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Valuable Assets: Phase 2 of A General Formal Investigation into the Role and Status of Classroom Assistants in Scotland's Secondary and Special Schools

**A study for the
Equal Opportunities Commission (Scotland)**



SCER Research Report 14
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The research team for this project comprised Dennis Nickson, Chris Warhurst, Johanna Commander, Scott Hurrell, Kay Gilbert and Abigail Marks. All are of the University of Strathclyde, except Marks who is at Heriot Watt University.

1. Research Purpose

Background

- 1.1 Initially, the General Formal Investigation (GFI) examining the role and status of classroom assistants focused only on primary schools in Scotland. Phase 1 of the GFI is fully reported in the research reports written by the Scottish Centre of Employment Research (SCER) and a team which conducted a series of job evaluations.¹
- 1.2 The research conducted for Phase 1 of the GFI found that classroom assistants in primary schools undertake a range of tasks that, following national guidelines, can be clustered under four headings - the *organisation and use of resources*, the *care and welfare of pupils*, *supporting the teacher* and *encouraging and supporting learning*. The job evaluation research during Phase 1 identified that within these four headings there were at least three different levels of job demand. It was recognised that all classroom assistants are involved in the first three task clusters which are clearly compatible with the initial policy remit. However, the results also suggested that with regard to *encouraging and supporting learning* a small but significant group of classroom assistants appear to be working beyond the policy remit, being involved in higher level learning activities. This 'role stretch' is evident to some extent with teaching new concepts and assessing learning but seems particularly the case with planning the curriculum.
- 1.3 A number of reasons for this role stretch were considered, including: local authority policy, individual school practices and personal characteristics of the classroom assistants. The results suggested that, although there were different outcomes in different local authorities, these outcomes were not driven by local authority policy. Instead the reasons for role stretch seemed to be more of an outcome of individual school or classroom practice. A further and significant explanation though lies in the personal characteristics of classroom assistants. Two particular aspects were considered - qualifications and skills brought to the job. For qualifications there was some evidence that those with Professional Development Awards (PDAs) were marginally more likely to plan the curriculum and assess learning and to regularly work unsupervised. The biggest difference was in relation to additional skills. Using music and language as proxies, classroom assistants who had additional skills were more likely to be engaged in higher level learning activities than those without such skills and were also more likely to work unsupervised.
- 1.4 Evidence gathered during Phase 1 of the GFI indicated that there are a wide range of job titles used across Scotland to describe those working in school support roles that involve working with pupils and teachers supporting learning and development in the classroom. The

investigation uses the term classroom assistant to refer to those working in pupil/classroom/learning support roles.

- 1.5 During Phase 1 of the GFI the EOC also identified that classroom assistants were being employed and deployed in secondary and special schools. As of 2005 there were 3,828 full time equivalent classroom assistants in Scottish secondary and special schools.² The extension of the classroom assistant initiative to secondary and special schools is partly explained by the intent to create an additional 3,500 FTE additional support staff to free teachers' time as part of the settlement which followed the McCrone Report.³ Additionally, classroom assistants in secondary schools are expected to primarily offer specialised support for disruptive pupils.⁴ The terms of reference for the GFI were therefore amended to reflect the increasing number of classroom assistants in Scottish schools. The research reported here extends the analysis to classroom assistants in these secondary and special schools.

Research Aims

- 1.5 The aim of this research is to extend existing data by considering classroom assistants in secondary and special schools in Scotland. The research examines the work and employment of classroom assistants and in particular explores the reasons for any role stretch amongst this group. Specifically it:
- Explores the work and employment of classroom assistants in secondary and special schools in Scotland.
 - Explores the extent to which classroom assistants are teaching new concepts, setting learning tasks and planning the curriculum for pupils and reasons for this role stretch.
 - Explores with the classroom assistants how schools are using additional skills and experience such as art, ICT, foreign languages, music, etc.
- 1.6 The report next provides an outline of the research design followed by the research findings, shaped by the aims and objectives above. The final section summarises the research and raises several issues that need to be considered regarding reasons for role stretch in Scotland's secondary and special schools.

2. Research Outline

- 2.1 After consultation with the Equal Opportunities Commission (Scotland) eight focus groups were conducted across Scotland with 64 classroom assistants from secondary and special schools. Focus groups were drawn from eight different local authorities, selected for representative size, location and rural/urban mix. Groups comprised of between 3-11 participants (average group size was 8). The focus group participants were overwhelmingly female, with only two men participating in the research.
- 2.2 In addition, a short questionnaire collecting demographic details, job information and school characteristics was collected from focus group participants before the focus groups (n=62). All responses are anonymised in the report as are the identities of the local authorities.

3. Research Findings

The Characteristics of Secondary and Special School Classroom Assistants

- 3.1 Almost all (97%) of classroom assistants in the survey were women; typically aged 31-50, with partners and children. Only 10% were lone parents. The largest group of classroom assistants (44%) were at the top end of this age range - 41-50. Their children are older too, with the majority attending secondary school.
- 3.2 Classroom assistants have a range of qualifications. Almost a quarter (24%), have Highers or A-levels. A number have further or higher education. For example, 14% have an HNC/D, 19% have an S/NVQ and 15% hold the new SVQ for classroom assistants. Over half (52%) have a Professional Development Award (PDA), with 47% of the sample having achieved the specific PDA for classroom assistants. 10% have a first degree and 5% a higher degree.
- 3.3 Nineteen job titles were listed in the questionnaire. Many jobs combined titles, reflecting the complexity of their roles. Most common job titles were Pupil Support Assistant (23%), combined Classroom/Learning Support/Pupil Support/Special Assistant (13%) and Learning Support Assistant (8%). For ease in this report, all are termed classroom assistants.
- 3.4 With regard to working patterns most respondents are permanent and 'part-time',⁵ typically working 27.5 hours per week (though a number of the SEN auxiliaries worked 30 hours per week). Respondents work term-time only; that is 42-46 out of 52 weeks in the year. A number of respondents take preparation work home, which is unpaid, and often work through lunch breaks.
- 3.5 The majority of classroom assistants were paid hourly with wages ranging from £5.70 to £9.00, with a mean of £7.34. For those reporting annual salaries these ranged from £7,500 to £13,000, with a mean of £10,936.

Job tasks

- 3.6 From the focus groups three main tasks clusters were apparent for classroom assistants: *welfare/care*, *behavioural* and *teaching and learning*. These aspects *should* map against Annex B of the Scottish Office *Classroom Assistant Implementation Guidance* document with regard to aspects such as 'care and welfare of pupils', 'pupils effectively accessing the curriculum' and 'learning and teaching in the classroom'.⁶ However there is some confusion about the extent to which the guidelines outlined in Annex B are applied to secondary and special

schools; when the implementation guidance is discussed it is routinely done so with a focus on primary schools only.⁷ Consequently, it is not clear if this template is being universally applied or, alternatively, if jobs descriptions for secondary schools follow local need.

- 3.7 Virtually all the classroom assistants from the secondary and special schools focus groups work with pupils with identifiable Additional Support for Learning (ASL) needs. These needs have been formalised in a Record of Need (RoN), which was provided for a child who had 'pronounced, specific or complex educational needs which require continuing review'.⁸ The number of pupils in secondary schools with either a RoN and/or Individualised Education Programme (IEP) has increased from just over 8,000 in 2002 to 12,019 in 2005, of whom over 9,500 spend all their time in mainstream classes.⁹ Pupils with a RoN have a range of needs, with the most prominent being learning difficulties (6,280), social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (1,934) and difficulties associated with the autistic spectrum disorder (825).¹⁰

The Care and Welfare of Pupils

- 3.8 Pupils with ASL needs have a range of physical, as well as social, emotional and behavioural difficulties to which classroom assistants respond. Responses will vary in relation to classroom assistants being utilised in special schools, in dedicated support units in mainstream schools (e.g. autism units) and within-class support in mainstream schools. This situation creates a continuum of complexity and frequency of response.
- 3.9 For example, with regard to physical needs classroom assistants often have responsibility for showering, toileting, changing tracheotomy tubes, tube feeding, changing colostomy bags, administering diazepam, administering oxygen, physiotherapy and applying restraint techniques.
- 3.10 In undertaking this task cluster, some classroom assistants have no training, some have prior training, some have post-hoc training. Moreover, some classroom assistants reported that they were doing work that would previously have been the role of other support staff and that could be designated as falling within the remit of 'social work'.
- 3.11 Classroom assistants felt they undertook complex welfare and care tasks without additional pay and often felt moral obligation or tacit pressure from the school to undertake this task.

'If it was your child was in school and staff refused to give your child medication, how would you feel?'

Speaking of a child with severe epilepsy one classroom assistant recognised:

‘... if you don’t administer [the procedure] at the right time or within a certain time, that child could die ... I went on a trip to London with her and I was aware of that the whole time.’

The responsibility felt by classroom assistants in undertaking these duties is illustrated by one assistant who explained the nursing tasks she performed; ‘This wee boy had to be resuscitated about twice a week and given oxygen.’ In sum, a number of classroom assistants felt that they were often doing complex medical tasks more suited to an old-style school nurse. In some cases therefore, ‘You’re doing a nurse’s jobs as well as a teacher’s’, said another assistant.

Providing Behavioral Control

3.12 In addition to the physical requirements of some pupils, classroom assistants were also working with pupils with a range of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. For those pupils *with* a RoN, classroom assistants found themselves providing support through a specific learning base or within the classroom on a one-to-one basis. Often this support entails classroom assistants working constantly with pupils with very challenging behaviour:

‘You will find that children with support for learning needs and complex needs will have behaviour problems as well. So you are not just working with their education needs, their primary care needs, their special care needs, medication, you are also having their behaviour, you know, challenging behaviour. And you have you deal with that at any time of the day, you don’t know when it is going to happen. We’ve got one wee boy who if he doesn’t want to do something he will just hit out. And we’ve got another wee boy if something is not going his way he throws tables and chairs across the room. We’ve had a room totally trashed with one child.’

‘... there is a lot of teachers won’t have behaviour kids in the their class ... they say we’ve risk assessed it and there is no way they are getting in our class ... now all these groups of kids who teachers can’t handle are put with the classroom assistants.’

3.13 In addition, a number of classroom assistants also recognised that they would often find themselves having to deal with the most disruptive pupils, including those *without* a RoN, reflecting the perception of the classroom assistants of a general decline in pupil behaviour:

‘Last year the class that I was in ... it was a particularly bad class, they were all off the wall, all bawling and shouting at one another, the teacher was at the front and I was at the back and she would give them their lesson and then say “there is two teachers in the classroom if you require to ask any questions ask Mrs [] or myself” and I’m like “I’m getting paid £10,000 you are getting paid maybe £38,000 or £39,000.” So she dealt with the front of the class and I dealt with the back for the full period.’

‘... in our school there is another [classroom assistant] that does the Better Behaved Better Learning Unit which is the room which they send the kids to prevent them from being excluded ... she is in there getting paid the same salary as me and last week she had five kids for three days on her own, there is no teachers ... she is left with those kids every day and she is expected to teach them ... the kids’ work is sent down and she is expected to do it with them.’

On the other hand, several classroom assistants reported a more co-ordinated and managed response to disruptive pupils:

... we have a behaviour base ... there is always a teacher and two members of staff, two other members of staff, usually PSAs or auxiliaries, in there at all times, irregardless of the number of children in there.

3.14 Classroom assistants also reported bullying or harassment from pupils on a regular basis. 79% of respondents had experienced bullying or harassment from pupils in the previous 12 months. 63% of those answering the question had experienced bullying or harassment weekly or more frequently. 15% experienced such occurrences daily. 34% of the sample had experienced physical violence in the previous 12 months.

Teaching and learning

3.15 With regard to undertaking duties associated with teaching and learning classroom assistants split in terms of the complexity and frequency of teaching input. There appeared to be two basic types. Type 1 classroom assistants *support learning*:

'I deal mostly with support for learning kids ... some of them can't read and write ... when it comes to exams ... I read and scribe for exams.'

Significantly, there were sometimes differences in the level of pay for those support staff undertaking such duties:

'That's another issue about the scribing apparently if they get people in from outside the school to scribe. They are paid £10 something an hour but again we are expected to do it for £6.25.'

3.16 Type 2 classroom assistants are *undertaking teaching and support for learning activities*, with differing levels of complexity, which creates three further distinctions. There are those classroom assistants who:

- *Deliver set work*, for example to provide short cover for absent teachers or when classes are split.

'... we maybe go a day or a couple of days without a teacher in the class. If the teacher is off sick, it would be the SLA taking the class if they can't get anybody on the supply list.'

'If a pupil is not succeeding, they've [the teacher] got a whole class, "This one pupil, oh well they are not trying, they are this, they are that or the other, besides you can take them and you can work them along at their own pace and produce work in the end.'"

- *Use own initiative*, drawing on possession of specific skills, for example ICT, swimming, etc:

'... a [fourth year pupil] has dyslexia so her mother was able to come to the Head of Learning Support and she said, "My daughter is wanting to drop out of Physics, I don't want her to." So the Head of Learning Support said "I've got an Auxiliary that is

good at Physics”...his [the Head of Physics] attitude was that he wasn’t bothered with [the pupil] because it was an attitude problem ... So I found myself for six months with this girl and I had to teach the entire standard grade topic of electronics.’

‘It’s an ICT programme ... and I was given the whole lot for all the children in the school, even children that I have never worked with. And the head teacher ... she said “Right, what do you think this child would be able to do and what he could he do?” And I had to make it all up, make the worksheets up, everything.’

- The final *group combines aspects of delivering set work and using their own initiative* in response to teacher circumstances, for example illness or schools’ supply and probationary teachers:

‘... when they get a supply teacher like the ones we normally get, we end up teaching the class. ... two weeks ago I ended up teaching a home economics class because the teacher we put in ... the kids or me couldn’t understand a single word he said. He got paid £180 ... and I was teaching the class.’

‘They [supply teachers] look to you for guidance. [The school] are just ticking the box legally. That body [a qualified teacher] being there covers the insurance part and that’s it.’

‘The teacher ... was quite ill for a couple of years ... before she realised this herself ... basically it was the SLA that ran the class for three years, did her paperwork, did all her work, did all her planning, did her daily timetable. [The teacher] was there in body. She was quite happy to let [the SLA] organise things before it was picked up by the head-teacher.’

3.17 In addition, classroom assistants involved in assisting pupils in the learning process are expected to do so in a number of different curriculum areas due to the departmental structure in secondary schools. This situation means that classroom assistants have to cover a wide variety of subjects, such as French, English, physics and up to Higher grade:

‘... you can be in one subject one minute and then you have to switch, you can be at a first year class, you switch into a 4th year, you are doing folio pieces maybe for English and then you are going to do Home Economics or you are doing Science or whatever ... teachers have actually said to us that they couldn’t do what we do because they teach one subject but we do everything. I mean, 13 subjects across the curriculum is quite a lot of brain power but as we keep saying “we are not recognised for the amount of work that every single one of us do”.’

Moreover classroom assistants require an often detailed knowledge of particular curriculum areas:

I take more English homework home now than I ever did when I was at school ... I don’t see the point in going into the class with a child and them doing a novel, and I don’t know the novel, and then they are asking questions and you are supposed to help them. So every book, play, poem I take them home and read them.

Explanations for ‘Role Stretch’

3.18 There are now more pupils with recognised ASL needs and more of these pupils are also being mainstreamed into primary and secondary

schools. Such needs now officially envelope the social, emotional and behavioural.¹¹ In addition, classroom assistants also reported a general decline in all pupils' behaviour. It has recently been noted that in addition to freeing teachers' time as part of the McCrone settlement the extension of the classroom assistant initiative to secondary schools in Scotland was also to 'provide more specialised classroom assistants to work with disruptive pupils'.¹² Classroom assistants dealing with these pupils are self-evident within special schools but, with mainstreaming, secondary schools' too are recruiting classroom assistants. As a result, the mainstreaming agenda seems to be increasingly falling on classroom assistants.

- 3.19 The focus group research points to the principal reason for the role stretch in secondary schools being the increasing number of pupils with recognised ASL needs and, subsequently, the practical implications of the mainstreaming agenda appear to be increasingly falling on classroom assistants. This explanation echoes the findings of Hastings and Leslie who suggest classroom assistant jobs in secondary schools are more varied than those of primary schools and this variation occurs, they state, because 'most of our sample were primarily concerned for most of their time with supporting pupils with ASL needs. This represents a significant difference from the primary school sample, whose role was not necessarily focussed on supporting pupils with ASL needs'.¹³
- 3.20 However, unlike in primary schools,¹⁴ this role stretch is both horizontal and vertical. The greater complexity of ASL needs, in particular, means that classroom assistants are now doing a broader range of tasks related to pupils' welfare/care and behaviour. In addition, with mainstreaming, there is evidence of some classroom assistants planning and delivering learning activities for pupils with ASL, freeing teachers' time to deliver the lesson and learning activities to the rest of the class who do not have ASL needs.

4. Summary

- 4.1 To some extent secondary and special schools represent a similar story to primary schools with regard to the general characteristics of classroom assistants and the range of duties they are undertaking. As with primary schools, classroom assistants in secondary and special schools undertake a range of tasks concerned with welfare/care, behavioural and teaching and learning activities.
- 4.2 However there was also evidence of classroom assistants in secondary and special schools undertaking tasks supplementary to that of primary school classroom assistants. This is evidence of a *horizontal* role stretch - encompassing significant and complex duties arising from welfare/care and behavioural activities. This broader range of tasks is most pronounced in special schools with classroom assistants engaging in often complex medical procedures. In secondary schools, the undertaking of such tasks is in support of pupils with ASL needs. In most cases, primary school classroom assistants undertake some of these supplementary activities but not to such a demanding degree.
- 4.3 As with classroom assistants in primary schools, there was evidence of *vertical* role stretch in the nature of tasks performed when delivering learning activities. However, the focus group research found this vertical role stretch to be a direct result of mainstreaming policy, with some classroom assistants being given direct responsibility for teaching and delivering lessons to pupils who are either disruptive or have complex learning needs. In addition evidence from the focus group suggests that classroom assistants in secondary schools have to cover a wide variety of subjects in some depth.
- 4.4 Audit Scotland believes that mainstreaming can work well where (amongst other things) 'there is a realistic assessment of school capacity to support pupils with differing needs'.¹⁵ The evidence from the research reported here, and elsewhere,¹⁶ suggests that in relation to pupils with ASL needs and mainstreaming, the level of school resources and support varies, with classroom assistants often being at the forefront in support of mainstreaming. The consequence is significant role stretch for many classroom assistants in secondary schools. Recent debates both in England and Scotland have questioned the mainstreaming agenda.¹⁷ Nevertheless with the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 mainstreaming is still a policy aim and will therefore continue in Scotland. Consequently, if there is no change in their status, classroom assistants in secondary schools will continue to be undervalued for an often demanding and responsible job.

Endnotes

¹ Scottish Centre for Employment Research (2006) *Valuable Assets: A General Formal Investigation into the Role and Status of Classroom Assistants in Scotland's Primary Schools*, SCER Research Report 11, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Hastings, S., Paddison, L., Hawkins, K. and Leslie, S. (2006) *Assessing the Value of the Work of Classroom Assistants in Primary Schools*. A report for Equal Opportunities Commission (Scotland), Glasgow.

² Scottish Executive (2006) *Teachers in Scotland 2005*, Statistical Publication, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/99843/0024183.pdf> This figure includes SEN auxiliaries, care assistants and classroom assistants.

³ Scottish Executive (2001) *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century*, Scottish Executive: Edinburgh.

⁴ Employers Organisation for Local Government (2004) *A Modern Apprenticeship for Classroom Assistants Framework Document for Scotland*, <http://www.ssascot.org.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.asp?IID=858&SID=50>.

⁵ There is no operational definition in UK government labour market statistics of a full-time or a part-time worker in terms of the numbers of hours worked, though it is commonly agreed that those working under 30 hours are classified as part-time.

⁶ SOEID (1999) *Classroom Assistants Implementation Guidance*, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library/documents-w10/cag-00.htm>.

⁷ See for example, Wilson, V., Schlapp, U. and Davidson, J. (2002) *Classroom Assistants: Key Issues from the National Evaluation*, Insight: Edinburgh.

⁸ Scottish Executive (2006) *Pupils in Scotland 2005*, Statistical Publication, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/94547/0022796.pdf> It should be noted that following the implementation of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, information with regard to the RoN will change for the 2006 pupil census, which will be published at the end of February 2007.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004

¹² Employers Organisation for Local Government (2004), op cit.

¹³ Hastings, S. and Leslie, S. (2006) *Assessing the Value of the Work of Classroom Assistants in Schools: Supplementary Report on Secondary Schools Classroom Assistants*. A report for Equal Opportunities Commission (Scotland), Glasgow.

¹⁴ See Scottish Centre for Employment Research (2006), op cit.

¹⁵ Audit Scotland/HMIE (2003) *Moving to Mainstream: The Inclusion of Pupils with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*, <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/publications/pdf/2003/03pf09as2.pdf>

¹⁶ Pirie, A., Head, G. and Brna, P. (2005) *Mainstreaming Pupils with Special Education Needs: An Evaluation*, Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/89188/0021334.pdf>

¹⁷ See for example MacDonald, C. (2006) 'Inclusion, but at what cost?', *The Herald*, 13 May and 'Special needs education queried' at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4071122.stm>