TEACHER-ASSISTANT PARTNERSHIPS IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS

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Executive Summary

Background: The number of assistants in schools in Ireland and Northern Ireland has increased significantly over the years in response to changes in educational policy and although the role of the assistant has been the focus of many research studies, ambiguity still surrounds the role. There is also a notable gap in the research on the topic of working relationships between assistants and teachers, particularly from the perspective of the assistant.

Aim: The aim of this project was to investigate the nature of teacher-assistant partnerships in special schools from the perspective of the assistant.

Methodology: Focus groups were conducted in a convenience sample of twelve special schools across Northern Ireland and Ireland. These focus groups took place between January and April 2018. A total of 81 assistants participated in these focus groups: 36 assistants in six special schools in Northern Ireland and 45 assistants in six special schools in Ireland.

Key Findings: The findings of this study confirm that the role of the assistant is a complex and wide-ranging one, with a varied pattern of deployment leading to ambiguity and misunderstanding surrounding the role. Examination of the range of duties, responsibilities, skills and attributes identified by CAs and SNAs illustrated the considerable overlap in the role of the CA and SNA (eg, providing personal care for and academic support for pupils, assistance to teachers, dealing with difficult behaviour, manual handling, assisting with meals/feeding and supervision). However, some of the duties mentioned by CAs were not identified by SNAs as part of their remit. Broadly speaking these duties seem to relate to either direct teaching assistance (eg, resource/activities preparation), specific skills training (eg, Braille, sign language, autism training, team teach) or nursing/medical support aspects of the role.

Status, identity and recognition of assistant competences were perceived to be key determining factors in teacher-assistant collaboration and genuine collaborative partnerships. The key facilitators of effective collaboration were identified as: good communication, having a valued input, respectful relationships, recognising shared

expertise, trust and a willingness to adapt. In contrast, the challenges to collaboration were identified as: poor communication, professional tensions and classroom management, limitations in teacher training and lack of time.

Conclusion: This unique all-island exploration of teacher-assistant collaboration from the perspective of the assistant is an area which still remains under-researched nationally and internationally. The findings from this study confirm the need for further research on the assistant workforce in Northern Ireland and Ireland. Firstly, there is a need for a larger scale study – amongst assistants themselves and with teachers and pupils – to fully explore the role in the special school sector. Secondly, there is scope to examine the particular knowledge and expertise of assistants and to consider how this can be applied in a meaningful, collaborative way in the school environment. Thirdly, a comprehensive review of the role is required to inform a professional framework for the effective deployment of this key workforce.

1.0 Introduction

Assistants are now a common feature in schools in the UK and Ireland but they are especially prominent in special schools. Reflecting changes in inclusive educational policy over the years, these assistants have become more visible across other school types and there has been a significant increase in the number of assistants worldwide (Blatchford et al., 2008; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). As the number of assistants has increased in schools, their role has been scrutinised and has been the subject of many research studies nationally and internationally. Assistants are predominantly employed to support students with special educational needs (SEN), to aide teachers in interacting with students and to collaborate with other professionals (Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Radford, Bosanquet, Webster & Blatchford, 2015; Butt, 2016; Douglas, Chapin & Nolan, 2016).

Existing research has found that there is recurrent ambiguity surrounding the role of the assistants, especially in relation to supporting pupils' learning and assisting teachers (Blatchford et al., 2008; Webster et al., 2010). Much of the existing literature on assistants and their working relationship with teachers tends to be descriptive, prescriptive and concerned with management issues relating to their deployment, roles, responsibilities and training needs. Although there are some empirical examples of inter-professional collaboration between teachers and assistants, a significant gap remains on the topic of the working relationships between assistants and teachers from the perspective of the assistant (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010).

2.0 Research aim and objectives

This project aims to investigate an under-researched dimension of special educational needs (SEN) provision in Ireland and Northern Ireland (NI), namely the nature of teacher-assistant partnerships. It will specifically focus on teacher-assistant partnerships in special schools to address the following research questions:

1. How do SNAs/CAs perceive their educational partnership with class teachers?
2. What are the strengths and limitations of this partnership?
3. How can the partnership between SNA/CA and classroom teacher be improved?

4. How can these findings inform the development of a teacher-assistant partnership evaluation framework?

The project is grounded in a holistic interpretation of special education which recognises the particular contribution of the special school workforce. The deployment of the SNA/CA has been a feature of provision in special schools since the 1980s. Often involving close, one-to-one support of pupils it is a pivotal role which, under the direction of the class teacher, can demonstrably enhance the educational experience of pupils with SEN. It follows therefore that, if utilised effectively, a collaborative partnership between the SNA/CA and the teacher, based on constructive shared expertise is the optimal classroom arrangement.

3.0 Background

3.1 Education policy in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, legislation for children with SEN is contained in the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order (2005a) (SENDO) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2016) (SEND Act). The Education Order contains a series of key provisions: a Code of Practice detailing the processes for the identification and assessment of SEN, requirements for statements of SEN, requirements to inform parents and the duties of health authorities. SENDO strengthened the rights of children with SEN to attend mainstream schools and introduced disability discrimination laws to the whole education system in Northern Ireland for the first time.

The SEND Act emerged from a protracted review of special education and inclusion commenced in 2009. It places new duties on the Education Authority (EA), Boards of Governors of schools as well as health and social services: this includes publication of an EA annual plan on arrangements for special education provision, the introduction of a new Code of Practice for the identification and assessment of pupils who have SEN, the appointment of a Learning Support Co-ordinator in all schools (replacing the former SENCO post), completion and review of a personal learning plan (PLP) for all pupils with SEN, greater co-operation between health and social services authorities and

capacity-building training for the range of school staff and Boards of Governors.

Some of the proposed changes have been more welcome than others. For example, a reduction in the time taken to complete an assessment from 26 to 20 weeks has been generally viewed as a positive step. In contrast, reducing the statutory assessment and statementing process from five stages to three and an anticipated decrease in the number of statutory statements through greater in-school support has provoked a cautionary response. In addition, a new of Code of Practice is to be introduced (replacing the 1998 document). It is expected that public consultation on the new Code will take place in 2018 and the new SEN Framework will be implemented in 2019. However, it is almost 18 months since the collapse of the NI Assembly and it is not yet clear what impact the absence of a devolved government will have on the implementation of the new legislation.

3.1.1 Special schools in Northern Ireland

Special schools are recognised for the contribution they make to *'enabling learners with significant and/or complex special educational needs to engage and benefit from education'* (DE, 2015, p.iii). In a recent review of special school provision (2015), the Department of Education recommended, *inter alia*, the development of a common structure to support pupils with significant and/or complex needs and a review of enrolment trends and needs of pupils. It also recommended that the expertise of staff in special schools was maintained. Most recently, reports that the EA was planning to close and merge seven out of 10 special schools in Belfast was met with huge resistance; the Authority is currently engaged in ongoing dialogue with parents to explore investment in special schools and has provided assurances that there will be no change to special school provision pending a full consultation process.

3.2 Education policy in Ireland

In Ireland, in the absence of education legislation prior to 1998, the Irish higher courts exerted considerable influence on the development of provision with seminal court cases such as the O'Donoghue judgement confirming the State's constitutional obligation to:

> *'… provide for free basic elementary education of all children…this involves giving each child such advice, instruction and teaching as will enable him or her to make the best possible use of his or her inherent and potential capacities, physical, mental and moral, however limited these capacities may be'* (O'Donoghue v Minister for Health [1996] 2 IR 20).

Arguably, the expansion of the definition of education to include *instruction* as well as teaching might be interpreted as suggesting that some of this "could be provided by a teacher's aid or other person as opposed to 'teaching' *per se*" (Glendenning, 1999, p154). The securing of this right highlighted the urgent need for legislation which, as predicted by Glendenning (1999), was to have huge resource and policy implications. The resulting *Education Act* (1998) made provision to ensure that:

> *'… there is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person'* (Ireland, 1998, s.7, para.1a).

The 1998 Act marked the end of the "legislative lacuna" noted by Glendenning (1999, p. 147) and by 2005, four separate pieces of legislation had been enacted, some directly pertaining to, and others with implications for education (*Education (Welfare) Act* 2000; *Equal Status Act* 2000; *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs* (EPSEN) Act 2004; *Disability Act*, 2005). The EPSEN Act (2004) foregrounded the right of pupils with SEN not only avail of, but to *'benefit from appropriate education'* and with the presumption that wherever possible, this will take place in *'an inclusive environment with those who do not have such needs'* (Ireland, 2004). Like the 1998 Act, EPSEN refers to but fails to delineate, the *'support services to be provided to the child to enable the child to benefit from education and to participate in the life of the school'* (Ireland, 2004, s.9, para. 2e). Furthermore in the context of the financial crisis which followed the enactment of EPSEN, few of the provisions of the Act have been implemented other than those relating to the establishment of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which is the statutory body responsible for the allocation of teachers and SNAs to schools through a nationwide network of special educational needs organisers (SENO). Key provisions relating to for example assessment, individual education planning and the provision of services have yet to be commenced.

The NCSE also holds a key research commissioning and dissemination remit and provides policy advice to the Department of Education and Skills (NCSE, 2014). In the absence of the implementation of EPSEN, in 2014, the NCSE proposed a new model for the allocation of additional teaching supports in mainstream schools which following piloting was implemented in September 2017 (Byrne, 2017). Many of the changes are to be welcomed in particular the allocation of teaching supports based on the profiled needs of each school taking into account the number of pupils with complex SEN, overall levels of achievement, and the school's socioeconomic status. As such this marks a significant move away from a deficit and frequently inequitable model heavily reliant on diagnosis and labelling, and towards the provision of support based on assessed need rather than disability category affording schools considerable autonomy and flexibility in the deployment of teaching resources. In addition the new model provides for the implementation of a Continuum of Support framework incorporating *classroom support*, *school support* and *school support plus* for identifying and responding to learners with additional support needs in mainstream schools in Ireland. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this model pertains only to the deployment of teaching supports within Irish schools and not to the deployment of SNAs.

3.2.1 Special schools in Ireland

In the school year 2006/ 2007, a total of 6,578 students were enrolled in 124 special schools (Department of Education & Science, 2007) representing 0.8% of the total primary and post primary student enrolment[1]. Figures for the year 2016/17 indicate little change in the rate of enrolment with 8,114 students attending 135 special schools (Department of Education & Skills, 2017) However, while the proportion of students attending special schools has remained relatively constant, in keeping with international trends, the profile of learners enrolled in special schools in Ireland has changed significantly with most special schools now catering for learners with the most significant and complex special educational needs. (Ware et al., 2009). In addition, it is noteworthy that most special schools, in particular those designated for learners with moderate GLD or physical disabilities now cater for a much broader range of students, than would be presumed based on their official DES designation (Ware et al., 2009).

[1] Total first level and second level student enrolment for the school year 2006/2007 was 814,033. Total first level and second level student enrolment for the school year 2016/2017 was 910,571

NCSE (2011) policy advice on the *Future Role of Special Schools and Classes* concluded that this broadening remit should be recognised and that special schools should '*be designated and resourced to serve those pupils within the community who require special school placement rather than be limited to any specific category of disability*' (p. 16). Furthermore, the report recommended that wherever possible students with SEN should attend mainstream schools and only those with complex needs arising from for example two or more low incidence disabilities, a severe or profound SEN or those who following evaluation over time are found not to be benefiting from placement in a mainstream school or are impacting negatively on the education of others should be enrolled in special schools. To date, none of the recommendations of the review have been implemented.

3.3 The assistant workforce

In defining the assistant workforce, the term Classroom Assistant (CA) is most commonly used in schools in Northern Ireland whilst Special Needs Assistant (SNA) is used in Ireland. In this study, the term 'assistant' will be used throughout for consistency except where a distinction is required.

In the UK, the first formal reference to consistent additional classroom support staff appeared in the Plowden Report (1967). Staff who had previously been described as ancillary support were described as 'teacher aides' and their role in providing an increased adult-pupil ratio and child centred approach to education was highlighted. Classroom assistants have been an established source of support for pupils with SEN since the remit for special education transferred from the Department of Health to the Department of Education in 1985. In Northern Ireland, there are approximately 12,175 CAs employed across all school types[2]. A recent report by the Audit Office (NIAO, 2017) revealed a spend of £55M on CAs in mainstream schools in 2015/16; concluding that such expenditure *'... may not be the most effective type of support'* (p. 32), the report recommended that support for children with SEN should be more easily identified and monitored. In terms of provision for special schools, the DE has overall responsibility, although special school budgets are partially delegated, with staffing and other costs met

[2] Communication from Education Authority, June 2017. Figures are based on 'head count' ie number of classroom assistants employed by EA.

centrally by the Education Authority (EA) (NIAO, 2017). There is a total of thirty-nine special schools in NI, with a pupil population 5,735[3] and an overall enrolment pattern that has remained fairly static over the past ten years. Approximately 2,012 Classroom Assistants are employed in an educational capacity within the special school sector[4]. In a recent review of special school provision, the DE (2015) indicated a move towards a common regional area plan for the special school sector that included a more consistent approach in the support of pupil needs. Within this revised framework, the skills and expertise of all staff and their on-going professional development are acknowledged as integral to effective support (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016). As yet, no evaluation of the overall deployment of the CA workforce has been undertaken by EA or DE.

The history of the deployment of assistants in schools in Ireland followed a similar trajectory. Assistants were first sanctioned during the school year 1979/1980 when 70 *child care assistants* were appointed in special schools (O' Mordha, 1980, cited in Stevens & O' Moore, 2009). Due to an embargo on recruitment to the public sector this number remained static for over a decade, but began to rise slowly during the 1990s and, by 1998, there were 299 SNAs, all working in special settings (DES, 2001). Among the measures recommended by the seminal Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (Ireland, 1993) was the appointment of additional teachers and *'Special Needs Assistants'*, a term introduced by SERC in place of 'Child Care Assistant'. However, as the late 1990s were a time of considerable financial constraint, few of the recommendations of SERC were acted upon in the years immediately following publication. Following an announcement in 1998 by the then Minister for Education and Science of "automatic entitlement" to child care support, the number of SNAs began to rise and by 2001 stood at 1,600 (DES, 2001). The rate of increase in the following few years was remarkable with the number having almost doubled to 3,000 within a year (DES, 2002) and had doubled again within 2 years. By 2004, the number stood at almost 6,000 representing a 4-fold increase in just 3 years (DES, 2004). Just over a decade later and despite the imposition in 2011 of a cap on the numbers set at 10, 575, as part of financial emergency measures (DES, 2011), the total number of SNAs in Ireland was

[3] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/DE-enrolment-stats-bulletin-revised-feb-2018.pdf

[4] Communication from Education Authority, June 2017. Figures are based on 'head count' ie number of classroom assistants employed by EA.

11,924 (Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, 2016, p.94). In December 2017 a total of 34,670 students were accessing support from 13,969 SNAs 2,466 of whom were employed in special schools (NCSE, 2018). In 2016/17 the total cost of the SNA scheme stood at €476m and as in NI this outlay has come under increasing scrutiny over recent years.

3.4 The role and responsibilities of the assistant

3.4.1 Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the roles and responsibilities for CAs are set out in job descriptions provided by the EA[5]. These include the posts of Classroom Assistant SEN and Classroom Asssistant ASN, the latter more commonly appointed in special schools. The main duties and responsibilities are determined by the Principal/outreach teacher/ Education Authority officer and it is expected that the CA will provide special classroom support and general classroom support:

SPECIAL CLASSROOM SUPPORT

- Assist the teacher with the support and care of pupil(s) with special educational needs e.g. enable access to the curriculum, attend to personal needs including dietary, feeding, toileting etc.
- Develop an understanding of the specific needs of the pupil(s) to be supported.
- Assist with authorised programmes (e.g. Education Plan, Care Plan), participate in the evaluation of the support and encourage pupil(s) participation in such programmes.
- Contribute to the inclusion of the pupil in mainstream classroom under the direction of the class teacher.
- Assist with operational difficulties and medical difficulties pertaining to pupil(s) disabilities.
- Support in implementing behavioural management programmes as directed.
- Assist pupil(s) in moving around school and on and off transport.

[5] http://www.eani.org.uk/i-want-to/view-current-job-opportunities/schools/non-teaching-jobs/classroom-nursery-assistant/

GENERAL CLASSROOM SUPPORT

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

For CAs who provide *additional special classroom support*, it is expected that at least one of the duties listed should be carried out as a requirement of the post:

- Undertake more comprehensive or invasive medical/clinical procedures.

- Help pupils with specialist communication skills and/or sensory difficulties access the curriculum.
- Deal with pupils with very challenging behaviour as identified by the Educational Psychology Service as requiring additional provision.

Additionally, it is expected that the CA will undertake administrative duties, including attendance at relevant in-service training.

The Department of Education has produced a resource file to support pupils with SEN. It includes the recommendations that school leaders should ensure teachers are trained in how to manage assistants, that they should have a clear policy in place to outline the work of these assistants as this *'may avoid situations where the assistant may inadvertently operate outside their remit'* and that assistants should work under the direction of, and in partnership with, the class teacher (DE, 2011, p.19). These recommendations are reiterated in the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) professional competences which state that teachers have a responsibility *to 'deploy, organise and guide the work of other adults to support pupils' learning, when appropriate'* (GTCNI, 2011, p.14).

3.4.2 Ireland

In a 2014 Circular from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in Ireland, a similar detailed list of duties for SNAs is provided. The Circular states that "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" and outlines a number of primary care duties that SNAs may be required to perform:

- 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 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.

(DES, 2014, pp.5-6)

The circular also outlined the role of the class teacher, noting that they are responsible for educating all pupils in their class, including any pupil with SEN, and that they have primary responsibility for the progress and care of all pupils in the class including those with SEN (DES, 2014, p.7). In contrast to GTCNI specification for teachers, the

Teaching Council Code of Conduct for Ireland makes no specific reference to teacher management of SNAs, and collaboration between teachers and other staff is only briefly mentioned (The Teaching Council, 2016, p. 8).

An Oireachteas report published in 2016 acknowledged that a serious issue had arisen in how the SNA role had been interpreted individually within schools and that the role had *'expanded to varying degrees'* from what was outlined in the DES circular. In particular, many SNAs were carrying out a broader range of duties at individual school level, including teaching students in small groups, working with children on a one-to-one basis outside of the classroom, being in charge of the classroom when the teacher was out and working with students with behavioural, mental health and social difficulties

In May 2018, following an extensive review of the SNA scheme conducted over two years, the NCSE proposed major changes including that the term Inclusion Support Assistants (ISA) should replace SNA, that an allocation of ISA support based on the special education teacher (SET) allocation should be provided to each school thus obviating the need for individual applications and that ISA support should be deployed in line with the existing continuum of support framework. While these proposals have been welcomed by the Minister (DES, 2018) at the time of writing there is no commitment to resourcing the implementation of the wide ranging changes proposed.

4.0 Literature review

To maximise the literature on the assistant workforce a search strategy of the ERIC, BEI and SCOPUS databases were used to locate relevant journal articles. These databases were chosen as they are prominent education databases. The following basic search strategy was applied: assistants AND schools OR special schools AND collaboration. No date restrictions were put in place and all relevant literature was considered . A number of documents (38) were discovered through websites which were visited after a Google search on the roles and responsibilities of assistants in special education and collaboration with teaching staff. These articles informed the literature review.

It is evident from policy documents and associated reviews that the role of the assistant comprises a diverse range of duties and this is also evident in the existing literature.

Defining the roles and responsibilities of assistants is a complex task due to the wide ranging nature of their work, the management and support they receive and, crucially, differing perceptions of the role held by class teachers and assistants (Butt & Lowe, 2012). Sharma and Salend (2016) reviewed several international studies on the role of the assistant in inclusive classrooms and found that confusion and lack of clarity over professional roles, limited communication between assistants and teachers, and restricted opportunities for collaboration and training were contributing factors in assistants undertaking inappropriate instructional, classroom management roles. The review concluded that such deployment was ineffective and undermined not only the inclusion, learning and progress of pupils, but also the role of the teacher. In contrast, Lacey (2001) concluded that the *'best'* assistants were those who were good at judging how much support to offer pupils, who knew when to step back, who worked with several pupils, were given time to plan with teachers, were clear about their role in the classroom and who felt supported and valued in their role. In exploring the literature on the assistant workforce, three key themes are explored: qualifications of the assistant workforce, the positive contributions of assistants and the limitations in practice.

There is further evidence in the literature of assistants performing pedagogical assessments, assessing student performance and making important decisions on aspects of teaching and curriculum delivery without consulting teachers (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Healy, 2011; Devecchi et al. 2012; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Webster & Blatchford, 2015). This evolving shift in the role from assistant to one resembling that of a class teacher has been identified as a recurrent issue (Adamson, 1999; Howes, Farrell, Kaplan & Moss, 2003; Cajkler et al., 2007). For example, Webster et al., (2010) examined assistants' timelogs and found that they typically spent more than half of the school day engaged in direct pedagogical roles with students. Similarly, Suter and Giangreco (2009) and Giangreco et al., (2013) found that assistants spent approximately three quarters of their time providing instruction and behavioural support to students. In a contrasting perspective, O'Brien and Garner (2001) have alluded to the potential marginalisation of assistants in schools. This professional isolation, often as a result of uncertain contractual arrangements and low salary, was seen to undermine the important daily contact, interaction and input that assistants have with children with SEN.

Overall, the diverse nature of the role of the assistant is evident throughout the literature. It has ranged from providing personal care to managing students' behaviour, providing instruction, administrative and clerical tasks, acting as an intermediary between teachers and students, preparing and adapting resources for students and supervising students outside the classroom (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2008; Liston, Nevin & Malian, 2009; Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick & Jament, 2012; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Cameron, 2014; Gibson, Paatsch, Toe, Wells & Rawolle, 2015; Harris & Aprile, 2015; Lehane, 2016).

4.1 Qualifications

The qualifications required to be an assistant is an issue which has recurred in the literature. Blatchford et al., (2008), for example, referred to the requirement for only basic qualifications and noted prevailing concerns that pupils with the most complex needs were being often supported by the least qualified adults in the classroom. In NI the minimum criteria for the post of CA is NVQ Level 2 or equivalent in a relevant childcare qualification along with GCSE Grades A-C (or equivalent) in English and Maths. For the post of CA ASN, a minimum of one year paid experience working with a child/children with SEN in formal environment is required in addition to a relevant childcare qualification[6]. In t Ireland, the minimum qualifications for SNAs are a FETAC Level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications or a minimum of three D grades in the Junior Certificate or equivalent (DES, 2011). Assistants may have, or choose to gain, additional qualifications to enhance their skills from an approved awarding body (Prospects, 2017). Within the school environment, training options for CAs vary across jurisdictions and access to training is often determined by the inclusive ethos of individual institutions. Additionally not all training is funded and ongoing strains on the education budget limit options further.

4.2 Defining the role

Whilst all adults working with children should be aware of their role and responsibilities in the educational process (Takala, 2007), the lack of clarity surrounding the post of

[6] http://www.eani.org.uk/i-want-to/view-current-job-opportunities/schools/non-teaching-jobs/classroom-nursery-assistant/

assistant has become increasingly problematic. Brown and Stanton-Chapman (2014) found that assistants' roles were often dependent on their workplace setting, their personal motivation and how they were treated by teachers. Successive studies have also attributed the variations in responsibilities to lack of clarity and guidance on assistant remit, alongside limited communication and collaboration with, and supervision from, teachers (Logan, 2006; Howard & Ford, 2007; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Docherty, 2014; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015; Lehane, 2016). Differing views between teachers and assistants about the latter's responsibilities has further confused the issue. For example, it has been reported that assistants considered their primary role to be providing academic support while teachers considered it to be aiding them in providing instruction and managing students' behaviour (Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Butt & Lowe, 2012). Saddler (2015) similarly suggested that assistants view their role as similar to that of the class teacher, especially when it comes to planning, preparation and assessment whereas teachers did not consider their roles to be similar due to the assistants' lack of professional qualifications. Giangreco (2003) nonetheless cautioned against 'The Training Trap', whereby teachers allow insufficiently trained assistants to take on teaching roles, believing that they have been trained to do so.

4.3 The positive contribution of the assistant

Research has found that, when deployed and managed appropriately, assistants can have a positive impact on student learning: for example, their presence can facilitate learning, encourage socialisation with other pupils and alleviate potential classroom disruptions (Webster et al., 2010; Haycock & Smith, 2011). Assistants themselves have identified those factors which enhance their performance; these include effective systems for communication and collaboration, sufficient planning and preparation time, and regular teacher feedback and support (Symes & Humphrey, 2011; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Wasburn-Moses, Chun & Kaldenberg, 2013; Docherty, 2014; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015). In a study by Devecchi and Rouse (2010), assistants identified the ways in which teachers made them feel supported in their role; this included praise and encouragement, recognising their knowledge, skills and expertise, acknowledging their input, being approachable, asking for their opinion, providing them with schemes of work and lesson plans, and discussing pupils' progress with them. Other studies have found that assistants can make a positive contribution to improve academic, behavioural and social

outcomes for students if they receive appropriate training (Cajkler & Tennant 2009; Bingham et al., 2010; Lushen, Kim & Reid, 2012; Ashbaker & Morgan, 2012; Brock & Carter, 2013; Saddler, 2014; Walker & Smith, 2015). Access to training can be a mixed endeavour since not all training is delivered in-house and not all professional development is funded. However, Saddler (2015, p.28) has noted that assistants often attend courses on specific areas of SEN; as well as being cheaper to release from the classroom than teachers, the high level of contact time they have with pupils means they can be more knowledgeable of their specific needs than the teacher.

4.4 The limitations of the assistant role

Limitations in the assistant role have been identified in terms of how they are managed in the classroom and the impact of inappropriate and/or ineffective deployment. Assistants themselves have identified those factors which limit the quality of their work. These include feeling under-appreciated, being underpaid and having heavy workloads, along with lack of supervision and guidance from teachers (Patterson, 2006; Symes & Humphrey, 2011; Devecchi et al., 2012; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco et al. 2013). Research has indicated that in terms of managing another adult in the classroom, teachers are not appropriately prepared to work effectively with assistants during their initial teacher education (Radford et al., 2015; Sharma & Loreman, 2014; Webster et al., 2010, Salter, Swanwick & Pearson, 2017). Undoubtedly, training would benefit both teachers and assistants, not least in terms of understanding each other's roles and developing the skills of effective communication and collaboration (Douglas et al., 2016; Radford et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2010).

The inappropriate deployment of assistants has also been shown to have negative impacts, particularly in relation to the learning experience and educational outcomes for pupils with SEN. The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff in Schools (DISS) study found that whilst pupils benefitted from assistant presence in terms of more individualised attention and classroom control, they also experienced less overall contact with, and attention from, teachers. As a result, '*... the more support the pupils received, the less progress they made'* (Blatchford et al., 2008, p.2). Similarly, Radford et al., (2015) identified potentially negative relationships, where the presence of the assistant reduced the amount of interaction between student and teacher as well as between

students and their peers. Confirming this, other studies have found that, where assistants undertake duties and tasks which they are neither trained nor qualified to do, interactions with pupils are of a low quality and that they are more likely to provide inaccurate information or ask students less challenging questions (Radford, Blatchford & Webster, 2011; Webster et al., 2011).

4.5 Collaboration between teachers and assistants

Collaboration in education has been extensively researched (Sergiovanni, 1996; Oldfather & Thomas, 1998; Thousand, Villa & Nevin, 2006). The benefits of collaboration between teachers and other professionals in supporting pupils with SEN is widely considered integral to best practice (Pena & Quinn, 2003; Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi & Shelton, 2004; Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron & Vanhover, 2006). Teachers of children with SEN have to be flexible in both their thinking and pedagogical practice and to do this successfully, they need to engage in collaborative professional relationships (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003; Salter et al., 2017). The key characteristics of collaborative practice, then, should include consistency, transferable knowledge and skills between professionals and inter-disciplinary partnerships that meet the dual demands of curriculum and therapeutic intervention (Kersner, 1996; Tollerfield, 2003).

Research has shown that collaborative relationships can be difficult to achieve in practice. For example, Conderman and Stephens (2000) found that special educators deemed collaborative relationships a more challenging prospect than many other aspects of teaching; one reason suggested for this was a lack of relevant training during initial teacher education. Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) investigated the collaborative practices between different types of teachers in an Irish context and found that although teachers were increasingly aware of the value of collaboration, there were a number of barriers which prevented it from happening, including a lack of time, a lack of planning and limited professional development opportunities. Lack of time is a recurring theme; the Deployment and Impact of Ssupport Staff (DISS) project found the majority (95%) of secondary school teachers had no planning or feedback time with assistants and that communication between assistants and teachers was *'brief and ad hoc'* (Blatchford, Russell & Webster, 2012, p.60). Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) made suggestions to

improve collaborative practice, including dedicated time slots, monthly planning meetings and structured rather than informal meeting times and concluded that teacher collaboration is an area with significant potential but would require a shift in culture and a willingness to pursue alternative approaches to classroom practice.

Considering collaboration between teachers and assistants, Mackenzie (2011) referred to the lack of guidance on mutual collaboration and noted that assistants are often excluded from discussions about the children with whom they have close relationships and that they tend to have little influence on what happens in the workplace. In a study on teacher-assistant collaboration, Devecchi and Rouse (2010, p.97) identified the following success criteria:

- sharing knowledge, skills, resources and ideas useful to support individual children and the whole class;
- knowing each other‘s teaching strategies and classroom behaviour management;
- having clear but also flexible roles and responsibilities;
- being professional and competent;
- being knowledgeable of the subject;
- being approachable;
- being respectful of each other; and
- being and enabling others to be autonomous, independent and self-determined.

The study concluded that teacher-assistant collaboration was beneficial on a number of levels: it facilitated consideration of the other’s viewpoint, created opportunities to reflect on practice and encouraged innovative approaches to problem-solving. A whole school approach to collaboration was recommended since how schools deploy, train and include assistants was clearly a significant factor in determining their contribution in the classroom.

4.6 Summary

The literature confirms variations in the role and responsibilities of the assistant workforce, and there is evidence of prevailing confusion and institutional discrepancies in how they are deployed. It is clear that assistants can and do make a significant contribution in supporting pupils with SEN but the exponential rise in assistant numbers has been no guarantee of quality provision or value for money. A number of studies have

explored collaborative practices between teachers and assistants and several factors which facilitate and prevent effective collaboration have been identified. Nonetheless, a gap remains in the research, particularly from the perspective of the assistant in the special school sector. The following section outlines the methodology developed and applied to gather the views and experiences of this group.

5.0 Methodology

Focus groups were conducted in a convenience sample of twelve special schools across Northern Ireland (n=6) and Ireland (n=6) between January and April 2018. The sample from Ireland comprised a range of special schools catering for pupils with mild GLD (1), moderate severe and profound GLD (3) physical and multiple disabilities (1) and multiple disabilities (1). The sample from Northern Ireland comprised special schools catering for pupils with moderate learning disabilities (1) moderate and other disabilities (1), moderate and severe learning disabilities (1), severe learning disabilities (2) and hearing and visual impairment (1). A total of 81 assistants participated in these focus groups: 36 assistants in Northern Ireland and 45 assistants in Ireland. The focus groups were scheduled at times convenient to the school principal and participating assistants and conducted on site in the special schools. All participants were provided with a plain language information statement and completed an informed consent form. The focus group interviews (Appendix 1) explored assistants' experiences and perspectives of their role. All 12 focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Dublin City University and the School of Education Ethics Filter Committee at Ulster University. The data was analysed thematically and the following findings are presented to represent the emerging themes.

5.1 The duties of the assistant

Assistants were asked to describe the duties and responsibilities of their role. The assortment of replies revealed some striking contrasts in the duties undertaken and demonstrated the range of knowledge, skills and expertise expected of assistants. These are summarised below (Table 1).

Duties and responsibilities	Occurrence
Caring for the children	NIFG1, ROIFG1, ROIFG2, ROIFG3, ROIFG4, ROIFG5, ROIFG6
Personal Care/Intimate Care	NIFG1, NIFG2, NIFG3, NIFG4, ROIFG2, ROIFG4, ROIFG6
Academic/Curriculum knowledge & help	NIFG2, NIFG3, NIFG4, NIFG5, ROIFG2, ROIFG5, ROIFG6
Assisting the teacher	NIFG1, NIFG2, NIFG3, NIFG5, ROIFG2 ROIFG4
Preparing resources/activities	NIFG1, NIFG2, NIFG3, NIFG5, NIFG6,
Dealing with difficult behaviour	NIFG1, NIFG4, NIFG6, ROIFG5, ROIFG6
Manual handling	NIFG2, NIFG3, NIFG6, ROIFG2, ROIFG5
Parenting skills/being maternal	ROIFG2, ROIFG4, ROIFG5,,ROIFG6
Assisting with feeding/meals	NIFG3, NIFG5, ROI2, ROIFG4
Supervision	NIFG4, NIFG5, ROI2, ROIFG4
Administrative duties	NIFG5, ROIFG4, ROIFG6
First Aid/Nursing/Medical needs	ROIFG2, ROIFG5, NIFG3
Working 1-1	NIFG5, NIFG4, ROIFG2
General expertise	NIFG1, ROIFG1, ROIFG3
Adapting work for children	NIFG1, NIFG2, NIFG5
Hoisting children	NIFG2, NIFG3, ROIFG2
Tube/peg Feeding	NIFG2, NIFG3, NIFG6
Physical activity i.e. swimming	ROIFG2, ROIFG6
Asthma/Oxygen provision	NIFG2, NIFG6
Working with other assistants	NIFG1, ROIFG5
Motivating/encouraging children	NIFG3, ROIFG1
Dealing with parents	ROIFG6
Going on school outings/trips	ROIFG2
Organisational skills	ROIFG2
Sensory activities	NIFG4
Autism training	NIFG6
Sign Language	NIFG2

Life skills	NIFG5
Social skills	ROIFG6
Physio	ROIFG6
Tidying	NIFG3

Table 1 Duties and responsibilities of assistants

Assistants generally agreed that they had additional duties beyond their job description, with many identifying this as an inevitable feature of their role:

> SNA (3): *I suppose we all have the same responsibility at the end of the day. We take on the responsibility, we often say that ourselves, that we take on probably more responsibilities than we should, but it wouldn't work any other way really, I couldn't see it working any other way …*
> SNA (2): *You would in fairness, girls disagree with me if you wish, but you will find sometimes that you are a not just a Special Needs Assistant, you are also a Physio and a Speech Therapist, rather than the carer and a counsellor.*

Examination of the range of duties and responsibilities carried out illustrates the considerable overlap in the role of the CA and SNA. For example, in at least two focus groups in Northern Ireland and two in Ireland, duties such as providing personal care for and academic support for pupils, assistance to teachers, dealing with difficult behaviour, manual handling, assisting with meals/feeding and supervision were mentioned. In contrast however, some of the duties mentioned by CAs were not identified by SNAs as part of their remit. Broadly speaking these duties seem to relate to either direct teaching assistant or nursing/medical support aspects of the role. Thus, only assistants in Northern Ireland identified the preparation of resources/activities, adapting work for children, tube/peg feeding, and asthma/oxygen provision as part of their role.

5.2 The skills/attributes of the assistant

Assistants were also asked to describe the particular skills and attributes they brought to the role (Table 2). Findings showed that some assistants brought a range of specific

expertise that included medical as well as educational skills, although personal characteristics also featured prominently:

> SNA (3): *I think students like a bit of craic, it's too structured. Remember who you're working with and the kind of kids especially coming to school. The kind of kids you're working with. If you want to teach mainstream children, go to a mainstream school. These are not mainstream children, but they need a bit of light heartiness, they need a little bit more comfort or whatever. Just don't be too rigid or structured with your ideas, because you're going to fall flat on your face.*

Skills and attributes	Occurrence
Parenting skills/being maternal	ROIFG2, ROIFG4, ROIFG5, ROIFG6
Sense of humour	ROIFG1, ROIFG2, NIFG1
Epilepsy Training	NIFG2, NIFG4, NIFG6
Epi-pen Training	NIFG2, NIFG4
Communication courses	ROIFG2, ROIFG5
Team Teach	NIFG2, NIFG6
Braille	NIFG2, ROIFG2
Creative skills/Art	NIFG3, ROIFG5
Knowing every child	NIFG1, NIFG4
Autism training	NIFG6
Sign Language	NIFG2
Life skills	NIFG5
Social skills	ROIFG6
Physio	ROIFG6

Table 2 Skills and attributes of assistants

In contrast, examination of the skills and attributes suggests differences in the role of the CA and SNA. For example, in six of the focus groups in Ireland the caring dimension of the post was identified in comparison to one focus group in Northern Ireland. Although both CAs and SNAs identified a range of key skills, ranging from epilepsy training, epi-

pen training, Braille, sign language, autism training, and team teaching, assistants in NI reported these over twice as often as their counterparts.

5.3 School Relationships

Assistants were asked a number of questions on their day-to-day relationships in school. Responses focused on working relationships with the class teacher(s) and the relationship assistants had with pupils.

5.3.1 Relationships with teachers

Overall, assistants agreed they had good working *relationships with class teacher(s)*. This was mentioned in 11 focus groups (5ROI, 6NI), with many of the assistants describing the importance of such collegiality in their work:

> CA (10): *Well my teacher at the minute is very approachable, you could literally go to her about anything, you could say 'this is all falling apart' and she'll work with you.*

> CA (4): *Like my teacher is out at the minute and she's texting making sure everything is alright and asking if we need any help even though she's not even in the school.*

Generally positive examples of team work and collaboration were provided by assistants in eight of the focus groups (3ROI, 5NI) and in seven of these the class teacher was identified as the determining character in establishing good working relationships (three ROI, four NI). For example:

> CA (3): *It depends totally on the person.*
> CA (4): *The teacher I'm working with at the minute, we're definitely a team, it's not a 'them and us' situation.*

However, assistants in six of the focus groups (3ROI, 3NI) identified instances of less positive working relationships which tended to be defined in terms of reduced status in the classroom as these examples illustrate:

CA (1): *I've been working with a child and a teacher working with another child and the teacher has stopped to ask me to go and get a tissue to wipe that child's nose.*

CA (9): *You don't matter to them, you're just a number in a workplace.*

CA (1): *I've been phoned on my lunch break to come back to clean up and it wasn't even a big mess.*

SNA (4): *I remember I met a girl that worked in that school with you, she was an SNA, and before the teachers would have their breaks, she set out all the cups, teas and coffees, and cakes and all. She went out to the yard one day, and the teacher came out and called her back, and said you didn't put enough milk in the jug.*

5.3.2 Relationship with pupils

In six of the focus groups (4ROI, 2NI), assistants described the importance of their relationship with pupils, emphasising that the support they provided was the focal point of their daily work:

SNA (1): *I love my job, and I love the kids. I absolutely adore the kids. I would put up with that, because the kids in my classroom are just super and I love it and when things go right, I love it. I give 100% every day, as do we all.*

SNA (7): *And even when you have them on their own, like in the changing room or if there's two of us in there – it's very one on one. You find when their taking to somewhere on their own and there's not a distraction of the classroom, you'd have more of an interaction with them. Like, you'd see them do things. We had one of the kids yesterday doing, 'if you're happy and you know it', and he was clapping his hands, but he'd never done that inside of the classroom. He won't do that in a circle, but he did that you know on a one to one.*

Assistants considered that they had closer relationships with pupils than the class teacher; in six of the focus groups (4ROI, 2NI), the consistency and level of their day-to-day contact was identified as giving assistants greater insight to, and familiarity with, individual pupils' needs:

CA (1): *And that's the benefit of having classroom assistants because we know each child's weaknesses and strengths so we know we can be there for them if they're having a difficulty with a particular subject or topic.*

SNA (4): *I think it's a more personal relationship then the one between the student and the teacher, so, they would often come to you to say something before they would approach the teacher. It's a more approachable role*.

SNA (6): *Because you know the kids, and you know what's going on, and you know what their triggers are, and know when you need to give your opinion and you know when you need to back off. And some people will decide, I'm going to take control of this, I will decide what's going to happen and control it.*

In discussing their relationship with pupils, assistants in four of the focus groups (4ROI) emphasised the strong maternal, caring aspect of their role:

SNA (4): *Yeah, you actually find after your own kids, you actually end up loving these kids, you actually do. You're watching trying to make sure they're looking after each other as well you know.*

5.4 Dynamics of working relationships

In exploring the dynamics of good working relationships with teachers, a range of core practices were identified; these were team work, collaboration and collegiate support.

Team work was mentioned by assistants in eight of the focus groups (3ROI, 5NI) and was most commonly described in terms of inter-dependence and joint effort. For example:

SNA (1): *In our situation because we're working together, our teacher will say right, 'what are we going to do today?', and the 'we' sets the tone, and you know that you're part of that team … and you'll say, 'right I'll do this', and you're full of ideas.*

CA (2): *I really feel part of a team, if something happened, the teacher would contact you outside of school hours to check you're ok and how you're feeling so I think it's more than just, they do value and think about you.*

SNA (2): I *think it's more of a team effort in a special school to be honest, because as SNA (4) is saying, you're needed so much, you're part of the class … maybe in mainstream, if you're supporting a child with a particular exercise, when that's complete the teacher may ask you to just go out and hang some art, or do something that's not going to interfere with rest of the class, and that wouldn't happen here now.*

In five of the focus groups (1ROI, 4NI), ***collaboration*** was described as an ongoing arrangement; although mainly informal, it nonetheless was viewed as a necessary feature of classroom practice:

CA (3): *It's ongoing, you always come together at the end of the day, there's always something being discussed…and there's a real sense of teamwork because of all the information is being passed between us all the time.*

CA (4): *Like if you have a problem there and then you can say it to the teacher and she would say to me…like if there was a child and there was an issue you'd say it on the spot.*

In four of the focus groups (3ROI, 1N), assistants referred to the value of the ***collegiate support*** provided by teachers and other assistants through their day-to-day interactions:

SNA (9): *Well, we kind of have an ongoing communication with our teacher, as of things happen, you kind of consult with your teacher, this and that, maybe this way and maybe that way, but it's ongoing communication through the day. If something happens at the end of the day, you have a bit more chat about it, what happened and why and how to deal with it maybe next time.*

CA (3): *In our class you would never be left alone in a situation, there's always three in our class and we work together, take it turnabout and relieve each other – like we*

have outbursts that could last over an hour so you're not sitting, one person isn't dealing with it for that length of time, you're always watching each other's back.

5.5 Facilitators of collaboration

In exploring the actions that facilitated effective collaboration, a broad range of practices and behaviours were recurrently identified. These spanned good communication, respectful relationships, recognised opinion and input, shared expertise, equality, trust, feeling valued, and adaptability.

In all of the focus groups (6ROI, 6NI), assistants stressed ***good communication*** as essential to effective collaborative practice:

> CA (5): *...we would discuss everything in the morning that we're going to be doing that day and any ideas the classroom assistants have are always taken on board as well*
>
> CA (3): *Yeah, different tactics on how to work around a child are discussed…*
>
> CA (2): *We spend a lot of time doing that at the minute, what would be better and so on*
>
> CA (4): *It (communication) can be throughout the day as well*
>
> *(All agree)*

Aligned with this, in ten of the focus groups (4 ROI, 6NI), assistants described the positive impact of teachers seeking their ***opinion and input*** in the support of pupils:

> CA (3): *Some teachers would say…*
>
> CA (1): '*What do you think of this?' For example, 'do you think this would suit him or her?'*
>
> CA (4): *Yes we have been brainstorming this year, any ideas, it's quite good, they ask our opinions which is quite nice.*
>
> CA (1): *With a challenging group I find we sit and say right what didn't work today, what did, we'll try this tomorrow…*
>
> CA (3): *Yeah like even today we were saying do you think this would work or do you think we should try this, like we all had an opinion if it was going to change.*
>
> CA (2): *It would be very rare that a teacher would make a decision without consulting us really.*

SNA (6): *You know, sometimes teachers will ask you for your opinion in fairness they do, I've had that in the last few years. They are more inclined to ask, or do you think that would, especially the longer I think you're here. Now, I had that experience.*

Another common theme was commitment to ***respectful relationships***, particularly in relation to professional identify and status, which was mentioned in nine of the focus groups (6 ROI, 3 NI):

SNA (3): *And respect has a lot to do with it as well, because we are SNAs, but it's a profession and we're not recognised as professionals, so words that I have heard you know is 'little slaves', you know. It's not necessarily the respect that you might give out, might not necessarily be given back, but then that is to do with individuals themselves*.

SNA (3): *It's communication and a bit of respect. You're not here as a dog's body and to clean up someone else's mess. It's respect and communication*.

The collaborative benefits of inter-dependent ***shared expertise*** was referenced in seven of the focus groups (2ROI, 5NI). Assistants actively welcomed having their skills recognised, particularly when teachers enabled them to work to their strengths:

CA (5): *But if teachers know you're good at something or that you're passionate about something they'll try to include you in some way, like with art and crafts and those kinds of activities*.

Assistants also considered that a classroom culture of shared expertise reflected teachers' regular reliance on their support:

SNA (1): *I think they couldn't cope, they wouldn't be able to function, the class wouldn't be able to function because of the needs of some students. There's certain areas in the classroom I think, each student goes to, their base station and either the teacher will tell you, to who you were to work with in the morning time or if you*

worked with that child yesterday, you'd swap over, but I don't think the school would function without SNAs, because of the demands of each student … I don't know how the other girls feel but… I don't think the teachers could function without SNAs.

Expanding this theme, in four of the focus groups (3ROI, 1NI) assistants identified the importance of parity in classroom relationships, where ***feeling valued*** and being ***treated as an equal*** highlighted the contributions they made:

SNA (8): *We work very equally in the school together, I mean there's no distinction really in our class. They provide the work, maybe, you know, the academic work … [then there's] the outside things we teach cycling, swimming, you know, so it's all equal in those kind of roles to begin with.*
SNA (2): *You have team relationships and if you haven't got that, that role probably does fall down, if you don't work well with the teacher and the SNA because everyone has to come together.*

Trust also emerged as an important issue in four of the focus groups (2ROI, 2NI):

CA (2)*: I think you can feel a wee bit, sometimes, this doesn't leave this room by the way, just a wee bit on edge – that's maybe a good way of putting it*
CA (1)*: Yeah like you're not doing something right and you're like, am I getting it wrong, it's not to perfection and stuff*
(All agree)
CA (3)*: Yeah I know what you mean, nervous, like*
CA (1)*: There's not that trust there on my part (NIFG1)*

The ***adaptability*** to work with different staff and to perform a range of duties was mentioned during three of the focus groups (2ROI, 1NI). Comments included:

CA (3): *There can be different personalities and it means you would have to adjust your personality to suit every different teacher, it can be exhausting.*

SNA (1): *Newly qualified teachers have a lot to bring to the table, they are all newly qualified and have a lot of new ideas. We appreciate that, I would appreciate that. We also have quite a bit to bring from life and years and years of experience. As long as being a teacher or an SNA coming on board, that they recognise us. We mightn't have letters and degrees after our names but, we've quite a bit of experience.*

5.6 Challenges to collaboration

Assistants were also asked to identify the most significant challenges to effective collaboration with teachers. Responses focused on the key themes of professional tensions, limitations in teacher training and lack of time, which were discussed from a range of perspectives.

Poor communication was identified as a key challenge in five focus groups (3ROI, 2NI) and manifested in a variety of ways that impacted negatively on job satisfaction, for example, not sharing information and not addressing assistants directly:

CA (9): *On the other hand you could be in a room where it's like you're not even there because you get told nothing and you don't get included on small things like messages or information that's meant to be shared within the group, and the other three were maybe told and you weren't, and you're like, sorry 'why was I not told', do we not all need to know that information together?! That's just the way it works.*

SNA (6): *You're members of staff at the end of the day, and when you're not informed on certain things that are important, and they're like 'oh did I not tell you that?', you feel that's small. Like you really do feel like, 'what am I doing here?', I'm not being taken seriously or…, do you get me? That's the way I felt anyway.*

SNA (5): *'My SNAs' is the big one, or the teacher barging in, 'can I have one of your SNA's to come down with me?'*
Interviewer: *The teacher put a stop to it?*
SNA (6): *Yeah yeah, I didn't think she realised. No, I think she did 'can I borrow one of your SNAs?' 'Borrow'.*

SNA (7): *In all the 20 years, we were always called (our name), it's never my staff or my SNA, and it's just come on… you know.*

In nine focus groups (3ROI, 6NI), assistants identified ***professional tensions*** with the class teacher. This was described in terms of approaches to classroom practice which undermined rather than nurtured collaborative practice:

SNA (4): *I've been told, 'who do you think you are, you're not the teacher in this room'* (ROIFG5)

CA (5): *The majority of the teachers, I think, give you a lot of respect.*

CA (5): *But then there are some that you don't get as much respect from, you're more treated like their assistant, they're like 'I'm the teacher and you're the assistant and you're not qualified to do that, that's your job'*
CA (3): *It's arrogance, it's 'teacher, teacher, I'm the teacher' with some of them.*

Elaborating on this theme, teachers' enduring reliance on assistants whilst simultaneously feeling ***professionally compromised*** by their knowledge and skills was expressed in seven of the focus groups (3ROI, 4NI):

SNA (2): *They feel threatened by the knowledge or experience you have.*

SNA (6): *They don't want to accept that maybe your little bit of input might solve that problem, they would go around the houses for a month before they come to the realisation 'okay, you know'. I think everybody has experienced that to some degree. It just depends, I suppose, on you and on them, because some of the teachers and SNAs don't mix well together and they have to be moved around do you know what I mean.*

SNA (2): *It's the right way to use SNAs. I actually bring a gender thing into it. I do think female teachers feel more threatened than male teachers, I found in my experience of the 10 years that I've been here. I think the male teachers that come*

into this school value or they seem to come across and appreciate your suggestions better than any teachers that I've worked with. Again, that is some.

Discussion also revealed that assistants' perceptions on this were partly shaped by the professional expectations placed on them particularly where, in some instances, they were left in charge of the classroom:

SNA (2): *I suppose I would like to say … we'd come in as SNAs but we work more and above than SNA's really. Don't we? We do. Sometimes when the teacher's out or has a course day, we're not covered and I'm not complaining or anything, but we'd take over the role. One of us would decide who's going to be in charge today, and we'd take over the role as a teacher. I don't think that's right, do you know what I mean? But I do it because it's my caring side coming out, because if I don't do it and the girls don't do it, what will the kids do? We'll just be caring all day. They need to be stimulated as well.*

Assistants in seven of the focus groups (3ROI, 4NI) also acknowledged that personality clashes can occur with teachers but that the needs of the pupils should remain at the forefront of professional relationships:

SNA (1): *Everything else falls into place and no matter how you might not want to admit it, but personalities come in you know, because that's the human you know, and unfortunately sometimes, people just do not get on, you know no matter, you could stand on your head and it won't happen. We do as a group, we really do try exceptionally hard to work, as SNA (5) said you might end up working with somebody you really don't want to, but you do your best because you're here for the kids.*

SNA (1): *You have to go with the needs of the child not the needs of the teacher or the way the teacher did it … you have to change to the times. You have to adapt to the needs.*

Assistants considered that ***limitations in teacher training*** impacted on effective classroom practice and this observation applied to teachers with several years' experience

as well as newly qualified teachers. In five of the focus groups (1ROI, 4NI) newly qualified teachers and substitute teachers were identified as having particular gaps in their knowledge and skills:

> SNA (1): *SNA input is vital, especially at the start of a new job like a student teacher starting on a new job. Like the SNAs know the kids, they know the routines, they know the behaviours, they know the signs, the triggers, everything. SNAs are vital to student teachers.*
>
> CA (1): *Some people who have come in as subs, a couple of people, and you know, they look at you like 'I don't need you' then they find out, well actually, I do! Their attitude towards you changes completely, after originally sitting you to the side of the class they the try to involve you, 'aren't you coming?!'*
> CA (2): *I think when they see maybe ten kids coming they think this is wee buns but then 5 minutes later suddenly realise it is not.*
>
> SNA (1): *Young new teachers coming in subbing. Last week we experienced this, we had a young girl came in subbing, and we feel we hate saying it – you know, 'what is to be done'. So, we got it as nice as simplified as we could on the paper … I suppose they look to you really for assistance, and the advice really, and they're willing, the majority of people coming in, especially to a special education school, I think.*

Similarly, in three of the focus groups (1ROI, 2NI), assistants referred to a perceived lack of teacher training in the specific and broader dimensions of SEN which, in turn, affected how well they adapted to the special school environment:

> CA (4): *Well with our kids' medical needs, it's a shock to the system, that's something you're not trained for when you become a teacher.*
>
> CA (1): *At the end of the day, it's pupils with special needs here, it's not really mainstream teaching here, it's adapting.*
> CA (2): *They don't have specific special needs training*
> CA (1): *They take a lot of primary teachers here, even though it's a secondary school, so they lack experience that way too.*

CA (3): *They have trouble adapting things.*

SNA (2): *I find a lot of newly trained teachers are kind of coming through the system, and although they have their knowledge and are fabulous with curriculum, they don't necessarily know special needs … sometimes they look as if they're petrified of the children. They're not confident I suppose in the room.*

In three of the focus groups (3NI), assistants referred to the ***lack of time*** they have to complete their duties on a daily basis and described how this affected their work. Comments included:

CA (6): *Yeah it would be good to get the information we need because the teachers are like 'did you get the email' and you're like, I didn't even get the time to get on to my emails.*
CA (10): *You're just depending on somebody passing it on to you and that doesn't always happen.*

CA (1): *Well we have planning meetings together, they're quite informal and mostly just five minutes here and there.*
CA (3): *You really don't have much time when you're not with the kids.*

6.0 Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this study provide fresh insight to the relationships between assistants and teachers working in special schools in Ireland and Northern Ireland from the perspective of the assistant. By focusing on an all-island exploration of the assistant workforce, the study has uniquely explored the concept and practice of collaboration. This is an area which still remains relatively unexplored nationally and internationally.

Corroborating other research (Blatchford et al., 2008, Sharma & Salend, 2016), the findings confirm that the role of the assistant is complex and wide-ranging, with a varied pattern of deployment that can generate ambiguities and mis-understandings in interpreting the role. Significantly, whilst the pedagogical position of the teacher is recognised, the findings suggest a consistent overlap between the two roles which was

reinforced by teachers' uncertainty about managing another adult in the classroom as evidenced elsewhere (Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009). Corresponding notions of status and identity were perceived to be key determinants in teacher-assistant collaboration. Recognition of assistant competences was strongly associated with genuine partnership built on shared expertise, whilst disregard of this particular skills set was perceived to minimise and de-value a pivotal classroom presence. Although there were examples of assistants being treated poorly and feeling subservient to their classroom teachers, positive experiences outweighed negative ones and there was an overall feeling of good working relationships. The insights provided through the study confirm the need for a larger research programme to fully explore the deployment of this workforce in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

In summary, the study findings raise a number of significant issues which merit further investigation.

- Firstly, understandings of the assistant role in the classroom on an all-island basis is still an unexplored aspect of collaborative practice in school and further research exploring the interactions with teachers and pupils is called for.
- Secondly, the particular knowledge and expertise that assistants possess needs to be fully exploited. One step towards this is to radically address collaborative practice between teachers and the assistant workforce. A review of existing provision and greater dedicated training on classroom management within initial teacher education and as part of in-service training is warranted.
- Finally, assistants play a unique role in facilitating the education of pupils with SEN in the education system, yet there is huge diversity and ambiguity in their role, status and deployment. A comprehensive review of these posts should be implemented in order standardise the assistants' role within a classroom and whole-school basis.

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Appendix 1 Interview Schedule

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this focus group about teacher/SNA partnership in special schools. I really appreciate your time.

In order to protect the anonymity of others I would ask each of you not to use real names when you are talking about your experience. As this is a focus group in which you will hear the views of others, I would also ask that each person treat all that they hear confidentially. What is said here stays here.

Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers. I am simply interested in your views regarding teacher/assistant partnership in special schools. I am also interested in hearing the range of different experiences and opinions in the group. With your agreement I would like to audio record the focus group. You have my assurance that no real names will appear in any part of the research. But just for the recording so that I can identify voices can I ask each of you to state your name using a full sentence. I'll start:

1. How would you describe the main duties of your job?
2. What particular knowledge/skills do you bring to the classroom?
3. How do you think teaching staff perceive your role?
4. How would you describe your daily work with the class teacher?

probe: type of support given: instruction, planning, meetings, administration

5. How would you describe your daily interaction with the class teacher?

probe: talk regularly, first thing only, at breaks in lessons, as necessary, very little)

6. How would you describe your relationship with the class teacher ?

probe: assistant, partner, collaborator?

7. To what extent do you think your relationship with the class teacher is a partnership?

probe: Could you give examples?

8. What are the strengths of your partnership with the class teacher?
9. What are the limitations?
10. Do you feel you could contribute more?

probe: If so, in what way? If not, why not?

11. What do you think are the characteristics of a good assistant-teacher partnership?
12. Do you think your partnership with the class teacher could be improved?

probe: In what way?

13. Would you like to add anything that has not been covered?

Thank you again for taking part in this research. When the research is completed you will receive a summary of the main findings.