

# Finding a Voice and Fostering Independence. The Role of the SNA in Supporting Children with ASD in Mainstream Schools



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Niamh Molloy graduated from the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme at Marino Institute of Education in 2020. Her interest in SEN stems from her experience on school placement throughout her years studying at MIE, and her passion to foster independence for children with ASD in mainstream primary schools. Niamh's experience working with SNAs, and observing their work, sparked her interest in research.

**KEYWORDS:** Inclusion, Special Education Assistants, ASD, Primary Education

## INTRODUCTION

This article uses documentary analysis to examine how a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) can support children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in accessing a holistic education in mainstream primary schools. The research examines children with ASD, focusing primarily on communication and social difficulties in primary school, and how the role of the SNA is key to supporting these needs by utilizing appropriate interventions. Such interventions that will be discussed in this study will be the use of social stories to support social difficulties, and the picture exchange communication system (PECS) to support individuals with communication difficulties.

## CONTEXT

The approach to children with special educational needs SEN in education policy has progressed significantly over the last four decades. The review of literature from the 1970s to current day reveals that there has been a move towards the inclusion of children with SEN in Irish

mainstream schools. This move towards inclusion of children with SEN has been influenced both nationally and internationally through policy.

In 1978, the Warnock report acknowledged the importance of equality for children with special educational needs and the right of the child to an education within this context, this was revolutionary in terms of acknowledging how children with SEN were excluded in society (Warnock, 1978). The Warnock Report (1978) massively influenced the 1993 publication for the report by Special Education Review Committee (SERC) in Ireland, which outlined flaws in the national system for children with SEN and the need for adequate resources to ensure appropriate provision of education for these children. These reports were further emphasised in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), stating that children should never be entirely educated in a segregated environment. Furthermore in 1998, the Education Act was introduced in Ireland, and stated that provisions will be made available to all state residents, including person with disabilities and SEN, quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and ability of said person. This underlined the equality of access for children with SEN to educational settings. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act further advocated the inclusion of children in mainstream settings clearly stating that children with SEN 'shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs' unless such inclusive education is inconsistent with the best interest of the child with SEN or the 'effective provision of education for persons with whom the child is to be educated' (EPSEN, 2004, p.7).

The role of the SNA dates back to 1979 with the introduction of the Child Care Assistant Scheme which was designed to provide non-teaching assistants to class teachers in special schools (DES, 1979). Non-teaching duties of the child-care assistants, include but are not limited to; preparation and tidy of the classroom, supervision of students during assembly and recreational times, helping a child who requires special assistance, and aiding with feeding, toileting and clothing (DES, 1979, cited in DES 2011, p.122).

The shift towards inclusive education provision for children with SEN highlighted the growing need for additional support within mainstream schools for children with SEN. The SERC recommended the provision of Special Needs Assistants in 1991 to any child who required support (SERC, 1993).

Circular 07/02 was the first significant policy statement outlining the role and duties of the SNA in Ireland. It stated that the recruitment of SNAs were specifically to 'assist in the care of pupils with disabilities' (DES, 2002, p.1). SNAs were allocated to both mainstream and special school settings. The assistance of the SNA was 'of a non-teaching nature' (p.4) and specific

duties included toileting, typing or scribing, feeding, clothing, preparation and cleaning of the classroom in which the children with assisted was taught, temporary withdrawal of child(ren) from the classroom, boarding and disembarking transport to school, and observing child with SEN during assembly, yard, and dispersal times.

Circular 24/03 further emphasised the SNA's duties as providing care to children with 'significant medical needs, a significant impairment of physical or sensory function or where their behaviour is a danger to themselves or to other pupils' (DES, 2003, p.3). This circular reminded schools that the role of the SNA is non-teaching in nature.

Circular 0030/14 outlined that the role of the SNA in Ireland is to address the primary care needs of children arising from disabilities. This role includes duties of non-teaching nature (DES, 2002), and is similar to the 1970's childcare assistants that were recruited in special schools for children who required physical care (Ireland, 1976). SNA support aims to facilitate the attendance of pupils with SEN in school, and to minimize disruptions to classroom teaching. SNAs are employed to encourage and enable inclusion in mainstream school setting, with the focus on developing independent living skills for children with SEN (DES, 2014). Circular 0030/14 specifically mentions the SNAs requirements in terms of training for children with communication difficulties. It states that SNAs working with children with hearing and communication impairments 'staff are required to be trained to provide Sign Language or specialist training (Braille, Lámh, Sign Language, Augmentive/Alternative Interventions) to assist in the provision of support for children with a specific sensory impairment' (DES, 2014, p.13). Furthermore circular 0030/14 indicates that various interventions must be implemented in schools to aid children with social difficulties. Basic communication and social skills are paramount in order to live an independent life. Communication and social difficulties have a huge affect on one another, if a child struggles to communicate their thoughts and emotions, they have great difficulty with navigating social interactions. It is through the work of the SNA in the classroom that children with communication and social difficulties can access a holistic education in mainstream primary schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Documentary research is the sole methodology used throughout this research paper. Briggs & Coleman state that 'documentary research is a form of interpretive research that requires researchers to collect, collate, and analyse empirical data in order to produce a theoretical account that either describes, interprets or explains what has occurred' (2007, p.281). Both primary and secondary documentary sources are used throughout this research paper including

newspaper articles, journal articles, books and legislation. It is imperative that documents used are reliable and credible; therefore, the researcher must evaluate each document used.

The researcher acknowledges that there are several limitations associated with this research paper. There was a time constraint of three months for this piece of research, thus limiting the author to the amount of research that can be done within that time frame. This time frame also limited this research project to solely documentary research, as primary data collection was not possible. This narrows the data collection to secondary data, which was limited in Irish contexts.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **SNA DUTIES ARE NON-TEACHING IN NATURE**

In 2002, Logan conducted some research in which parents, pupils and SNAs were interviewed regarding the duties carried out by the SNA. It was noted that in practice, such duties were teaching and non-teaching in nature (Logan, 2006). Parents who were interviewed stated that 'SNAs offered support for learning, behaviour and social interaction with peers' (p.95), to children with SEN. 'Escorting children on school buses and/or assisting children to board and alight from school buses' was the lowest ranking duty that was carried out, with a mere 28% of SNAs completing this duty daily.

Over 85% of SNAs, teachers and principals indicated that educational duties such as; assisting pupils engaging in education activities, supervising and assisting small groups, clarifying instruction, and giving encouragement to students (Logan, 2006, p.96) were carried out by SNAs. Overall SNAs, teachers and principals stated that the duties carried out by the SNA were more educational than care duties, and 57% of teachers vocalised the need for a shared understanding of the role of the SNA. It is worth noting that the data found through this research was primarily a representation of the duties carried out by full time SNAs, assigned to one child in a Dublin school whose class teacher had less than two years' experience working with an SNA. Therefore, the case study findings cannot be considered representative of Irish primary schools.

According to Keating & O'Connor, SNA's are assigned to children with SEN who require specialised assistance due to medical needs, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, and where a child's behaviour is a danger to themselves or to other children (2012). Keating & O'Connor found that there were contrasting perspectives of the role of the SNA in Ireland. Although policy outlines that the role of the SNA is non-teaching in nature, there is a major inconsistency in practice and expectations of the SNA within different schools. It is important to

note that this journal was published in 2012, just two years prior to circular 0030/14 which specifically outlined the duties of the SNA in the classroom.

Similar findings were drawn between Keating & O'Connor (2012) and Logan (2006). Keating & O'Connor's study found that over 80% of both SNAs and teachers agreed that SNAs engaged in educational duties such as; clarifying instructions for pupils, helping students to concentrate and finish work, and giving encouragement to students (p536). It is interesting to note that studies carried out a decade apart showed very similar findings despite being undertaken in different parts of the country and in a significantly different number of schools.

### CONFLICTING POLICY AND PRACTICE

Both Logan (2006), and Keating & O'Connor's (2012) findings were based on self-reporting questionnaires by respondents which is a major limitation of these case studies as the respondents may provide answers that they feel are more socially acceptable, and/or they may not have the ability to assess themselves accurately. Observations of the work of SNAs would have strengthened the findings in each of these studies and provided a range of methodologies to data collection.

In 2015, a similar quantitative study was carried out in a total of 282 schools (Kerins & McDonagh, 2015). The case study examined current duties of the SNA following circular 0030/14, and possible future training needs. However, similar results were found between Logan's (2006) case study in 2002, and Kerins & McDonagh's work (2015). Both studies showed that a limited number of SNAs assisted children with SEN in feeding, toileting, clothing and general hygiene. Over 80% of SNAs reported engaging with pedagogical duties throughout the school day, despite this study following the circular 0030/14. An enormous 96.3% of SNAs reported repeating instructions for children with SEN, and 95.1% reported assisting these students to stay on task. Despite the limitations of this study focusing on SNAs in post primary schools, it is evident that the practicing duties of the SNA does not correlate policy.

Policies such as circular 07/02 and 0030/14 specifically outline the duties of the SNA as non-teaching in nature. It is evident that policy and practice do not directly correlate. Studies have shown that in reality, SNAs engage in a number of duties that are teaching in nature such as; repeating instruction, assisting with educational activities, and providing encouragement.

### SNA'S ROLE IN FOSTERING INDEPENDENCE

Two interventions explored how to support children with ASD in relation to their communication and social difficulties, and to promote independence. These are social stories and picture

exchange communication system (PECS). The role of the SNA is of supreme importance here in practically supporting children with ASD in terms of social and communication difficulties. Circular 0030/14 outlines (DES, 2014) 'assistance with severe communication difficulties' (p.6), and assistance enabling a pupil to access 'psycho-educational programmes' (p.7), as key aspects of support from the SNA.

In a study carried out by Charlop Christy *et al.* (2002), three children with ASD were observed to examine the effects that using PECS had on their spontaneous speech and imitation. This sample size should be considered a limitation of this study however the results of all three children present a positive correlation between the use of PECS and children speech. After PECS training, each child displayed spontaneous speech over 65% of the time during trials, and imitation over 70% of the time. Each child displayed a high level of both spontaneous speech (90%) and imitation (80%) during free play time. SNAs are responsible for the complex communication needs arising from ASD and are provided specialised training to deliver such support to children (NCSE, 2108). Communication skills are amongst the life skills to be developed by SNAs, which supports independence of children with ASD. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) interventions such as PECS provide a 'voice' to children with ASD who are non-verbal. These AAC interventions also facilitates the initiation of interactions by an individual who is non-verbal, with a verbally communicative individual.

Social stories provide assistance, to children with ASD in dealing with scenarios that are common in their everyday life. Familiar situations such as sharing, collaborating with other individuals, and turn taking (Briody & McGarry, 2005). In a study carried out by Scattone *et al.* (2006), three boys with ASD aged between 8-13 years old were chosen for this study as neither previously initiated nor responded to social interactions during free play. In the case of each three children, an individualised social story was constructed to demonstrate appropriate social initiations and responses that were relevant to their personal free time social encounters. Scattone *et al.* specifically outlines that for the purpose of this study 'an *appropriate social interaction* was defined as a verbal, physical, or gestural initiation or response to a peer' (Scattone *et al.*, 2006, p.214). Results showed that following the introduction of social stories, each child's appropriate social interactions increased with the highest increase of 32%.

The sample size of this study is extremely small therefore the data found does not provide an accurate representation of the use of social stories on a wide scale. It is interesting to note that this study solely focuses on boys with ASD, however this could be a reflection of the profile of children with ASD as experts have stated that ASD is more prominent in boys (Halladay *et al.*,

2015). This is an international case study that was undertaken in the United States, thus does not depict the benefits of social stories in the Irish primary school context.

The NCSE (2018) states that the SNA is responsible for the social competence of students by developing their social skills and social interaction needs through psycho-educational programmes. It is evident that AAC and psycho-educational programmes such as PECS and social stories are advantages for the development of a child with ASD's social and communication skills. Such skills enable children with ASD to lead a more independent life. It is the responsibility of the SNA to develop children's life skill set and assist children in acquiring skills to aid independence.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research has highlighted the central importance of the SNA in supporting children with ASD in accessing a holistic education in mainstream primary schools. The aim of this dissertation is to examine the role of the SNA as an inclusive factor in supporting children with communication and social difficulties in primary schools. At the outset, circular 0030/14 (DES, 2014) was interrogated to present an understanding of the role of the SNA. What may be concluded from this circular is that SNA support is concerned with the care needs of the child and is a non-teaching role. While the ideology of inclusive legislation seeks SNA support as a care role, this study has shown that there is a conflict between policy and practice of the role of the SNA, as over 80% SNAs are still engaging in educational activities with children with ASD (Kerins & McDonagh, 2015). Arguably, there is still some uncertainty or as NCSE (2018) states, there is a need for formal training to consolidate the understanding of the role of the SNA.

The role of the SNA must be explicitly outlined to pre-service teachers and NQTs in order to establish a healthy classroom environment. Such knowledge enables class teachers to understand the duties of the SNA as non-educational in nature, thus facilitating direction given. Teachers need to receive training regarding the role of the SNA in the classroom. The school, and or professionals should give this training to ensure that there is a universally clear understanding of their duties in relation to children with SEN. Such training will ensure that there is a healthy classroom environment where teachers can provide direction. A mutual understanding in relation to the work of the SNA will facilitate an inclusive mainstream classroom environment.

It would be beneficial for continuous professional development (CPD) to be made available to all SNAs. Such CPD should involve training in relation to implementation of interventions for children with communication and social difficulties. As recommended in the policy advice paper (NCSE, 2018) schools should 'have the professional capacity necessary to

meet students' additional care needs, where possible and appropriate, including those arising from significant medical, physical, emotional/behavioural, sensory/communication and other significant difficulties engaging in learning”.

More research is needed surrounding communication attainment with use of interventions. Future research should be conducted to investigate the effects of interventions on acquisition of complex skills, and the attainment of such communication skills. Research must look beyond the acquisition of such communication skills and focus on best interventions for communication attainment. Such research is urgently needed in improving independence for children with complex communication difficulties.

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