

Perspectives on Childhood

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Edited by

Aisling Leavy and Margaret Nohilly

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PREFACE

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This book aims to gather diverse perspectives on childhood to provide a picture of the landscapes of childhood in Ireland and further afield. It collects incisive contributions from leading researchers and practitioners about the characteristics of environments that promote children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. The contributions address various theoretical aspects underpinning the development of childhood experiences and their related pedagogical implications.

The 18 chapters cover a broad range of topics that span childhood. The chapters have been organized into the following four organising themes: (1) Children and families in education and special education settings; (2) Children's environment and play spaces; (3) Children's voice in research, classrooms and non-traditional settings, (4) Children's experiences in STEM education.

Several cross-cutting themes are pervasive across and underpin many of the chapters. Evident in all chapters are the advances made in acknowledging the critical role that childhood plays in later life. Concomitantly, the authors point to the progress in recognising the breadth of experiences that are critical to childhood development and the efforts to provide children with access to such high-quality experiences. There is a strong theme relating to places and spaces, both geographical and educational, that children inhabit and the critical need for children to gain access to places and spaces appropriate for their needs. The fundamental role of schools in promoting equitable and high-quality experiences cuts across all four themes;

alongside this role comes the responsibility placed on schools and policymakers to encourage partnerships that encompass and incorporate the voices of children and their parents in decision-making.

The authors identify current best practices, place them within the overall context of current trends in research into childhood, and consider the implications both theoretically and practically. Many chapters report on original, cutting-edge empirical studies, which demonstrate validated practical experiences related to childhood learning. Other chapters contribute to research and theory-building by presenting reflective or theoretical analyses, epistemological studies, historical and critical literature reviews.

Theme 1

In the first chapter Claire Griffin provides a comprehensive overview of the Irish government policy commitment to SEN, which both emphasises and pays cognisance to the importance of the child's viewpoint. She identifies the strengths of these policy commitments and guidelines by drawing parallels between these and lauded perspectives and theories such as those espoused by Lundy (2007). Griffin gives voice not only to children but also to schools in identifying the chasm that exists in translating these goals and guidelines into practice. By drawing on theoretical perspectives, she raises a warning flag highlighting how continuing with the status quo and not attending to the child's voice may contribute to the phenomenon of learned helplessness, which is in direct contradiction to the goals we aspire to for our children. Importantly, Griffin reports on studies that reveal the critical insights that children provide into the strengths and weaknesses of paraprofessional support. She argues convincingly that giving opportunities to voice this feedback, and experience control, empowers the child and results in positive outcomes for both children and schools.

The emphasis on accessing and attending to the voice of stakeholders in education receives further attention from Johanna Fitzgerald in chapter 2. Fitzgerald problematizes the task of identifying appropriate education for children and young people with special educational needs as she explores the highly contested and politicised arenas of inclusive and special education. She applies the lens of 'Wicked Problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973) as an analytic tool to reveal the complexity of the decision-making process and challenge assumptions about inclusive education's beneficence for all. She asks the reader to reflect on whether by moving to a full inclusion model for all children with SEND, we are failing some children who require highly specialised and individualised educational approaches,

thereby limiting the options for these children and their families? By problematizing the “wickedness” and complexity of the inclusive and special education discourse, Fitzgerald makes a compelling argument for meaningful collaborative approaches to problem posing and problem solving thus broadening the decision-making power by including the diverse perspectives of all stakeholders.

This importance of ensuring that children are located in settings where their educational needs are best met arises in the chapter written by Lainey Keane and Margaret Egan. Keane and Egan draw on the seminal work of Cummins (2008) to explain the overrepresentation of children with EAL in special education. They argue that misunderstandings of the processes and theories underlying second language acquisition can contribute to systemic school bias in relation to children with EAL and children from minority ethnic backgrounds. Underestimating the academic potential of these children combined with biased assessment methods, which do not factor in the effect of the child’s language acquisition on their performance in standardised assessments, leads to lower academic goals and expectations and contributes to their mislocation in special education. The authors make the cogent argument that misidentifying the academic potential of multilingual children not only reduces their future opportunities and right to inclusive and appropriately targeted education; it also is a loss for society as a whole. They proffer a series of recommendations for practice focusing on the adoption of teaching and assessment methods; thus, ensuring that language diversity is not equated with disability and emphasising the importance of celebrating the richness and diversity that bilingual children bring to our classrooms and society as a whole.

In the next chapter, Sandra Ryan shines a light on the critical role that schools play in promoting equity for all children - a prevalent theme in the preceding chapters. Ryan presents a broad sweep of the landscape of parental involvement in education, incorporating a focus on initiatives and government policies put in place to promote partnership. Drawing on the notion of cultural capital, Ryan reminds us of the different ways that working-class and middle-class families relate to their children’s schools and stresses the crucial role that schools play in supporting parents to engage with their children’s learning. This comprehensive detailing of the policies and schemes in place in Ireland to support partnerships with parents reminds us, once again, that the Irish educational system has put in place structures and systems that protect and cherish the child.

The final chapter of this SEN theme, penned by Sarah O’Leary and Mary Moloney, describes the lived experiences of six parents of young children on the autism spectrum. Arising from this critical narrative inquiry are some of the themes evident in the other chapters, most notably the importance of attending to parents’ voices and the accompanying crucial role that professionals play in opening up or limiting access to high quality and desirable educational experiences. This chapter gives us cause to consider again the complexity of the ‘Wicked Problem’ of appropriate education provision for children with special needs and reminds us of the importance of meaningful and constructive dialogue and partnerships between parents and educators. The insights we gain into the experiences of these six parents paint a picture of the power and influence that professionals have regarding the placement of children on the autism spectrum and the frustration and upset this can, at times, cause for parents. In contrast, the narratives also provide poignant and powerful insights into the care and education that children receive in inclusive practice and point to the pivotal role of individual teachers in the realisation of inclusive education in schools in Ireland.

All chapters in this first theme, which focuses on SEN, acknowledge the evolution of thinking, as evidenced in Irish policy and government funding, towards advocating and supporting the educational advancement of all children. However, they go further and challenge us to rethink the current status quo, to challenge our assumptions, and to draw on both theory and research and question ‘Do the current structures and arrangement serve all our children equally well?’ They pose important questions about the type of education system we want for our most vulnerable children and about whose voice counts when engaging in these decision-making processes.

Theme 2

Theme 2 places a spotlight on children’s voices. The five chapters offer a diversity of perspectives on both accessing and enabling the voice of the child to be heard and represented in matters of importance to them.

In chapter 6, Fionnuala Tynan and Margaret Nohilly present an interesting perspective on wellbeing in the Irish primary school context from the perspective of pupils. The evolving concept of wellbeing in education is considered and a conceptual framework for wellbeing that has been developed by the authors, based on the work of Maslow, Bronfenbrenner and Morris, is presented. The framework has been designed to situate wellbeing within an education focus, and while the individual is the central

focus, the framework takes account of the relational aspect of life. Findings of a wellbeing study undertaken with pupils in a selection of Irish primary schools are presented. The study findings provide a convincing argument that the inclusion of pupil voice in the evolution of wellbeing policy in schools supports the development of a shared understanding of wellbeing across the school community.

Maurice Harmon advances the argument of including the voice of children in the future of education, in their own contexts, in chapter 7. The chapter provides an overview of current policy and legislation that supports the rights of children and situates the rationale for the inclusion of the child's voice firmly in article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). While the inclusion of pupil voice is firmly enshrined in policy, Harmon considers the practice of both meaningfully including and responding to child voice. The rights-based model of child participation, developed by Laura Lundy, based on Article 12 of the UNCRC and encompasses the elements of space, voice, audience and influence is presented as a framework to harness child voice. The chapter then presents an overview of the Lundy model in action, where the framework was employed in a study on the voices of children on Religious Education in the Irish context. The findings of the study clearly illustrate that the Lundy framework enables the cultivation of a democratic educational setting where the voice of the child is embedded in the acoustic of the learning environment and supports their active participation in decision-making processes that are relevant to their lives.

Chapter 8 traces the development of child protection practices in Ireland, and therein, highlights the importance of policy and legislation advocating for the voice of society's most vulnerable children who may feel powerless to effect change. Margaret Nohilly and Mia Treacy trace the development of child protection practices in Ireland, beginning in the early 1900s. Given the influence of church and state in Ireland, the history of child protection practices is somewhat unique, and the chapter captures the profound transformation that has occurred in the last thirty years in particular, reflected in legislation and culminating in the introduction of mandatory reporting for professionals who are in regular contact with children. The impact of a number of high-profile child protection cases across the 1990s and indeed into the 21st century in engendering change in child protection practices and legislation is a notable feature of this chapter. The chapter addresses caution however, while robust legislation and updated guidelines and procedures have brought a much stronger focus on child protection in all organisations that work with children, a stronger emphasis on interagency

communication and collaboration, coupled with appropriate and regular training for professionals who work with children is required in the area. Otherwise, the voice of the child may remain unheard, and the silence that surrounds the abuse of children continues.

In chapter 9, Sara Fitzgerald presents an interesting perspective on pupil voice by examining pupils' attitude to collaborative group work in a multigrade Irish primary school setting. Given that the focus of the study is the implementation of a writing programme, the author develops a strong rationale for the development of writing skills with children, cautioning that such skills take more time and perseverance when compared with other skills children develop when learning the English language. The chapter then turns its attention to writing instructional practices. The Gradual Release of Responsibility model is critiqued, both from the perspective of literacy attainment and the utilisation of collaborative learning interactions between peers. As is explored in other chapters in this theme, Fitzgerald raises legitimate queries regarding the inclusion of child voice, particularly in the context of the school environment and the dynamics this may present. The study findings indicate mixed views from pupils regarding the experience of engaging in collaborative group work through writing tasks. Of particular interest are the challenges the children reported when working collaboratively, which ironically behoves a need to engage children in the process of working together. In conclusion, the chapter argues strongly for preparation for pupils ahead of collaborative group work tasks. Consulting with children and hearing their voices, Fitzgerald argues, will aid teachers in organising classroom activities and catering for the individual needs of all.

In the final chapter in this theme, Mia Treacy argues that meaningful engagement with and respect for pupil voice is both a human right and a tool for shaping teachers' practice. This chapter draws this theme to its conclusion in exploring human rights from an international human rights perspective and critiquing Irish legislation for constitutional protection for children. Treacy then presents findings from a qualitative study that illustrate the unique insights that pupils possess and can share in relation to classroom teaching and learning. She argues that, when utilised correctly, pupil feedback can create 'cognitive dissonance', an integral aspect of the teacher change process. Therefore, Treacy argues that pupil voice can lead to transformative teacher learning. This chapter raises an exciting perspective on teacher professional development, recommending that pupil voice is included as a critical component and has the potential to be more impactful for the educator. The study findings are testament to the argument

developed and advocate strongly for the inclusion of pupil voice in teacher professional development.

All chapters in this theme present convincing arguments for the meaningful inclusion of children's voice in matters of relevance to them. They challenge us to think beyond policy and legislation alone that enshrines the voices of children in our constitution and think about how we can actualise this right. Findings and recommendations from various studies presented across these chapters confirm that both policy and practice have the potential to be transformative through the inclusion of pupil and child voice.

Theme 3

Theme 3 of this collection relates to children's Geographies and Play Spaces. The four chapters include perspectives on play, place and positive partnerships with parents.

The opening chapter, penned by Suzanne Egan, Clara Hoyne, and Chloé Beatty, provides a critique of play in the home environment and posits that play is a basic human right for children. Bronfenbrenner's biological systems model, which is presented by the authors as a framework to consider the factors that influence play in the home environment, enables the reader to reflect on the impact of the various 'systems' on the child's development and later life. Findings of a study undertaken with parents of under 6-year-olds paint a picture of various elements of play for children in the home environment and the factors that influence it. The influence of touchscreen digital devices in recent years and their potential impact on different forms of play was a notable feature of this study. The study provides a rich insight into the play activities of young children today, which, although impacted by technology, is not dominated by it. The authors draw the chapter to its conclusion by highlighting particular questions raised by the research relating to children's play environments, including how male and female parents might differ in their responses relating to their children's play, given that the survey responses are mainly from mothers.

Chapter 12 continues with the theme of play, focusing on the Great Outdoors and explores the role of outdoor play, and as with chapter 11, adopts Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework as a multisystem framework. An overview of the current national and international trends concerning outdoor play is presented by Jennifer Pope, Suzanne Egan and Emma Hilliard. Particular emphasis is given in this chapter to the various

systems within Bronfenbrenner's framework, and specific consideration is given to the way the systems interact. This enables the reader to reflect on the many levels of influence on child development and play ranging from the individual characteristics and experiences of the child right through to the impact environmental factors may have on a child's engagement in outdoor play. The influence of the global Coronavirus pandemic on the exosystem for children and its impact on their play activities provides particular food for thought in this chapter. The chapter concludes by outlining the importance of hearing from the playmakers themselves in relation to supporting their outdoor play experiences.

In chapter 13, Rebecca Aspell and Anne Dolan present a convincing argument for the inclusion of place-based education for children. An overview of place-based education is presented, which involves generating a deep knowledge of a particular locality, supporting children to care about landscape, nature and people linked to a place. Findings of a self-study completed on place-based education are presented in this chapter and highlight the benefits of bringing learning to the outdoors, connecting with the natural world, supporting children's health and wellbeing and developing a love of locality. The potential of place-based learning to enhance engagement with and integration across the primary school curriculum is also highlighted. Given the urgent need to address climate change, the authors advocate that place-based education is a meaningful educational tool to engage children.

The final chapter in this theme presents a perspective on a pilot book gifting scheme in Ireland for young children, given that no such scheme exists in Ireland presently. This chapter is penned by Mary Moloney, Suzanne M. Egan, Clara Hoyne, Jennifer Pope, and Deirdre Breatnach, who are involved in evaluating the scheme. In addition to reviewing the benefits of a book rental scheme, this chapter also considers the lessons learned from the Bookseed scheme, which would inform a national rollout of this scheme in Ireland. As with other chapters in this theme, Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework conceptualises the study through the many systems which influence the young child. This chapter also highlights the potential of a book rental scheme to greater equality of access to reading opportunities at a young age, supporting the development of critical early language, communication and literacy skills.

The importance of play in a child's life both in the home and in the great outdoors is a central theme of the chapters in this section. Together these chapters highlight the complex interactions of factors that influence the

quality of play and geographical spaces of children. In advocating the great outdoors, place-based education has the potential to be used by teachers as a springboard to innovate curriculum redesign. Bronfenbrenner's biological systems model is woven across the themes of this chapter, including the final chapter which shifts the focus from play to the importance of the development of early literacy and communication skills through book reading, which can be supported by a book reading scheme.

Theme 4

Theme 4 shifts our gaze to a specific educational arena prevalent in formal and informal childhood spaces – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education.

The important role played by affect, and positive attitudes towards mathematics, on achievement and decisions about the uptake of mathematics is examined by Aisling Leavy and Breed Murphy in chapter 15. The authors report on the affective dispositions towards mathematics of 8568 children at age 9 and again at age 13 through secondary analysis of child cohort data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* longitudinal study. While their analysis reveals positive attitudes towards mathematics at age 9 and age 13; however, it reveals that attitude and gender are statistically significant predictors of mathematics attainment as early as age 9 and four years later at age 13. This study presents a concerning picture of girls' deteriorating and negative attitudes towards mathematics, perceiving it as more difficult and less interesting than their male peers and thus contributing to lower outcomes as measured by standardised assessments at age 9 and 13. Fortunately, and of particular interest, is that these gender differences are not reflected in mathematical outcomes at ages 14 and 15 as measured by Junior certificate grades in mathematics. The authors argue that the investment of effort into ways of promoting more positive attitudes towards mathematics, for girls especially, is critical due to the role played by mathematics in maintaining democratic ideals and in acting as a gatekeeper that dictates participation in some aspects of society that, in turn, leads to economic enfranchisement for those who succeed in mathematics.

The descriptions of classroom enactments of science teaching outlined by Maeve Liston in Chapter 16 provides a captivating account of how to foster young children's engagement in science and thus provides a perfect complement to the argument advanced in chapter 15 about the need to promote positive attitudes in the primary years. Liston argues for the importance of experiences in doing science and describes how to foster the

development of curious scientists through tinkering and making toys. She bridges theory and practice by explaining how to develop scientific process skills by introducing children to the engineering design process by designing and building toys. The descriptions of the activity of 8 to 12-year-olds as they use the engineering design process to create and build prototypes of toys, aligned with perspectives from Montessori and Froebel on the value and role of play in childhood educational settings, highlight the highly interconnected and complementary aspects of the landscape of childhood.

The recognition in the previous two chapters of the variety of factors impacting childhood STEM experiences is further developed by Miriam Hamilton and Anne O'Dwyer in chapter 17. In this chapter, Hamilton and O'Dwyer connect with an earlier theme in the book focusing on the importance of partnerships between schools and the critical role played by parents. Adopting the science capital approach as a theoretical framework, the authors emphasise the need for inclusive science education opportunities for all children. By drawing on the work of Bourdieu, they emphasise the importance of recognising the interplay of family background, habitus and capital in influencing attitudes and aspirations towards science. They provide valuable guidance for teachers on developing children's science capital, particularly focusing on the parameters conducive to supporting science learning in the informal family setting and for the development of effective home-school collaborations. Furthermore, the provision of the types of questions that parents could explore at home to develop scientific habits of mind provides valuable guidance on connecting with more formal school science education while at the same time celebrating and leveraging the situational context of each family setting.

Mairéad Hourigan and Aisling Leavy advance the argument developed by Hamilton and O'Dwyer when they frame the early exposure to STEM opportunities as an equity issue and emphasise the importance of broadening participation in STEM to all children. In this final chapter of the book, Hourigan and Leavy provide a compelling argument for giving young children access to important STEM knowledge and practices and thereby developing early STEM literacy. The authors acknowledge the important role of teachers in providing access to high-quality integrated STEM activities and provide valuable guidance on the use of quality indicators for STEM curricula. Hourigan and Leavy describe an integrated STEM investigation carried out in a classroom of ethnically and language diverse 5 and 6 year-olds as part of a 5-day integrated STEM unit of instruction focusing on the theme of bees. Children's responses in the first lesson,

focusing on an engineering design task, are explored in terms of how they planned, designed, tested, revised, and redesigned a bee house. The responses indicate that these young students were developing important foundational components of STEM literacy. Using their emergent understandings of STEM as a foundation, they could draw on and develop 21st century skills in problem solving, critical thinking, perseverance and communication. This, Hourigan and Leavy argue, points to the need for early STEM experiences that provide more opportunities for young children to engage in and develop STEM reasoning to capitalize on and advance their learning potential.

The four chapters dedicated to STEM bring together many of the themes discussed in the book. While the authors situate their arguments and research within the context of STEM learning in primary schools, we believe that their findings generalise to all educational content, contexts and settings. The authors communicate a persuasive message about equity and the responsibility we have to ensure that all children of all ages and from all aspects of society have access to high-quality learning opportunities in appropriate learning environments. The analysis presented by Leavy and Murphy provides evidence of the impact that positive attitudes toward STEM have on academic outcomes and consequently for opportunities in later life. One approach to promote positive attitudes is to draw on families' cultural funds of knowledge, as described by Hamilton and O'Dwyer, and help children find meaning and relevance in education, thus increasing their engagement and developing, in this case, their science capital. Hamilton and O'Dwyer also return to a cross-cutting theme in this book - the critical role played by parents in supporting and promoting learning. Descriptions of innovative pedagogical practices focusing on the engineering design process, provided by Liston and by Hourigan and Leavy, are convincing exemplars of child-centred and meaningful instructional practice. Like previous chapters in the book, these chapters acknowledge and emphasise the important role played by teachers and staff in schools and childcare settings and illustrates that when we open up opportunities for children to participate in activities in ways that make sense to them, we provide opportunities for children themselves to construct meaning and promote genuine developmentally appropriate learning.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the acknowledged importance of childhood, and the highly developed research and evidence base in specific arenas that impact childhood, the overall perspective that we hold on the provision of quality childhood experiences tends to be fragmented. This book addresses the need for a holistic and broad account on childhood that draws together the perspectives of a variety of educators, academics and stakeholders. Thus, by focusing this book on research, policy and practice, this publication fills a significant gap by providing a picture of contemporary society and its' impacts on experiences of childhood. This book provides a comprehensive survey of policy advances and state-of-art-knowledge, and of opportunities and challenges associated with supporting children in educational settings, but also in spaces outside early childhood and classroom setting. It gives valuable insights into contemporary and future trends and issues related to childhood, informing best practices in childhood education research and practice.

THEME 1:

**EDUCATION AND SPECIAL
EDUCATION SETTINGS**

CHAPTER 1

“DO I GET A SAY IN THIS?” CONSIDERING THE VOICE OF THE CHILD IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANT SCHEME

DR. CLAIRE GRIFFIN

Abstract

Recent years have witnessed strong emphasis on the rights of children and young people to a voice in decisions that affect their lives. Both nationally and internationally, policy documents have placed particular focus on the participation of children and young people in decision-making processes, spanning formal and non-formal education systems. Nonetheless, the degree to which such policy changes have impacted on applied practices within schools remains unclear. This chapter centres on the position of the voice of the child in education, with specific focus on children with significant care needs in receipt of Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support. In particular, the chapter interrogates the degree to which such pupils' voices are included in the decision-making processes in relation to the SNA scheme and related pupil planning, with reference to policy, research, theory and practice. Firstly, this chapter reviews and critiques relevant policy documentation, with specific focus on a rights-based model of pupil participation. Thereafter, the chapter presents a host of national and international research detailing the degree to which the voice of the child is elicited, heard and given due weight in relation to both the SNA scheme and wider international paraprofessional support. Next, the importance of including the voice of the child in matters that affect his/her life is considered from a theoretical viewpoint, with particular focus on theories of learned helplessness and learned hopefulness (Zimmerman, 1990, 71-86). Finally, the author forwards implications and positive suggestions for improving practice, with

the overall aim of increasing the position of the voice of the child in education, with due regard for the SNA scheme.

Introduction

In recent years, the importance of eliciting, hearing and acting on the views of children and young people has become a central tenet of various policy documents. Stemming from a rights-based perspective, the need to ensure that children and young people have a voice in decisions that affect their lives now underpins a range of national and international strategies and conventions. From an Irish perspective, some of the key documents in this regard include the *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, [DYCA] 2015, 1-84), *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* (DCYA, 2014, 1-168) and *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland, 2019, 1-97). Such documents highlight the strong commitment of the Irish Government in relation to the participation of children and young people in decision-making that affects their lives. This spans a range of settings including early education, schools and the wider formal and non-formal education systems. In addition to a rights-based perspective, the value of including the voices of children and young people is recognised in terms of supporting overall child development (Department of Health and Children, 2000, 6), in strengthening the support system around the child (DCYA, 2014, vi) and in respecting the evolving capacities of children, including the freedom to make one's own choices (United Nations [UN] General Assembly, 2006).

Conversely, a review of the literature shows that in spite of this policy focus, pupil voice is typically undervalued and under-utilised in practice (Baroutsis et al., 2016, 127; Enright et al., 2017, 461). This issue also extends to include the voices of pupils with disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs (SEN); a group that has largely been excluded from consultations regarding child-centred matters (Morris, 2003, 337-348; Rabiee et al., 2005, 385; Shevlin and Rose, 2008, 423-430). This is in contrast to the range of policies that highlight the importance of including the voices of seldom-heard and vulnerable persons on matters that affect their lives (DCYA, 2015, 4). Such policy documents are strongly informed by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN General Assembly, 1989, 1-15) and the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with*

Disabilities (UN General Assembly, 2006), as ratified by Ireland in 2012 and 2018 respectively. Embedded in the latter convention, Article 7(3) emphasises how children with disabilities should:

...have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, on an equal basis with other children, and to be provided with disability and age-appropriate assistance to realize that right. (UN General Assembly 2006, 7)

Nonetheless, the reality for persons with disabilities is often one of exclusion, marginalisation (Messiou 2006, 306) and segregation (Finnvold, 2018, 187). Given this policy-practice divide, this chapter seeks to review the position of the voice of the child with disabilities and/or SEN in educational settings, with a discrete focus on the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme. In particular, this will be explored across three main areas including policy documentation, national and international research, and related theoretical perspectives. Finally, implications and positive suggestions for improving practice will be discussed, with the overall aim of increasing the position of the voice of the child with SEN in education.

Policy context

One of the largest support systems to facilitate inclusive practices in the Irish education system presents as the SNA scheme. The scheme, which dates back to 1998, serves to support children with SEN in mainstream education, as well as provide care support to pupils in special schools and special classes (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2014, 1). Applications for SNA support are made by school principals to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). In turn, local Special Educational Needs Organisers allocate SNAs to schools to support children with SEN in accordance with DES criteria. Specifically, according to Circular 0030/2014, the remit of the SNA is to:

Provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with SEN who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate their attendance at school and to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills (DES, 2014, 1).

In particular, the non-teaching care role of the SNA is emphasised across Irish policy documentation. This focus dates back to the very first SNA

circular (Department of Education and Science, 1998) and remains a central tenet of SNA policies today (DES 2014, 7; 2020, 4). In lieu of teaching assistance, the Irish SNA serves primarily to support children presenting with *significant care needs*, spanning three main domains. These include children with a significant medical need, a significant impairment of physical or sensory function, or where a child presents with significant behaviour-related care needs (DES, 2014, 4-5). Notably, the SNA care role stands in stark contrast to numerous international models of paraprofessional support, where teaching assistant duties form a central component of the role (Giangreco and Doyle, 2007, 429-439; Giangreco et al., 2014, 1-12).

A review of policy related to the SNA scheme highlights the importance of paying cognisance to the viewpoint of the child. Specifically, *Circular 0030/2014* (DES, 2014, 18) emphasises that as far as practicable, the viewpoint of a child capable of forming his/her own views should be obtained and given due weight, having regard for the child’s age and maturity level. Such views predominantly relate to the level and extent of SNA access provided to the child. Although SNA access is granted to schools by the NCSE, school authorities have full responsibility for the management and deployment of SNAs within their school, thereby allowing flexibility in how SNA supports are utilised across the school system and with individual pupils (DES, 2020, 4). Moreover, *Circular 0030/2014* highlights the need for pupil contributions during the development, implementation and review of Personal Pupil Plans. The Personal Pupil Plan presents as a form of individualised pupil planning which focuses on the child’s care needs and related supports, alongside the strategies to proactively develop his/her independence skills. In particular, the circular highlights “good practice” in terms of the SNA supporting the pupil to voice his/her views on such planning (DES, 2014, 17). On the one hand, the strength of *Circular 0030/2014* must be acknowledged, whereby it situates the voice of the child as central to the SNA planning process, with due regard for balancing the child’s care support with his/her right to develop independence. In contrast, the circular falls short in providing guidance to SNAs or schools on appropriate means of eliciting the voice of the child in this regard. This is particularly relevant given the lack of job-specific training required to work as an SNA (DES, 2011a, 91), the poor level of continuous professional development opportunities available for SNAs (Fórsa, 2018, 5) and the range of disabilities with which pupils accessing SNA supports may present (Irish Government Economic & Evaluation Service [IGEES], 2016, 10). Based on such reflections, the author deemed it imperative to review and critique research in the field of SNA support to

ascertain the degree to which Irish educational policies are enacted within schools and classrooms.

Policies to Practice? National Context

Over recent decades, a significant national increase in SNA personnel has occurred (DES, 2011b, 9; Fórsa, 2018, 2). Specifically, a review of national data illustrates that in 1998, there were 293 SNA posts, increasing to 2,988 SNAs by the year 2001 (IGEES, 2016, 9). This exponential growth continued steadily over subsequent years, reaching 11,924 SNAs by 2015 (IGEES, 2016, 9). Today, this figure stands at almost 17,000 SNAs, spanning special schools, mainstream primary and post-primary schools and special classes (DES, 2019, 1; NCSE, 2020b).

In spite of this significant increase, a review of the literature shows that paralleled research in the field was slow to follow suit. Although recent years have witnessed increased national growth in SNA-related research (DES, 2011b, 1-177), specific focus on the voice of the child in such research remains minimal. Interestingly, a review of studies beyond Ireland depicts a similar pattern. For example, following a review of a subset of international peer-reviewed articles between 2005 and 2012, Giangreco et al. (2014, 692) rated ‘student voice’ as a recent line of inquiry in the field of paraprofessional research, with data on this topic deemed to be at a “modest” and “preliminary” stage. Accordingly, when reviewing national and international data in this domain, findings cannot be interpreted as a reflection of general educational practices but rather an insight into *some* practices across *some* schools on an under-researched, under-prioritised matter.

Within an Irish context, the degree to which the voice of the child is welcomed or heard in schools remains unclear, both in relation to SNA access and pupils’ personalised planning. Following a review of the literature, minimal studies were deduced that provide insight in this regard. Accordingly, a sample of findings from some larger national studies will be outlined, with specific focus on the themes of pupil voice and the SNA scheme. Firstly, research conducted by Rose et al. (2015, 80), as part of Project IRIS, highlighted positive pupil involvement in target-setting as part of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. In fact, across all school settings involved in the research, over half of pupils with SEN were part of their IEP planning (primary: 59%, N=110; post-primary: 59%, N=88; special schools: 63%, N=23). Although this finding is positive in the context of pupil voice, data remains unclear as to pupils’ level of involvement in