

An Evaluation of Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Ireland: The Role of the Special Needs Assistant

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Abstract : The education provision for students with special educational needs, including students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), has undergone significant national and international changes in recent years. In particular, an increase in resource-based provision has occurred across educational settings in an effort to support inclusive practices. This paper seeks to explore the role of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in supporting children with ASD in Irish schools. This research stems from the second national evaluation of 'Education Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Ireland' (NCSE, 2016). This research was commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in Ireland and conducted by a team of researchers from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick from February to July 2014. This study involved a multiple case study research strategy across 24 educational sites, as selected through a stratified sampling process. Research strategies included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, documentary review and child conversations. Data analysis was conducted electronically using Nvivo software, with use of an additional quantitative recording mechanism based on scaled weighting criteria for collected data. Based on such information, key findings from the NCSE national evaluation will be presented and critically reviewed, with particular reference to the role of the SNA in supporting pupils with ASD. Examples of positive practice inherent within the SNA role will be outlined and contrasted with discrete areas for development. Based on such findings, recommendations for the evolving role of the SNA will be presented, with the aim of informing both policy and best practice within the field.

Keywords : autism spectrum disorder, inclusive education , paraprofessional, special needs assistant

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