriculum planning to best support pupils. Not enough time given by Seno to support all children in my care especially as I'm on part-time hours. 75 of a day is not enough time to support 4 children throughout the day including yard.
Being pulled from students to do irrelevant work and lack of respect for our role from management.
Pressure to do things not in job description.

No support from upper management. No clear 'rules' as to what we can/should do. This year, the class teacher expects us to do a lot in teaching children but then expects us to adhere to 'your own role as an SNA' because she is 'the teacher in charge'.
Sometimes being left to do everything on my own especially if the child has a bad day.
I will be treated very poorly if I do not carry out these duties and feel bullied into tasks and duties that I should not have to do by my principal.
Sometimes it is considered a subordinate role and SNA are not allowed any input which is ridiculous depending on teacher and discretion of principal which is a clause which should be removed. Allow us to do our jobs in what we see fit. It is never just care needs. We educate by breaking down concepts. We deal with challenging behaviour and we help shape them into the independent person they will become.
Knowing what I SHOULD be doing is different to what is expected of me. Our vulnerability as SNAs; our jobs can be gone at the stroke of a SENOs pen; we are often expected to be completely in charge of some of the most vulnerable members of society. The children we care for change each year, their needs can be COMPLETELY different to what we've come across before and yet we are given no training to deal with these new needs.
That management know what our role entails and yet disregard the circulars, our contracts to have SNAs carry out duties that are not in our remit. Not enough good quality training for us to evolve within our role as an SNA, especially in challenging behaviours.
Being asked to do tasks not suitable for SNAs, criticism from a parent, lack of respect, lack of training.
As a Brain calm practitioner, being interrupted during sessions, bullying, passive aggression, ignored, used as a pawn.
Lack of communication from principal, at times not being treated as part of the staff.
No support from school management, they often interfere and escalate situations or undermine my work. Excluded from rest of school staff, separate lunch times, social outings etc. No information given to us about school planning, holidays, etc.

Appendix 4 SNAs on the issue of career progression

COMMENTS – Views of SNAs when asked to comment further on the issue of career progression
Most definitely. I am working in the same school for 30 years. Twenty as an SNA, plus have so much personal experience with Foster children etc, and it's a crying shame that I stay static now with nowhere to go, and on the same PayScale for the rest of my working life. Plus, I have so much more experience working with kids with various special needs than most of the current SEN teachers on the SET Team, and they NEVER ONCE look for my input or for any contribution from me. I find it very insulting, and stressful ON A DAILY BASIS.
SNAs spend more time with students than teachers do. They deal with children's meltdowns on a daily basis, they are assaulted regularly. If anyone has a full awareness of special needs children, it is an SNA and deserve the chance to better themselves by having the opportunity to become an SEN teacher.
We have no career path at present and cannot progress into teaching, if desired, without higher level Irish, and without giving up our jobs to fit in teaching practice. There is also no further level career wise for those who would not have an interest in teaching, but would like to specialise or progress in some area of special education.
The only people who cannot work and study to be a teacher are SNAs, yet part of teacher training is to shadow teachers. I have been shadowing teachers for six years but wouldn't be allowed to train as a teacher while working as an SNA.
Horrified at this question. Our SEN teachers are all fully qualified primary teachers with post grad qualifications including masters in SEN. Why would SNA experience equate to this?
Yes, or even if SNA have adequate qualifications, I think teaching council needs to change their criteria or be more flexible.
I would love to become an SEN teacher but have no desire to teach a class of mainstream children.
I have worked with very experienced SNA who would make amazing SEN teachers.
I have studied a level 8 degree and went and studied at Level 5 afterwards to gain insight into SNA duties after touching on topics in my degree. I would welcome this pathway for myself.
Not sure. We are not taught to teach but no reason why we couldn't.
Definitely, most teachers have no experience of students with SEN. It is not part of their training, SNAs who wish to undertake further training would have a much better understanding of the whole area.
This should definitely be an option as SNAs carry an abundance of knowledge in this area and are well equipped to become SEN teachers.
Definitely, because the years spent helping students with varying needs a lot of different skills and methodologies are learned and improved upon with experience and confidence in one's ability.
It would be nice to be able to progress further in our title. We SNAs are continuously upskilling ourselves and training outside of school time.
With a wealth of experience gained over the years that an SNA works junior teachers do tend to rely a lot on the SNA. I am always proud and happy to try help always trying to not undermine the teacher and encourage confidence within them. So, if there was a career path it's beneficial to everyone especially the children.
If this was the path, they wanted to take then there should be a way around it. I had the chance many years ago to return as a mature student, but I decided that I'd rather be an SNA.
There is no pathway for progression from any SNA course. There should at least be the option of doing a Level 8 degree for SNAs.
Makes sense to offer career progression, SNAs have a unique wealth of practical experience but do not have qualifications to match their experience, therefore remain very underpaid.

Maybe if that's what they want to do. Some SNAs would be quite happy in their current role if they had job stability and proper contacts.
I have 10 years' experience of working with Special needs children and have even travelled to London for specific training for the child that I work with. I have gained so much knowledge along the way. I am regularly doing short courses to extend my knowledge specifically with Autism and Deafness.
Absolutely. Majority of teachers either don't want to work in the area/have no passion and they're not equipped to deal with autism and challenging behaviour.
With years of experience, you are more expertise in the role than a teacher with less years of experience.
SNAs should be able to combine years of experience with add on courses.
Totally agree. Years of experience means much more than any newly trained teacher could bring.
This is a must. We should be able to go forward with our career.
Absolutely, they have first-hand experience working with all sorts of challenges children face.
This should definitely be an option as SNAs carry an abundance of knowledge in this area and are well equipped to become a SEN teacher.
Most have more life/real experience. SNA's should be recognised for courses they do and it should reflect in their wages.
Absolutely!! SNAs are very much in tune with those children attending SEN teachers and in my experience are more capable of this role.

Appendix 5 SNAs on what could be done to improve their work

COMMENTS – Views of SNAs when asked what could be done to improve their work
Clear concise policies and not worded 'at the discretion of the principal'.
Explanation of the role of SNA to some teachers who dislike having another adult in the room.
Get rid of Croke Park hours would help morale.
Clarity in the role and support from headteacher to not be exploited by teacher.
Respect from DES. Inclusion is spoken about in all their papers and proposals, yet SNAs are not included. We also need be included in BOMs and the everyday running if the school.
Remove the unpaid hours. They are abused in most schools and are In some cases used to silence any objections. To be honest the pay is pretty poor and asking people to do more (unpaid!) is unfair. It's a fairly stressful job as it is and that is not acknowledged. The extra hours leave a bitter taste – especially as it is twice the number that teachers do.
Fair employment conditions, we are the only public service workers who are never permanent.
CPD, at present SNAs source and finance this ourselves. Many courses only open to teachers.
Informing Principals and teachers on the role and duties of SNA.
Clarity on role – removal of 'at discretion of principal' in contract.
More support and training from management and department of education.
Be treated as an equal from the department of education be entitled to the same as teachers.
Professional status given to our role.
Treated and respect from the SENO as a vital individual for the children and school.
Job security. This must be the only government job where there is absolutely no security of tenure. You can lose your job at the drop of a hat at any moment. Even after having been years in the same school! Surely something could be done to address this. There is always a need for extra help in every school. Why not allocate a certain number based on pupil numbers and add temporary SNAs as needed. These could even be training posts and assign the more qualified SNAs to the most needed in that eventuality.
Proper Role identified so that can't be made to do anything.
Training training and training, I cant stress the importance of this. There is nothing available for SNAs for professional development.
Acknowledging the important role SNAs play in supporting children with special needs.
Needs to be a greater level of respect particularly for SNAs with many years of experience. The school that I work in could not run without us and we actually make up the main body of staff although this is not always recognised.
Improved working conditions for SNA, e.g. a small number of discretionary days off during term time, abolishing the 72 hours and working for month of June in secondary school.
The role needs to be seen as a professional role rather than a caring role.
A computerised report system to be completed by the principal and signed by THE SNA on what duties are ACTUALLY done during the 72 hours before this nonsense of a requirement can be disposed of completely it's this 72 hours that lowers the position of the SNA in the eyes of teaching staff SNAS are shown to be treated like a sort of uneducated skinny who can be asked to do anything and they cannot object where something is regulated it will be abused.
Higher level of qualifications needed.
Same leave entitlements including course days as teachers.
Route for progression.
Courses provided free to upskill, allow SNAs attend courses that are provided free to teachers.
Abolish the 72 hours especially for secondary school SNAs as we already work longer hours daily than our primary school counterparts for the same salary.

Be treated as equally as teachers. And pay scale should go up to 25 the same as teachers – at present SNAs only goes to 15.
The opportunity to progress, some sort of grading system for obtaining qualifications etc.
Clarification on our role. Less 'at the discretion of the principle or BOM'.

Appendix 6: Distribution of male and female staff education in the EU

Distribution of male and female staffs in primary, secondary and third level education in the EU

Country	ISCED 1 Primary		ISCED 2–3 Second level		ISCED 5–8 Third level	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Denmark	30.9	69.1	43.6	56.4	58.8	41.2
Greece	29.8	70.2	41.7	58.3	67.3	32.7
Luxembourg	24.2	75.8	46.9	53.1	62.1	37.9
Spain	23.8	76.2	43.1	56.9	57.5	42.5
Sweden	22.9	77.1	36.1	63.9	55.7	44.3
Finland	20.2	79.8	34.1	65.9	48.9	51.1
Portugal	19.9	80.1	29.9	70.1	55.6	44.4
Belgium	18.2	81.8	37.1	62.9	51.4	48.6
France	17.9	82.1	40.6	59.4	62.1	37.9
Cyprus	17.6	82.4	34.4	65.6	58.9	41.1
United Kingdom	15.9	84.1	39.9	60.1	55.7	44.3
EU 28	15.4	84.6	36.0	64.0	58.4	41.6
Poland	14.6	85.4	30.7	69.3	55.6	44.4
Netherlands	13.8	86.2	47.9	52.1	55.6	44.4
Germany	13.2	86.8	37.6	62.4	61.8	38.2
Ireland	**13.0**	**87.0**	**29.0**	**71.0**	**56.0**	**44.0**
Romania	11.0	89.0	29.3	70.7	50.6	49.4
Slovakia	10.3	89.7	25.6	74.4	54.6	45.4
Malta	9.9	90.1	34.1	65.9	64.7	35.3
Estonia	8.9	91.1	23.8	76.2	51.1	48.9
Austria	8.4	91.6	34.9	65.1	57.3	42.7
Latvia	7.2	92.8	17.5	82.5	44.3	55.7
Croatia	6.4	93.6	29.4	70.6	52.0	48.0
Czech Republic	6.0	94.0	32.1	67.9	59.9	40.1
Bulgaria	5.4	94.6	21.0	79.0	51.9	48.1
Italy	4.1	95.9	29.1	70.9	62.7	37.3
Hungary	3.2	96.8	29.7	70.3	57.9	42.1
Slovenia	2.8	97.2	26.8	73.2	58.9	41.1
Lithuania	2.8	97.2	18.5	81.5	43.9	56.1
Turkey	41.8	58.2	50.6	49.4	57.2	42.8
Norway	25.0	75.0	37.1	62.9	54.5	45.5
Macedonia	18.5	81.5	42.0	58.0	50.1	49.9
Iceland	18.2	81.8	18.4	81.6	:	:
Switzerland	18.2	81.8	51.3	48.7	65.7	34.3
Serbia	13.6	86.4	35.3	64.7	55.4	44.6

▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮
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Date: xx/xx/2019

MA Thesis
Primary School Special Needs Assistants: An investigation of the role, function, and expectations of this post in Ireland

Dear Principal XXXXXX,

I am pursuing a research MA at Cork Institute of Technology; as the title above suggest I'm building a profile of Special Needs Assistants in Irish Primary Schools to improve the system for children and staff alike. Could you please circulate this mail to your Teaching and SNA staff in your school.

No names are sought, surveys are GDPR compliant and you may opt out the survey at any point. I appreciate your time and I value your contribution. Thank you.

If you work as an SNA click on 'Special Needs Assistants' – Survey 1: Special Needs Assistants
If you are a Primary School; Resource; or SEN Teacher please click on the 'Teachers' – Survey 2: Teachers

Alternatively, these surveys can be accessed by scanning a QR codes with your mobile phone. I have attached a Notice Board Poster with the bar-codes. I am happy to send you a printed copy (email address below)

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me. My email address is ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ and my phone number is ▮▮▮▮▮

Kindest regards,

_____

Imaobong Essien

Appendix 8 Special Needs Assistant Questionnaire (SNA)

I am conducting research on the role and duties of Special Needs Assistants as part of my MA degre in Cork Institute of Technology and I would really like to find out how you view your role. I value you contribution.

1. Are you

- ○ Male
- ○ Female

2. Your age group is

- ○ 18-24
- ○ 25-34
- ○ 35-44
- ○ 45-54
- ○ 55-64
- ○ 65+

3. How many years have you been working as an SNA?

- ○ Less than 1 year
- ○ 1 - 3 years
- ○ 4 - 6 years
- ○ 7 - 9 years
- ○ 10 or more years

4. What is your current employment status?

- ○ Full whole time employment
- ○ Part-time employee
- ○ Casual employee
- ○ Other (please specify)
- ○ Fixed term and contract
- ○ Government's internship scheme

[   ]

5. Please indicate the type of setting you are working in

- ○ Special needs school
- ○ Special class in mainstream school
- ○ Supporting student in mainstream class
- ○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

6. In your role as SNA do you ...(tick all that apply)

- [ ] Assist pupils with feeding/eating
- [ ] Assist pupils with administration of medication
- [ ] Assist pupils with toileting
- [ ] Assist pupils with general hygiene
- [ ] Assist pupils with typing or writing
- [ ] Assist children board / alight from school buses
- [ ] Assist pupils with class work set by the teacher
- [ ] Tidy classroom in which the pupil with special needs is/are being taught
- [ ] Help prepare work spaces and materials for pupils with teacher
- [ ] Prepare work spaces and materials for pupils on your own
- [ ] Support teacher in preparing Individual Education Plans for pupils
- [ ] Develop Individual Education Plans on your own
- [ ] Other (please specify)

- [ ] Correct / grade students' work
- [ ] Create assignments for students
- [ ] Plan lessons for pupils
- [ ] Supervise whole class if teacher is out of classroom (even for short periods)
- [ ] Teach whole class to provide cover for teacher absence (even for short periods)
- [ ] Observe pupils as they work in the learning environment
- [ ] Assist on out-of-school visits, walks and similar activities
- [ ] Carry out therapeutic interventions for pupils
- [ ] Support the work of outside professionals, such as Speech Therapists and Occupational Therapists
- [ ] Attend school/class planning meetings
- [ ] Attend Parent-Teacher meetings

7. Do you have experience with ...(tick all that apply)

- [ ] Physical disability
- [ ] Intellectual disabilities (below-average IQ / lack of daily living skills)
- [ ] Learning disability (academic skills: reading / writing / maths etc.)
- [ ] Social/Emotional disorders / conditions
- [ ] Other (please specify)

- [ ] Mental health disorders / conditions
- [ ] Visual impairments
- [ ] Hearing impairments
- [ ] Sensory disorders / conditions

8. From the list below, pick the top three reasons why you chose to become an SNA

- [ ] the challenges / unpredictability
- [ ] Working with children is my passion
- [ ] It fits with my family life
- [ ] Other (please specify)

- [ ] I have a child with SEN
- [ ] to jump start into another line of work

9. Please indicate your highest level of education

○ Leaving certificate or equivalent

○ QQI Level 3 (Fetac)

○ QQI Level 4 (Fetac)

○ QQI Level 5 (Fetac)

○ QQI Level 6 (Fetac)

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

○ BA (Ordinary) Degree Level 7

○ BA (Honours) Degree Level 8

○ Postgraduate Masters / Diploma Level 9

○ Postgraduate Doctorate Level 10

10. Did you undertake some sort of training in the area of special needs before commencing employment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, (please specify)

[   ]

11. Do you think the training you received adequately prepared you for your role as SNA? On a scale of 1 – 10, (1 = 'Not prepared' and 10 = 'Well prepared')

0   10

○————————————————————————————————— [   ]

12. Did you receive training in ...(tick all that apply)

☐ role of an SNA

☐ duties of an SNA

☐ Inclusion, equality, diversity

☐ Children's rights

☐ Challenging behaviour

☐ Assistive technology

☐ Child protection procedures

☐ Physical disabilities

☐ Intellectual disabilities

☐ Learning disability

☐ Other (please specify)

[   ]

☐ Social/emotional disorders

☐ Mental illness / disorders

☐ Visual impairments

☐ Hearing impairments

☐ Sensory disorders

☐ First Aid Responder (FAR)

☐ Health & safety

☐ ICT

☐ Individual Education plans (IEP)

13. I'd LIKE training in ...(tick all that apply)

☐ role of an SNA	☐ Social/emotional disorders
☐ duties of an SNA	☐ Mental illness / disorders
☐ Inclusion, equality, diversity	☐ Visual impairments
☐ Children's rights	☐ Hearing impairments
☐ Challenging behaviour	☐ Sensory disorders
☐ Assistive technology	☐ First Aid Responder (FAR)
☐ Child protection procedures	☐ Health & safety
☐ Physical disabilities	☐ ICT
☐ Intellectual disabilities	☐ Individual Education plans (IEP)
☐ Learning disability	
☐ Other (please specify)	

[   ]

14. Indicate your opinion for **each** statement

	Disagree	Somewhat	Agree
My educational background has prepared me to support children with special needs	○	○	○
The training I received prior to my employment prepared me for my role as a SNA	○	○	○
I have been adequately trained to support children with a variety of disabilities in the classroom	○	○	○
I am confident in my ability to support children with special education needs	○	○	○
I am comfortable supporting children with all types of special education needs	○	○	○
I am sometimes anxious about my role of as an SNA	○	○	○
I need more training in order to appropriately support pupils with special education needs in my care	○	○	○

I feel comfortable in working collaboratively with the special education teacher	○	○	○
I need more training for my role as an SNA	○	○	○
I would welcome the idea of a professional institute for SNAs	○	○	○

15. Have you carried out duties that are not part of your designated SNA role?

○ Yes

○ No

If yes (please specify)

[ ]

16. What difficulties, if any, do you face in carrying out duties?

[ ]

17. Do you think that changing the SNA title to 'teaching assistant' will make a difference in your profession?

○ Yes

○ No

Why (please specify)

[ ]

18. Do you think that the current qualification benchmark for SNA role is adequate?

○ Yes

○ No

Comment

[ ]

19. Do you think there should be a path for SNAs with years of experience to become qualified SEN teachers?

○ Yes

○ No

Comment

[ ]

20. What could be done to improve your work as an SNA

1.

2.

3.

Any further comments welcome

I am conducting research on the qualification profile of Primary School and SEN Teachers in Ireland as part of my MA degree in Cork Institute of Technology and I would really like your perspective. No names or identifying data is sought and you may stop the survey at any point you wish. I appreciate your time and I value your contribution.

1. Are you

○ Male

○ Female

2. Your age group is

○ 18-24   ○ 45-54

○ 25-34   ○ 55-64

○ 35-44   ○ 65+

3. Please indicate your qualification/s (tick all that apply)

○ Bachelor of Arts – Level 8   ○ Postgraduate Diploma (Special Education Needs)

○ Bachelor of Education B.Ed. in Primary Teaching   ○ Postgraduate Doctorate Level 10

○ Professional Master of Education (PME)

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

4. Teaching Council registration

○ Route 1 - Primary

○ Route 3 - Further Education

○ Route 4 - Montessori / other (restricted recognition)

○ Registration with Conditions

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

5. Did you gain your teaching qualification in Ireland?

○ Yes

○ No

If no, please say where you qualified

[   ]

6. Did you undertake some sort of training in the area of special needs before commencing employment?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, (please specify)

[   ]

7. Your employment position is ...

○ Primary School Teacher

○ SEN Teacher

○ Resource Teacher

○ Learning Support Teacher

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

8. How many years have you been working in this role?

○ Less than 1 year   ○ 7 - 9 years

○ 1 - 3 years   ○ 10 or more years

○ 4 - 6 years

9. What is your current employment status?

○ Permanent employment   ○ Non-casual part-time

○ Regular part-time   ○ Casual part-time

○ Temporary whole-time

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

10. Please indicate the type of setting you are working in

○ Mainstream Primary School

○ Special Educational Needs [SEN] Primary School

○ Special Class / Unit attached to mainstream Primary School

○ Working with individuals / groups in mainstream Primary School

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

11. Have you experience working with children who have ...(tick all that apply)

☐ Physical disabilities   ☐ Mental illness disorders / conditions

☐ General Learning disabilities [GLD]   ☐ Visual impairments

☐ Specific Learning disability [SLD]   ☐ Hearing impairments

☐ Social/Emotional disorders / conditions   ☐ Sensory disorders / conditions

☐ Other (please specify)

[   ]

12. From the list, pick 3 reasons why you chose to work as a teacher?

☐ The challenges / unpredictability   ☐ It fits with my family life (school holidays)

☐ Working with children is my passion   ☐ Qualified as a Primary School teacher

☐ My qualification is in the area of Special Needs

☐ Other (please specify)

[   ]

13. How many children a week do you typically work with ..

○ The whole class   ○ 8-10 children

○ 1-3 children   ○ 10+ children

○ 4-7 children

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

14. Where do you typically work with these children ...

○ In the main classroom   ○ In the hallway

○ In a dedicated resource room   ○ Wherever we can find a space

○ A free meeting room

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

15. How common is support needed in the following

	Uncommon	Somewhat common	Very common
Literacy learning support	○	○	○
Numeracy learning support	○	○	○
Behavioural challenges	○	○	○
Specific Learning Disability	○	○	○
Mild General Learning Disability	○	○	○
Moderate General Learning Disability	○	○	○
Children from the Travelling Community	○	○	○
English as an Additional Language (EAL)	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

[   ]

16. In your role, do you …(tick all that apply)

- ☐ Assist pupils with feeding/eating
- ☐ Assist pupils with administration of medication
- ☐ Assist pupils with toileting
- ☐ Assist pupils with general hygiene
- ☐ Assist children board / alight from school buses
- ☐ Prepare work spaces and materials for pupils
- ☐ Develop / implement Individual Education Plans
- ☐ Develop programmes of learning activities
- ☐ Plan, prepare and research lessons
- ☐ Teach individuals / groups within or outside the class
- ☐ Other (please specify)

- ☐ Prepare and adapt teaching materials
- ☐ Make use of special facilities and/or equipment
- ☐ Review referral, history and assessment data
- ☐ Check / assess students' work and give feedback
- ☐ Attend meetings and reviews
- ☐ Liaise with parents
- ☐ Liaise relevant agencies / professionals
- ☐ Write reports
- ☐ Coordinate the work of support staff

[   ]

17. Did you receive training in ...(tick all that apply)

☐ role of an SEN teacher	☐ Social/emotional disorders
☐ duties of an SEN Teacher	☐ Mental illness / disorders
☐ Inclusion, equality, diversity	☐ Visual impairments
☐ Children's rights	☐ Hearing impairments
☐ Challenging behaviour	☐ Sensory disorders
☐ Assistive technology	☐ First Aid Responder (FAR)
☐ Child protection procedures	☐ Health & safety
☐ Physical disabilities	☐ ICT
☐ Intellectual disabilities	☐ Individual Education plans (IEP)
☐ Learning disability	
☐ Other (please specify)	

[   ]

18. Do you think the teacher training you received adequately prepared you to work with children with Special Needs? On a scale of 1 – 10 (1 = 'Not prepared' and 10 = 'Well prepared')

1   10

○————————————————————————————————————   [   ]

19. I'd **LIKE** training in ...(tick all that apply)

☐ role of an SEN teacher	☐ Social/emotional disorders
☐ duties of an SEN Teacher	☐ Mental illness / disorders
☐ Inclusion, equality, diversity	☐ Visual impairments
☐ Children's rights	☐ Hearing impairments
☐ Challenging behaviour	☐ Sensory disorders
☐ Assistive technology	☐ First Aid Responder (FAR)
☐ Child protection procedures	☐ Health & safety
☐ Physical disabilities	☐ ICT
☐ Intellectual disabilities	☐ Individual Education plans (IEP)
☐ Learning disability	
☐ Other (please specify)	

[   ]

20. In the last 3 years have you participated in any type of continuous professional development [CPD]? IF **NO** skip to **Q24**

○ Yes

○ No

21. Which of the following types of CPD activities? ...(tick all that apply)

☐ Self-reflection   ☐ Classroom management

☐ ICT in the classroom   ☐ Student assessment and evaluation

☐ Behaviour management   ☐ Knowledge and understanding of best practice in special education

☐ School management and administration

                                         ☐ Content and performance standards for students with SEN

☐ Teaching in a multicultural setting

                                         ☐ Teaching students with a wide range of disabilities

☐ Differentiating lessons

☐ Other (please specify)

[   ]

22. What is the impact of these CPD activities on your development as a teacher?

[   ]

23. What was the CPD format / delivery...(tick all that apply)

☐ Taught courses / attend classes   ☐ Mentoring or peer observation

☐ Online / distance learning   ☐ Conferences/ conventions

☐ Accredited / certified courses   ☐ Individual or collaborative research

☐ Non-cert / general learning courses   ☐ Participating in a network of teachers

☐ Seminars / workshops   ☐ Observation visits to other schools

☐ Other (please specify)

[   ]

24. I would LIKE professional development training in ...(tick all that apply)

☐ Self-reflection   ☐ Classroom management

☐ ICT in the classroom   ☐ Student assessment and evaluation

☐ Behaviour management   ☐ Knowledge and understanding of best practice in special education

☐ School management and administration   ☐ Content and performance standards for students with SEN

☐ Teaching in a multicultural setting   ☐ Teaching students with a wide range of disabilities

☐ Differentiating lessons

☐ Other (please specify)

[_____]

25. Indicate your opinion for **each** statement

	Disagree	Somewhat	Agree
My educational background directly prepared me to teach children with SEN	○	○	○
I have been adequately trained to teach children with a variety of disabilities	○	○	○
My knowledge of special needs is general	○	○	○
I need more training in order to appropriately teach pupils with SEN	○	○	○
A Special Education Needs teacher is qualified to be a Primary School teacher	○	○	○
A Primary School teacher is qualified to be a Special Education Needs teacher	○	○	○
I would welcome the idea of a professional institute for Special Needs Assistants	○	○	○
Specific training is necessary to teach children with SEN	○	○	○
Primary School training is sufficient to work as a SEN teacher	○	○	○

26. In the last 18 months, have you received appraisal or feedback from?

○ The principal

○ Other teachers

○ External bodies e.g. DES Inspector

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

27. Do you currently have SNA support in your class?

○ Yes full-time

○ Yes part-time

○ Occasionally / as needed

○ No

28. Special Needs Assistants [SNA's]...(tick all that apply)

☐ help with IEP preparation   ☐ help with classroom management

☐ help with assigned child's lessons   ☐ help with assigned child's homework

☐ help with checking assigned child's work   ☐ help supervise class (if you need to leave the room briefly)

☐ Comment

[   ]

29. What are the biggest challenges you face working in your role?

1. [   ]

2. [   ]

3. [   ]

30. Any further comments welcome

[   ]

An Roinn Oideachais Education and Skills		agus Scileanna Department of
Rannog Oideachais Section		Speisialta Special Education
Cor na Madadh		Cornamaddy
Átha Luain Athlone		
Co. na hlarmhí Co.		Westmeath

AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS

Circular 0030/2014

Circular to the Management Authorities of Primary Schools, Special Schools, Secondary, Community and Comprehensive Schools and the Chief Executive Officers of the Educational Training Boards

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme to support teachers in meeting the care needs of some children with special educational needs, arising from a disability.

1. Summary of Circular

 The main issues addressed in this Circular are:

- This Circular clarifies and restates the purpose of the SNA scheme, which is to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate their attendance at school and to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills. **(Section 2: Introduction and Section 3: The SNA Scheme)**

- It provides details of the **primary care needs** for which SNA support will usually be provided and details the types of **secondary care associated tasks** which SNAs may often perform, but only once they have been allocated on the basis of a requirement to provide for primary care needs: **(Section 4: Care Needs)**

- The Circular clarifies the role of the Classroom Teacher and Resource/Learning Support Teachers to provide for the education of a child, and the role of an SNA to support those teachers in assisting with care needs **(Section 5: The Role of the Classroom Teacher, Resource Teacher and SNA)**

- The role that professional reports play in supporting the SNA scheme is set out. While professional reports play a valuable role in identifying the needs of a child, responsibility for deciding on the quantum of educational supports to be provided to schools rests with the NCSE, in accordance with DES policy: **(Section 6: The Role of Medical and other Professional Reports)**

- The Circular details the circumstances in which SNA support will be provided for behaviour related care needs. SNA support will only be provided for behaviour related care needs where there is a clear diagnosis of EBD/SEBD, or a behavioural disorder in conjunction with another disability, and also where it is clear that behavioural management strategies have not been successful to date, and where it is demonstrated how access to SNA support can assist the child: **(Section 7: SNA Support for Pupils with Behavioural Care Needs)**

- Details of the particular requirements for SNA support for children with sensory impairment are included: **(Section 8: SNA support for Children with Visual or Hearing Impairment.**

- The Circular provides details of the NCSE allocation process, which is designed to allocate a quantum of SNA support to schools annually to cater for the care needs of qualifying children. **(Section 9: NCSE Allocation process, Section 10: Allocation of Quantum of Support for Schools)**

- Pupils should access the support of an SNA based on their level of needs arising during the school day. The responsibility of schools in relation to the management and deployment of SNAs and requirements to ensure that pupils can develop independent living skills are detailed at **(Section 11: Access to SNA Support, Section 12: Role of School to Manage SNA Support)**

- All SNA allocations are subject to annual review by the NCSE. All allocations will be time bound, made initially for a period of three years, subject to annual review, and subject to a full re-assessment at the end of the three year period. **(Section 13: Annual Review and Section 14: Time bound Allocation)**

- Schools are required to put in place a Personal Pupil Plan (PPP) including a care plan for all pupils availing of SNA support. Schools who employ SNAs must have a clear policy in place, as part of the school planning process to manage and deploy SNAs: **(Section 15: Personal Pupil Plan (PPP))**

- The importance of paying cognisance to the viewpoint of the child in reviewing the level of access to SNA required is set out at **(Section 16: The View of the Child)**

- The policy in relation to SNA deployment at Post Primary school level is detailed: **(Section 17: Post Primary SNA Allocation)**

- Details of how parents or schools may appeal the level of SNA support allocated for a child **(Section 18: Appeal to School and Section 19: NCSE Appeals Process)**

2. Introduction

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those

pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

The Special Needs Assistant scheme has been a key factor in ensuring the successful inclusion of children with special educational needs into mainstream education, and also with providing care support to pupils who are enrolled in special schools and special classes.

Since the criteria for the SNA scheme were last set out in DES Circular 07/02, there have been a number of developments in relation to the provision of special educational supports to schools. This includes; the establishment of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the expansion of National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS); the establishment of the Special Education Support Services (SESS); new school transport and Bus Escort arrangements; and the provision of additional learning support and resource teachers for Primary and Post-Primary schools.

In 2011, the DES published a comprehensive Value for Money and Policy Review of the SNA scheme which made a number of recommendations with regard to the future operation of the SNA scheme. This Review found that the SNA Scheme is supporting schools in meeting the needs of students with disabilities, who also have significant care needs, and that the SNA scheme has assisted in enabling as many students as possible to be included in mainstream schools.

However, the Review also found that the purpose of the scheme and the allocation process is generally not well understood within schools or by parents. It found that the deployment of SNAs in schools had in practice moved away from the objectives originally envisaged, which was to provide for children's care needs, and had moved towards SNA involvement in behavioural, therapeutic, pedagogical/teaching and administrative duties.

It recommended that the criteria for allocation of support should be restated and clarified for both parents and schools.

The NCSE has also recently published a number of policy advice papers in relation to the provision of services for children with special educational needs, including: 'The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes', 'The Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children', 'The Education of Students With Challenging Behaviour Arising from Severe Emotional Disturbance/Behaviour' and 'Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs', which make a number of recommendations in relation to the provision of SNA support.

This Circular replaces DES Circulars 07/02 and 09/2009. It should be read in conjunction with:

- DES Circular 0071/2011: Public Service (Croke park) Agreement – Special Needs Assistants http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0071_2011.pdf

- DES Circular 058/2006: Redundancy Arrangements for SNA
  and DES Circulars 12/05 and 15/05 on Contract of Employment
  for SNA www.education.ie
- Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan process http://www.ncse.ie/uploads/1/final_report.pdf
- Special Educational Needs – A Continuum of Support http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Educational-Psychologist-NEPS/neps_special_needs_resource_pack.pdf
- A Continuum of Support for Post Primary Schools http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Educational-Psychologist-NEPS-/neps_post_primary_continuum_resource_pack.pdf
- Behaviour, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) – A Continuum of Support http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Educational-Psychologist-NEPS/neps_besd_continuum_teacher_guide.pdf
- Sp ED Circular 02/05: Organisation of Teaching resources for Pupils who need Additional Support in Mainstream Primary Schools http://www.education.ie/en/Advanced-Search/?q=Sp%20ed%2002/05
- DES Circular 08/02: Applications for full or Part Time Resource Teachers www.education.ie
- Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post Primary Guidelines http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/EvaluationReports-Guidelines/insp_inclusion_students_sp_ed_needs_pp_guidelines_pdf.pdf
- Guidelines for Developing School Codes of Behaviour http://www.newb.ie/codes_of_behaviour_guidelines/introduction.asp

3. The SNA Scheme

SNA support is provided specifically to assist recognised primary, post primary and special schools to cater for the care needs of pupils with disabilities in an educational context, where the nature of these care needs have been outlined in professional reports as being so significant that a pupil will require adult assistance in order to be able to attend school and to participate in education.

SNA support is provided in recognised primary and post primary schools only. SNA support is not provided in centres which are not recognised schools, but which may be providing services for young people, such as medical facilities, youth detention centres, high support units, hospitals, crèche and pre school settings. Such facilities will generally have a care dimension incorporated into their own staffing arrangements.

SNA support is also not provided for adults attending education centres or to third level education colleges which also have their own arrangements to cater for students with special needs.

Applications from recognised schools under this scheme should be made to the NCSE, as set out in Section 9 of this Circular.

Applications for SNA support will be considered under this scheme where medical or other relevant professional reports set out that a pupil has significant care needs arising from:

(i)   a significant medical need, or

(ii)   a significant impairment of physical or sensory function.

Section 6 of the Circular provides details on the role that medical and other relevant professional reports and assessments play in assisting to identify the care needs of children and guiding the allocation process.

Section 7 of this Circular sets out the circumstances under which SNA support may be allocated to provide for the care needs of pupils whose disability categorisation is that of Emotional Behaviour Disorder or Severe Emotional Behavioural Disorder, or where the care needs specified relate to behavioural disturbance or behavioural related care needs.

4. Care Needs

All children require care and attention in school. This is particularly true in relation to younger children and infants. All schools have responsibility to provide for the care and well-being of all the pupils who attend their schools including children with special educational needs.

It should not be assumed that all children who have special educational needs or who have been diagnosed as having a disability, require access to SNA support.

It should also not be assumed that the allocation of additional adult SNA support is a prerequisite for a student with special educational needs to attend school.

The purpose of the SNA scheme is to provide for the <u>significant additional care needs</u> which some pupils with special educational needs may have.

It is therefore important to set out what constitutes significant care needs under the terms of this scheme, and which will normally qualify for SNA support under the scheme.

For a child to require or qualify for access to SNA support, a child must have an assessed disability. The care needs outlined must be of such significance that they are beyond that which would normally be expected to be provided to a child by the child's class teacher, support teacher, or other school teachers, or beyond the level of assistance which could be offered to the student by his/ or her fellow pupils in school. The care needs must also be those beyond which could normally be provided for by alternative supportive approaches or modifications of the classroom environment, teaching approaches and/or assistive technology or specialist equipment.

The type of significant care needs that pupils may have can be varied, depending on the nature or level of the disability or sensory impairment that a child may have. Given the variety of medical conditions that children may suffer from, it is not possible to list all of the care needs that may arise here.

However, examples of the <u>primary care needs</u> which would be considered significant – and which might require SNA support are:

●   **Assistance with feeding:** where a child with special needs requires adult assistance and where the extent of assistance required would overly disrupt normal teaching time.

●   **Administration of medicine:** where a child requires adult assistance to administer medicine and where the extent of assistance required would overly disrupt normal teaching time.

●   **Assistance with toileting and general hygiene: (including catheterisation)** where a child with special needs cannot independently self-toilet, and until such time as they are able to do so.

●   **Assistance with mobility and orientation:** on an ongoing basis including assisting a child or children to access the school, the classroom, with accessing school transport (where provided, school Bus Escorts should, in the first instance, assist a child to access school transport), or helping a child to avoid hazards in or surrounding the school. (Every effort must be made by the school to provide opportunities for independence, e.g. the removal of hazards.)

●   **Assisting teachers to provide supervision in the class, playground and school grounds**: at recreation, assembly, and dispersal times including assistance with arriving and departing from school for pupils with special needs where the school has made a robust case that existing teaching resources cannot facilitate such supervision.

●   Non-nursing **care needs associated with specific medical conditions**: such as frequent epileptic seizures or for pupils who have fragile health.

●   **Care needs requiring frequent interventions including withdrawal of a pupil from a classroom when essential**: This may be for safety or personal care reasons, or where a child may be required to leave the class for medical reasons or due to distress on a frequent basis.

●   **Assistance with moving and lifting of children, operation of hoists and equipment.**

●   **Assistance with severe communication difficulties** including enabling curriculum access for pupils with physical disabilities or sensory needs (See also Section 9) and those with significant, and identified social and emotional difficulties. Under the direction of the teacher, this might include assistance with assistive technology equipment, typing or handwriting, supporting transition, assisting with supervision at recreation, dispersal times etc.

The tasks noted above are the primary care support tasks for which access to SNA support will normally be provided.

The following tasks are the type of <u>**secondary care associated tasks**</u> which SNAs will often perform, but only once they have been allocated on the basis of the <u>primary care support tasks</u> listed above. The indicative list of secondary associated tasks listed below is not definitive and is reflective of the tasks detailed in Circulars 08/02 and 71/2011.

The associated support tasks which may be carried out, but which would not in themselves normally constitute a reason for the allocation of SNA support include:

●   Preparation and tidying of workspaces and classrooms or assisting a child who is not physically able to perform such tasks to prepare and tidy a workspace, to present materials, to display work, or to transition from one lesson activity to another. To assist with cleaning of materials.

- Assistance with the development of Personal Pupil Plans for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on developing a care plan to meet the care needs of the pupil concerned and the review of such plans.

- Assist teachers and/or Principal in maintaining a journal or care monitoring system for pupils including details of attendance and care needs. Assist in preparation of school files and materials relating to care and assistance required in class by students with special needs.

- Planning for activities and classes where there may be additional care requirements associated with particular activities, liaising with class teachers and other teachers such as the resource teacher and school principal, attending meetings with parents, SENO, NEPS Psychologists, or school staff meetings with the agreement and guidance of class teacher/principal.

- Assistance with enabling a pupil to access therapy or psycho-educational programmes such as anger management or social skills classes, under the direction of qualified personnel[1], including class teachers or support teachers.

- Assistance to attend or participate in out of school activities: walks, or visits, where such assistance cannot be provided by teaching staff.

5. The Role of the Classroom Teacher and Resource/Learning Support Teachers and the Role of an SNA to support those teachers

Students with special educational needs can have very complex learning needs and should be taught by qualified and experienced teachers who are equipped with the necessary skills to meet the needs of these students.

SNAs are recruited specifically to assist in the care needs of pupils with disabilities in an educational context. SNAs therefore do not have a teaching/pedagogical role and it would not be appropriate for pupils with special needs to be taught by unqualified personnel.

Section 22 (1) of the Education Act 1998 states the primacy of the teacher in the education and personal development of students in schools. The classroom teacher is responsible for educating all pupils in his/her class, including any pupil with a special educational need. The class teacher has primary responsibility for the progress and care of all pupils in his/her classroom, including pupils with special educational needs.

Therapy interventions such as speech and language and physiotherapy services are often provided to students who require such therapy in schools by HSE medical professionals.
The role of the SNA is to support the care needs of a child. Therefore, while it is appropriate for SNAs to assist students to access therapy support in schools, or to assist a therapist in providing support for a child or assist the child to preform therapy tasks directed by a therapist, it is not appropriate for an SNA to be expected to be responsible for the management or provision of therapy services in view of the particular skill-set required to deliver therapeutic interventions. Accordingly, the delivery of therapies is not in itself a reason to warrant the allocation of an

SNA post nor can the provision of SNA support be made to compensate for a lack of therapy provision by qualified personnel.

It is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to ensure that each pupil is taught in a stimulating and supportive classroom environment where all pupils feel equal and valued. The teacher will have access to all information that is likely to be relevant to teaching or supervising a pupil with special educational needs. The classroom teacher also has a central role in identifying and responding to pupils with additional needs. These responses will be informed and assisted by collaboration with colleagues, parents/guardians and others such as the school's NEPS psychologist and the local SENO.

The classroom teacher will also make specific accommodations for a pupil within the class as a result of concerns about a pupil's progress, application, communication, behaviour or interaction with peers.

When a pupil with significant and complex care needs has access to support from a SNA the classroom teacher will work closely with the SNA. However the class teacher continues to have primary responsibility for teaching and learning and for the social and emotional development and progress of the pupil.

Though the SNA can provide useful assistance to the teacher in ensuring that the pupil is able to access education, the role of the SNA is not to provide additional tuition, as this is the role of qualified learning support/resource teachers who may assist the teacher to provide additional teaching to pupils with special educational needs.

Additional Teaching Support

Many children with significant special educational needs require additional teaching support in schools[1]. In such circumstances, the classroom teacher will be supported by a resource teacher/ /learning support teacher, who are fully qualified teachers who will have access to additional training in the area of special education, and who will work closely with the class teacher to provide additional teaching support for children with special educational needs (SEN).

The classroom teacher and resource /learning support teacher will consider ways in which the curriculum can be differentiated or adapted to suit the needs of individual pupils so as to make the best use of the additional teaching hours. This may also involve identifying the most

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[1] Access to resource teaching/learning support is provided to schools either under the General Allocation Model or through additional resource teaching hours allocated to schools in respect of individual pupils in line with criteria set down by the Department of Education and Skills. The criteria specify the level or number of additional hours to be provided to pupils according to the category or type of need for which they have been assessed. The allocation is made to schools by NCSE SENOs.

appropriate teaching strategies and programmes to meet the child's needs. Parents are typically consulted as part of this process.

Resource/learning support can be provided in a variety of ways. The support teacher might team teach by working in the classroom with the class teacher or withdraw students in small groups and/or individually for a period of time (depending upon the nature of pupils needs) for intensive teaching of key skills.

Whereas the SNA may assist to ensure the delivery of both class teaching and additional teaching, the SNA is not the person who is designated to deliver this teaching or instruction.

6. Role of Medical and other Professional Reports/Recommendations by Medical and other Professionals

SNAs are provided specifically to assist schools to cater for pupils with disabilities, who have additional and significant care needs, in an educational context and where the nature of these care needs have been outlined in medical and other professional reports as being so significant that a pupil will require additional adult assistance in order to be able to attend school and to participate in education.

Professional reports and assessments therefore play an important role in the SNA allocation process.

Responsibility for deciding on the quantum of educational supports and resources to be allocated to schools to support individual pupils, rests with the NCSE, in accordance with DES policy.

The consideration of professional reports is an integral part of determining the extent of supports to be provided for pupils with special educational needs. However, whereas health reports provide valuable assistance to education providers in identifying a diagnosis or identifying appropriate interventions, health staff have been directed by the HSE not to include references to the specific quantum of educational resources in their reports, but should state the outcome of assessments carried out and the range of needs of the child as clearly as possible.

This is because, while a medical or relevant professional report can indicate the care needs that a child may have, the Health professional will not have knowledge or awareness of the current resources available to a school to cater for these care needs, will not be aware of the layout of the school, or have had an opportunity to observe the child in class or observe their interaction with their teachers and classmates on an ongoing basis.

It is the role of the NCSE to process applications from schools for SNA support, taking into account the frequency and extent of the care needs as referenced in the professional report, the manner in which they arise in a school setting and in this regard, the evidence the school can

provide to support the application. The NCSE can also consult with other professional e.g. NEPS and will allocate a level of SNA support to a school to ensure that the school has sufficient resources to cater for the significant care needs of the relevant children who are enrolled in the school for whom it has been indicated that there is a care requirement.

In general, it is therefore expected that all primary school pupils having their first school experience will have been enrolled and have commenced attending school before any application for support will be made.

7. SNA Support for Pupils with Behaviour Related Care Needs

The Value for Money and Policy Review of the SNA scheme found, that in many instances, SNAs were being used, contrary to the intended purpose of the scheme, to contain or manage pupil behaviour as distinct from students receiving appropriate interventions in school through individualised planning, whole-school pupil management strategies (including the promotion of positive relationships between and among staff and students), and additional psycho-educational programmes (such as anger management or social skills classes) and psychiatric/medical interventions, as required.

Students with challenging behaviour need, in the first instance, should be supported by their class teachers, other school staff members, and by whole school polices on the management of behaviour in schools. The responsibility for the overall progress of students with behavioural difficulties lies with the classroom teacher. The emphasis in the school situation should be on the development of well co-ordinated interventions in response to the child's identified needs. The provision of appropriate teaching and health supports, as required, should result in improved behaviours, leading to improved educational outcomes for children with Emotional Behavioural Disorder (EBD) or Severe Emotional Behavioural Disorder (SEBD).

For children who are experiencing behavioural difficulties or who have received a diagnosis which places them in the EBD disability category, it should not be assumed that all children who have some form of emotional behaviour disturbance require access to SNA support or that SNA support is the appropriate intervention in each instance.

A range of guidelines are available to support schools in meeting the needs of children with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties. These include:

- Behaviour, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) – A Continuum of Support Guidelines www.education.gov.ie
- DES Information Guides for Primary and Post Primary Schools on Supporting Students with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties www.education.gov.ie/
- Guidelines for Developing School Codes of Behaviour www.newb.ie

The Information Guides above indicate that behavioural, emotional and social difficulties can occur on a continuum from mild, transient difficulties to difficulties which are significant and persistent. Thus, responses provided should be incremental, moving from classroom based

interventions to more intensive and individualised interventions. The timing and pace of implementation may vary depending on the level of need and the nature of the presenting problems, with interventions tailored to the individual needs of pupils.

Provision of SNA support should therefore not be considered as a first response for management of behaviour. SNA support should only be provided where it is clear that behavioural management strategies have not been successful to date and where it is demonstrated how access to such support can assist with ongoing planning and intervention for the child

Thus, SNA support is not a substitute for the normal behavioural management and disciplinary practices that a school is required to have in place.

Where a professional report has identified care needs as being related to behaviour, access to SNA support will only be considered after the school has set out the specific strategies that have been employed to manage the behaviour and those that have been implemented to minimise the pupil's difficulties in accordance with the staged approach recommended by the guidelines which recommend a number actions or interventions at different stages; [2]

(1)   Classroom Support when a teacher first becomes aware that a pupil is showing significant behavioural, emotional and social difficulties;

(2)   School Support which involves more systematic gathering of information relating to the pupil's behaviour and the development and monitoring of a support plan (in collaboration with the learning support/resource teacher, principal) and finally;

(3)   School Support Plus which involves a more intensive individualised response for those pupils with more severe and/or persistent needs and will often include liaison with outside agencies and professionals.

Further guidance on the type of classroom and school supports which can be provided are available in the DES Information Guides for Primary and Post Primary schools on Supporting Students with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties which are available at www.education.gov.ie/

Schools may also seek advice from their local NEPS psychologist as to how children with behavioural needs can best be supported in schools. NEPS supports schools in developing whole school responses, including specific interventions for groups of children and for individual pupils with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. SENOs provide advice in relation to SNA deployment and support for pupils' care needs. Further assistance may also be provided to schools by the Special Educational Support Service (SESS), by the National Behavioural

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[2] At second level the three stages of assessment and intervention are referred to as: 1. Support for All (Whole school Approaches/classroom/Subject Support; 2. School Support (for Some) Individual and/or Group approaches; 3. School Support Plus (for a Few) Individual.

Support Service (NBSS) for post primary schools who can be contacted through the Navan Education Support Centre for advice on positive behaviour and learning throughout the school.

Where there is a diagnosis of EBD/SEBD, or a diagnosis of a behavioural disorder in conjunction with another disability categorisation, access to SNA support will only be sanctioned in cases:

- **where it is clear that school based interventions have been attempted and have not worked to date (as evidenced in educational and behavioural plans and reviews)**
- **where there is a clear and documented history of violent behaviour, assault, or self harm, or other safety issues including leaving the school premises.**
- **where it has been clearly demonstrated that the behaviour of the child is such that it is impossible to teach him/her in a classroom situation without additional adult assistant support on a temporary basis.**
- **Where the school sets out clearly how access to SNA support will support educational and behavioural planning.**

As SNA support will only be sanctioned for behavioural related care needs in the circumstances detailed above, in the case of new applications for SNA support, where a professional report has identified the care needs as being related to behaviour, in general, it will not be possible to consider access to SNA support until there has been a clear assessment of the child's needs in the classroom setting and other school contexts.

Schools will also be required to detail what interventions have been put in place, including the specific strategies that <u>have</u> been employed to minimise the pupil's difficulties and to promote more adaptive behaviours.

Where an application relates to the management of a student's behaviour, there must be clear evidence that sustained efforts have been put in place by the school and that these have not proven to be successful to date in the amelioration of such documented behaviours.

Where access to SNA support is granted overall progress continues to lie with the classroom teacher (supported by learning support or resource teacher) and that the child should not be excluded for extended periods of time from the classroom setting.

The care role of the SNA, in instances where SNA support is sanctioned to assist with behavioural related care needs, is concerned with assisting the teacher to meet the care needs of the child by:

- preserving the safety of the pupil and others with whom the pupil is in contact
- assisting to ensure the prevention of self injurious or destructive behaviour
- reinforcing good behaviour on the child's part and acting as a positive role model for the child
- Assisting with recording data in relation to pupil behaviour and behavioural development

As set out in section 15 below, the deployment of all additional supports which are provided to support children with special needs should be linked to personalised planning processes for the pupils for whom the applications are being made.

It is important to ensure that the school has a clear plan in place as to how an SNA resource, which is being provided to assist with behavioural difficulties, will be utilised and to set out the time frame for which this resource is expected to be required. The plan should also demonstrate how the school intends to actively reduce, and, if possible, eliminate dependency on SNA support within a reasonable time frame and should include time-bound targets for the development of independence skills and for a reduction in behavioural difficulties.

SNA support should not be considered as a permanent solution to behavioural problems but as an assistive support to try to improve and adjust behaviours in a managed way over a period of time.

All SNA allocations for behavioural purposes will therefore be time bound, being made initially for a maximum period of three years, subject to annual review, and a full reassessment of the child's care needs before the end of the three year period.

8. SNA Support for Children with Visual and Hearing Impairment

Children with acute sensory impairment such as visual or hearing impairment have particular and distinct care needs which are of a non teaching nature, but where the assistance of SNA support is required for those pupils to be able to attend school and to be able to access the curriculum.

SNAs can assist in providing access to peer interaction and curriculum participation for pupils who have a hearing impairment and who communicate through sign language. They may also assist in the care and preparation of audiological and assistive technology equipment.

For pupils with visual impairment they may assist in the preparation of Braille materials, tactical graphics, assistive technology equipment, large print assists, and also assist with orientation and mobility throughout the school day.

Care support may also assist to ensure that such students do not experience social isolation and exclusion due to an inability to communicate with staff members and peers.

Circular 0071/2011, which outlined the revised employment terms and conditions for SNAs, restated the role of the SNA in Ireland to ensure that it includes the necessary duties that are required to support the care needs of Deaf and hard of hearing students.

In addition to the care needs detailed in Section 4 of this Circular there are additional support needs which children with hearing impairment require including the use of Sign Language support in order to assist with communication and socialisation.

- **Schools should therefore ensure that SNAs who work with Deaf and hard of hearing children are equipped with the skills necessary to support the particular needs of these pupils, including capacity to use Sign Language where required.**

- **Where existing SNA staff are required to be trained to provide Sign Language or specialist training (Braille, Lámh, Sign Language, Augumentive/Alternative Interventions) to assist in the provision of support for children with a specific sensory impairment, schools should ensure that the most senior SNA staff in the school are the staff that are trained in order to avoid a situation where staff trained in specialist skills may leave the school due to a reduction in the overall level of SNA support allocated to a school in future years.**

9. NCSE Allocation Process

The NCSE is responsible, through its network of local SENOs for allocating SNAs to schools to support children with special educational needs, in accordance with DES criteria, including a requirement to have regard to the overall limit on staffing numbers under the Employment Control Framework.

A key feature of the NCSE allocation process is to provide for an annual allocation of SNA support to eligible schools. The NCSE issues a Circular to schools each year requesting that they submit applications for SNA support to the NCSE in respect of applications for such support for the coming school year.

Having considered all of the applications received, the NCSE will advise schools of their SNA allocation quantum for the coming school year, taking into account the number of valid applications for SNA support and the assessed care needs of the children concerned. This gives schools certainty as to the resources which will be available to them for the coming school year and allows for school planning to commence as soon as possible.

Whereas the NCSE will continue to consider applications throughout the school year in cases where schools have enrolled new pupils with care needs, where new assessments have been forthcoming, or in cases of emergencies, the main allocation of SNA support is now made to schools on an annual allocation basis.

Full details regarding the NCSE allocation process are available at www.ncse.ie or through your SENO.

To ensure the greatest level of transparency and fairness possible the NCSE publish details of all SNA allocations which are made to school each year on their website. These details are also available at www.ncse.ie.

10. Allocation of Quantum of Support to Schools

SNAs are not allocated to individual pupils but to schools, as a school based resource, in the same manner that teachers are allocated to schools.

The NCSE allocates a quantum of SNA support for each school annually, taking into account the care needs of all of the qualifying children enrolled in the school, and on the basis of the assessed care needs of all of the children concerned, rather than solely by reference to a pupils disability categorisation.

The provision of a quantum of support to schools gives schools the autonomy and flexibility to manage their allocation of SNA support in order to utilise this support to the best possible effect. It allows schools to target support to those pupils who have the greatest degree of need at any given time, recognising that the level of need that a child may have may be variable over time. The school is in a position to use their educational experience and expertise to manage the level of support which has been allocated to them to provide for the care needs of identified children as and when those needs arise and to provide access to SNA support for all children who have been granted assess to support.

11. Access to SNA support

The SNA scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs.

Their role is not to act as a constant personal assistant to individual children, who need to be able to develop independent living skills and to associate independently with their classmates. Neither is the role of an SNA to act as an alternative teacher for children with special educational needs, who are required to be taught by the class teacher with additional support from resource/learning support teachers in schools.

Pupils will access the support of an SNA based upon their level of need, which can range from a requirement for brief periods during the day to most of the school day in some instances.

There are a relatively small number of children, who for medical or sensory reasons associated with their condition, require full-time care support throughout the school day. For such children, access to full day support will be provided for and this will be reflected in the school quantum of SNA allocation.

The majority of children who have care needs, however, require attention and assistance at certain times of the school day and require intermittent intervention at particular points.

It is neither efficient nor beneficial for children to have a full-time SNA assigned to them throughout the school day in circumstances where they do not require this level of support. A valuable resource may be wasted for much of the school day and pupils who need to develop independent living skills and intermingle independently with their class mates may be prevented from doing so.

Students who have care needs requirements are therefore granted access to SNA support, whereby a quantum of SNA support is allocated to a school, which is reflective of the assessed

individual needs of a group of identified children. Those SNAs will then be in a position to cater for the care needs of those designated pupils, as the need arises, and as they require assistance, with the level of support being provided reflecting actual need at any given time.

It is important to ensure that the presence of SNA support does not create over dependency, act as a barrier or intermediary between the student and class teacher or contribute to the social isolation of students by creating a barrier between the students and his/her peers.

A key aspiration for pupils with special educational needs is that they will, on completion of their school-based education, be able to graduate as young independent adults in so far as this is possible. There is therefore a need to balance the support provided in schools with each pupil's right to acquire personal independence skills. As such, in order to give those pupils every opportunity possible to develop independent living skills, the assistive SNA support which is given to them should always be at the minimum level required to meet the care needs of the pupil.

The alternative would be the provision of too much SNA support, where a child can be overly shadowed or constantly monitored by an attached adult. As evidenced in the policy review, this can lead to social isolation, frustration, feelings of exclusion and can act as a barrier to a child achieving independent living skills.

Good practice is that SNA's will be aware of the various configurations of support such as close proximity and distance, as appropriate, with dependency upon a particular SNA being avoided.

Attending to students moving from dependence to independence can be bridged by the strategic use of team-teaching to assist the student in accessing learning in a less dependent classroom environment. The role of fellow students in this regard should also be considered.

12. Role of Schools to Manage SNA Support

SNAs should be deployed by schools in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated. It is a matter for schools to allocate the support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

Once allocated to schools, SNAs are important and valued members of the school community. An SNA is an important whole school resource. SNAs participate fully in the life of the school and may therefore also assist other children is the school, who from time to time need assistance, or who have intermittent care needs, but who may not have been assessed as requiring SNA support on a permanent basis.

SNA duties are assigned at the discretion of the Principal, or another person acting on behalf of the Principal, and/or the Board of Management of a school or VEC in accordance with Circular 0071/2011.

The work of SNAs should, at the principal or teachers direction, be focussed on supporting the particular care needs of the student with special educational needs and should be monitored on an ongoing basis and modified accordingly.

The role and duties of SNAs and the intended purpose of the scheme, as set out in this Circular, should be communicated to parents by school authorities, when discussing the issue of provision of SNA support to qualifying children in the school with parents.

13. Annual Review

All SNA allocations are subject to annual review by the NCSE as each school now receives an annual allocation of support each year.

A key goal of SNA support is to help children to develop their independent living skills. It is important that pupils do not become over dependent on adult SNA support nor unduly isolated from peers. Where care needs diminish and the goal of independence is achieved, the level of SNA support required by the child should be reduced. In some cases, a pupil's care needs may remain constant, or increase, due to the nature of their condition. All pupils with access to SNA support therefore have their need for this support reviewed on a regular basis, with school and parental feedback being an important and valued part of the review process. The general rule being that the role of support staff should decrease as independence increases. A review of SNA support should include a review of the care support plan for the child concerned.

14. Timebound Allocation

The care needs of pupils are not constant but change as children grow and develop. In many instances, access to SNA care support may have been allocated to a pupil to ameliorate a particular difficulty that a pupil may have at a certain point in time, such as care support to assist with toileting issues, or a particular behaviour.

The care needs that a pupil has may change over time. Many children will naturally have diminishing care needs as they get older and as they develop both physically and socially.

It is neither appropriate nor beneficial for a child to have a permanent allocation of SNA support which would follow them throughout their school career without recourse to a consideration of changing needs. This could impede that child's development of independent living skills, interaction with peers, or stigmatise the child though association with a permanent allocation of adult support, at a point of their development where this support may no longer be required.

**Whereas the NCSE will maintain the minimum SERC recommended ratios of SNA support in special schools and classes, all other SNA allocations which are made, from September
2014, will be time bound, linked to the provision of a personal pupil plan, will be made initially for a maximum period of three years, subject to annual review, and subject to a full reassessment of their care needs at the end of the three year period.**

15. Personal Pupil Plan (PPP)

Personalised Pupil Planning should be a feature of provision for all students with special educational needs. A team approach to the development, implementation and review of Personal

Pupil Plans should be adopted. Where relevant, and in any instance where SNA support is provided, a care dimension should be included in the planning.

Schools are currently encouraged to use individualised planning through policy guidance, support, and training and the majority of schools now use some form of personal education planning for children with special needs.

Further assistance to schools in relation to the development of Personal Pupil Plans will be set out in forthcoming Circulars.

In the interim, the following documents from the National Educational Psychological Services, the National Council for Special Education, and the Special Education Support Services, contain information for schools, guidance, and sample Personal Pupil Plan templates which schools may wish to refer to, or use:

http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Educational-Psychologist-NEPS/neps_special_needs_resource_pack.pdf

http://www.ncse.ie/uploads/1/final_report.pdf

http://www.sess.ie/resources/teaching-methods-and-organisation

The deployment of all additional individualised supports, both teaching and non teaching, which are provided to support children with special needs should be linked to a personalised planning process for the pupils for whom the application is being made.

If an application is being made for additional support, such as care support, it is important to ensure that the school has a clear plan in place as to how this resource will be utilised and the time frame for which this resource is expected to be required.

From the 2015/16 school year onwards, all new applications for SNA support must include a copy of that pupils PPP, must be clearly linked to the individualised planning in place for each student and specifically refer to the student's identified care needs. The plan must also focus on the proactive development of students' independence skills and set out the programmes and strategies that are being used to meet the child's needs.

Schools applying for SNA support from the 2015/16 school year will be required to submit a Personal Pupil Plan for each pupil outlining the pupil's special care needs and showing how the SNA will be deployed to assist the pupil. The plan should demonstrate how the school intends to actively reduce, and where appropriate, eliminate dependency on SNA support within a reasonable time frame. The plan should include time-bound targets for the development of independence skills. Only a very small number of pupils with severe special educational needs and very significant care needs will continue to require access to Special Needs Assistant support throughout their education.

Good practice is that the SNA should contribute to the care plan and support the student to voice their views on the Personal Pupil Plan. The SNA will also assist in monitoring the implementation and impact of the plan including documenting, via observation schedules, the progress being made in relation to the child's care needs on a day-to-day basis.

16. The Views of the Child

In deciding the level and extent of access to SNA support which should be provided to a child, the best interests of the child should be the paramount consideration.

As far as practicable, the views of a child capable of forming his/her own views should be obtained and given due weight, having regard to the age and maturity of the child.

The views of the child, where possible, should therefore be taken into account in reviewing the extent of access to SNA support required.

17. Post Primary SNA Allocation

Transition to post-primary should be recognised as a critical time for a student with special educational needs.

Personal Pupil Plans for fourth and fifth class students should reflect this and focus on ensuring that student care needs are, in so far as possible, ameliorated before moving to post primary.

Some pupils, particularly those with physical disabilities or conditions with enduring needs, will continue to have a requirement for some level of access to SNA support. In some instances, there may also be short term care needs for pupils with SEN as they transition to post primary schools.

For some pupils at post primary age, emerging conditions or needs may only manifest as the child or young adult gets older.

However, for the most part, only students with chronic and serious care needs arising from a disability should require SNA support either in sixth class or in primary and in post-primary schools. Care supports freed up as a result should be reinvested in further supplementary teaching supports for this group of students.

SNA support will be provided for Post Primary schools who enrol pupils with special educational care needs and support will be provided in a manner which recognises the distinct requirements of post primary schools, where pupils may attend a range of different classes as opposed to being based primarily in a single classroom.

However, continued and ongoing access to SNA support is generally not desirable for post-primary students, unless absolutely essential, as it can impede their independence and socialisation needs at an important developmental stage of their life.

The most appropriate form of support for post primary aged pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools will be a combination of differentiated and additional teaching supports from class teachers, from resource/learning support teachers either though team teaching or withdrawal, and from other relevant teaching staff, as opposed to care support from an SNA.

Accordingly, whereas SNA support will be provided to post primary schools when required, in general, only pupils with chronic and serious care needs will normally be allocated SNA support in post primary schools. In considering applications for SNA

support from post primary schools the NCSE will take into account the importance of the requirement to allocate necessary care supports with the right of a child to acquire personal independence skills.

18. Appeal to School

In circumstances where a child has qualified for access to SNA support and is so being provided for within the quantum of SNA support which is allocated to a school, and where a parent feels that their child is not receiving sufficient care support in school, the parent should raise this concern in the first instance with the School Principal or the School Board of Management.

School management authorities have responsibility for the management and deployment of SNAs in their school and, therefore, have the potential to adjust or moderate the level of support which is being given to a child in the school.

19. NCSE Appeal process

The NCSE has developed an appeals process in relation to allocations of SNA support.

The appeal process allows schools, or parents, to appeal decisions made by SENOs to allocate Resource Teaching Hours (RTH) or SNAs to schools.

The kind of decisions which may be the subject of appeals are those either in relation to a child not qualifying for an SNA allocation, in accordance with DES criteria, or in relation to the quantum of resources allocated to a school, i.e. the number of SNAs allocated to a school to provide for the care needs of qualifying children.

Significant features of the new appeals process which has been developed by the NCSE are:

- Where a parent/school appeals the decision that a child was not granted access to resource teaching hours and/or SNA support on the grounds that the DES policy was not met
- Where the school considers that the SENO, in applying DES policy, has not allocated the appropriate level of teaching/SNA supports to the school to meet the special educational and/or care needs of the children concerned

Whereas appeals will be considered by Senior SENOs in the first instance there is potential for independent oversight in that schools/parents will have access to an independent Appeals Advisory Committee (AAC), should they consider that the operation of the appeals process was flawed or deficient.

Full details of the appeal process are available at www.ncse.ie

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