



## Submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection

### The Role of Special Needs Assistants in Early Childhood Care and Education Settings

Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) supports and represents the people who play a role in the development, delivery and oversight of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland, and prioritises the interests of children. In line with ECI's mission "enabling the provision of quality ECCE in Ireland, with positive outcomes for children" we believe that early childhood is critical period for the nurturing of each individual child's curiosity, resilience, creativity, confidence and potential. We believe that every child has a right to a childhood that is loving, secure and stimulating. This mission is supported by substantial evidence on the importance of quality early childhood care and education for children's well-being and development<sup>i</sup>, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and for those with additional needs<sup>ii</sup>, two forms of disadvantage that are often linked<sup>iii</sup>.

#### Consultation on Additional Needs

ECI recently held a solution-focused consultation meeting with members and invited guests on the issue of inclusion of children with additional needs in mainstream ECCE settings. The meeting provided an important preliminary needs analysis and identification of themes in inclusive ECCE, including:

- ❖ **Parents' involvement** in their child's early childhood education, including communication with the ECCE setting, has significant influence on the experiences of children with additional needs and ECCE settings' ability in responding to such needs
- ❖ **Funding** is a significant issue for both parents and ECCE settings
- ❖ Parents and providers face significant challenges in **accessing needs assessment, services, funding and support** and experience these processes as a lonely and alienating battle
- ❖ ECCE settings continue to primarily rely on **Special Needs Assistants**, which is associated with as many challenges as benefits.

The meeting gave strong consensus that well-supported and resourced ECCE provides children with additional needs significant opportunity for improved well-being and development, as is well-reflected in the literature<sup>iv</sup>. What also emerged very powerfully was the lack of benchmarks for:

- ❖ What is acceptable for children with additional needs in ECCE settings
- ❖ The level of involvement required of parents and ECCE settings in accessing necessary supports

Both these calls for benchmarks speak to recommendations by the NDA<sup>v</sup> regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream ECCE. Subsequently, due to the heavy reliance on special needs assistants (SNAs) and the immense difficulties in accessing funding to employ them, we have endeavoured to gain a better understanding of this primary mode of support within ECCE settings. In light of the recommendations and this preliminary needs analysed carried out by Early Childhood Ireland, we

welcome the chance to submit our views and recommendations regarding the role of special needs assistants.

### **Current Context and Challenges**

When the Department for Education and Skills in 1999 published the White Paper Ready to Learn, early intervention for children with special needs was highlighted as especially important and the government was called upon to improve this sector's provision by, amongst others, improving the training and skill of early childhood educators, increasing the level of provision for preschool children with special needs as well as increasing support for preschools already enrolling children with special needs and increasing resources with visiting teacher supports. However, local audits, research and anecdotal evidence from our members in this field continue to highlight concerning numbers of children who are not diagnosed or have their needs assessed (CECDE 2006) until they are about to start primary school as well as to highlight large numbers of children who either have no access to support to attend ECCE settings or who have insufficient intensity or quality of support (CECDE 2006; Moloney & McCarthy 2010).

An important factor is the lack of legal entitlement for children in ECCE settings to receive support from a special needs assistant. While it is at the HSE's discretion to provide such support to children in ECCE settings, research and anecdotal evidence suggests that only a minority of children receive such support. Thus, to ensure the inclusion of a child with additional needs in ECCE settings parents often have to pay privately for an SNA or try to campaign for funding through local charities. Moreover, when children do get provided with SNA support, they are often given insufficient hours to sufficiently respond to their needs (Moloney & McCarthy 2010). The majority of participants at the consultation meeting spoke of the immense difficulties in accessing funding for SNAs and other supports and resources.

Another difficulty highlighted to Early Childhood Ireland is that some children with additional needs, when they have been approved for funding or resources allocated, have had to choose either between the free pre-school year or the use of an SNA as they have not been entitled to both at the same time. In some cases this leads to the child attending the pre-school service in the morning and having an SNA in the afternoon so that the child gets limited benefit from the pre-school session.

Challenges such as these in late 2013 led Early Childhood Ireland to call for the provision of special needs assistants in preschool education. Then, we argued:

"The current situation is that there are 4,600 notified ECCE services in the country catering for approx. 150,000 children every day. A national Pobal Survey (2012) suggests that 45% of ECCE services have at least one child with a diagnosed special need, while an Early Childhood Ireland member survey (2012) highlighted 71% of services reporting having at least one child with a special need both diagnosed and undiagnosed. Access to SNAs is variable and shrinking with HSE, parents and childcare services now trying to fund this important role. There has never been a responsibility or commitment across HSE regions (or previously Health Boards) to providing SNAs to children in pre-schools. The provision of SNAs to preschools has been at the discretion of each HSE region with no access to these supports from the Department of Education and Skills.

The ongoing experience of our members compels us to draw the attention of the Education Committee to the worsening situation for young children with special needs, their parents and the pre-school services that work with them. **We are calling for policy reform and are asking the Education Committee to broaden the scope of their deliberations and consider the provision of Special Needs Assistants (SNA) for children with special needs as an equitable, inclusive system of preschool education."**

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## **New Evidence Calls for a Different Support Model**

However, in light of emerging evidence Early Childhood Ireland no longer calls solely for the provision of SNAs in ECCE settings but rather calls for a tiered system of support for children with additional needs, of which the Special Needs Assistant is but one element, albeit in many cases a crucial one. This position speaks to the accumulating evidence that SNAs and teaching support workers should be seen as a way to support children with additional needs but not **the (only)** way to support such children<sup>vi</sup>. At Early Childhood Ireland's recent consultation meeting on the inclusion of children with additional needs in ECCE settings, it emerged that while Special Needs Assistants are often considered invaluable to efforts in including a child with additional needs, there are also considerable challenges associated with this model of support, which we believe can be addressed by a more holistic and integrated approach.

### **Benefits and Limitations of the SNA Model**

According to a study by CECDE<sup>vii</sup>, intensity has consistently been identified in the literature as the key to effective early intervention: "In terms of provision for young children with disabilities or children at risk for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage, the key measures of intensity are length of day, staff pupil ratios, staff training and qualifications, curriculum and family partnership. The findings from this study show serious lack of quality in relation to all of these measures of intensity." The provision of SNAs alone will not solve this huge deficit in quality when it comes to the inclusion of children with additional needs.

### **Segregation and Learned Helplessness**

Research from the UK points to some of the challenges associated with SNAs as the sole or primary provision of support. For example there has been shown to be a negative relationship between the level of support that students with special educational needs in mainstream schools received from support staff and the progress they made in English, Mathematics and Science. That is, the more support the students received, the less progress they made<sup>viii</sup>. It has been suggested that this may be due to SNAs' and teaching assistants' tendency to segregate the children from the class by working individually with the student away from the class setting<sup>ix</sup>. Practice wisdom and anecdotal evidence from many of Early Childhood Ireland's members suggest that a similar situation is occurring in ECCE settings. One service manager for example suggested that especially SNAs who are not appropriately trained to work with children in early education who have additional needs often tend to segregate the child from the group when a problem arises, leading the child to spend a large amount of time away from the group. The focus on one-on-one support, thus, as such can inhibit social integration and inclusion of a child with additional needs.

### **Qualifications**

According to the manager just quoted, the segregation of the child especially happens when SNAs have a background in primary-level education where the focus is on educational outcomes as opposed to social interaction and development, which she saw as the main benefit to children in early childhood education. Research evidence similarly speaks to the challenges of under-qualified or inappropriately qualified SNAs in the integration of children with additional needs<sup>x</sup>, including interference with peer interactions, social isolation and/or provoking behaviour problems<sup>xi</sup>.

### **Benefits and Ways to Overcome the Challenges**

Despite such challenges, many ECCE settings and parents see SNAs as absolutely vital to a child's inclusion in ECCE services, in particular in instances of complex, combined or especially challenging additional needs. In the case just quoted, the challenges relating to the use of an SNA were addressed when all the staff received training in the Marte Meo approach to work with their children with additional needs. The training had the dual benefit of upskilling the staff to work more appropriately and effectively with the children with additional needs and to give staff the resources to work more cooperatively with

the SNA. This led to the SNA and the child being more included in the group as opposed to spending the majority of the time doing tasks outside the group and thus gave greater focus on the social development and integration of the child. The benefits of the Marte Meo training are well-known<sup>xii</sup> and show some obvious benefits to a more integrated and holistic approach to providing support for children with additional needs in ECCE settings. In the case quoted, the needs of the child was so severe that the Marte Meo training and upskilling of staff were insufficient in supporting the staff and there was a continued need for the special needs assistant.

Along similar lines, Ann Coughlan has suggested a model in which early childhood educators become an integral part of early intervention teams and support the integration of children with additional needs in ECCE settings not only by working with the child but by ensuring that the setting integrating the child becomes properly upskilled and trained to ensure inclusive practice. Thus Coughlan argues that the quality of early intervention depends on what occurs between 'intervention' sessions. This means that how staff feel able to work with the child when the SNA is not there – especially considering the limited amount of hours most SNAs work with the child – has tremendous influence on the child's inclusion in the service<sup>xiii</sup>. This speaks to recommendations by the NDA that in addition to SNAs where these are vital, inclusive early childhood practice should involve upskilling of all staff in the setting as well as an increased staff-child ratio to ensure that sufficient adult time is available to the child with additional needs<sup>xiv</sup>.

### **Proposed Model of Support**

Based on available evidence, Early Childhood Ireland proposes the following approach to supporting children with additional needs:

- 1) **Staff Training** - All staff involved in the care and education of the child needs appropriate training to support the child when support staff are not available and in order to work more effectively and cooperatively with the support staff.
- 2) **Staff Support** - Support should be provided to the room and/or setting that is integrating the child more so than to the individual child.
- 3) **Increase staff-child ratios** - With the upskilling of the entire staff group and improvement of the inclusive practice of the service needs to come an increased staff-child ratio to ensure that not only the child with additional needs but that all children in the setting receive the care, education and support they need.
- 4) **Access to an SNA** - Where a child's additional needs cannot be addressed solely by upskilling staff and improving the inclusivity of the service, a child should have access to an SNA who is sufficiently qualified and who is with the child for as many hours as the child needs. That is to say, the SNA should be there for more than the average 1-2 mornings that they most often work with the child and should be educated at least to Fetac Level 5 and have had modules in special needs.
- 5) **Integration of SNA within the ECCE Setting** - Where SNAs are needed, and in line with the call for support being given to the child's setting/room instead of the child per se, a coherent and consistent system needs to be set up, which allows for full integration of the SNA within the ECCE setting. That is, the SNA needs to be employed by the service as a member of the team in order to ensure positive staff relationships that will benefit the child/ren with additional needs.
- 6) **Single Agency Responsibility** - In order to ensure an integrated and cohesive model of support, one government agency needs to take responsibility for the provision of early childhood care and education services for children with additional needs and needs to have an earmarked budget for the inclusion of such children.

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- <sup>i</sup> Sylva, K. Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Sirah-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. - The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from Pre-school to end of Key Stage 1, 2004
- <sup>ii</sup> *ibid.*; Melhuish, E. – A literature review of the impact of early years provision on young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, 2004, p4-5
- <sup>iii</sup> Banks, J., McCoy, S. and Shevlin, M. – Inclusive education research: Evidence from Growing Up in Ireland, 2013
- <sup>iv</sup> Sylva, K. Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Sirah-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. - The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from Pre-school to end of Key Stage 1, 2004
- <sup>v</sup> National Disability Authority – Briefing Paper: Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Early Childhood Care and Education, 2011, p82
- <sup>vi</sup> Giangreco, M.F., Broer, S.M. (2007). School-based screening to determine overreliance on paraprofessionals. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 22(3), 149-158.
- <sup>vii</sup> CECDE (2006) Early Years Provision for Children from Birth to Six Years with Special Needs in Two Geographical Areas in Ireland. CECDE, Dublin.
- <sup>viii</sup> Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P. et al. (2009). Deployment and Impact of Support Staff in Schools: The Impact of Support Staff in Schools.
- <sup>ix</sup> Webster, R. & Blatchford, P. (2013). The Making a Statement Project Final Report: A Study of the Teaching and Support Experienced by Pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Primary Schools.
- <sup>x</sup> Butler, J. and Quinn, M. (2014) The Future Role and Professionalisation of the Special Needs Assistant in Ireland. CIT.
- <sup>xi</sup> Giangreco and Doyle 2007, quoted in Butler and Quinn 2014.
- <sup>xii</sup> Clarke, J., Corcoran, Y. & Duffy, M. (2011) The Dynamics of Sharing Professional Knowledge and Lay Knowledge: A Study of Parents' and Professionals' Experiences of Childhood Interventions within a Marte Meo Framework. DCU, Dublin.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Coughlan, A. (2013) The Critical Role of the Educator in Early Childhood Intervention in Ireland. In *An Leanbh Og, The OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, vol. 7.
- <sup>xiv</sup> National Disability Authority – Briefing Paper: Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Early Childhood Care and Education, 2011, p82.