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McClelland, J. F., O'Connor, U., Shannon, C., Saunders, K. J., & Little, J.-A. (2023). Exploring the role and experience of classroom assistants supporting pupils with visual impairment. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1-15. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2023.2238221>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

Published in:

International Journal of Inclusive Education

Publication Status:

Published online: 26/07/2023

DOI:

[10.1080/13603116.2023.2238221](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2023.2238221)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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To cite this article: Julie F. McClelland, Una O'Connor, Christine Shannon, Kathryn J. Saunders & Julie-Anne Little (2023): Exploring the role and experience of classroom assistants supporting pupils with visual impairment, International Journal of Inclusive Education, DOI: [10.1080/13603116.2023.2238221](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2023.2238221)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2023.2238221>



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Published online: 26 Jul 2023.



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Exploring the role and experience of classroom assistants supporting pupils with visual impairment

Julie F. McClelland ^a, Una O'Connor ^b, Christine Shannon ^b,
Kathryn J. Saunders ^a and Julie-Anne Little ^a

^aCentre for Optometry and Vision Science, Biomedical Sciences Research Institute, Ulster University, Coleraine, UK; ^bUNESCO Centre, School of Education, Ulster University, Coleraine, UK

ABSTRACT

The role of the classroom assistant (CA) is considered pivotal in inclusive provision for pupils with additional needs. CAs' support of pupils who have a visual impairment (VI) is greatly underreported in the literature. Scaffolding theory was applied to investigate the role of CAs in supporting pupils who have a VI in mainstream schools in Northern Ireland, UK. Focus groups were conducted with 18 CAs who were embarking on an accredited VI-focused professional development programme. Findings revealed the majority of assistants had received no formal training to work with these pupils although they provided support in a wide range of ways to ensure their educational, social and physical inclusion in school. Although positive aspects of their contribution were described in inclusive terms, challenges were identified that mainly impacted on the participatory options of pupils with VI. Most prominently, minimal access to professional development engendered uncertainty that pupils were being appropriately and effectively supported. Viewed through the lens of scaffolding theory, CAs occupy a predominantly supporting role, with paucity in upskilling opportunities and hierarchical structures limiting further professional progression. More strategic consideration of the CA role could contribute to greater equity of access to education for children with VI.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 January 2022
Accepted 14 July 2023

KEYWORDS

Classroom assistant; visual impairment; professional development; scaffolding

Introduction

Classroom Assistants¹ (CAs) are a key school workforce, especially where pupils with diverse needs are educated together (Zhao, Rose, and Shevlin 2021). Traditionally framed as a caring role, it has transformed over time to include a wide range of responsibilities, combining therapeutic and medical duties alongside behaviour management, administrative and instructive tasks (O'Connor et al. 2021). This expansion of duties has been shaped by the dynamics of the inclusive classroom and, while the

CONTACT Julie-Anne Little  ja.little@ulster.ac.uk  Centre for Optometry and Vision Science, Biomedical Sciences Research Institute, Ulster University, Coleraine BT52 1SA, UK

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responsibilities of the CA have broadened, there has been little change to the job specification (Bennett et al. 2021). Reported reliance on the assistant workforce is not a new phenomenon; however, there has been a relative paucity of research on how the CA operates in classrooms (Bennett et al. 2021; Nemeč et al. 2015), particularly those working directly with pupils with certain disabilities.

The role of the school in a child's life is critical, not just in terms of educational attainment but also as a means to nurture psychological wellbeing and develop social skills. For pupils with VI, such participation is reliant on a continuum of accessible and appropriately resourced support (UNESCO 2017). Population-based data on the epidemiology of childhood VI and blindness is limited, largely due to the methodological challenges to obtaining accurate information on uncommon and heterogeneous disorders. The prevalence of VI in children is also difficult to establish due to differences in data collection, and underreporting of formally certified VI. A recent British childhood study estimated that the overall cumulative incidence of VI, severe VI or blindness was 10.03 per 10,000 children (Teoh, Solebo, and Rahi 2021). The RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool (2021) estimated there are 840 VI or blind children aged 0–16 years in Northern Ireland, of whom 49% have a certification of sight impairment. The heterogeneous nature of visual impairment in children means that the support required is highly specific for each individual child (McKerr et al. 2020). In addition, it is estimated that up to 50% of children with visual impairment have additional special educational needs or disabilities (Sutherland 2022), suggesting that a bespoke support plan is required to meet the child's needs. Ideally, this plan should be carefully formulated by educationalists with expertise in supporting children with a visual impairment.

Presently in the UK, support for children with visual impairment may be instigated by health professionals, via the school system or by families themselves. In Northern Ireland (NI), the UK region where this research was undertaken, sensory support is administered by the NI Education Authority through access to Qualified Teachers for the Visually Impaired (QTVI), who provide guidance on teaching strategies, resources and equipment to maximise access to a participatory and inclusive educational experience.

Classroom assistants and visual impairment

The growth of inclusive education has meant that pupils with VI have routinely attended schools alongside their fully-sighted peers, supported on a one-to-one basis by Classroom (Learning Support) Assistants (Williams 2016). Whilst the educational and social benefits of this are acknowledged, its successful implementation is dependent on sustained professional collaboration between classroom teachers and CAs working with Qualified Teachers for the Visually Impaired (QTVI). Thus far, it is unclear the extent to which this co-operation happens and knowledge about the challenges to learning for these pupils in inclusive settings remains scarce (Metatla et al. 2018).

Limited access to equal learning opportunities can impact on short and longer term outcomes for pupils with VI. The immediate effects are apparent in pupils' day-to-day experiences. A recent longitudinal study in Sweden examined the social wellbeing of pupils with VI in mainstream schooling and identified higher levels of stress and anxiety among this group (de Verdier 2016). Additionally, the potential for educational isolation is apparent across the curriculum; for example, one study of SENCOs reported

the exclusion of children with VI from certain subjects such as Physical Education for health and safety reasons (Gray 2009), whilst another found that, for pupils with a VI, ‘*doing nothing*’ was a frequent response when subject content was deemed inaccessible (Jessup et al. 2017). Elsewhere, pupils described exclusion on a daily basis, typically where curriculum content was displayed in visual format and teacher instruction as well as teacher-pupil interaction was via visual cues (Cain and Fanshawe 2020).

The role of the assistant in supporting pupils with SEN is well-represented, with studies addressing the benefits and limitations of deploying this workforce (Pinkard 2021; Webster and Blatchford 2019). While these largely focus on the role of the CA in the wider classroom environment, there remains a significant knowledge gap on their work supporting children with VI and their contribution in the educational journey is often overlooked. For these pupils, access to the physical environment of the school as well as to the curriculum, presents distinct challenges if there is poorly planned and supervised CA involvement (Williams 2016). Socially, it can interfere with peer relations and the general life of the classroom; academically, it can undermine pupil progress, inhibiting confidence and independent learning, whilst culturally, it can foster an over-dependence, constraining pupil engagement and self-advocacy (Vivash and Morgan 2019; Webster et al. 2011). Technological advances in recent years have undoubtedly offered innovative options for children with VI, although navigating the breadth of educational resources can be daunting for school staff who, in the absence of relevant professional development, may struggle to introduce digital alternatives (Metatla and Cullen 2018). In the longer term, equal access to education has significant benefits for young people with a VI, with independent learning recognised as a fundamental component of the transition to adulthood (McLinden et al. 2016); however, while their attainment can be comparably high, educational opportunities remain limited, and the numbers transitioning to higher education or employment tend to be lower than their peers (Byrne 2014).

Scaffolding

Scaffolding for the CA workforce is an informative lens through which to consider the data emerging from this study. In educational settings, scaffolding refers to support that is tailored to individual pupils’ needs (van de Pol et al. 2015). Grounded in Vygotsky’s original concept (1978), it is most visibly represented in the principles of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) that distinguishes between what a pupil can do with and without assistance. In a learning environment, the support provided by a teacher or other adult is initially focused and directed, gradually fading as pupils’ learning becomes more independent (van de Pol, Volman, and Beishuizen 2010). Although generally interpreted in relation to teacher instruction, the principles of scaffolding have validity when applied to the CA role. The proximity of CAs in supporting pupil learning provides regular opportunities to introduce scaffolding strategies within a child’s ZPD; however, success depends on the extent to which they are sufficiently prepared and capable of adapting their input accordingly.

Research by Radford et al. (2015) conceptualised scaffolding for CAs within a three-way framework, with assistants adopting functional roles that are both separate and inter-related: *support* role, *repair* role and *heuristic* role. The *support* role is motivational and comprises three elements – emotional, curricular and relational – that help pupils to

participate in everyday learning. This would involve, for example, a CA using strategies to encourage, reassure and guide children in their learning, whilst helping them to pay attention and listen effectively (Radford et al. 2015). The *repair* role consists of four elements that relate to CAs' interaction when children experience difficulty in their learning: withholding correction (encouraging pupils to problem-solve themselves), effective questioning, modelling and awareness of children's ZPD. The *heuristic* role encourages CAs to implement their own learning strategies. By its nature, the heuristic role has to be explicitly taught to CAs as it requires some pedagogic knowledge and understanding of learning outcomes and how to work progressively towards achieving these based on pupils' individual learning needs (Radford et al. 2014, 2015).

Existing studies have queried the associated relationship between CA support and poor pupil outcomes, citing insufficient preparation, training and monitoring as significant causal factors (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2013; Webster and Blatchford 2019). As schools continue to ask CAs to work in a more instructive way, the scaffolding approach merits consideration as a tool to inform meaningful professional development. Such intervention has assumed greater significance over the recent period of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, raising some concern around the expectations placed on assistants at this time (UNISON 2021). A recent large-scale national study of assistants ($n = 9055$) confirmed their unanticipated but pivotal role in supporting pupils; they frequently covered staff absences, ensured schools remained open for vulnerable and key worker children and over half of the sample managed a whole class or bubble alone (Moss et al. 2021).

Methodology

The aim of the study was to conduct a qualitative exploration of the current landscape of CA's role in supporting pupils with VI in mainstream schools in NI. An accredited training programme has been developed for CAs by Ulster University and this initial phase of the study engaged with CAs prior to the commencement of training. The present study did not intend to review the training programme, however, some of the CAs provided comments on the perceived benefits of such a course. The study adhered to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki and received approval from Ulster University Education Ethics Filter Committee. CAs in NI who support children and young people with VI were informed of the training programme through local networks, VI groups, educational interest groups and social media. A number of CAs registered their interest and twenty-four were enrolled on the initial programme.

The training programme was developed in response to an identified need by eyecare professionals, educationalists and parents of children with a VI, and was designed to bridge the disconnect between healthcare and education provision. Recent work on a 'Family Insight Project' from Angel Eyes, an advocacy charity for families with children with VI in NI, identified that the biggest need for children and young people with VI was appropriately trained staff and improved educational support. In collaboration with Angel Eyes and vision science academics from Ulster University, the training programme was developed as a short 10-credit, Level 4 course (equivalent level to a Certificate of Higher Education [Cert HE] or Higher National Certificate) delivered in a part-time mode over a 12-week period to facilitate employed CAs. The programme involved a blended learning approach, with face-to-face workshops, online lectures and continuous

interaction in the form of regular discussion forums. The course content was informed by previous one-day events with teachers and CAs, vision science and optometry research involving children with developmental disabilities and Angel Eyes' ongoing conversations with families; it consisted of six units of learning, covering the themes of aetiologies of visual impairment, medical classifications and definitions of visual impairment, the roles of eyecare professionals, simulations of different kinds of visual impairment, adapting learning materials, adapting the school environment, promoting independent and successful learners, and developments in assistive technology. It is worth noting that this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have impacted on the support available for school staff.

Once enrolled on the programme, all CAs were given information about the study. A total of 19 CAs (100% female) out of 24 participated in a series of four online focus groups in March 2021. The proportion of females in the present study broadly reflects the predominantly high proportion of females in support staff roles in the UK (89% School workforce in England Report 2021).

Focus groups were selected for data collection. This is a useful approach in initial research, enabling participants to interact and exchange information on a particular issue (Cohen et al. 2018). Additionally, it was considered that the structure and style of this format would provide a supportive environment for a participant group who were less familiar with research engagement.

The focus groups consisted of 5–6 participants per session, each one lasting approximately one hour. A series of questions were designed to encourage open dialogue and gain information about CAs' experiences. Of the 19 CAs, nine were working in a primary school setting and ten were working in a post primary setting, and focus groups were organised to group those working in primary and post-primary school settings together. One participant was removed from the final data analysis as she had not yet commenced working with a VI pupil, leaving a final reported sample of 18 participants. The participants comprised CAs with a range of different experiences, with some only one year in the role, and others having years of experience working with a child throughout their school life. They were supporting children with a variety of aetiologies and levels of visual impairment, from mild/moderate VI to those with no light perception.

Focus groups were transcribed and thematically analysed. Thematic analysis provides a rich and detailed account of data and is an inductive approach to pattern recognition and theme identification (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Following the analytic steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), they were transcribed, read and re-read, and initial codes identified. Codes were then collated into potential themes and relevant data were attributed to each theme. The rigour and trustworthiness of data analysis was checked through a process of researcher triangulation (Nowell et al. 2017). This involved one researcher (CS) leading the analysis which was independently reviewed by a second researcher (UOC) and subsequently discussed amongst the research team through peer debriefing.

Results

In total, thirty-five codes were identified from the data. From these, the following themes of the CA experience were identified: Access to Training; Added value of Training

(reflecting on the benefits and challenges of supporting pupils); and Professional Development. A brief summary of each section is provided, followed by specific comments from individual participants, identified as CA1, CA2 etc.

Access to training

Access to training was described by CAs as consistently problematic, with responses largely emphasising a piecemeal and ultimately unsatisfactory experience. The majority of CAs ($n = 15$) reported they had not received any previous formal training in preparation to support pupils with a VI. For these CAs, much of their knowledge and skills had been acquired on an ad hoc basis from a wide range of sources. Information in the first instance was more likely to come from teachers, SENCOs, school Learning Support Department, parents, other CAs and pupils themselves.

CA7: I haven't really had any training at all, his case worker has given me some advice on how to adapt the classroom and resources, but this is the first official training I have got. We work alongside the teacher, parents and outside workers, along with asking the child's own opinions, to try to give him the best experience we can give him.

A number of CAs ($n = 11$) identified outreach service provision as a source of support; this included input from the statutory Education Authority Visual Advisor and wider sensory services – typically once per term. This was an occasional rather than regular event that tended to be delivered as part of a whole-school training day; however, input was negatively affected during and after the Covid-19 pandemic resulting in the loss of valuable expertise.

CA6: It would be whole school days and with the outreach from the sensory service ... but then with the whole lockdown and everything, we've lost all that contact.

More informally, a few CAs elaborated their knowledge and skills acquisition often took place 'on the job', through interaction with the pupil and/or observation of other CAs.

CA6: learning as you go, kind of thing. That's about the height of it. It was very nerve wracking in the beginning, I had no idea ...

Of the three CAs who had received formal training, this was provided either by the regional Education Authority or through input from local voluntary agencies. In each instance, this provided valuable knowledge and expertise:

CA10: I had kind of a little bit of training ... and that was the EA, the Southern Eastern Region Sensory Support Service, so they had like a vision support section and they came in and specifically talked about my pupil because the person that worked with him in the kind of service knew him from primary school

The added value of training

The added value of training was identified by CAs in terms of its immediate contribution to their role and, more pertinently, its potential to inform and expand dimensions of support that were problematic.

Many CAs described their role in functional/supportive terms; duties included enlarging text and other resources for pupils ($n = 13$) or providing physical assistance in the school environment: classroom, playground, lunchroom or corridor ($n = 10$). Others reported downloading and preparing electronic resources ($n = 8$), helping pupils socialise and integrate with peers ($n = 6$) and scribing ($n = 3$). A recurring observation across these activities was the importance of nurturing independence and autonomy in the VI pupil.

CA19: I would have sat beside him in class as well, which yes it was good at the start to get that relationship and we did get a very good relationship but then it did keep an awful lot of people away from him as well because nobody really wants to sit with the grown up in the room so I did find that I started to distance myself ...

Asked about the most rewarding aspects of working with VI pupils, CAs most commonly identified seeing pupils' academic and social progress ($n = 12$), their increased independence and confidence ($n = 7$) and the personal satisfaction gained from helping pupils ($n = 5$). To a lesser extent, CAs also identified good relationships with pupils ($n = 3$), seeing pupils happy ($n = 3$) and job satisfaction ($n = 3$).

CA11: And then I think the most satisfying thing is whenever you are able to do something and just seeing them being happy that they can do something, that somebody has maybe said to them they couldn't do because of their VI.

Challenges were described in more detail. The most common response related to establishing the most appropriate level of support, with seven of the CAs describing difficulty in striking a balance between doing too much or too little.

CA8: At the minute he is coping so much better than I was expecting, sometimes I feel I should be doing more for him but he is very capable and his confidence is growing. At the minute he is able to do a lot independently although my challenge will be spotting when he needs that extra help or his unable to continue doing the things he can now.

Several CAs ($n = 5$) referred to issues with class teachers, often based on a perceived lack of understanding of the barriers to learning experienced by VI pupils. This ranged from limited awareness of environmental considerations (such as pupil seating in the room or mis-use of lighting) to poorly planned and prepared academic resources.

CA11: ... when we're doing exams and we will say right, you have a pupil in this class who has a VI, you need to ensure that you have a paper ready that is in this font size, and on this size of paper and we get ones, they've just got a normal exam paper and they've gone, oh well we'll blow it up to 150% and that'll work for them and we're saying well they can't access 50% of that, especially if it's something a maths paper because it then becomes too pixelated – it's little things like that, but it doesn't help the pupil in that way.

Several CAs described challenges with pupil behaviour ($n = 6$) which was attributed to the frustration of feeling 'different':

CA2: ... the more challenging thing would be, he doesn't like being different so sometimes instead of going up to the computers, the large screen monitor beside the teacher's desk, he'll stay at his desk and just listen when he can't see what's on the board.

A few CAs were more specific, identifying their lack of experience of VI ($n = 3$) and limited technological skills ($n = 3$) as key challenges. There was agreement that

absence of this fundamental knowledge and skills base undermined their capacity to provide effective pupil support:

CA16: My biggest problem and my pupil's biggest problem is technology, at the moment we are waiting on an iPad coming although it's been a rather long wait. Technology is my biggest problem, I'm a bit of a dinosaur as far as it goes for want of a better word ...

Training for professional development

The professional development acquired over the course of the accredited training programme was diverse and included access to bespoke technology and equipment, gaining confidence in their skills and duties, an interaction with other CAs. The most common response ($n = 14$) was the opportunity to share knowledge and skills with the class teacher:

CA9: I definitely think it would be great for us to have this knowledge and this training course to go back to the teachers, just to help them with regards to work and what routes to go down next and what strategies to put into place, because when you're dealing with a class of 24 and you've one child who needs their work done different it can be a bit stressful for the teacher so it would be good now to take this back to the teacher.

Other responses acknowledged the value of having greater knowledge and insight of VI ($n = 11$) and the inherent benefits this would bring to pupils:

CA7: I think it will help all of us give them the best learning experience and chance of a normal school life as much as we possibly can ... the more I know the more I can help the child I'm working with.

Access to accredited and VI-specific training was clearly important to CAs, who saw it as a valuable professional development opportunity.

CA19: I think everyone should have to do the training first-hand, instead of relying on one learning assistant passing the information on, that's where things get watered down when they should be learning it from scratch from the professional that knows what they're doing. the more of us that are trained, the more back up we are for each other and the more prepared we are.

When asked what the training programme could offer, another common response was the acquisition of technological knowledge and skills ($n = 9$):

CA2: training with the iPad or other technical things ... I need to practice using them so that I can remember how to do all those things because I know how useful it is to help the child so I think it would be good if I was going to help another child who maybe wasn't as familiar with the things, that I'd be able to help them more.

For some CAs, greater understanding of VI ($n = 8$) was considered a pre-requisite; in these instances, familiarity with the sensory challenges to learning ($n = 7$) was an essential starting point since this would inform subsequent practice.

CA4: ... finding out more about the child's condition and what way I can support that ... the skills and knowledge to put that in place ... anything that I can learn that can make the child's life easier.

In some instances, this understanding was described in terms of its potential to enhance daily interaction with pupils ($n = 3$) and encourage greater pupil independence ($n = 2$).

For others ($n = 6$), regular interaction with fellow CAs provided valuable peer support and confidence-building among a workforce who typically did not have many opportunities to share experiences.

CA19: ... if there was any kind of support groups for CAs, you know that they would be able to text each other or help each other out or an email or something like that, you know, just because you do find, so far an awful lot of us are in the same boat with the same issues or concerns, we are realising now 'oh it's not just us', just having that wee support bubble for ourselves, it might be something to help.

Additionally, use of technology ($n = 4$) and resource adaptation ($n = 2$) were identified as necessary facilitators to learning, provide a knowledge base to inform effective in-class support.

CA18: I think if we're using technology to its best advantage for them that can only be a benefit for their education because they're getting as good a chance as we can possibly give them, you know, having their CA who is fully trained and fully aware of all sides, of all aspects of it ...

The training programme as also seen as an opportunity to develop inclusive practice through cascading learning within the school.

CA18: ... it's specific training that we can share in the school so there's other staff that's going to have a knowledge of this as well and that can only be good for the kids.

Discussion

The findings of this study identify the relative position of CAs on Radford et al.'s (2015) scaffolding framework, enabling timely reflection on the current availability of training in NI and the implications for the inclusive resourcing of schools. The findings, therefore, may help inform the development and roll-out of future training options as well as contribute to wider debate on this workforce. Perhaps the most notable finding in the study was that CAs consistently operated largely within the *support* role on the scaffolding continuum. The data revealed a series of explanatory factors that determined the extent to which they could progress beyond this position. These related to access to training; limitations or lack of confidence in their own knowledge and skills and the teacher-assistant dynamic in the classroom. Having reported minimal training options it is, perhaps, inevitable that CAs have assumed a *de facto* visible support role. However, although their support position typically reflected generic job descriptors that define the role of the CA, it was also clear that their deployment could, and on occasion did, accommodate a more explicit *repair* function. Research evidence has established that deployment practices regularly exceed employment expectations, thereby creating a tension between policy and practice (Logan, O'Connor, and McKeever 2019). This is not a new phenomenon but it does illustrate the pressure points that can occur when the parameters of responsibility as distinguished in the scaffolding framework become blurred.

A progressive and standardised professional development framework should be a cornerstone for effective inclusive practice. The function of formalised and accredited

training such as the one described in this study can be instrumental in upskilling CAs to provide specialised support for pupils with SEN. Such training recognises pupils with SEN as a heterogeneous group and these findings illustrate the importance of distinguishing the particular needs of groups of pupils. The positive impact of curriculum interventions delivered by assistants has been identified in other studies (Nickow, Oreopoulos, and Quan 2020; Slavin et al. 2009); additionally, research has further addressed the potential for the assistant workforce to acquire a wider identity, combining education and health responsibilities (Östlund et al. 2021; Zhao, Rose, and Shevlin 2021). At present, the absence of mandatory, fully funded training is likely to constrain CA progression to assuming a more informed and skilled *repair* and *heuristic* roles in supporting pupils with VI. Such stagnation means that the option for professional development and, by association, a systematic career progression pathway for CAs has yet to be properly explored in NI, resulting in a critical resource deficit that has implications for all pupils with SEN.

This study also makes clear that access to dedicated training should align with in-school opportunities for meaningful implementation. The relationship between CAs and class teachers is shaped by the position of each in the hierarchy of the school and their associated professional boundaries (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). Disruption of this can provoke professional territoriality if assistants are perceived to be encroaching upon pedagogical competences (O'Connor et al. 2021). To understand this dynamic, one has to consider the current infrastructure of the assistant workforce in NI. The role can include a general remit as well as an SEN specialism. Although some of these posts can, and do, provide a range of specialised support, the prevalence of a largely normative workforce has prohibited any genuine distinction between those assistants who maintain a largely supportive presence and those who could perform a more heuristic role in the classroom. Undoubtedly, the tendency for individualistic training diminishes any possibility for collaborative professional development, yet empirical evidence has demonstrated how shared working practices can significantly add to classroom and whole-school ethos (McDermott et al. 2017; Syrnyk 2018). Training schemes must work within the education framework to provide a sustainable model of support which is reviewed on an ongoing basis. Any programmes developed must align with the demands of the role considering both the numbers of children with VI and the type of support required in addition to financial considerations in a dynamic educational landscape.

The visibility of an appropriately trained assistant workforce is a cornerstone of schools' commitment to ensuring the inclusion and participation of pupils with SEN. Research on the contribution of CAs in fulfilling a school's inclusive agenda has highlighted the particular benefits and limitations of their contribution to classroom instruction, curriculum delivery and pupil engagement (NICCY 2020; Sharma and Salend 2016). Much of the evidence has addressed this dynamic within the homogeneous scope of SEN generally. Whilst discrete studies have been undertaken on some of the more prevalent SEN; for example, those with autism, dyslexia or behaviour difficulties, the absence of similar empirical research on VI (and, indeed, other less common SEN) has contributed to a knowledge gap in how best to support these pupils, diminishing their opportunities for equal access to education. Equally, whilst there is much to learn from the extant literature on CA engagement with SEN pupils

generally, the findings presented in this paper highlight some particular distinctions in CA support for children with a sensory impairment. Undoubtedly, school closures were disruptive to all children during COVID-19 school closures, and disproportionately so for those with SEN. For pupils with VI, the absence of visually appropriate material and digital alternatives created added complexities and underlined the importance of having schools sufficiently prepared to make reasonable adjustments for inclusion and equity in resource provision (Wilson 2020). In this context, a trained CA workforce operating under a scaffolding framework employing support, repair and heuristic roles to facilitate inclusive pupil participation, would be well-placed to deliver this specialist task.

The main limitation of the study is the scale and sample size, due to the relatively small numbers of pupils with VI (and corresponding numbers of CAs who support them). This means that the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the wider CA workforce is limited. However, as a snapshot of the perceptions of one particular group of CAs, this research will be used to drive further explorations of the CA role and stimulate discussion on the most appropriate way to deliver support to children with visual impairment. Furthermore, the perceptions of pupils with VI is less developed in educational research; their involvement would provide valuable insights into the access to, and experience of, education and this is a dimension to be developed in future research.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the merit of applying a scaffolding lens to identify the current knowledge, skill and practice of CAs in supporting pupils with VI. Clearly, CAs are providing a fundamental support that enhances the inclusion of these pupils; however, the uneven pattern of, and access to, training has diminished the extent to which CAs can fully scaffold pupils' participation in the classroom and wider school environment. The study has highlighted the untapped potential that better utilisation of this workforce could bring to help ensure equity of access to education for children with VI.

Note

1. This is the terminology currently used in Northern Ireland, other jurisdictions use alternative terms e.g. Teaching Assistant, Learning Support Assistant, Teacher Aide.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Classroom assistants that participated in this study, and for the work of our collaborators in Angel Eyes: Sara McCracken, Chief Executive and Karen Wilson, Education Advocate.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The Classroom Assistants undertaking the training programme were funded by Ulster University's Centre for Flexible Education. Further support for delivery of the programme was available from the Garfield Weston Trust. Invest NI innovation voucher funding was secured by Angel Eyes NI to support this research.

Ethical approval

The study adhered to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki, received ethical approval through the Ulster University Education Ethics Filter committee and informed consent from participants was obtained.

Notes on contributors

Julie F. McClelland PhD is Senior Lecturer in Optometry at Ulster University. Her research interests concern visual development in children with visual impairment and effective communication of visual status to ensure vision is considered in daily life.

Una O'Connor-Bones PhD is a Research Director for the School of Education at Ulster University. Her inter-disciplinary research monitors the rights and well-being of children and young people in Ireland and Northern Ireland and she works closely with agencies in the statutory and voluntary sectors to enhance educational outcomes for children and young people.

Christine Shannon PhD is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the School of Education at Ulster University, with a focus on optimising the educational outcomes of children and young people.

Kathryn J. Saunders PhD is a Professor of Optometry and Vision Science at Ulster University. She has a special interest in paediatric vision and visual development. Her research aims to provide improved methods for assessing and managing visual problems in children, particularly where developmental disability co-exists with vision deficits.

Julie-Anne Little PhD is a Professor of Optometry and Vision Science at Ulster University. Her research aims to improving vision, education outcomes and quality of life for children across the world; particularly those with visual impairment and/or learning disabilities.

ORCID

Julie F. McClelland  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9726-3736>

Una O'Connor  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9430-347X>

Christine Shannon  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4663-8504>

Kathryn J. Saunders  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9289-5731>

Julie-Anne Little  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5242-8066>

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