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**Capacity Building for Inclusion:
The Role and Contribution of
Special Needs Assistants and
Classroom Assistants in Ireland
and Northern Ireland**

Briefing Paper



Briefing Paper

This paper provides a summary of the fourth Report of the Children and Youth Programme which adopts a rights-based approach to examining the provision of education for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Using the General Measures of Implementation as an elementary tool for good policy (CYP, 2011) together with the principles of best interests and voice of the child, the objectives of the Report are to:

1. identify the right to education for children and young people with SEN in Ireland and Northern Ireland with reference to policy and legislation;
2. analyse provision for SEN within a framework for inclusion;
3. consider research evidence in relation to the role and function of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) and Classroom Assistant (CA);
4. identify good practice to inform the capacity building potential of SNAs and CAs to support the rights of pupils with SEN and make recommendations for policy development and implementation.

The Report outlines the relevant rights instruments and standards for the education of pupils with SEN, provides an overview of provision for SEN in Ireland and Northern Ireland, considers the policy and practice of inclusion and documents the nature of classroom assistance in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Finally the Report draws concluding messages for policy in relation to capacity building to support the education of pupils with SEN.

Key Conclusions

Drawing on the evidence the following key conclusions have been identified.

- 1. The extent to which inclusive education is realised has implications for the full educational experience of children and young people with SEN.**

Inappropriate or limited classroom support constitutes a denial of educational opportunities to enable pupils to reach their full potential.

Adopting a rights-based approach has permitted the best interests of young people to be considered against provision of education for children and young people with SEN in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Recent and proposed reforms of SEN policy in both jurisdictions have been informed by children's rights standards but implementation often

falls short of what is required by those same standards. Effective inclusion has been constrained by ambiguous interpretation of the role of classroom assistance and remains problematic.

Good policy can enhance the rights and provision of education for children and young people with SEN and help government in both Ireland and Northern Ireland to develop more inclusive outcomes for this group.

In Ireland Project IRIS represents notable progress in this area and there is scope to develop a similar initiative in Northern Ireland.

2. Dedicated training for SNAs and CAs is essential to realise the rights and educational needs of children and young people with SEN, both to improve inclusive practice and enhance educational experiences.

Children and young people with SEN are rights holders and entitled to be educated alongside their peers. The pivotal role of SNAs and CAs cannot be underestimated and their input under the direction of the class teacher can demonstrably improve educational experiences. Training for support staff is a recognised priority for effective inclusion.

In Ireland and Northern Ireland few SNAs and CAs have an appropriate qualification to support pupils with SEN and there are variations in training options. Government in both jurisdictions should take steps to address the status of this post in schools to ensure that development pathways fulfil the educational, social and pastoral dimensions of inclusion.

3. The voice of children and young people with SEN is underdeveloped and needs to be progressed to inform inclusive educational policy development and implementation.

Access to quality quantitative and qualitative data can inform policy imperatives and provision for inclusion. There is relatively little monitoring of the lived experience of children and young people with SEN, including educational experiences. This is a crucial perspective in any planning for inclusion and should be incorporated into planning at micro (school) and macro (policy) levels to uphold implementation of the educational rights of pupils with SEN. The Disabled Children and Young Person's Participation Project illustrates how those with SEN, including complex needs, can have a voice in matters affecting their well-being. Options to learn from and/or develop the project further should be actively explored. The SNA, CA has an active role in supporting pupils with SEN to claim their rights and ensuring that the voice of the child is heard in the classroom.

4. Collaborative partnerships between teachers and SNAs, CAs are crucial to the effective inclusion of children and young people with SEN in mainstream schools.

Adopting a collaborative approach between teachers and SNAs, CAs facilitates constructive use of evidence to support children and young people with SEN. A partnership approach, based on the acknowledged expertise of the teacher and the SNA, CA will undoubtedly enhance inclusive classroom practice.

Limitations in collaborative practice and in teachers' management of another adult in the classroom can have a detrimental impact on the education of pupils with SEN. Management training for teachers is essential for the effective deployment of SNAs and CAs in classrooms in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Teachers' access to dedicated training is minimal at pre-service and in-service levels.

Options for management training of SNAs, CAs should be a more visible feature of teacher training in both jurisdictions, giving teachers the skills to collaboratively plan, prepare and support inclusion in the classroom. In addition, joint in-service training with SNAs, CAs should be explored further.

5. Other forms of expertise should be explored to inform and enhance inclusive education practice.

Whilst the role of the parent has been strengthened in policy and legislation, the extent to which parents feel partners in their child's education is questionable, with the balance of power seemingly in favour of professionals. Parents have a unique perspective on the needs of their child, so it is essential to harness the particular expertise that they can provide. A power-sharing relationship between children and young people, their parents, education and other providers should continue to be actively promoted at all levels of the education system.

Although not the focus of this Report, the role of special schools in advancing inclusive practice is increasingly recognised and there is evidence of greater collaboration to improve the educational opportunities of children and young people with SEN in the mainstream sector. Further options for SNAs, CAs and teachers from the two sectors to collaborate should be explored, including active networks that enable the mobilisation of resources.

