

The Role of Special Needs Assistants: Report on Focus Groups with Teachers

September 2024

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Abbreviations

| | |
|----------|--|
| CPD | Continuous Professional Development |
| DE | Department of Education |
| DEIS | Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools |
| ESCI | Education Support Centres Ireland |
| IR | Industrial Relations |
| ITE | Initial Teacher Education |
| ESCI | Education Support Centres Ireland |
| ESC | Education support centre |
| NCSE | National Council for Special Education |
| NQT | Newly Qualified Teacher |
| SEN | Special Educational Needs |
| SENO | Special Educational Needs Organiser |
| SET | Special Education Teacher |
| SNA | Special Needs Assistant |
| SNAWDU | Special Needs Assistant Workforce Development Unit |
| WSE | Whole School Evaluation |
| The plan | The SNA Workforce Development Plan |

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1. Acknowledgements

The SNA Workforce Development Unit (SNAWDU) would like to thank the teachers who participated in the focus groups for their open and productive engagement. The feedback based on their experience working closely with Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in the classroom offers a unique perspective on the importance of the SNA role which, in turn, provides valuable input to policy development in this area.

SNAWDU would also like to thank management and staff in the Education Support Centres (ESCs) in Galway, Kilkenny, Cork, Dublin-West, Carrick-on-Shannon and Navan for the warm welcome extended to the team, the use of their excellent facilities, and for their assistance and support in planning and hosting the focus groups.

Thanks are also extended to colleagues in other business units of the Department of Education (DE) for their assistance with the organisation and delivery of the focus groups.



Teacher focus group in session at Galway Education Support Centre.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background

2.1.1 SNAs make a valuable contribution to school communities, through the provision of adult support to enable students with significant care needs attend school. Many students would not be in a position to attend school without SNA support.

2.1.2 Similar to the significant increase in the paraprofessional workforce internationally aimed at facilitating inclusive education,¹ the number of SNAs in Irish schools has grown exponentially since the introduction of this role, from 270 in 1997 to almost 23,000 at the time of publication of this report.

2.1.3 In December 2022, the DE established a dedicated unit — the SNAWDU — within its Special Education section, in order to ensure that sufficient time and attention is given to examination of the SNA role and any reform or development required.

2.1.4 The unit was established to adopt a more strategic approach to SNA policy development, with the objective of developing an enhanced SNA service which delivers the best outcomes for children with additional and significant care needs in primary and post-primary education.

2.1.5 In October 2023, the DE announced the establishment of the first Special Needs Assistant Workforce Development Plan. Work began on the development of the plan by the DE in January 2024.

2.1.6 The plan will reflect a consistent and strategic approach to meeting present and future needs of the SNA workforce. It will encompass an understanding of the SNA role and how SNAs, and others in the school community, can best be supported to provide the most effective service to children and young people in primary and post-primary educational settings.

¹ Griffin, C., & Blatchford, P. (2021). Give them wings to fly: critiquing the Special Needs Assistant scheme through the lens of pupil independence. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 36(2), 198–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1901372>

2.1.7 The five key pillars underpinning the plan are as follows:

- **Pillar 1** – Review and Development of the SNA Role.
- **Pillar 2** – Establishing a Quality Framework.
- **Pillar 3** – Establish a SNA Learning and Development Programme.
- **Pillar 4** – Supporting SNA Recruitment, Retention and Diversity.
- **Pillar 5** – Devising a Communications Strategy.

2.1.8 As part of the research and analysis for the plan, focus groups were convened with SNAs in May 2023 and with school leaders in January 2024. The first national survey of SNAs was also completed in the first half of 2024. The associated reports can be found on www.gov.ie, on the [SNA Information Hub](#), and are also available via the following links:

- [SNA Learning and Development Focus Group Report May 2023](#)
- [The Role of Special Needs Assistants Report on Focus Groups with School Leaders](#)
- [Report on National Survey of Special Needs Assistants](#)

2.2 Purpose of the focus groups

2.2.1 The plan is being developed in consultation and collaboration with stakeholders including SNAs, school leaders and teachers, school management bodies, trade unions, parents/guardians, and children.

2.2.2 Focus groups are an important element of this collaborative approach and facilitate a more in-depth exploration of the experiences and attitudes of key stakeholders. Rich qualitative data can be collected through the medium of focus groups. Participants are encouraged to interact with each other rather than merely respond to the moderator. “In this way, the range and complexity of attitudes and beliefs can emerge. Focus groups offer an opportunity for immediate feedback or clarification on one’s viewpoint, with the contributions of other group members. They enable the researcher to take into account not only what is said but also gestures, facial expressions and other forms of non-verbal

communication. Focus groups can allow a researcher to explore the unanticipated aspects of the problem under study”².

2.2.3 The DE focus groups conducted under Phase 1 of the plan, including the most recent teacher focus groups, have enabled the DE to meet and work directly with these key stakeholders to build a better understanding of the SNA role in the classroom and the school community, to note good practice, and discuss issues that arise in the areas explored.

2.2.4 The relationship between the teacher and the SNA is an important factor in providing the best educational experience for children with special educational needs. Understanding this interaction will assist in determining strategic approaches for the plan. The findings in this report, along with the other research mentioned above, combined with other relevant evidence and insights, will provide valuable input to policy development and reform for the SNA workforce.

2. Qualitative Research for the Information Professional: A Practical Handbook, Facet Publications, Statistics and User Studies: G. E. Gorman, Peter Robert Clayton, Sydney J. Shep, Adela Clayton (2005)

3 Methodology

3.1 Location

The DE collaborated with the Education Support Centres (ESCs) to host focus groups in six locations across the country during September 2024. The locations, chosen with a view to delivering an appropriate geographical spread, were as follows:

- Galway
- Kilkenny
- Cork
- Dublin West
- Carrick on Shannon
- Navan

3.2 Attendees

3.2.1 A total of 218 teachers participated in the focus groups across the six locations. Participants came from a variety of school settings including primary, post-primary, special schools, Gaelscoileanna (5%), and DEIS (28%) schools. A mix of representatives from urban and rural schools as well as both single-sex and co-educational schools attended.

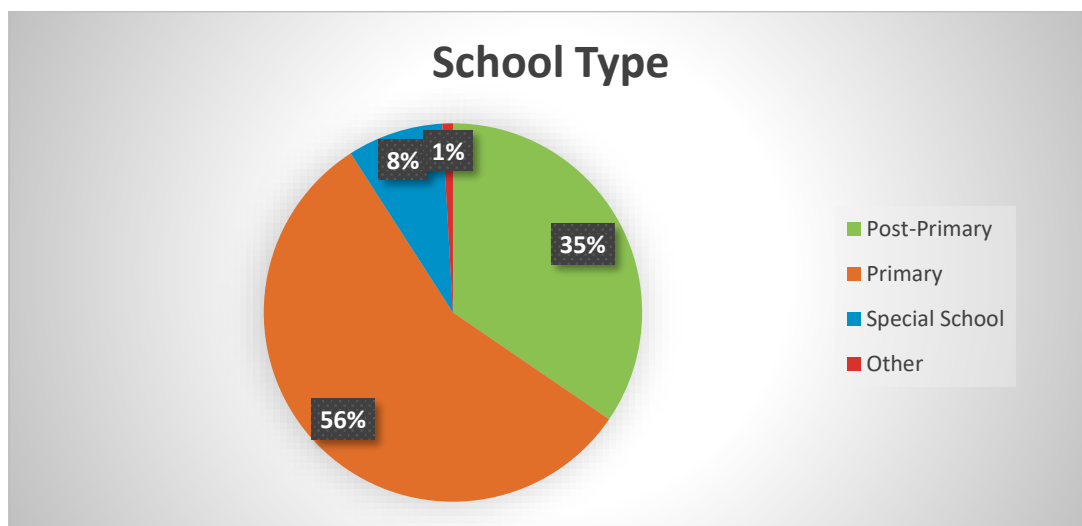


Table 1: Participants by school type

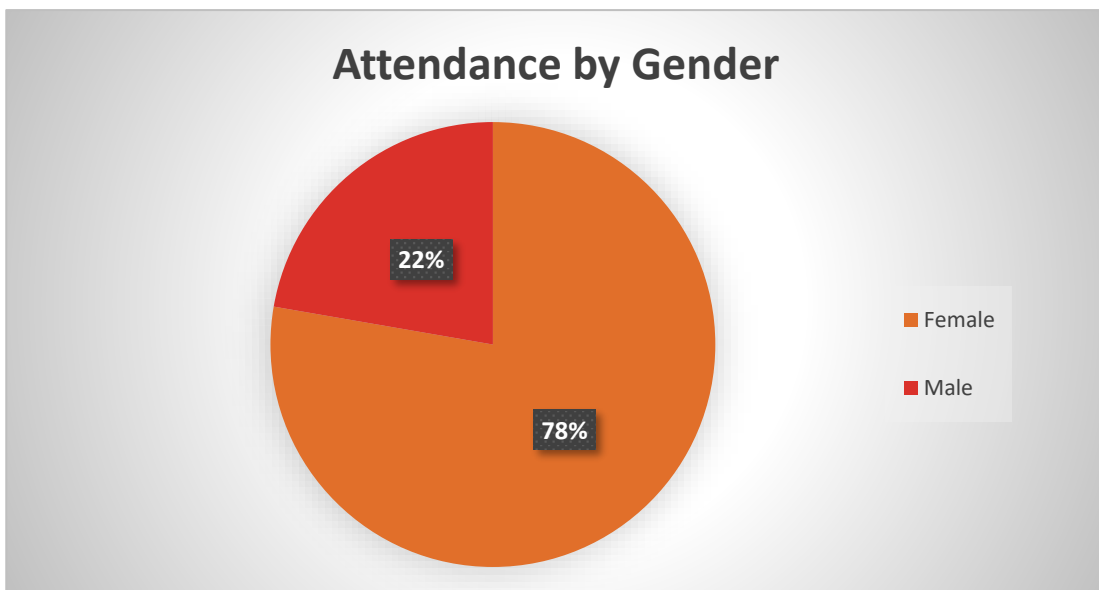


Table 2: Participants by gender

3.3 Actions

3.3.1 To establish the focus groups, the following actions were undertaken:

- An invitation letter and promotional poster were issued by the DE to all recognised schools on 2 September 2024, to notify principals and deputy principals of the teacher focus groups and advise how teachers could register to participate. The DE Communications Unit promoted the focus groups on the SNAWDU page on www.gov.ie and on the DE social media platforms.
- The ESCs were provided with posters, including a QR code to promote the focus groups. Participant teachers self-selected by registering on an online facility provided by the ESCs. To facilitate the widest range of views and responses, it was requested that only one representative per school be registered to attend.
- The ESCs issued the agenda to all registered participants on behalf of the DE in the days leading up to the focus group.
- To support teacher attendance, substitute cover for schools was facilitated by the DE where required.
- A morning and an afternoon session were scheduled at each location.

3.4 Discussions Topics

The following topics were explored in the focus groups:

1. Role of the SNA

- Apart from addressing primary care needs, what do you see as the role of the SNA?
- What are the benefits of having a SNA(s) in the classroom?
- What are the challenges of having a SNA(s) in the classroom?

2. Interaction & Communication

- How can we promote effective communication with the SNA in the classroom and the school?
- What does a SNA need to work effectively with the teacher?
- What does a teacher need to work effectively with a SNA?
- How can teachers and SNAs work together to provide the best outcome for the students?

3. Learning & Development

- What training does a new SNA need to be effective in their role?
- What training is needed in the school community to ensure the needs of all students are met?

- Participants were divided into breakout groups for discussion, comprising four to eight participants per group, depending on attendance numbers at each location.
- Participants were encouraged to speak freely whilst respecting the views of others.
- Each focus group agreed to apply the Chatham House Rule to encourage open sharing of views and experiences. When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.
- A DE official acted as facilitator for each of the breakout groups to encourage sharing of views and opinions by all participants and to ensure that participants stayed on topic within the set time limits.
- Each group nominated a participant to record the data and to share the main points with the wider group.

- There was a significant overlap of findings across breakout groups; therefore, each new point was discussed by each table with the wider group to provide an opportunity for other participants to discuss their views and to assess whether there was consensus or debate on issues raised.
- The data, displayed in chart form in this report, reflects overall responses under the different topics and subtopics.

4. Findings

4.1 The level of engagement by participants in the focus groups was excellent. Participants discussed topics openly and respectfully within their groups whilst ensuring everyone in the group was afforded the opportunity to voice their views and opinions.

4.2 Overall, feedback through the focus groups indicates teachers have high regard for the work of SNAs and the support they provide. The teachers acknowledged the importance of the work of SNAs in the classroom and the significant role that SNAs play in the school community as well as in the lives of students.

4.3 Findings throughout this document are presented in percentage charts and text. The following quantitative terms are used when interpreting the percentages of participants communicating shared opinions:

| Percentage | Language used |
|-------------|----------------|
| 80% or over | The majority |
| 60% - 79% | Most |
| 40% - 59% | Many |
| 25% - 39% | A small number |
| 24% or less | A few / some |

4.4 The views presented in the following chapter are those expressed by participants in attendance at the focus groups.

5. Section 1 – Role of the SNA

5.1 Apart from addressing primary care needs, what do you see as the role of the SNA?

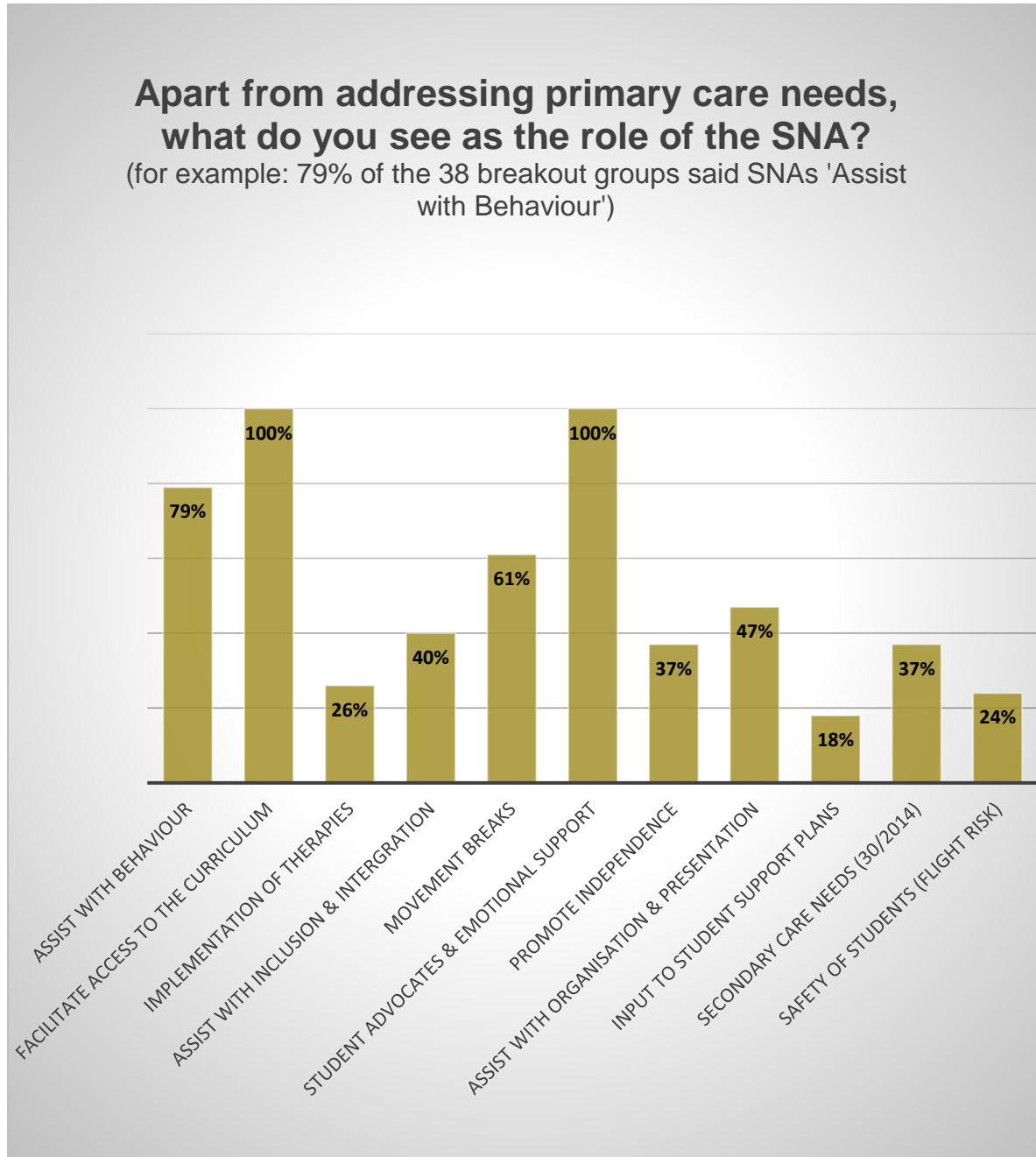


Table 3: Apart from addressing primary care needs, what do you see as the role of the SNA?

5.1.1 The majority of participants agreed that the SNA role is broader than supporting primary care needs and that they play an important role in assisting students to access the curriculum. Examples provided include helping a student to stay on task and reinforcing learning by repeating the teacher's instructions to the student.

5.1.2 A few teachers considered it important to have SNAs included in the development of the Student Support Plan (SSP), as they work closely with the students. They also felt that it was important for the SNA to be aware of the goals and strategies in place for students with special educational needs.

5.1.3 Many participants described how the SNA assists the student with writing by encouraging repetition and providing positive feedback. It was stated that they often help the student with correcting homework by using 'tick sheets' and reporting to the teacher where there are difficulties. In these ways, they support both the student and the teacher in the classroom.

5.1.4 The majority of participants indicated that the SNA often acts as an advocate for students in situations where the student expresses their views or preferences to the SNA. As a consistent and reliable adult support to students in the school community, the SNA frequently provides emotional support and understanding to students. With their encouragement the student's confidence increases and they are supported to accomplish tasks.

5.1.5 Most participants described how SNAs assist the teacher in addressing behavioural issues: The SNA will frequently recognise when behaviour is about to escalate and interject to support the student involved, thereby avoiding further upset for both the individual and the class group. The SNA will also be aware of 'triggers' for certain students and can respond to these quickly to de-escalate emerging situations.

5.1.6 Most teachers indicated that the SNA facilitates movement breaks for students which are important to help some students regulate. Without SNAs, teachers would be unable to facilitate these breaks as the class would be disrupted, and the rest of the class would lose teaching time. Participants stated that even where a whole class approach to movement breaks is adopted there are times when individual students require this intervention separately. There was discussion on how such breaks are managed and the

need for training to deliver them effectively with a view to minimising the loss of teaching and learning time for the student.

5.1.7 Many of the teacher participants agreed that, whilst the key responsibility of the SNA is to provide support for primary care needs, they also assist students to integrate in the classroom. This can involve the SNA working with the student to organise and present their work. While the SNA is present in the background to provide support, the student has the same experience as their peers in presenting their work to the teacher, thus promoting inclusion and reducing the perception that they are different from others in the class.

5.1.8 A small number of participants outlined the importance of the SNA in promoting independence while also providing an appropriate level of support to students. This takes many forms, including encouraging the student to engage with peers, rather than becoming over-reliant on the SNA. It also includes prompting and supporting the student to do things for themselves as much as possible. The discussion included an acknowledgement that there can be a concern among SNAs that, as the student becomes more independent, their post can be in jeopardy. There can also be a sense that by doing less for the student, albeit in their best interest, the SNA is in some way failing the student. The SNA's role in promoting independence is an area which participants considered requires careful consideration and appropriate training to increase understanding and competence in this role.

5.1.9 Participants noted that the SNA's role is expanding and is increasingly focused on managing behaviours of concern. Examples included assisting students with emotional regulation and addressing safety matters, such as with students who are a flight risk. There was discussion about the approach to SNA allocations, which is not based on secondary care needs and the challenge this presents. Overall, the groups agreed that the provisions of circular 30/2014³ need to be reviewed to reflect the growing and evolving needs of students.

5.1.10 A small number of participants shared how SNAs assist in implementing recommended therapies from professional reports. It was pointed out that SNA support in

³ [gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) - [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 \(www.gov.ie\)](http://www.gov.ie)

delivering these therapies is essential, as a teacher with responsibility for a whole class does not have the capacity to provide this support alone. However, it was also noted that this assistance needs to be delivered under the direction of a therapist to ensure that the SNA receives appropriate support also.

5.2 What are the benefits of having a SNA(s) in the classroom?

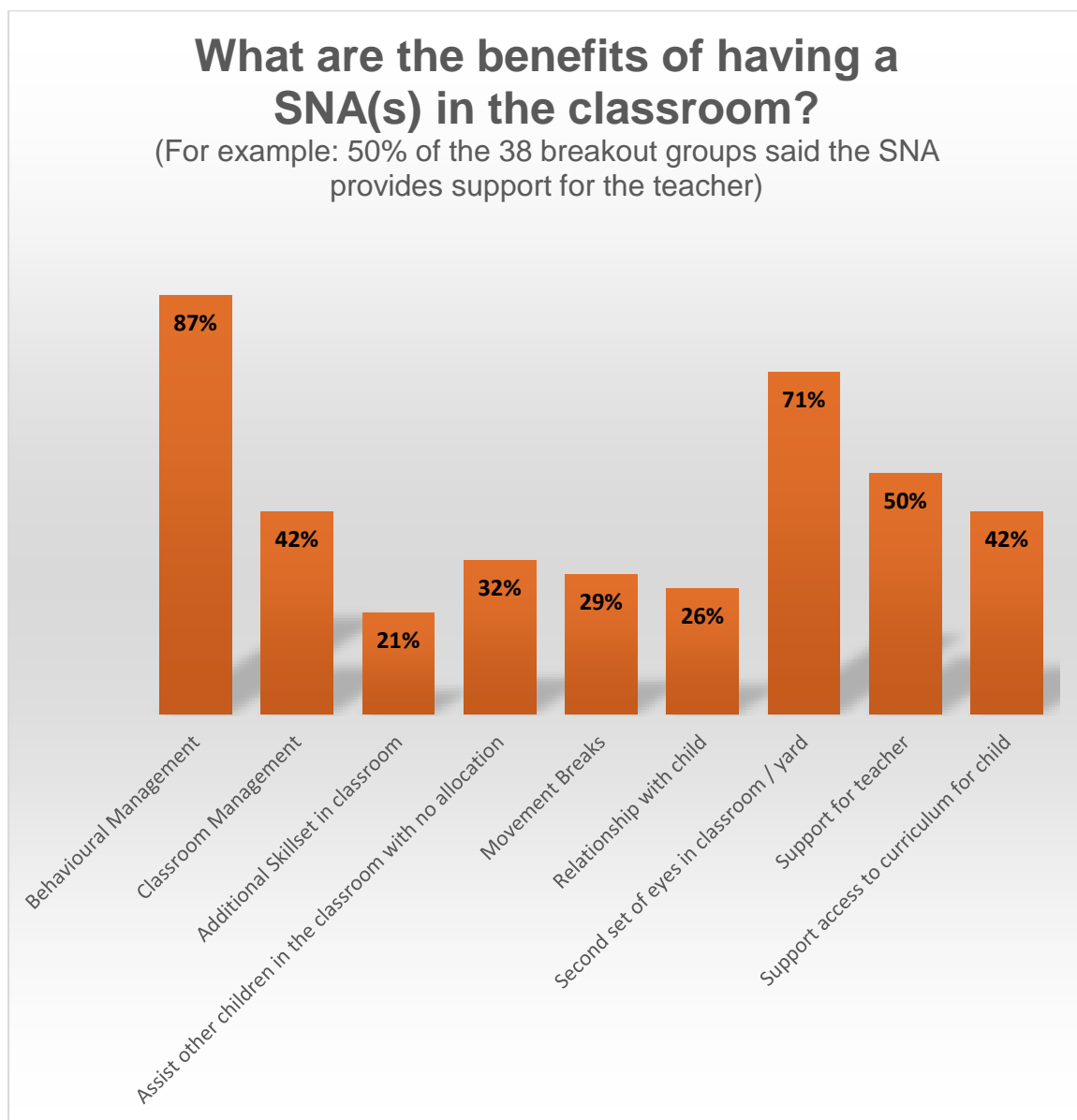


Table 4: What are the benefits of having a SNA(s) in the classroom?

5.2.1 The SNA’s role in managing behaviours of concern was cited by most participants as a significant benefit to the teacher and the student. The SNA frequently identifies

triggers and is aware of when behaviour is about to escalate, intervening to support the student, thereby averting distress for both the individual and the class group while also facilitating the teacher to perform effectively in their role.

5.2.2 Most of the teachers described how having a second pair of eyes in the classroom is a significant benefit of having a SNA in the classroom. They noted that the SNA is ideally placed to see what the teacher might not. This was also seen as a benefit during supervision on yard duty. It was strongly felt that this extra adult assists in monitoring students overall and may notice potential bullying or other challenging interactions between students. When the SNA and teacher collaborate effectively, this insight is considered a very important factor in the wellbeing of students.

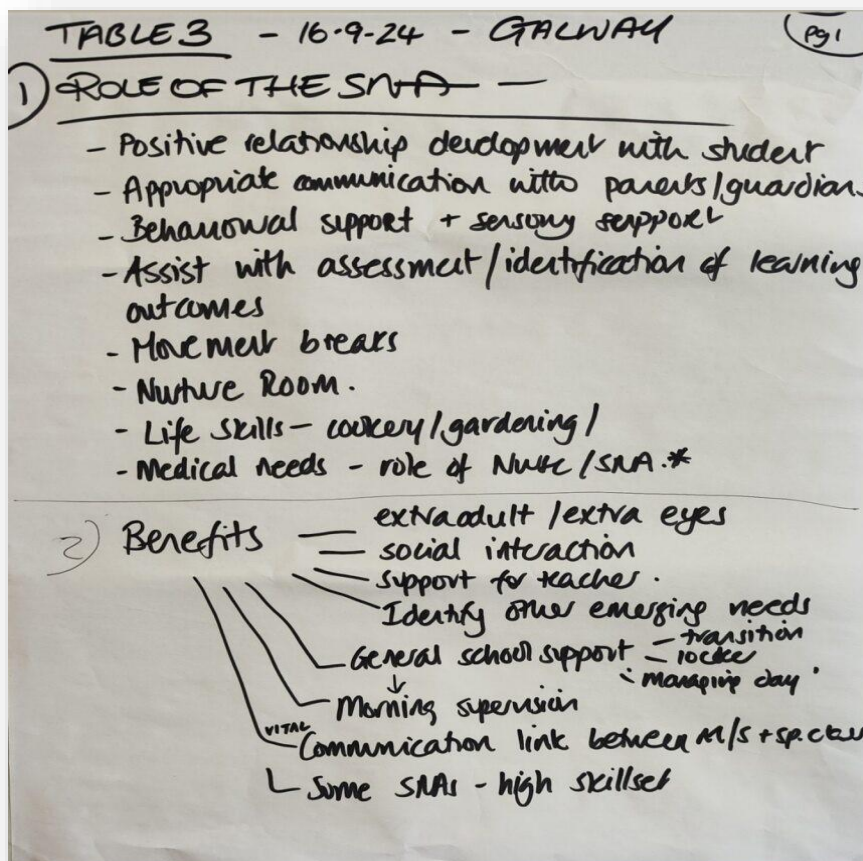
5.2.3 Many participants agreed that SNAs are a key support to teachers. It was reported that this support comes in many forms, including:

- Supporting access to the curriculum. Examples provided included repeating tasks, helping with assistive technology, reinforcing learning (including repetition and additional guidance with tasks), identifying learning outcomes, praising work completed and encouraging students to engage in class.
- Acting as the link between home and school and providing another perspective, as the SNA has a less formal relationship with the child than the teacher. This often provides insight that would otherwise be unknown to the teacher.
- Facilitating movement breaks, allowing the teacher to continue teaching the class without interruption.

5.2.4 A few teachers mentioned that, due to the relationship they have with students, SNAs can provide helpful assistance with school avoidance and refusal by supporting and encouraging the student to return to school.

5.2.5 Teachers expressed the view that the SNAs' knowledge and insight into children's needs, derived from working directly with them, often on a one-to-one basis, is a considerable benefit. While the SNA may be assigned to work with certain students in a class, they also assist others who require intermittent support. One example provided was when a SNA noted an instance of echolalia, or repetition of inappropriate language, which can be associated with special needs, and this prompted discussion with the teacher.

5.2.6 Some described the benefits of having SNAs with additional skill sets in the classroom and school. Examples were provided of SNAs with qualifications and expertise in the areas of cooking, gardening, and other life skills and also in the areas of art, sports, and drama.



Responses from a group in Galway Education Support Centre

5.2.7 Some participants mentioned that these additional skill sets can have a positive impact on classroom management, assisting the teacher and benefiting the students. It was suggested that many of these skills are not strictly aligned with the provisions in DE circular 30/2014, even though they can be a significant benefit to school communities.

5.2.8 Post-primary teachers pointed to additional benefits of the SNA role in that setting, such as support for Leaving Cert Applied students, assisting with social stories⁴, supporting engagement with work placements and enabling students to attend and take part in school life. They pointed out that while SNA support is important for all students with special educational needs it is especially key when they start post-primary school.

5.2.9 With different teachers and locations for each class subject, SNAs can support students to manage timetables, books, and lockers and help them arrive to class on time. This support minimises stress for the students involved, providing a smoother transition to the new school setting, which benefits the whole school community.

5.3 What are the Challenges of having a SNA(s) in the classroom?

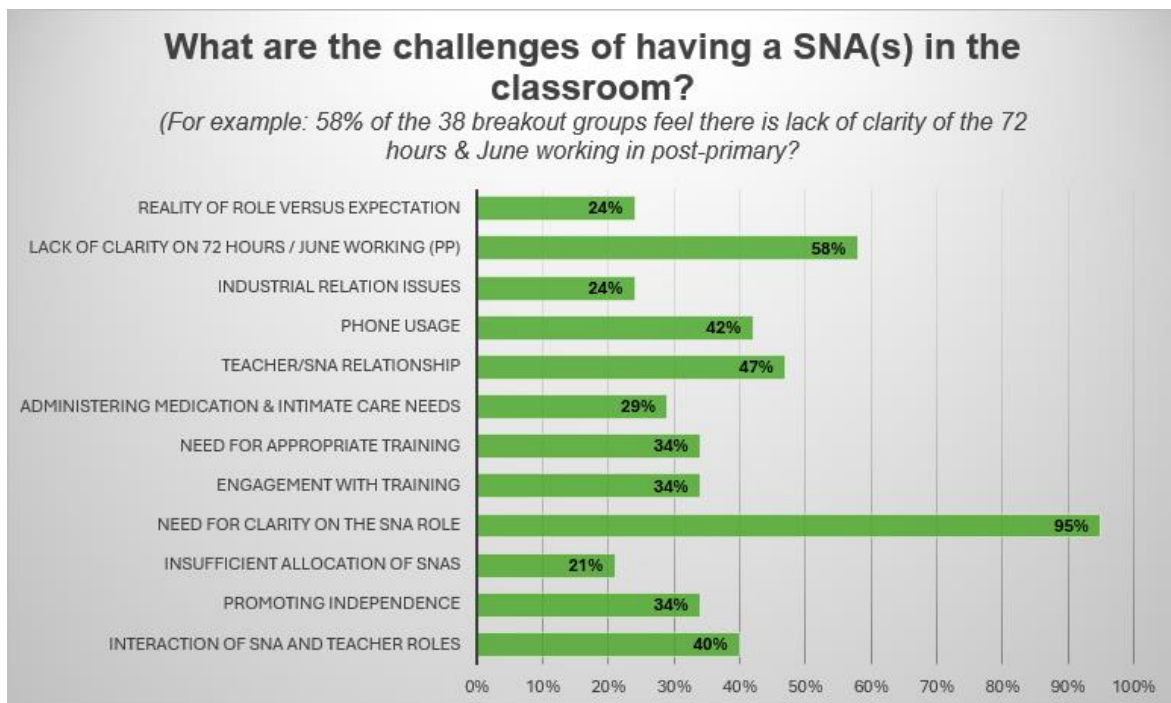


Table 5: What are the challenges of having a SNA(s) in the classroom?

5.3.1 While teachers participating in the focus groups indicated overall that the support of a SNA has a positive impact, it was noted that working with another adult in a classroom can also present challenges.

⁴ NCSE website: [Social-Stories-Supporting-students-with-ASD-transition-back-to-school.pdf](https://www.ncse.ie/~/media/1/1/1/1/Social-Stories-Supporting-students-with-ASD-transition-back-to-school.pdf)

5.3.2 The need for clarity on the SNA role, as set out in DE circular 30/2014, was cited as problematic by the majority of participants. This is seen as a challenge for SNAs, teachers, school leaders, and parents and students which could be addressed through the review of the relevant circulars, supported by better communication from DE.

5.3.3 The need for clarity in relation to the SNA role and duties can lead to Industrial Relations (IR) issues when there are differing interpretations of provisions in DE circulars or guidelines. While administering medication and attending to intimate care needs, such as catheterisation, are primary care needs included in DE circular 30/2014, they can sometimes present difficulties. It is important that these duties are communicated effectively and supported through appropriate training to avoid impacting school attendance and participation for relevant students.

5.3.4 As part of their standard employment contract, all SNAs are required to be available for a number of days outside of school hours. Under the Croke Park agreement, this time was converted to 72 hours (pro-rata for part-time SNAs). Related provisions are contained in DE circular 71/2011. The need for clarity and consistency in the approach to these 72 hours and June working (in post-primary schools) was cited as a challenge by many of the participating teachers. In the view of participants, DE circular 71/2011 lacks clarity around the purpose of the 72 hours and how they should be implemented. They see a need for better communication and planning on this issue. Working arrangements can differ across schools, which can be problematic, and there is a need for greater consistency of approach.

5.3.5 Participants advised that, while relationships between the teacher and SNA generally work well, challenges can arise. There can be confusion and/or uncertainty around roles, which in turn can lead to confusion for the students in the class.

5.3.6 Participants advised that reporting structures can present a challenge. While the teacher is not the line manager for SNA staff, they are often expected to direct the SNA and sometimes don't feel equipped to do so.

5.3.7 The teachers indicated a need for training to manage the collaborative relationship with the SNA and suggested that Initial Teacher Education (ITE) should include training on how to work effectively with other adults in the classroom. They proposed that this would be complemented by training for SNAs on how to work with teachers.

5.3.8 Participants agreed that mobile phone usage policies are important for all school staff and need to be better utilised and applied consistently in all aspects of school life to ensure better outcomes for children.

5.3.9 Teachers described how the presence of multiple adults in the classroom, arising from team-teaching, therapists engaging with children, and SNA support can generate challenges, such as increased noise levels in the classroom. This can negatively impact on teaching and learning, and many considered that this can be managed through training for school staff on how to work collaboratively.

5.3.10 Teachers advised that space in the classroom is a challenge in some schools. This was noted as a significant issue in some special schools, where, due to the complex needs of students, there are multiple adults in the classroom, along with students and their equipment.

5.3.11 Some participants described how SNAs, while trying to be supportive, can sometimes over-prompt and/or shadow the student. While the intention is to assist the student, it can have the opposite effect, leading to students becoming over-reliant on the SNA. Participants suggested that there should be an increased focus on fostering independence in students. This to be accompanied by appropriate training for SNAs.

5.3.12 Participants noted that while ongoing training is essential, and most SNAs engage enthusiastically, it would be beneficial for all to have access to training to support them in their role. This would build their capacity to meet the emerging needs of students and keep them up to date with the latest approved approaches to education and care.

5.3.13 Teachers outlined how it can be difficult for SNAs to access appropriate training/upskilling opportunities and there is often uncertainty as to whether the training is recognised, accredited, or appropriate to the SNA role.

5.3.14 Many participants supported a structured probation process for SNAs, supported by appropriate guidance and communication. The DE explained that probation arrangements are set out in the SNA employment contract, as set out in circulars 12/2005 and 15/2005 (these circulars are for update and review under the plan). Participants suggested that there is potential to manage the probation process for SNAs more

effectively. This was seen as an opportunity for school leaders to set expectations and manage performance, including identifying training needs.

5.3.15 Teacher participants highlighted the absence of regulation for the SNA role, in comparison to the respective role of the Teaching Council for teachers. This is seen as a gap in professional support for SNAs, which should be considered from a policy perspective.

5.3.16 A few participants outlined the need for a quality system for the SNA role. It was suggested that the Looking at Our Schools (LAOS)⁵ quality framework for schools could include the work of SNAs. This was seen as an opportunity to support and enhance the performance of the workforce.



Teacher Focus Group in Galway Education Support Centre

5.3.17 Some participants confirmed that there is still some misunderstanding across school communities regarding the allocation process for SNA posts. Many are not aware that the allocation of a SNA is to the school and not to an individual child, as it was in the

⁵ [Looking at our Schools \(LAOS\)](#)

past. This presents a challenge where there is an expectation that each child with access to SNA support will receive one-one care rather than a shared SNA resource.

5.3.18 Some teachers highlighted challenges where SNAs also take on a bus escort role. Due to a variety of factors, this can sometimes require them to arrive later to the school and leave immediately after school finishes meaning they are not available to provide support for other students during reception and dispersal time.

6. Section 2 – Communication

6.1 How can we promote effective communication with the SNA in the classroom and the school?

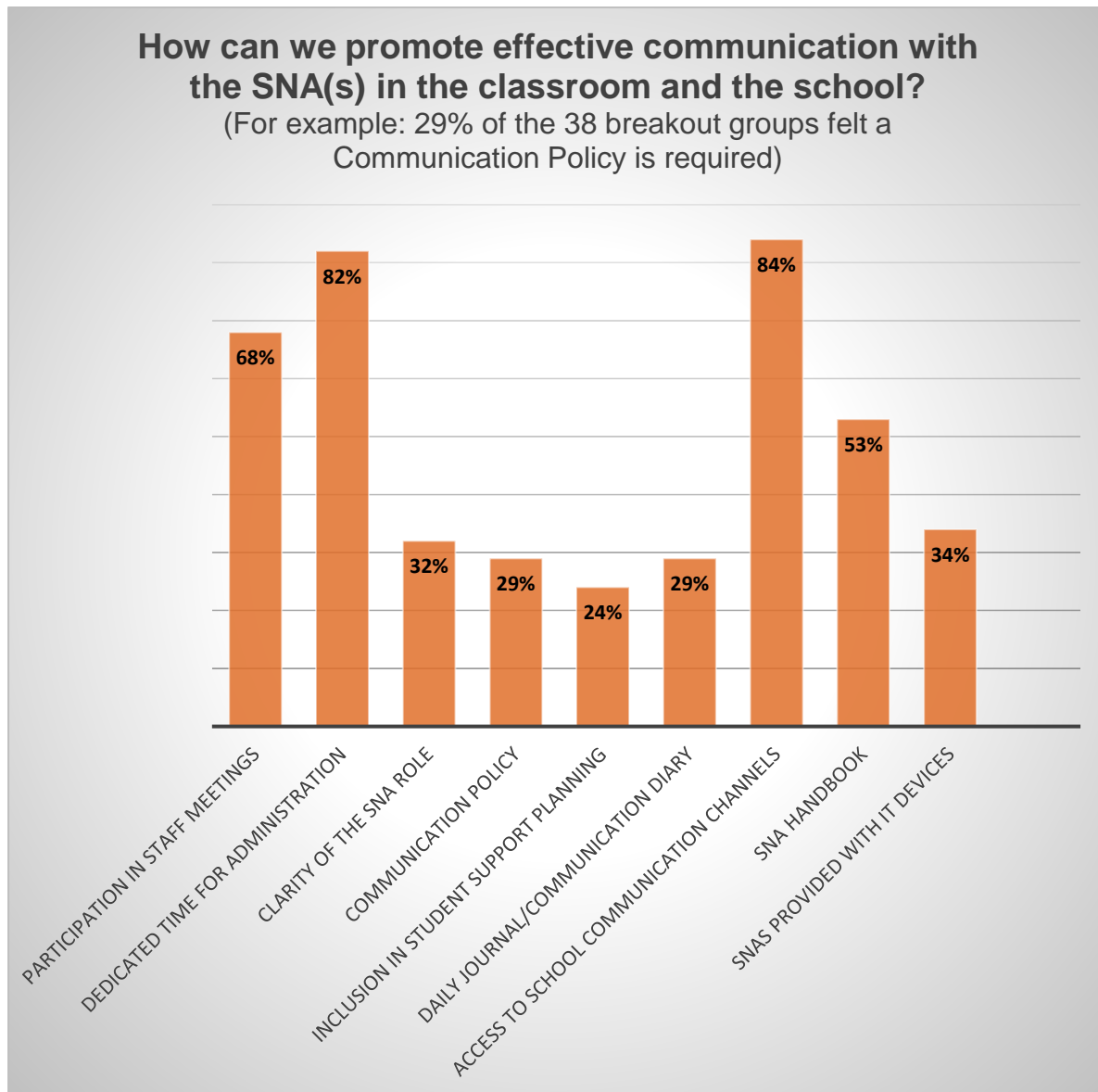


Table 6: How can we promote effective communication with the SNA(s) in the classroom and the school?

6.1.1 Participants described the methods of communication with SNAs used in their schools that they considered effective, including Aladdin, SharePoint, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp. It was considered critically important to providing an effective service that SNAs have access to relevant information on such school systems.

6.1.2 While acknowledging that time for meetings and administrative work is important, participants felt strongly that it is difficult to find time for these tasks in a busy school day. Some participants found weekly meetings with the special educational needs team to be an effective communication method which supported a cohesive approach to education and care.

6.1.3 Many participants indicated that SNAs attend staff meetings in their schools, which was considered an essential component of effective communication, with a view to ensuring SNAs have access to relevant information and an opportunity to provide input to school planning.

6.1.4 Some participants highlighted the importance of having the SNA present at meetings on development and review of the Student Support Plan. This would involve them in the planning, delivery and review of supports and targets for the student concerned.

6.1.5 There was discussion about SNAs' participation in Parent/Teacher meetings. A few teachers felt that it was not necessary for the SNA to attend while others felt it could be beneficial, providing an opportunity for formal discussion on the child's needs.

6.1.6 It was noted that Gaelscoileanna conduct their school meetings through Irish, and there is an associated training need for SNAs in those settings.

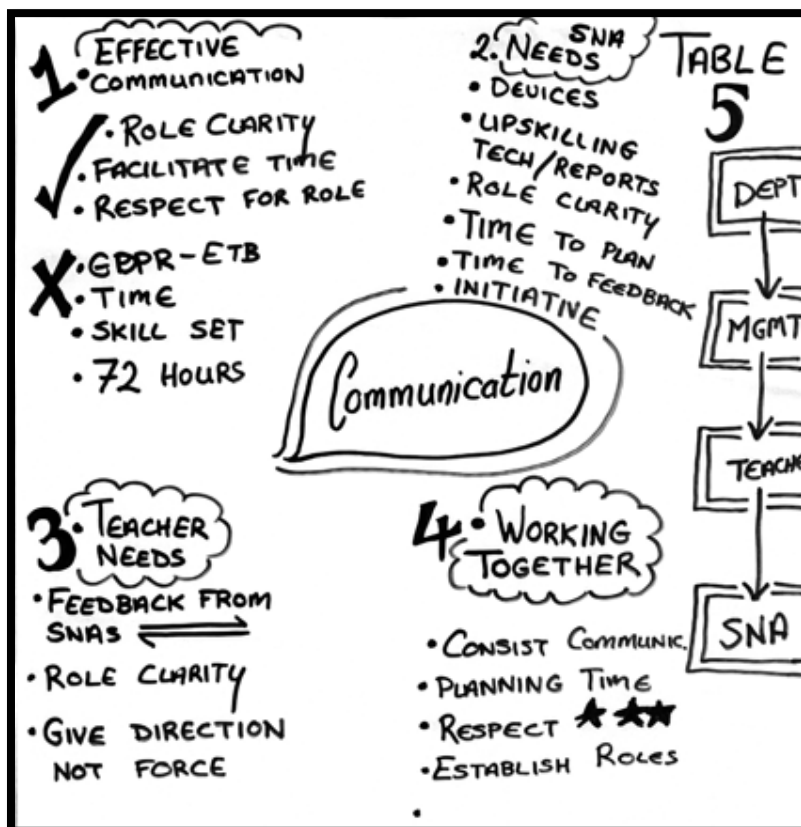
6.1.7 A SNA handbook, setting out guidelines and relevant information on the role and the use of the 72 hours, was suggested as an effective communication channel. It should include reporting templates, useful information, and links to procedures for dealing with various situations and incidents.

6.1.8 Most participants agreed that SNAs should have their own IT devices in the school, with appropriate access to systems including email, which could help keep them informed of school policies, including any changes, and relevant information on students and other school matters.

6.1.9 The majority of participants described the need for clarity on appropriate use of the 72 hours and the potential for facilitating collaboration between the teacher and SNA during those hours. Participants noted that the 72 hours could be used effectively for formal meetings, debriefs, and informal meetings to foster collaboration as a team.

6.1.10 A small number of participants suggested that schools should have a communication policy to clearly outline how the school communicates internally and externally with all stakeholders in the school community. This should include training on effective communication and collaborative working for SNAs and teachers.

6.1.11 Some participants suggested that a senior SNA post, similar to the posts of responsibility for teachers, would be beneficial to the school community. This senior SNA could assist with co-ordinating the work of SNAs and represent them in meetings of the special education needs team ensuring that SNAs have a voice in the school community. It would provide an opportunity for relevant input into overall planning for students with special educational needs and ensure that SNAs are included in decision making relevant to their role and duties.



Responses from a focus group in Kilkenny

6.1.12 A small number of teachers proposed the use of communication diaries or daily journals by SNAs. These could be used by the parent, teacher, and SNA to communicate effectively and to record the student’s daily profile, progress and other important or useful

information. Some reservations were expressed about how this would apply in post-primary schools, where students may be resentful of this type of interaction.

6.2 What does a teacher need to work effectively with a SNA?

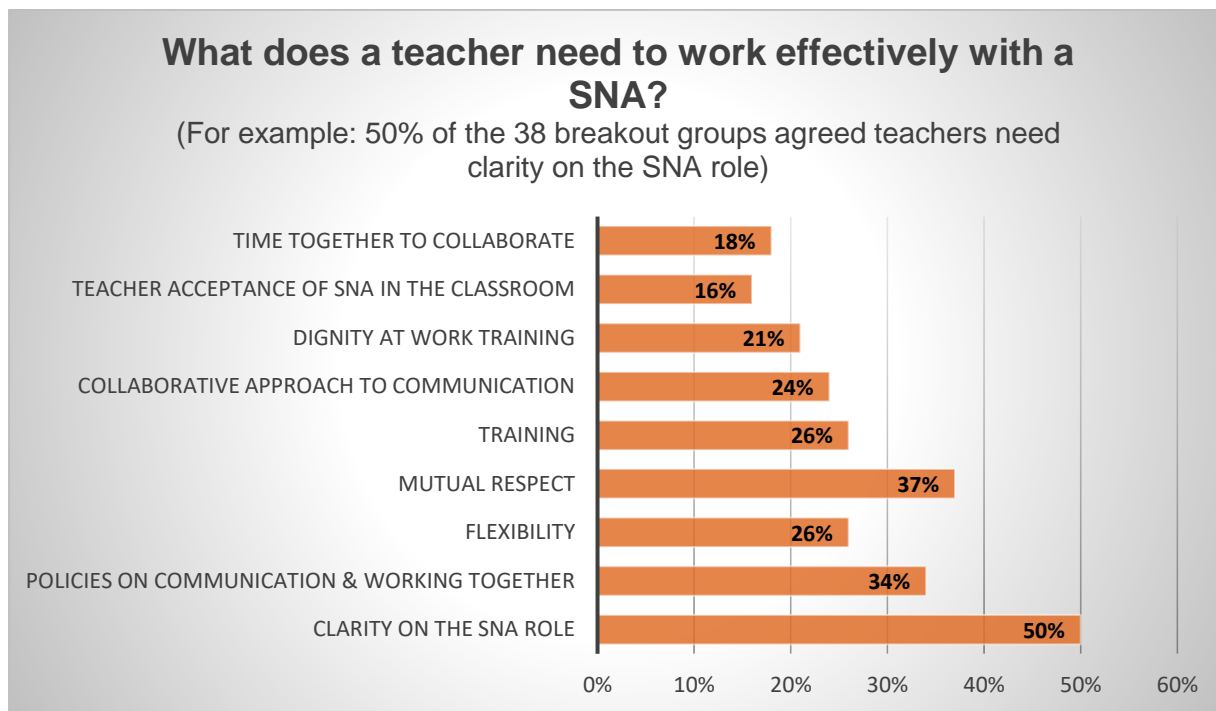


Table 7: What does a teacher need to work effectively with a SNA?

6.2.1 Many participants discussed the need for clarity and guidance for both the teacher and the SNA about their roles. Some participants felt there is a lack of understanding among teachers and SNAs about their roles and how they interact. It is important this relationship is managed effectively through a collaborative approach, supported by appropriate training.

6.2.2 A small number of participants outlined how mutual respect is crucial for enabling both the teacher and SNA to effectively carry out their roles. Each role is dependent on the other to work effectively and it is important that the SNA’s role in facilitating a child’s attendance at school and the teacher’s responsibility for delivering the curriculum are recognised. This can be fostered through Dignity at Work training.

6.2.3 Some participants stated that SNA input into relevant school planning, including staff meetings, is important. It was noted that a clear school policy on communication and collaboration is required to provide the best educational experience and outcomes for children.

6.2.4 A few participants suggested that there is a need for flexibility from teachers in how the classroom is run to accommodate the SNAs and ensure the best outcomes for the students.

6.2.5 Participants agreed that it was difficult to arrange for a time to meet with the SNA(s) to plan, organise, and review but nonetheless it is necessary to ensure that classrooms work effectively.

6.3 What does a SNA need to work effectively with the teacher?

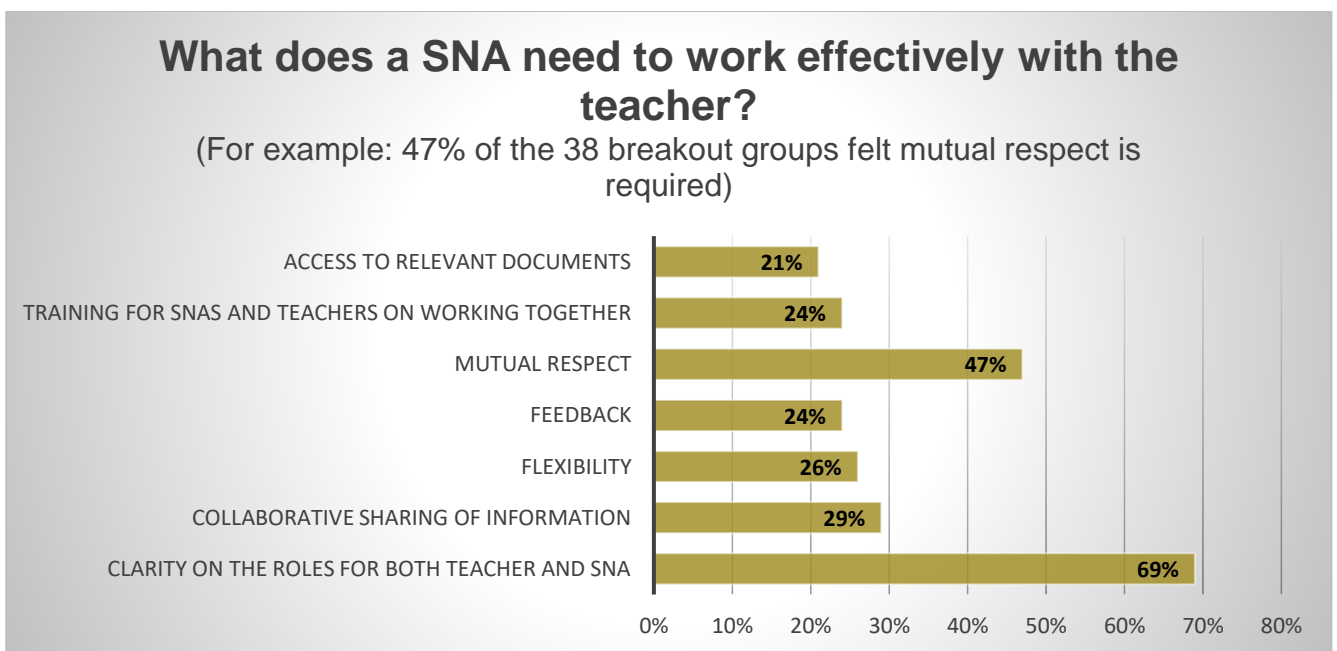


Table 8: What does the SNA need to work effectively with the teacher?

6.3.1 Most participants discussed the need for clarity and guidelines regarding the SNA role for both the teacher and the SNA. They need to have a clear understanding of each other's roles and how they interact to provide optimal education and care to students.

6.3.2 Many of the teachers acknowledged that mutual respect between the teacher and the SNA is vital to ensure a good working relationship and the best outcomes for the students. A few participants noted that the work being carried out by the DE under the plan will help promote understanding and respect for the SNA role in school communities.

6.3.3 Some participants indicated that training is required for both SNAs and teachers on how to work collaboratively. This training should clearly outline the separate but related responsibilities of each role and how they can work effectively to meet the educational and care needs of students. It should include a two-way feedback mechanism, where the teacher and SNA discuss what worked well and what could be improved.

6.3.4 A few participants suggested that there is a need for flexibility from SNAs in how the classroom is run, to accommodate new approaches to education and care. One example given was where the teacher and SNA successfully collaborated to deliver a new approach to support teaching and learning in the classroom.

6.3.5 A few participants expressed the view that access to relevant documentation and information, including relevant aspects of the Student Support File, is important for SNAs. In order to collaborate effectively with teachers, they need to be equipped with this relevant information.

6.4 How can teachers and SNAs work together to promote the best outcome for the students?

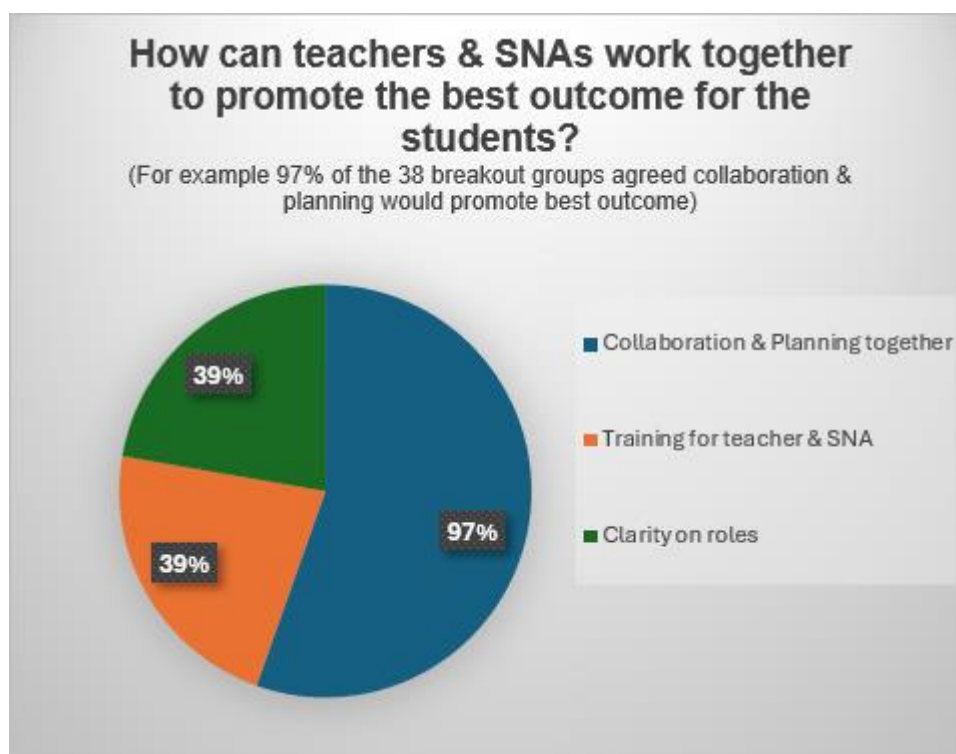


Table 9: How can teachers and SNAs work together to promote the best outcome for the students?

6.4.1 Participants agreed that collaboration between teachers and SNAs on student planning is essential to deliver the best educational experience for students. This would include flexibility in their approaches to their roles. It would also include collaboration in the form of debriefing on a regular basis to discuss progress and any issues arising. This is seen as a training need for both roles, to be addressed through ITE and CPD.

6.4.2 The allocation of dedicated time to plan for student's needs, develop an agreed approach, outline responsibilities, and review outcomes was seen as essential to provide the best educational experiences and outcomes for children and young people.

6.4.3 Regular rotation of SNAs was seen by some as good practice. Approaches to rotation in various settings were discussed, including the impact of change on certain students.

6.4.4 There was exploration of the feasibility of rotating SNAs on a split-week between mainstream and special classes in relevant schools. Participants expressed the view that a split-week approach helps students to become accustomed to planned change and not to become over-reliant on an individual SNA. It builds their confidence, reducing the impact of unexpected change such as when a SNA is on leave or otherwise unavailable. Others felt that this approach of working with different staff members would be too disruptive for students, particularly those with autism, and they considered yearly rotation to be more appropriate.

6.4.5 A few participants mentioned that access to well-being supports for SNAs is very important, as they are often caring for students with complex needs and students who are experiencing grief and trauma in their own lives. SNAs need to have access to these supports.

7. Section 3 - Learning and Development

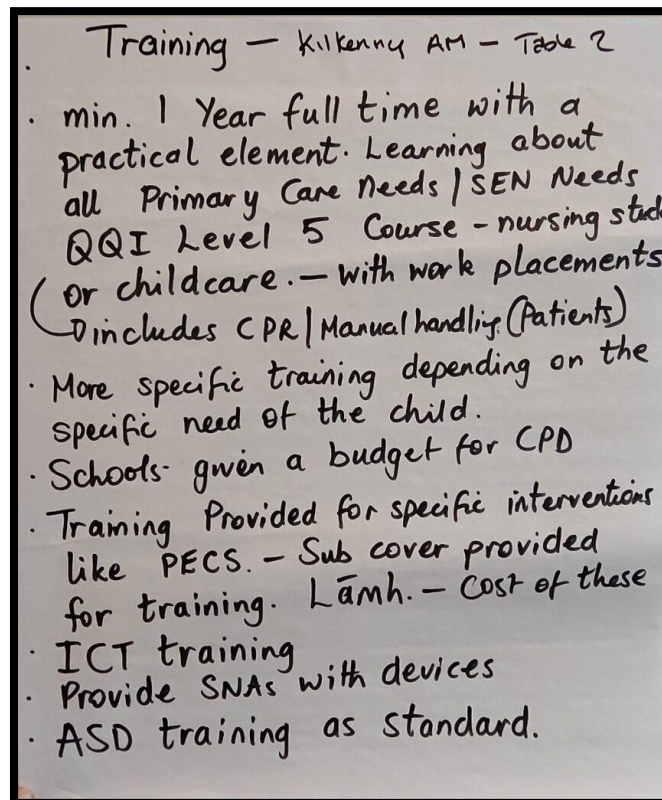
7.1 What training does a new SNA need to be effective in their role?

7.1.1 The majority of participants agreed that induction training is important for new staff. This should include a mentoring programme for new SNAs to provide support and build competence. Participants considered that a formal induction system would work well for SNAs.

7.1.2 It was proposed that SNA training should include a practical element to ensure that SNAs, particularly those new to the role, are confident in carrying out their primary care duties. Practical training and upskilling are particularly required for first aid, medical interventions etc.

7.1.3 Other training discussed as important for a new SNA included:

- Confidentiality / GDPR
- Communication skills
- Report writing
- First Aid
- Manual Handling
- Understanding complex medical needs
- ICT skills / Assistive technology
- Autism awareness training



Responses from a teacher focus group in Kilkenny Education Support Centre

7.2 What training is needed in the school community to ensure the needs of all students are met?

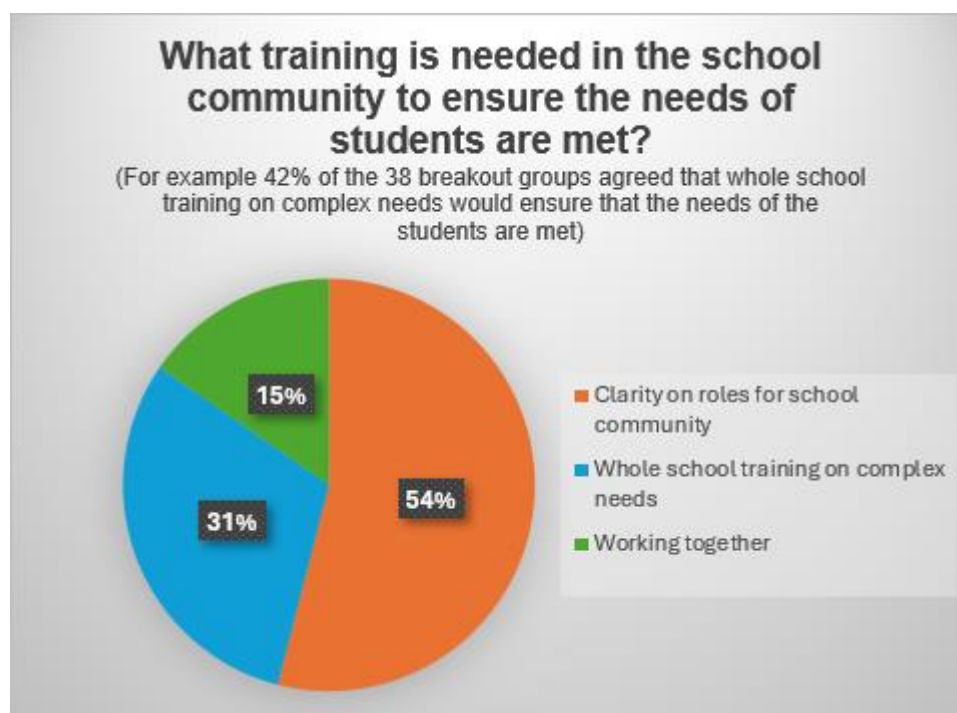


Table 10: What training is need in the school community to ensure the needs of all students are met?

7.2.1 The majority of participants agreed that guidelines around awareness and understanding of the SNA role and duties would be beneficial for the whole school community, including the board of management, teachers, school leaders, as well as parents and students. A few participants indicated that such information should also include guidance around the SNA's professional relationship with parents.

7.2.2 Many participants suggested that there should be whole-school training on complex needs. It was agreed that it is important that the whole school understands complex needs and the education and care required to meet these needs. They also suggested there is a need for training for SNAs on how to foster independence appropriately in the student(s) for whom they provide care.

7.2.3 Participant teachers described a need for training for SNAs and teachers on how to work together effectively to best meet the needs of students. For SNAs in post-primary settings, this should include training on the needs of adolescents and how to balance appropriate support with the concerns of young people who do not want to be perceived as different by their peers.



Teacher Focus Group in Kilkenny Education Support Centre

7.2.4 Some participants noted that there is a need for training for the whole school community to build understanding on care needs arising from specific disabilities, for example, autism and ADHD. First aid and first aid refresher courses were also mentioned as important training needs.

7.2.5 It was noted that appropriate training and upskilling for SNAs are essential and should be promoted and encouraged in every way possible, including through the use of the 72 hours.

7.2.6 Funding for CPD for SNAs was mentioned as a challenge for schools to provide effective support. This is particularly relevant in special schools where higher numbers of SNA staff lead to significant training costs for the school.

8. Discussion

8.1 Overall, feedback from teachers who participated in the focus groups was very positive, reflecting a high level of respect for the SNA role and the support provided to both teachers and students. This support is seen as essential to the effective running of schools and the provision of a high-quality educational experience for children and young people.

8.2 The Role of the SNA

8.2.1 Feedback from the focus groups point to an evolved role of the SNA, which includes behaviour management, emotional support, and support for learning. This support is viewed positively, as it allows teachers to focus on delivering the curriculum and enables schools to function effectively. However, there are aspects of this evolved role which merit further consideration from a policy perspective to ensure alignment with the best interests of students.

8.2.2 The planned review of circular 30/2014, as part of work on the first SNA Workforce Development Plan, aims to provide clarity on the role and duties of the SNA, and in turn assist with the effective deployment of this key resource in schools. Complemented by the review of circular 71/2011, it will aim to provide clear policy provisions on the use of the 72 hours to ensure consistency and fairness across all schools. These reviews should address issues set out by teachers in the focus groups, including the SNA's role in promoting independence and facilitating learning. Furthermore, the reviews should be accompanied by communication to convey how the 72 hours, which have formed part of the SNA contract of employment since 2005 (originally as 12 days), facilitate key functions of the SNA role, including care planning, training and other SNA duties which cannot ordinarily be carried out during school hours.

8.2.3 The reported gap between SNAs' expectation of the SNA role and the reality of its demands must be addressed in the SNA Workforce Development Plan. This can be achieved through greater consistency in the content of entry-level SNA training courses, including providing a clear outline of the role requirements. Other measures to promote understanding of the SNA role must also be considered as part of the communications strategy under pillar five of the Plan.

8.3 Supporting Learning

The support for learning provided by SNAs must be considered to ensure that it adds value to educational experiences and outcomes, rather than forming a barrier or replacing interaction between teacher and student. At a minimum, it must be accompanied by careful collaboration between teachers and SNAs on the type and level of support provided, and a mechanism to communicate progress to the teacher. A scoping review of published research in relation to the role and duties of the SNA will be completed in early 2025 and will assist in developing a policy approach in this and other areas of the SNA Workforce Development plan.

8.4 Regulation support

8.4.1 Findings from the focus groups pointed to concerns around the effective use of movement breaks to help with emotional regulation and their impact on learning time. It is acknowledged that, even where a whole-class approach is taken, there may be times when an individual student must be withdrawn, and these interventions prevent disruption for the class. However, the SNA should be appropriately trained in techniques to ensure maximum effect and to minimise the duration of movement breaks.

8.4.2 The help and support with emotional regulation provided by the SNA is a significant benefit to school communities. In addition to supporting the individual student, it allows teachers to focus on teaching and learning, and avoids disruption to the class. However, it is critically important that SNAs are supported through relevant training and a whole-school approach to meeting students' needs.

8.4.3 Regulation strategies should be based on recently published guidance from the DE regarding [Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations](#)⁶, and from the NCSE on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and [the Physical-Classroom-Environment](#)⁷. It is important that these tools and strategies are used appropriately, in the best interest of all the students in the class.

⁶ [gov.ie - Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations](#) (December 2024)

⁷ [NCSE-Physical-Classroom-Environment.pdf](#) (2024)

8.5 Fostering Independence

8.5.1 The reported need for guidance to address the balance between appropriate care support and increased independence for students must be addressed in SNA policy development. In the absence of encouragement to develop independence, students can become over-reliant on SNA support, which can be to their detriment.

8.5.2 While it is acknowledged that some students may always require some SNA care support throughout their time in school, increased independence (emotional, physical etc.) accompanied by planned and appropriate levels of support, should be promoted as a measure of success for SNA support. The NCSE Toolkit on Deployment of SNA Resources⁸ includes among its guiding principles that “The use of additional care supports is focused on the development of students’ independence so they are enabled to live independent lives when they graduate from school – in line with their individual abilities.” Student Support Files should address this objective by incorporating strategies to promote independence.

8.6 Rotation

There is a need for careful consideration around planning for the rotation of SNAs in school. This should take into account student dignity—for example, in relation to intimate care needs—and balance the need for fostering independence and the student’s response to changes. Planned rotation of SNAs in school, accompanied by appropriate communication, can build a student’s capacity to manage change and prepare them for times when a SNA is absent.

8.7 Effective Communication

Training needs for SNAs identified in the focus groups include the communication, report writing, and IT skills essential to effectively document and record matters related to care planning and review. Training on GDPR and confidentiality will also support SNAs to fulfil their duties effectively and with confidence. This will also ensure that there is appropriate communication and others in the school community, such as parents. While there is currently no mandatory training for SNAs in this area, these topics are critically important, and mechanisms to support schools and SNAs to engage in this training are merited. There should also be a record of all training completed by the SNA should be maintained

⁸ https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/SNA_Toolkit_Final_English_Feb_2022.docx

and made portable or accessible when a SNA changes employment to another school. This will promote safe and efficient work practices and assist schools in managing training needs and ensuring all legal requirements are met.

8.8 Induction Training

Induction training is an important opportunity for an employer to effectively onboard new staff and provide them with the knowledge and support they need to perform their role. In the [first national survey of SNAs](#) conducted by the DE in 2024, 36% of SNAs indicated they received induction training during their employment, while the majority (64%) reported they did not receive any induction training. When conducted in a timely and effective manner, induction training benefits not just the SNA but the whole school community, as it reduces the lead-in time to gain proficiency in the role. There may be scope to provide common elements of induction —such as information on terms and conditions and broader communication of the role requirements — outside of schools. This should be explored in the SNA Workforce Development Plan as a means of building understanding of the role and supporting school leaders and SNAs.

8.9 Working Effectively with other Adults

The relationship between the teacher and the SNA is critical to supporting students with special education needs in school. A collaborative working relationship, where each are clear on their role, provides the optimal environment for teaching and learning. At present, it appears that neither SNAs nor teachers receive specific training on how to work in partnership to deliver the best possible educational experience for students with additional and significant care needs. This need must be addressed both in initial teacher education and induction for newly recruited teachers and SNAs, and through continuous professional development for both. This training need is supported by findings in the NCSE (2019) report [Initial Teacher Education for Inclusion](#)

8.10 Dignity at Work

School communities require support to build better relationships and develop the skills, knowledge, and strategies to work together more effectively. Whole-school training on Dignity at Work would benefit all staff by providing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to promote mutual respect in the workplace.

8.11 Wellbeing

SNAs need to have access to well-being supports. There are various supports in place for SNAs, some of which are referenced on the SNA Information Hub on www.gov.ie. These supports include the Spectrum Life Employee Assistance Service (EAS), which is a free and confidential mental health support service that provides wellbeing support to SNAs as part of the Department of Education's Wellbeing Together/Folláine le Cheile Wellbeing Programme. In addition, courses on well-being, self-care, and resilience for SNAs are also available in various Education Support Centres.

8.12 Student Support File

8.12.1 The involvement of SNAs in relevant school planning is critical to building an effective workforce. In addition to providing input into schedules, timetables, and relevant information about the students in their care, this involvement should also extend to broader matters not directly related to their role. The SNA should be included in school meetings and in any communications around school matters that affect them. This will demonstrate respect, promote inclusion in their school community, and ensure the SNAs contribute to a cohesive and collaborative school community.

8.12.2 To carry out their roles effectively and provide the best outcomes for students, it is essential that the SNA and teacher collaborate on care planning. This collaboration should involve agreeing on an approach, setting targets, and sharing progress for each student. This includes discussion on behaviours of concern and how these can potentially be avoided. This will contribute to a calmer, more structured learning environment, conducive to uninterrupted teaching time and effective learning for all students in the class.

8.13 Mobile Phone Policy

The importance of each school having a mobile phone usage policy in place for all school staff was highlighted by participants in the focus groups. This policy should set out acceptable and unacceptable use of mobile phones by staff during school hours and while on the school campus. The staff policy should take account of circular 38/2018 – Consultation with the School Community including Teachers, Students and Parents on the use of smartphones and tablet devices in schools – which is aimed at students. The staff phone policy should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

8.14 Probation

Probationary periods provide an opportunity for the employer and employee to understand each other's needs and expectations. Probation arrangements for SNAs are set out in circulars 12/2005 and 15/2005. The feedback from the focus groups indicated that many schools do not use the probation process for SNAs effectively. This represents a missed opportunity to set out expectations and manage performance, including identifying training needs. Schools must be supported and encouraged to manage probation including through appropriate guidance.

8.15 Reporting Structure

Research carried out by the NCSE in 2011⁹ advised that a management and reporting structure, which includes teachers, SNAs, and other ancillary staff, needs to be formally established by schools. This is supported by feedback from the focus groups. Participants suggested that a senior SNA post would be beneficial to the school community. It would provide a career path for existing SNAs and make the role more attractive to school leavers. This senior SNA role would also facilitate regular upward and downward feedback in the school and alleviate some of the administrative burden for school leaders.

8.16 Quality Framework

A quality framework for the SNA workforce is merited to ensure that the service provided meets expectations. Along with other options, consideration should be given to how the SNA role may be included in the DE Whole School Evaluation (WSE) inspections in schools. This is an area for consideration by the relevant working group under the plan.

⁹ [Professional Development of Teachers.pdf](#)

Professional Development for Teachers Working in Special Education/Inclusion in Mainstream Schools: The Views of Teachers and Other Stakeholders A Research Report Part Funded by the National Council for Special Education, Special Education Research Initiative (Elizabeth O’Gorman/Professor Sheelagh Drudy)

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

9.1 The focus groups were arranged to seek teachers' perspectives on the SNA role and to explore the relationship and interactions between the SNA and the teacher. They facilitated discussion around the benefits and challenges faced by teachers in the classroom setting and considered how these challenges could be overcome. It is noteworthy that many of the benefits and the challenges cited by teachers were also raised by SNAs in focus groups convened by the DE in May 2023¹⁰, and by school leaders in focus groups convened in January 2024¹¹.

9.2 The feedback from the focus groups with teachers will assist in forming policy decisions for the SNA Workforce Development Plan. The findings outlined in this report will be shared with relevant stakeholders with a view to conveying information relevant to the work of the SNA, identifying areas for improvement, and building stronger, more cohesive school communities.

9.3 The following are the recommended actions for the DE arising from the focus groups with teachers. These actions will be considered by the relevant working groups established for the plan:

- Review and republish circular 30/2014¹² on the role of the SNA to bring clarity to the role and associated duties and responsibilities for all stakeholders. The following will be included/taking into consideration in the review:
 - Appropriate and effective use of regulatory movement breaks in school in line with the most recent NCSE documents on [the Physical-Classroom-Environment](#), which provides guidance on creating universal learning spaces.
 - Including the use of movement and sensory breaks as part of regular classroom approaches.
 - The extent to which SNAs support learning and whether this adds value to the educational experience for relevant students.
 - Information on behaviours of concern in line with recent publication by the DE of [Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations](#) and

¹⁰ [Special Needs Assistants Learning and Development Focus Group Report](#)

¹¹ [The role of Special Needs Assistants: Report on Focus Groups with School Leaders](#)

¹² [gov.ie - 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 \(www.gov.ie\)](#)

[Relate – National Council for Special Education – Working to deliver a better special education service](#) – a new resource provided by the NCSE for schools, which is a regulation-first approach to reframing behaviour to support student engagement and participation

- Review provisions related to the 72 hours and June working for SNAs currently provided for in circular 0071/2011¹³, with a view to providing clarity to SNAs and other stakeholders on the purpose, appropriate use, and scheduling of these hours.
- Provide guidance on timetabling of the 72 hours to include communication, feedback, and planning between the SNA and the teacher/principal in relation to the students that they work with.
- Liaise with stakeholders to develop a communications programme promoting clarity and understanding of the role and duties of the SNA and the benefits of effective communication and teamwork within school communities.
- Work with Quality and Qualifications Ireland and other relevant stakeholders to ensure all relevant SNA courses include a practical element and/or work experience to prepare course participants for the SNA role.
- Liaise with relevant stakeholders to consider cluster days and other opportunities for SNA training.
- Explore options for managing training for SNAs, which provides a record that is portable and/or accessible to multiple schools.
- Promote learning and development opportunities for SNAs through the National Training Programme for SNAs.
- Collaborate with Education Support Centres to provide appropriate training opportunities.
- Develop and establish a structured induction programme for SNAs to include training on GDPR, confidentiality, and communication to be used by all schools.
- Work with stakeholders to promote training for teachers and SNAs on working collaboratively in the classroom.
- Encourage schools to provide information and training in Dignity at Work to promote mutual respect in the workplace.

¹³ [Circular 0071/2011](#)