WHO CARES?

EXPLORING THE INEQUALITIES OF THE ROLE OF SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANTS AND POSITIONING OF CARE IN EDUCATION

MAIRÉAD MCHALE

Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the MEd in Adult & Community Education

Department of Adult and Community Education
Maynooth University

2018

Supervisor: Dr Bernie Grummell

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to a number of people who have helped and supported me in researching and writing this thesis.

Sincere thanks to the lecturers on the Masters in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University.

A special thank you to my thesis supervisor, Bernie Grummell, for your wonderful support and academic guidance over the past year. Bernie, your feedback and support was invaluable and sustained me through the final, often gruelling, weeks. You have truly cared for me throughout this process and I am enormously grateful.

The research participants who shared their experiences, feelings and personal stories deserve special recognition. Without your wholehearted input, I could not have completed this thesis. Thank you all very much.

Thank you to my wonderful sister, Edel, for being my 'critical friend' and for your love of that red pen! I appreciate your support and love throughout this year. Thanks also to my amazing niece, Rebecca, for your help and support in the final hours. To my brothers, Eoin and Eamonn for your support and sense of humour throughout. To my dear sister Aideen who is living in America but always available at the end of the phone for moral support. To my dad, Pat, for your love and worry about my emotional well-being. I love you all dearly.

The final and most heartfelt gratitude is reserved for my beautiful family. Without your patience, support, encouragement and love, I could not have undertaken this research project. So, thank you Padraic, for the amazing support you gave me to make this possible. I am so grateful to have you in my life. Thank you, my dear children, Lauren and Ryan, I love you with all my heart and soul. Mam is finally back, and the laptop is going into hibernation!

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the memory of my dear mother,

Betty Murphy

for the inspiration, she gives me every day.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the experiences of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in their working lives supporting children on the autism spectrum. The study problematizes the role of care in education in Ireland, analysing the disjunctions in differing conceptualisations of the SNA role between policy makers and SNA workers. A qualitative transformative methodology, using the lens of critical and feminist theory, gives voice to the SNA participants who illustrate the depth, complexity and multidimensionality of the role of special needs assisting in Ireland. Their stories draw attention to the deep inequalities present in care work in education, originating, for the most part, in the social and economic system which has become increasingly rationalised and cost-conscious under neoliberalism. The experiences of SNAs in their professional lives have broader class and gender implications which are explored throughout this research.

The key contribution of this thesis for adult education is its focus on SNAs as a marginalised and mis-recognised group in our education system. It highlights the importance and impact of affective equality and care in education which has implications for SNAs, the inclusion of the students that SNAs are supporting, and to learning when care and the wider affective and relational domains of life and knowledge are often neglected.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AS	Autism Spectrum
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DESc	Department of Education and Science
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychology Service
QQI	Qualifications and Quality Ireland
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENO	Special Education Needs Organiser
SESS	Special Education Support Service
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
TA	Teaching Assistant

CHAPTER ONE

Framing the issues

Introduction to the research study

This research project explores the experiences of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in their working lives. I have both worked as a SNA supporting children on the autism spectrum[1] (AS) and am currently facilitating SNA training courses. Hence, I have an extensive knowledge of and deep interest in the work of SNAs as a caring role that supports children in our schools. My work as a SNA and an educator has highlighted how SNAs themselves and policy makers appear to have two quite distinct conceptualisations of the SNA role. The low standing of SNAs in the education system reflect a broader lack of respect for caring in Irish Society, as reflected in the low wages and poor occupational security associated with the role. Care, and the crucial work that goes to sustaining it, is fundamental to human survival and well-being. However, the low status and high demands of care generate social distinctions between those who delegate and those who provide the care work that is deeply implicated in the oppression of women and in relations of social class (Lynch and Walsh, 2009). This study aims to explore these differences and offer alternative understandings of the role. It focuses on the qualitative experiences of six women who returned to the workforce after re-engaging with formal education through the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) in the adult and further education sector. Based on six in-depth interviews, this thesis considers the marginalisation and mis-recognition of this group of SNAs in their professional lives while highlighting the importance and impact of affective equality and care in education. It is important that the voices of these SNAs are heard so that their perspectives become central to our understanding of the complexity and multidimensionality of the practice of special needs assisting in education.

[1] There is much disagreement about the language used to describe autism. A recent study (Kenny et al., 2016, p. 442) suggests the most highly endorsed terms are 'autism' and 'on the autism spectrum', and to a lesser extent, 'autism spectrum disorder'. I personally do not approve of the term 'disorder' and, therefore, throughout this study, I will use the term children on the autism spectrum (AS).

This introductory chapter provides the context for this thesis, beginning with a discussion about my reflexive relationship with the study which incorporates the rationale for undertaking this research. It then presents the research question and discusses the shift in focus of this thesis. The chapter then moves to locate the research question within the theoretical literature and policy frameworks relating to SNAs in Ireland and their teaching assistant (TA) counterparts internationally. It finishes with a discussion about the context of special needs assisting in Ireland before presenting the thesis structure.

Reflexive relationship with the research

All research comes from a particular context involving particular motivations and it is bound by the researcher's self-awareness of their historical, social, cultural, and political contexts (Walsh, 2015). These contexts and motivations affect every step of the research process, including the research methodology chosen, how the field work is conducted and how the research findings are analysed (Walsh, 2015). Reflexivity is a learned skill that involves deep critical thinking and reflection to facilitate an awareness of the world around us and then uses that awareness to inform "our actions, communications and understandings" (Walsh, 2015, p. 159).

Through the practice of reflexivity, I became aware of the existence of the historical, social and cultural forces that have shaped my life. I have over 10 years of personal experience of working as a SNA. I made the decision to move to SNA work from the corporate sector when my children were toddlers. While I felt it would be rewarding work, it also made sense due to crippling childcare costs, and the extra domestic duties and time pressures that go hand in hand with the caring work of a busy mother. Interestingly, the question never arose as to whether my husband would change roles to accommodate our new circumstances, it was silently assumed that it was my duty.

Working as a SNA provided me with first-hand knowledge of the issues and challenges of working in this role. The first feeling that surfaced for me on moving from the corporate world to the care arena was the lack of respect and recognition that I, along with my SNA colleagues, were afforded. SNAs are poorly remunerated and receive no training from the DES to support them in caring for the most vulnerable children in our

society. I found myself attending courses in my own time and at my own expense to help me in my role because I believed the children I was supporting deserved better. I was working in a special school with children on the AS who were non-verbal, yet none of the SNAs in the school had any training in augmentative or alternative forms of communication systems to facilitate the communication development of these children. I became deeply angry about the lack of regard for the emotional well-being of the most vulnerable children in our society. It became clear to me that these children were not valued within the education system and my gut feeling told me that this was because they were not viewed as contributing members of society. In addition, I began to feel a deep awareness of being at the bottom of the hierarchal structure in the education system. The lack of respect and recognition is experienced in many ways, such as poor status and wages. I also felt deeply hurt that my voice was not valued. During my 10 years working as a SNA, I was never asked by researchers, DES inspectors, Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) or anyone else about my work with the children I was supporting. In fact, only the teachers and school principals were asked to explain how SNAs experience the role in practice. This triggered enduring feelings of humiliation, guilt, and self-reproach which ultimately led me to return to education to 'better myself'.

During my time working as a SNA I was in the privileged position to return to education on a part-time basis studying a Certificate in Psychology (level 7), BA Community Studies (level 8) and Higher Diploma in Further Education (level 8). After graduating with the teaching degree, I began teaching in the adult and further education sector. I also furthered my education by completing the Post Graduate Diploma in Special and Inclusive Education (level 9) and now the Master of Adult and Community Education (MEd) (level 9). But, this journey in lifelong learning is an extremely emotional and personal one that carries deep historical, social and cultural meanings which have ultimately guided me in researching and writing this thesis.

The long journey that has taken me from a teenager leaving school believing I did not hold the credentials to enrol in higher education, to the point where I am now writing up this MEd research, can be summed up as a journey from oppression to freedom. Before I became critically aware of the structural forces that had shaped my life. I held the belief that I was fully accountable for my previous underachievement in education. As a

youth, university was not encouraged within my family, social group or in school and I believed that higher education was for 'other', more privileged, groups. Returning to learning as a mature student has given me with the opportunity to question my whole thought process and to critically appraise the assumptions with which I had lived my life. I became critically aware of the oppressive forces that hindered my progression within formal education and I felt compelled to seek change.

In my current role as an adult educator, I facilitate the Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI) Special Needs Assisting module in a number of further education settings. As mentioned, I have previously worked as a SNA in special classes for children on the AS. This current master's thesis is motivated by the juxtaposition of teaching students about the role of the SNA in accordance with DES policy and the actual practice of working as a SNA on the ground. While the SNA role (DES, 2014) clearly states it is non-teaching in nature, with a primary function of supporting care needs of pupils with SEN, my experience of working as a SNA suggests that the role encompasses a broader remit. This research is further motivated by my anger at the policy rhetoric which puts forward the view that the SNA scheme "has been a key factor in ensuring the successful inclusion of children with special educational needs" (DES, 2014). Conversely, the implications of the lack of respect, recognition and precarious employment of SNAs contradicts the holistic concept of SNAs in educational inclusion. It is important, therefore, to understand the nature and complexities of the SNA role and the interplay between care and education in this work. It is against this backdrop that the research topic and question emerged.

Research Question

The study makes specific reference to the role of SNAs working in special classes for children on the AS. Through an analysis of the lived experiences of SNAs, this thesis develops a critical, egalitarian and feminist analysis of how the six SNA participants experience the role of caring for children on the AS. The respondents account for a way of thinking about the 'doing' of care work that highlights how inequalities are generated and reinforced through political, economic, cultural, and affective systems. This stands in contrast to the defined roles of SNAs in educational policy. In exploring this policy-

practice contradiction in relation to the care role of SNAs, the following research question emerged:

> How has the discursive gap between policy and practice informed the framing of the special needs assistant role?

While I am not using Bernstein's (2000) pedagogic theoretical framework in-depth in this thesis, his concept of the 'discursive gap' is most useful in explaining the intricacies of the policy practice divide. The relationship between policy production and its effects on practice is central to this study. In recognising the dominant values and rhetoric of those delegating the care work over those doing the care work, this research deliberates on the implications of policy on practice for SNAs in their work to support children on the AS. Bernstein (2000) argues that pedagogic discourse has its own logic, one that is different to that of the knowledge discourses produced in the field of practice: "Pedagogic discourse is constructed by a recontextualising principle which selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order" (Bernstein, 2000, p. 33). This is due to the 'discursive gap' which occurs when knowledge about a particular field, in this case SNA work, is produced outside of that context, for instance, by policy makers who are disconnected from the affective care work that SNAs perform on the ground.

A shifting research question

The focus of the research question shifted during the learning process on this taught MEd programme with Maynooth University (MU). During a previous academic year (2016-2017), I had carried out a small-scale research project on the role and training needs of SNAs in classes for children on the AS. This research (unpublished) was submitted in part fulfilment of the Professional Diploma in Special and Inclusive Education with Dublin City University (DCU). In my initial MU MEd research proposal, I wanted to revisit this topic to explore further some of the issues emerging from participants in this DCU study. For the initial MEd proposal, I sought to use a Participant Action Research (PAR) approach. Five of the original six DCU research participants willingly agreed to take part in the PAR project with MU in which I proposed to devise and deliver an autism studies module. However, a key shift in focus away from the PAR approach came about as I was nearing the end of the first semester.

The Advanced Gender Studies in Adult and Community Education module facilitated a deeper level of thinking and understanding about gender inequality. Overall, it was instrumental in influencing this research study as discussed below.

I have never felt comfortable speaking about gender inequality. It is scary to be a feminist because speaking out about women's rights normally evokes a backlash. Yet, my thinking shifted throughout the course of the module. I began to realise that if I want to continue to challenge the status quo, through my teaching as an adult educator, mother, wife, sister and so on, I must also critically explore and question the structural power inequalities that exist which legitimise dominant patriarchal structures and cultures in society. As mentioned, this study is motivated by the differing conceptualisations about the role of SNAs. I began to realise that before the issue of training and day to day concerns are resolved, there are deeper structural issues that need to be confronted. In particular, the impact of class and gender on the SNA's career paths and their overall position in the education system. Thus, this study shifted its focus from a PAR project to a critical, egalitarian and feminist analysis of how these six SNA participants experience the role of caring for children on the AS.

Five of the participants from the previous DCU study agreed to be interviewed for the purpose of my new study and they consented to their previous interview data being used. I initially had not considered using this material because it voiced the SNA experiences about their day to day role and training needs (which diverges from the revised focus of the MEd study). Nevertheless, during the writing and reflective process of the second phase of interviews completed with five of these participants, I realised that the significance the SNAs give to their daily roles is important because these meanings expose how the broader issues impact on their day to day working lives. Therefore, the original data from the DCU interviews about their roles pertaining to the care, educational and behaviour remit along with their training needs are weaved into the findings. In addition, part one of the analysis chapter represents my interpretations of how they experience the day to day role and their training needs. While the interview transcripts are used from the original DCU study (with participants' consent), they have been completely re-analysed along with the more recent interviews in light of the focus of this MEd research.

The following sections explain the development of the SNA scheme and the policy definition relating to SNAs in Ireland and their counterparts internationally. Principally, I have drawn on research about policy to set the context for the SNA role. First, however, it is important to understand that the SNA scheme materialised as a response to growing concerns about parallel education for children with SENs nationally and internationally (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

Considering the dearth of research focused on the role of support staff in assisting pupils on the AS, this chapter largely addresses the role of SNAs in supporting pupils with SENs in general.

Inclusive education

The policy rhetoric puts forward the view that the SNA scheme "has been a key factor in ensuring the successful inclusion of children with special educational needs" (DES, 2014). However, as argued by Florian (2014, p. 286), "Inclusive education has been criticised as promising more than it delivers". It is, therefore, important to understand what is meant by inclusion and the role SNAs play to its advancement in our schools.

Inclusive education has gained significant impetus in recent years in Ireland and internationally. The move towards inclusion is rooted in the worldwide civil rights movements of the 1960s, which began to question discrimination at every level, including discriminating against people with disabilities. International policies such as The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) grounded the importance of developing a framework for inclusive education based on fundamental human rights. The rights-based social model opposed the medical model of disability, which had emphasised the problems and deficits as being located within the person rather than from societal barriers (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007).

In Ireland, a review of special education provision by the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) reported in favour of "…as much integration as is appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as is necessary" (Department of Education and Science (DESc), 1993, p. 22). The subsequent 'White Paper on Education: Charting our Education Future' (DESc, 1995) and the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) established

the constitutional right to an appropriate education for all children, including children with disabilities and other special educational needs. A considerable body of legislation ensued, including: The Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland, 2000); The Education (Welfare) Act (Government of Ireland, 2000); The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland, 2004); The Disability Act (Government of Ireland, 2005). Another notable development in the inclusion agenda was the increase in the number of resource teachers and the introduction of the Special Needs Assistant scheme in 1998 (DESc, 1998).

The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) is said to make a key contribution to the promotion of inclusive education. It requires that "a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment" unless it is not in the best interest of the child or the other children in the child's classroom (p.7). Furthermore, it certified The National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) development of the *Inclusive Education Framework (*NCSE, 2011). The framework provides guidance to schools asking them "to reflect critically and evaluate how inclusive values are promoted in classrooms, staffrooms, and school yards and in interactions with all members of the school community" (NCSE, 2011, p. 11).

However, despite the plethora of national and international policies and legislations, the inclusion agenda is far from straightforward. There are many barriers, challenges and tensions involved in making inclusive education a reality.

Barriers to inclusive education

Education is primarily seen as a social good to which every person is entitled to as a human right. Most people share the understanding that "… without education their world would be a poorer place, economically but also intellectually, culturally, socially and even morally" (Schuller, 2004, p. 3). Yet, if some groups are unable to access education on equal terms with others, it is evident that inequality and exclusion are defining features of the educational system in Ireland (Clancy 2007; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007; Lynch, 1999). One of the most striking reasons for this rests in the fact that there is a neglect for care in education (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009; Noddings, 2002, 2003). Central to human development and flourishing is the development of affective caring relationships (Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009). Despite this, the

importance of caring is largely absent in Irish political policy discourses primarily because love and care are considered private rather than public matters (Lynch et al., 2009; Lynch & Lyons, 2009a).

There are serious issues for special education policy and practice in terms of the general equality and participation context of education (Clancy (2007; Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). In Western society, neoliberal political discourse promotes the meritocratic idea that positive outcomes occur when individuals work hard in formal education to enhance their position in the employment market (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009; Grummell, 2017). This individual meritocracy focus, as Griffin and Shevlin (2007) affirm, is key as "education levels have a major influence on employment prospects, income and participation in society…" (p. 21). Pupils with special educational needs are less likely to progress, in comparison with their peers, to higher education and on to obtain well-paid jobs (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). The emphasis on academic achievement and the competition between schools in the 'points race' also poses a serious challenge to the inclusion agenda. The inclusion of children with learning difficulties in mainstream classes is perceived by some as conflicting with the public pressures on teachers and schools to achieve high examination results (Lindsay, 2007; Daly, 2008). Consequently, educationally disadvantaged people, including those with disabilities, are at a considerably higher risk of poverty and social isolation (Gannon and Nolan 2004, cited in Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). Inequality becomes normalised and accepted as inevitable when schools cultivate 'justifiable' inequality through the "… meritocratic manner by which they reward and promote students, and allocate them to distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy" (Bowles and Gintis, 2011, p.11). Through a 'hidden curriculum', the educational system works to maintain the status quo and "reinforces images of what is culturally valuable in a given society" (Lynch, 1999, p. 17).

The findings of this study reveal the complexities, as well as the classed and gendered nature of these inequalities which have major implications for SNAs in terms of low status and recognition, lack of training, poor remuneration, and precarious employment. This impacts the students these SNAs are supporting because inclusion is not achievable if those who are tasked with including them are deeply disrespected and deprived of

"human goods, including an adequate livelihood and care itself" (Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009, p. 1).

More generally this also implicates learning and knowledge. Care and the wider affective and relational domains of life are neglected over logical-mathematical and linguistic capabilities; the favoured competences to serve the occupational market place (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009). This results in a focus on knowledge and learning styles which favour logical-mathematical and linguistic competencies rather than more holistic notions of knowledge and learning which encompass relational and emotional capacities (Walker, 2006).

The above section has outlined some of the major barriers to inclusive education and the consequences for students with special educational needs, those supporting them, as well as the nature of learning and knowledge. The next section locates the SNA role in the theoretical literature relating to the SNA role in Ireland, and their teaching assistant (TA) counterparts internationally, in supporting children on the AS. This provides a background context to understand the current framing of the role of SNA in Irish education.

Autism spectrum disorder and SNA support

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) cites Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a complex developmental disability manifesting in deficits in social communication, social interaction and restricted behaviours and interests (APA, 2013). The complex nature of ASD and the associated difficulties across a broad spectrum, ranging from mild to severe, can result in a significant barrier to learning and inclusion (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). Recognising the issues relating to traditional pedagogical practices, Griffin and Shevlin suggest "specialist strategies" for specific types of SEN, including ASD (2007, p. 204).

Growing numbers of pupils with a diagnosis of ASD are being educated in special classes within mainstream schools and in special schools (NCSE, 2015; 2016). Current research data on students with a diagnosis of ASD in Ireland indicate a prevalence rate of 1.55 per cent of school-aged children, which is higher than the international agreed

prevalence rate of 1% (NCSE, 2015). In the 2014/2015 school year, there were 13,873 children on the AS attending schools in Ireland. Significant resources are provided to support these students in special classes and special schools, including an increased ratio of support in every special ASD class, with one teacher and a minimum of two SNAs supporting a maximum of six pupils (NCSE, 2016).

In line with the growing inclusive educational provision for children on the AS and other SENs, both nationally and internationally, increased levels of support staff are being employed to support them (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown & Webster, 2009b; Rispoli et al., 2011; Symes & Humphrey, 2011a; 2011b; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Sharma & Salend, 2016). In Ireland, SNA support has increased from 293 SNAs in 1998 (Irish Government Economic & Evaluation Service (IGEES), 2016) to 13,969 posts by December 2017 (NCSE, 2018). Despite this dramatic rise in numbers, the role and qualification requirements of SNAs has remained largely unchanged (Keating & O'Connor, 2012).

Recent research points to the tensions that exist between the policy regarding the role of support staff assisting children with SEN and the practice on the ground (Blatchford et al., 2009b; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; NCSE, 2018). In Ireland, policy documents specify the role of the SNA as non-teaching in nature and sanctioned to provide for the care needs for pupils with a diagnosed disability (DESc, 2002; DES, 2014). The most recent circular on the SNA scheme (DES, 2014) sets out nine primary care needs which might require SNA support and lists six secondary SNA associated tasks (Appendix A). However, a Value for Money Review of Expenditure on the SNA Scheme (VfMR) found, that SNAs were being used, contrary to the intended purpose of the scheme, for behavioural and pedagogical duties (DES, 2011). It highlighted that SNAs were sometimes being used to manage pupil behaviour as distinct from students receiving appropriate positive and preventative interventions (DES, 2011). This is inconsistent with policy guidelines which state that SNA behaviour-related duties should only be considered if behaviour management strategies have been unsuccessful (DES, 2014). Furthermore, in accordance with policy, teachers have sole responsibility for pupils' overall behavioural support and schools must implement appropriate supportive measures as outlined in the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

Continuum of Support guidelines and the DES circular on the SNA scheme (NEPS, 2007; DES, 2014).

Several research articles query the care only role, as stipulated by the DES, and the actual practice on the ground (DES, 2011; Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Government of Ireland, 2016; NCSE, 2018). The Oireachtas Report (Government of Ireland, 2016) and a recent review of the SNA scheme (NCSE, 2016) confirmed that a broader range of duties were being carried out but varied at individual school level. Keating and O'Connor's (2012) study found that 57% of the principals and 47% of the SNA respondents acknowledged that the role of the SNA extends well beyond care duties encompassing a range of behaviour management and pedagogical activities (2012, p. 534). The study raises questions about the effectiveness of unqualified support staff in carrying out educational activities, particularly if these pupils are not afforded an appropriate inclusive education, as proposed in the EPSEN Act (2004), in terms of their right to access the curriculum through "skilled, differentiated teaching" (Keating & O'Connor, 2012, p. 538). Furthermore, the overall findings of their study suggest that the role of the SNA is inconsistent with the role set out in DES (2014) policy and presents a compelling case to reconsider the current description of the post.

A recent Irish study investigating the training needs of SNAs in ten counties reported that the role of the SNA was predominantly to support the care needs of students with SENs (Kerins, Casserly, Deacy, Harvey, McDonagh & Tiernan, 2015). This finding is consistent with the role in accordance with the SNA scheme (DES, 2014). However, the study also identified many teaching duties performed by SNAs across the primary, post-primary and special school sectors, summarised as:

- Encouraging and helping students to stay on task [with academic work]
- Reporting students' [academic] progress to the teacher
- Changing worksheets/materials for students
- Developing Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) with teacher and on their own
- Writing for students
- Planning work for students to do in class
- Correcting students' work
- Teaching individual and small groups of students with SEN
- Teaching whole class to provide cover for teacher absence.

(Kerins et al., 2015, p.18)

Likewise, a comprehensive analysis of international research, conducted in 11 countries, suggests that TAs are performing duties far beyond their remit (Sharma and Salend, 2016). The study reports an overall mismatch between the parameters of the role and responsibilities of TAs and the pedagogical roles they perform (2016). It further indicates that the inclusion of students with SENs may be undermined due to unclear professional TA roles and because of limited training for TAs and teachers. These issues may facilitate support staff in adopting considerable teaching roles and "ineffective and separate instruction that inadvertently undermine the inclusion, learning, socialization and independence of students with disabilities…" (Sharma & Salend, p. 118). They conclude that if TAs continue to hold pedagogical roles, they must receive adequate training to obtain the necessary skills to perform the role effectively (2016).

The topic of training

Good practice guidelines published in the UK proposed that all professionals working with people on the AS need to update their skills due to ongoing developments and innovative approaches (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2002). In 2001, The Irish Report of the Task Force on Autism recommended that SNAs receive adequate training (DES, 2001). Fourteen years on, policy advice on supporting students with ASD in schools was still advocating for the DES to develop a training programme for SNAs (NCSE, 2015).

The topic of SNA training is important because SNAs are often involved in the provision of pedagogical, behavioural and therapeutic support to pupils with SENs (Government of Ireland, 2016; NCSE, 2018). But, the increasing use of support staff to assist children on the AS is worrying because of their inadequate training and experience (Glashan et al., as cited in Symes and Humphries, 2011a; Rispoli et al., 2011). The VfMR raised concerns about SNAs taking on educational duties stressing that the pedagogical skills necessary to assist children in accessing the curriculum should only fall under the remit of qualified teachers (DES, 2011). However, Moran (as cited in Travers et al., 2010) reveals that teachers often feel ill prepared to teach children with SEN. Assuming primary responsibility for the teaching and learning of pupils with SENs is challenging, particularly for teachers who have little special and inclusive education training. Travers et al.'s (2010) study reported on insufficient

teacher education and expertise in SEN and draw attention to teachers' lack of confidence and competence in teaching students with "behaviour difficulties and more complex intellectual disabilities" (p. 37). Pupils on the AS, for example, "may experience the dynamics of teaching and learning quite differently to other learners" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 206). Thus, teachers may draw on SNA's experience to assist them with educational and behavioural duties.

Symes and Humphrey (2011b) point out that research on the effectiveness of support staff tends to focus on factors relating to support staff themselves while disregarding wider issues in schools. They cite the lack of teacher ASD awareness as an encumbering factor to the role of TAs in supporting children on the AS. If the needs of the children are unmet due to a lack of understanding about the correct teaching methods and appropriate use of resources to help them, this can hamper TAs in their role (Symes and Humphrey, 2011b). They highlight the need for TA expertise to be respected, utilised and shared in-house among support and teaching staff to ensure effective support for children on the AS (2011b). Farrell, Alborz, Howes and Pearson (2010) further argue that both support and teaching staff can have a positive impact on the academic progress of students if they are properly trained and supported to better collaborate with each other. Given that pupils with SENs are "more likely to be given extra support in schools it is vital that this support is well organised, prepared and effective" (Blatchford et al., 2009b, p. 140).

Research by Giangreco, Edelman, Broer and Doyle (2001), as cited in Rispoli et al., 2011) demonstrated that properly trained support staff can have a positive bearing on intervention programmes for these pupils. Rispoli et al.'s (2011) review of training paraprofessionals to implement interventions for people with a diagnosis of ASD reported positive outcomes in 92% of the 12 studies. While limited information was known about their educational backgrounds, the paraprofessional's prior experience of working with people on the AS ranged from no experience to 17 years of experience. They were trained to implement the following evidence-based interventions: Social Stories, Prompting, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Discrete Trial Training (DTT), Pivotal Response Training (PRT) Incidental Teaching, and Activity Schedules. It concluded that appropriate training for support staff consisting of "written

and verbal explanations, modelling, video demonstrations, role-playing or feedback" may be effective in helping them to implement interventions accurately (2011).

The context of special needs assisting in Ireland

Many reports have validated the positive contribution and value of the SNA workers in supporting children with SENs (DES, 2011; Government of Ireland, 2016; NCSE, 2015, 2016, 2018). However, in practice, SNA workers in Ireland have been afforded little professional status and with a starting salary of €23,122 or €13.85 per hour (DES, 2017b), they are poorly remunerated for their work. Furthermore, there is clear ambiguity surrounding the SNA scheme and a marked mismatch between the required qualifications and the training demands of the role. The review of international literature on best practice for pupils on the AS concluded that practitioners need "specialist knowledge" and "mandatory training" to understand the specific needs of pupils with ASD (NCSE, 2009, pp. 127-8). Nevertheless, intense frustrations are being expressed by whole school communities about the lack of initial training and CPD for SNAs (NCSE, 2015). The NCSE's (2015) evaluation of education provision for pupils on the AS highlights the importance of providing "appropriate training" for SNAs working with pupils on the AS (p. 68). However, it suggested that the DES should arrange for a "generic training programme" to address the core skills required to work as a SNA in accordance with the care role (NCSE, 2015, p. 75). Likewise, the recent NCSE (2018) review of the SNA scheme proposes the implementation of a national training programme (preferably online) to achieve professionalisation of the role and provide the:

> requisite skills to assist schools and teachers to meet students' care needs arising from significant medical, physical, emotional/behavioural, sensory/communication and from other significant difficulties with engaging in learning". (NCSE, 2018, p. 55)

The NCSE (2018) suggest that a relevant level 5 relevant qualification should be the minimum future entry level requirement for all newly appointed SNAs, reflecting what has been prerequisite in schools for some time. Currently, the minimum entry level qualification is a Junior Certificate or a level three QQI qualification in any subject. Furthermore, the CPD training in special and inclusive education and evidence-based approaches offered to teachers is not extended to SNAs. This is indicative of the lack of

respect and recognition for care work in education in Irish society (Lynch and Walsh, 2009)

Nonetheless, in the absence of official statistics (because they are not collected), anecdotal figures from the field suggest an increasing number of women undertaking the QQI level five or six SNA qualification to re-engage in the workforce. I have witnessed a high demand for QQI SNA courses in my work as an adult educator facilitating these programmes, particularly SNA and other courses in the caring domain that are offered through second-chance education initiatives. In my capacity as an adult educator, I facilitate the QQI level 5 SNA course under the BTEI programme. This programme falls under the remit of adult and further education. The BTEI provides part-time courses for students over the age of 16 who have not completed a Leaving Certificate or equivalent qualification. The overall aim of the BTEI is:

> To increase the participation of young people and adults with less than upper second level education in a range of part-time accredited learning opportunities leading to awards on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to facilitate their access, transfer and progression to other education or employment pathways. (DES, 2012, p. 3)

In the current changing political, economic and cultural context in Irish Education, influenced by the rise of neoliberalism, the BTEI programme:

> enables providers to address the skills needs of unemployed people, in particular the priority groups identified in the Government's activation agenda, and to develop part-time education and training opportunities for low skilled people in employment to gain qualifications. (DES, 2012, p. 3)

This view of education suggests that its primary function is to serve the employment market rather than the broader function of education as proposed in The White Paper on Adult Education: 'Learning for Life' (DESc, 2000). These are: Consciousness Raising, Citizenship, Cohesion, Competitiveness, Cultural Development, and Community Building (p.12). Similar to primary and secondary education, discourses and policies of Western rationality are evident in adult education programmes in their failure to recognise the broader value of education and learning. They ignore "the political and ideological context of education, failing to problematize the interdependent, emotional and relational qualities that are inherent in learning" (Grummell, 2007, p. 3142).

The recent NCSE (2018) SNA review was commissioned by the DES in light of their aim "to make the Irish Education and Training service the best in Europe by 2026" (NCSE, 2018, p. 10). To achieve this goal, it is recognised that "all students must be equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to achieve their individual potential and to participate fully in society and the economy" (p. 10). The terms of reference pertaining to the SNA review tasked the NCSE to:

> Identify and recommend the most appropriate form of support options to provide better outcomes for students with special educational needs who have additional care needs, having regard to the significant amount of State investment in this area. (p. 10)

The terms of reference are in keeping with the increasing policy demands of education to service the economy. Discourses like this are wholly inconsistent with DES guidelines surrounding inclusion in schools which states that "meaningful inclusion implies that all pupils are taught in stimulating and supportive classroom environments where they are respected and valued" (DES, 2017, as cited in NCSE, 2018, p. viii).

Thesis structure

This research study aims to problematize the role of care in education in Ireland, deconstructing the seemingly alternative conceptualisations of the SNA role between policy makers and SNA workers. This first chapter has highlighted the depth, complexity and multidimensionality of the role of SNAs in Ireland. It draws attention to the deep inequalities present in care work, originating in part, in the economic system which has become increasingly rationalised and cost-conscious under neoliberalism. As shown, SNAs are not afforded respect, recognition and educational opportunities to enhance the inclusion and overall well-being of students with SENs. The low status of SNAs in the education system reflect the deep disrespect for caring in Irish Society. As becomes evident in later chapters of this thesis, class and gendered inequalities in care work become significant for SNAs and their role in education.

Chapter two provides the theoretical framework underpinning this entire research study. Motivated by concern at the degree of inequality within care in education, this thesis has been undertaken using the lens of critical and feminist theory. In examining the salience of care and love as important work that receives little political attention in education and

the class and gender inequalities surrounding the doing of care work, the thesis draws on the work of prominent critical and feminist theorists.

Chapter three details the research methodology used and provides a rationale for each of the research decisions made within this thesis. Within a transformative theoretical approach, I present a rationale for adopting the qualitative research approach and the methods used to aid the understanding of the nature and complexities of the SNA profession.

Chapter four presents the findings from the series of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with six SNA workers in 2016/17 and 2017/18. The conversations unearthed rich meanings about how the SNAs view the work they do and the care they receive in doing it.

Chapter five presents an overall analysis of the findings. It synthesises the data from the interviews, identifying key themes between the findings and the policy and theoretical literature.

Chapter six summarises and discusses the main findings of the research. It emphasises the key contribution of this thesis for adult education which is its focus on SNAs as a marginalised and mis-recognised group in our education system, and in doing this highlights the importance and impact of affective equality and care in education. It concludes with my overall reflection of the research process.

CHAPTER TWO

The classed and gendered politics of caring

> Everywhere we learn that love is important, and yet we are bombarded by its failure. In the realm of the political, among the religious, in our families, and in our romantic lives, we see little indication that love informs decisions, strengthens our understanding of community, or keeps us together. This bleak picture in no way alters the nature of our longing. We still hope that love will prevail. We still believe in love's promise.
>
> (bell hooks, 2000, p. xxvii)

Introduction

hooks (2000) reminds us that the practice of love is conspicuously absent in public discourse and policy. Yet, love is one of the fundamental ingredients necessary for the development of caring relationships which are central to education and human flourishing (hooks, 2000; Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009). This chapter considers the salience of care and love as important work that receives little political attention in education. The main point of this chapter is to provide a sense of how and why care work holds little recognition in the public sphere despite the importance of care and love for human survival and development. It deliberates on how the care work of SNAs, and the class and gender inequalities surrounding this role, may impact on those being cared for. But, the main focus of this chapter is to consider the inequalities faced by those doing the care work.

Inequality in care and education

Most of us go about our daily lives caught up in our family and work commitments. We may not always associate the drudgeries of poor working conditions or lack of quality personal or family time with broader political, social and cultural forces. Even those who do recognise the structural forces that negatively influence their lives, often feel there is little that can be done to improve their situations (Andersen & Collins, 2004).

There are deep inequalities in the doing of care work (Lynch, 2007; Lynch & Lyons, 2008). Women, and in particular working-class women, do not enter a 'level playing field' with men in the labour market (Connell, 2002, Lynch & Lyons, 2008; Skeggs, 1997). Women disproportionately bear the burden of care work, both paid and unpaid, under the cultural assumption that it is their moral imperative to do so (O'Brien, 2005). Historically, there has always been deep structural inequalities associated with care work in terms of class, gender and family status. Women are over-represented in paid and unpaid care and domestic work. Those who are in paid employment are paid less than men and are under-represented in public decision making (Connell, 2002). In fact:

> The whole economic sphere is culturally defined as men's world (regardless of the presence of women in it), while domestic life is defined as women's world (regardless of the presence of men in it). (Connell, 2002, p. 61)

In Ireland, 98% of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities are performed by women and women who are in paid employment are over-represented in the care sector (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2017). Women are also significantly under-represented in decision-making structures in Ireland with less than a quarter in Government office (CSO, 2017).

Although the gendered meanings assigned to caring roles appear to play a key role in women's attraction to care work, class intersects with gender to produce complicated patterns of affective inequality (Lynch & Lyons, 2009c). People working in low-status jobs, such as SNAs, who are already economically disadvantaged, are made more vulnerable by the 'care-less' view of the citizen in public policy decision making which has become increasingly cost-conscious. The resulting outcome is poor working conditions and precarious employment for those working in caring roles (Lynch & Lyons, 2009c).

Education is a powerful ideological institution that exercises considerable control over how we think about class and gender relations and the legitimising of women's subordinate position in Irish society (Lynch & Lyons, 2008). The promotion of Cartesian rationalism and Western scientific knowledge (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009; Grummell, 2017) has been instrumental in fostering the idea of the 'rational' autonomous model citizen, one who disregards the importance of the relational caring being (Noddings, 2002; 2003). Neoliberal discourses foster the idea of

equality of opportunity in education, one that frames and drives individuals to narrowly pursue educational attainment to enhance employability (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009; Grummell, 2017). This narrow focus ignores the broader function of education for the development of "critical consciousness, building our capacities to be productive in all aspects of life – socially, emotionally, aesthetically, politically, culturally and economically" (Grummell, 2017, p. 3142).

The elevation of rationality and reason in education undermines the fact that people are deeply interdependent, emotional and relational beings (Gilligan, 1995; Grummell, 2017; Lynch, 2007; Lynch & Lyons, 2008; Lynch & Walsh, 2009; Noddings, 2003). Education continues to draw on Piagetan thinking placing primacy on linguistic and mathematical reasoning abilities to service the employment market (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009). The emphasis on these acumens has elevated them as the only types of intelligences "that have typically been valued in school" and society as a whole (Gardner, 1999, p. 41).

Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition that social, emotional and ethical competencies are essential for participation in democracy and for overall well-being. (Cohen, 2006). These skills are also crucial for humans to develop their capacities for love, care and solidarity (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009; Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009). Noddings (2002) argues that it is feeling rather than reason that motivates us in caring for others. She advocates for an "ethic of care", one that is "relational-centered rather than agent-centered" (p. 2). Yet, this relational view is not inherent in education because neoliberal policies and Western tradition put great emphasis on individualism. Furthermore, neoliberal political policies that propose a meritocratic vision of 'equality of opportunity' is wholly problematic if some groups are unable to access economic, social, and cultural capital on equal terms with others.

The influence of liberal thinking on Western political decision making is seen in discourses of individualism and market competitiveness in public policy. Citizenship is defined by the neoliberal market-led system that "...promotes a certain conception of human beings as self-interested, calculating and individualistic" (Finnegan, 2008, p. 58). Harvey (2005) is critical of the way in which neoliberalism promotes the ideal concepts of "human dignity and individual freedom" as fundamentally important to civilisation and how these concepts have become "so embedded in common sense as to

be taken for granted and not open to question" (p. 5). In neoliberalism, the world is seen as an efficient market-place in which 'inferior' goods and people are 'naturally' eliminated through 'free' competition (Harvey, 2005). It assumes that people are detached from social conditions and contexts and, therefore, social issues such as class inequalities are seen as personal problems for which each individual is responsible (Harvey, 2005). Nonetheless, it is a contested view:

> The politics of neo-liberalism needs to be understood as a powerful and complex form of cultural hegemony rather than simply as economic policy– that is a set of strategies, ideas and models that have been used to secure consent for the increasingly uneven distribution of power and wealth across the globe.
>
> (Finnegan, 2008, p. 58)

The complex way in which inequalities are embedded in care relations has considerable implications for the positioning of care in education for students, particularly students with SENs. Moreover, there are considerable implications for the SNAs at the centre of this research in terms of their care roles and how they are positioned in the educational system.

The impact of care inequalities on students with special educational needs

As discussed in chapter one, inclusion is a key policy objective across the world. In Ireland, a considerable body of legislation and the Inclusive Education Framework provides guidance to schools to help them ensure inclusive practices and values are promoted (NCSE, 2011, p. 11). The policy rhetoric puts forward the view that the SNA scheme "has been a key factor in ensuring the successful inclusion of children with special educational needs" (DES, 2014). Yet, in practice, a system that persistently favours and promotes the concept of the model rational individual over the relational caring being is not conducive to inclusive practices. Models proposed in special education are largely behavioural and evidence-based and the over-emphasis on "measurement, surveillance, control and regulation" (Lynch, Grummell & Devine, 2012, p.199), does not take account of the specific needs of children on the AS.

Educationally disadvantaged people, including those with disabilities, are at a considerably higher risk of poverty and social isolation (Gannon and Nolan 2004, cited in Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). Inequality becomes normalised and accepted as inevitable when schools cultivate 'justifiable' inequality through the "… meritocratic

manner by which they reward and promote students, and allocate them to distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy" (Bowles and Gintis, 2011, p.11). Through a 'hidden curriculum', the educational system works to maintain the status quo and "reinforces images of what is culturally valuable in a given society" (Lynch, 1999, p. 17).

Educational inclusion requires a radical societal overhaul of the system to recognise the fundamental importance of caring for human development and flourishing (Nussbaum, 1995). In traditional theories of justice, equality and inclusion, personal dignity is closely related to independence (Kittay, 2011). In this way, care is seen as offering people a way to achieve the greatest possible autonomy, but it fails to take account of the importance of human dependency (Kittay, 2011). Kittay argues for a vision of equality that recognises that dependency is a typical condition of human life:

> Instead of seeing assistance as a limitation, we consider it to be a resource at the basis of a vision of society that is able to account for inevitable dependency relationships between "unequals" ensuring a fulfilling life both for the carer and the cared for. (2011, p. 49)

The impact of care inequalities on SNAs

SNAs are said to play a key role in the inclusion of children on the AS and with other SENs. However, the lack of respect and recognition for their care work is another encumbering factor to the inclusion agenda. Discourses in circulars and documents surrounding the SNAs scheme consistently insists that the role is a 'care only', one simply meaning that SNAs 'look-after' or 'care-about' the self-care and physical needs of the children. Obviously, this is important work and SNAs must 'care-about' the children they are supporting to ensure their care and physical needs are met. However, Nodding (2002) distinguishes between the terms "caring-about" which occurs at a somewhat superficial level and "caring-for" which is central to the development of caring relations.

Lynch and Walsh (2009) argue that "primary care relations are not sustainable over time without love labour; that the realisation of love, as opposed to the declaration of love, requires work" (p. 35). However, the major implications of neoliberal policies for love labouring in terms of low status and high demands, reflect the deep disrespect for caring

in society and the highly classed and gendered nature of care work (Lynch & Walsh, 2009).

The relevance of class inequality for the SNA role

In a class-divided society like Ireland, caring is considered "low status work generally undertaken by low status people" (Lynch and Walsh, 2009, p.35). Deep inequalities in the doing of care work are reflective of the inequalities produced within and through the social systems of a society (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009). As argued by Wright (2012, p. 2) "human suffering" results from social institutions and structures that impose inequalities on people.

As mentioned above, Western political discourses promote the idea of the individualism. Some argue that class position can be explained in terms of the personal merits of the individual using rational choice theories, maintaining that an equal society would lack incentives for people to work to the best of their abilities (Davis & Moore, 1966, as cited in Munck, 2007). This functionalist view of inequality encourages the idea of social mobility and the responsibility on individuals to improve their employability and lives (Andersen & Collins, 2004; Grummell, 2007). Neoliberalism has permeated all aspects of economic, political and social society and many have accepted this ideology believing there is, as Margaret Thatcher put it, "no alternative" (Harvey, 2005, p.40).

Conversely, Karl Marx (1818-1883) argued for an alternative affirming that capitalist economic structures only benefit the already privileged groups in society. Care workers, like SNAs, are exploited and persistently remain over-represented in low-paid and precarious work (Davaki, 2016). The relationship between class and employment is well known. According to research carried out by Scott (2002, cited in Crompton, 2010, p.10), occupational class situations are important "causal components" in the lives of their members. Crompton (2010, p. 22) emphasises how the structure and organisation of employment contribute to our understanding of class:

> The organisation of capitalist production generates a structure of employment in which material rewards, as well as other desirables such as autonomy, esteem and capacities for self-expression are unequally distributed. Within this structure, groupings that we may describe as 'classes' may be identified,

> corresponding broadly to their roles in the processes of production (including the production of services), distribution and exchange.

Power differences are fundamental to class and are linked to organisational hierarchies (Baker, et al., 2009). The fact that SNAs occupy positions of low status and low income mean that they lack the power to occupy positions that may influence change.

Marx identified this type of domination and exploitation of labour as key to understanding social inequality, arguing that people are divided against each other primarily in terms of their social class; "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels, 2001, p. 8). Marx was deeply pessimistic about capitalism contending that those who hold economic hegemony - the ruling class – shape every aspect of thought and perception of the subject class – the oppressed - leading them into a state of 'false consciousness' and an acceptance of an 'ideology' that is taken for granted as real and true. The oppressed ultimately become 'alienated' from their work and social life (Crotty, 1998). However, Marx believed that they would eventually revolt against this inhumanity stating that the working class (proletariat) "can and must emancipate itself" (Marx, 1961, p. 237). Thus, Marx took an activist view of philosophy believing that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, the point is to change it" (p.84). His starting point for social action is based on the reality that:

> We begin with real, active men, and from their real-life process show the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process … Life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life. (Marx, 1961, p. 90)

The shortcomings in Marx's economic and materialistic analysis of class is well established. While not dismissing the enormous contribution of Marx's theory of class relations, others (for example, Bourdieu, 1984; Weber, 1978; Willis, 1977; Wright, 1985) have expanded on his analysis pointing to broader definitions of power and how it is socially and culturally constructed. While this thesis is more concerned with the intersection of class and gender, I think Bourdieu's theories are relevant to this study in terms of our understanding of social class positions as outlined below.

Class and participation in the caring 'field'

Bourdieu, while heavily informed by Marxist ideas, argues that society should not just be analysed simply in terms of class conflict. He contends that "there is a strong correlation between social positions and the dispositions of the agents who occupy them" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 10). He uses the analogy of a field to explain how individuals (agents) are positioned in a given society explaining it as "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). It is a social arena within which people manoeuvre and develop a "game" plan using a "species of capital … both as a weapon and as a stake of struggle" (p. 98). The structure of the field:

> … undergirds and guides the strategies whereby the occupants of these positions seek, individually or collectively, to safeguard or improve their position and to impose the principle of hierarchization most favourable to their own products. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 101)

The acquisition of capital, whether economic, social, or cultural, is directly related to the power individuals hold within the given field (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). Nevertheless, it is cultural capital that Bourdieu speaks of prolifically and which is most relevant for this thesis. Cultural capital relates to the knowledge, skills, tastes, perceptions of beauty, and education qualifications that a person holds, which affords them a higher status in society. Those who accumulate cultural capital or social assets, such as educational attainment, can utilise it in the cultural market place to improve their social mobility (Ritzer, 2003). Accordingly, an individual's social class will impact significantly on their level of cultural capital and their positions in the occupational hierarchy of care work. Bourdieu's theoretical approach gives insight into how those from what is categorised as lower classed groups may be positioned and motivated to pursue work in the care professions. His work enriches our understanding of how class stratification occurs and why the middle-classes can operate so powerfully as a 'class for themselves' in the education sphere (Skeggs, 2004). Yet, while the analysis of capital is central to his understanding of social space, he, like other leading male theorists, pays little attention to the relationship between gender and capital (Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Thorpe, 2009) which is discussed later.

As shown above, theorists highlight how inequality is a pervasive fact in our society with social class differences playing a key role in its shaping. Oppressed people internalise the belief of 'equality of opportunity' and individual freedom. This is central to the ideology of oppression which is outlined in the highly inflectional work of Paulo Freire (1996).

Critical Pedagogy: Coming into Consciousness

Although Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire's (1921-1997) theories are primarily associated with critical pedagogy, his ideas give great insight to the fact that human existence can only be truly understood when "historically positioned within its economic, political and cultural contexts" (Fitzsimons, 2015). Moreover, his ideas help us to understand how oppression operates and why marginalised workers, like SNAs, may consider themselves unable to do anything to improve their circumstances.

Like Marx, Freire was deeply concerned with highlighting the structures that oppress and marginalise some groups in society. He viewed oppression as the result of specific conditions that cannot simply be removed by virtue of consciousness. The oppressed must move beyond the discovery of their dehumanisation to ensure this realization becomes "… the motivating force for liberating action … in the struggle to free themselves" (1996, p. 31). Freire believed that oppressed people are treated as 'objects' which denies them their humanity asserting that to become fully human "… men must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation" (1996, p. 29). This concept termed 'conscientização' - to develop consciousness - is most significant in terms of understanding Freire's philosophical assumptions. It refers to "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (1996, p. 17). Freire traces the development of consciousness as it transcends from a person's naïve "fatalistic perception of their situation" to a state of critical awareness about their existence in the world (1996, p. 66).

People often do not perceive the nature of their oppression; they adapt and accept it as their reality. Freire rejected the 'manipulative' forms of religion and pedagogy of the dominant elites that aim to "conform the masses to their objectives" (1996, p. 128). He

further rejected the non-democratic non-dialogical nature of 'banking' pedagogy as an instrument of oppression believing it conforms people into "… adaptable, manageable beings" who passively accept the dominant rules and norms of the society in which they live (1996, p. 54). In this view, the person is not 'corpo consciente' (a conscious being), they are merely 'in' rather than 'with' the world (1996, p. 56). The revolutionary democratic educator, the one who is in complete solidarity with their students, cannot simply impart the belief of freedom on to the oppressed; rather, they must enter into dialogue with them. Dialogical pedagogy will lead the oppressed through a process of critical inquiry to a state of deepened consciousness of their situation which becomes "… susceptible of transformation" (1996, p. 58). Conscientisation must always involve critical thinking and dialogue, but it can only lead to real transformation when it combines these intellectual processes with action and reflection; "… only then will it be praxis" (1996, p. 41). Reflection and action must be inextricably combined or otherwise "action is [merely] pure activism" (p. 48). Moreover, "the conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own conscientização" (1996, p. 49).

Nevertheless, becoming aware of their situation and understanding that without freedom they cannot become liberated causes great conflict; the oppressed have internalised and adapted to the dominant structure of their situation and are "fearful of freedom" (Freire, 1996, p. 29). This is not surprising given how the oppressor perpetuates certain myths to validate the status quo as a "free society"; the myth that all persons are free to work where they wish;…the myth of the universal right of education;…the myth of the equality of all men…" (1996, p. 120).

Freire's anti-dialogical theory describes how the ruling class use conquest, divide and rule tactics, manipulation and cultural invasion to discourage unification, promote individualism and ultimately penetrate the culture of the subordinate group. Thus, "cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded; they begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders" (Freire, 1996, p. 134).

Freire's theories help to illuminate the complex manner in which power relations and exploitation are deeply embedded in the care domain. In Ireland, there are deep

inequalities associated with care work resulting from a lack of investment in public services (Lynch and Lyons, 2009a). This translates to poorly resourced care services directly impacting those doing the care work and those being cared for. Freire's ideas offer great insight into the structural and covert processes that lead powerless groups to adapt and accept the dominant rules of society.

Marx, Bourdieu, and Freire's analysis of structural inequality are valuable to our understanding of the disparities between the power elites and the power-less. However, there are certain shortcomings in their conceptualisations of class; in all cases, they have been heavily criticised for their gender blindness in their analysis of society. While class is most significant to our understanding of inequality, it is the intersection of class with gender that produces complex forms of inequality in care and education.

The intersection of class and gender

Skeggs (1997) argues that class should feature more prominently in theoretical explanations of gender, identity and power. Her book 'Formations of Class & Gender' documents her detailed longitudinal ethnographic research to explain how a group of 83 'real' working class women live and produce themselves through social and cultural relations. Her work claims that women who are constrained by historical and structural inequalities lack the forms of capital to access opportunities in education and the labour market (Skeggs, 1997). Nevertheless, Skeggs' research illustrated that the women's lack of capital motivated them to pursue courses and employment in the caring domain which has resonance for this study of SNAs experiences. This, in turn, facilitated the production of responsible and respectable identities:

> For those who had already experienced the negative allocative function of the education system by the age of 16, whose employment prospects are bleak and cultural capital limited, caring (whether paid or unpaid) offers the means to value, trade and invest in themselves, an opportunity to 'make something of themselves'. It enables them to be recoginized as respectable, responsible and mature. (Skeggs, 1997, p. 56).

However, as mentioned, there are deep inequalities in the doing of care work. Women, and in particular working-class women, do not enter a "level playing field" in the labour market (Skeggs, 1997). The ways in which gender relations operate in employment,

politics, and the cultural sphere is central to understanding women's subordinate position in all aspects of the public sphere (Lynch & Lyons, 2008).

Confronting patriarchy

Gender is central to the discussion about how inequality is understood in society. As discussed earlier, many prominent male theorists have been criticised for their gender blindness in their analysis of power and oppression. hooks (1994) challenged Freire on the 'blind spot' in his works that otherwise offer such profound insight. But, rather than dismiss Freire's work or indeed any work that has neglected gender in its analysis, hooks asserts that feminist thinking empowers researchers to engage in a "critical interrogation" of this flaw. In her book, *All About Love*, hooks (2000) considers the degree to which gender shapes a writer's viewpoint suggesting that men write about love from a very different perspective to women, in so far as men primarily speak from a position of receiving love and women from a position of lack of love. Men, as hooks affirms, often remain bound to assumptions that propose there are innate differences between them and women, yet:

> … all the concrete proof indicates that while the perspectives of men and women often differ, these differences are learned characteristics, not innate, or "natural," traits. If the notion that men and women were absolute opposites inhabiting totally different emotional universes were true, men would never have become the supreme authorities on love. Given gender stereotypes that assign to women the role of feelings and being emotional and to men the role of reason and non-emotion, "real men" would shy away from any talk of love. (2000, pp. xxv-xxvi)

Feminist research highlights the exclusion of women from "dominant avenues of knowledge building" in a patriarchal society in which women are viewed as the *other* (de Beauvoir, 1952, pp. xvii-xviii). It questions traditional ways of knowing to create new meanings and asking new questions that place the *other* at the centre of social inquiry (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3). Fundamentally, feminist perspectives are not simply a way of thinking or a mindset, they are "… rooted in the very real lives, struggles and experiences of women" (Hesse-Biber & Keavy, 2007, P. 3).

Owing to the growing influence on feminist research throughout the 1980s, social research began to pay attention to gender relations within caring. Of particular concern, was how women's identities are connected with care (Gilligan, 1982). Care tasks, both paid and unpaid, largely remain in the female domain while men are more likely to

command others to care on their behalf (Lynch, Lyons, & Cantillon, 2009). As noted by Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh (2006) "relations of dominance and subordination are typical of many social divisions, including those of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and class" (p. 414).

Providing and sustaining relationships of love, care, and solidarity serves as a central function for generating equalities and inequalities (Baker et al.2009; Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009). Love, care and solidarity are fundamental to human development. However, they involve work and when there is unequal distribution of the burdens and benefits of care work between men and women, it deprives those doing the caring of basic human goods, including an adequate livelihood, recognition and respect (Baker et al., 2009; Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009).

Inequalities of respect and recognition

The State controls the conditions for caring in the way it regulates social systems, such as the amount of time people spend in paid work, housing, transportation, education, taxation and social expenditure. These regulatory mechanisms either "inhibits or enables" caring (Lynch & Lyons, 2009a, p. 78). In public policy discourse, carers and care recipients are not highly valued "except at a rhetorical level" (Baker & Lynch, 2012. P. 12). Drawing on the findings of their Care Conversations study, Lynch and Lyons (2009a) validated the lack of value placed on care work in public policy demonstrating that, "all types of carers feel invisible and undervalued in their various forms of care work" (p. 78). As shown, the liberal-egalitarian emphasis on equal opportunity holds the individual personally responsible for the choices they make. But, this idea of 'free choice' is wholly problematic within the context of a social system that places the moral imperative on women to provide care. (Baker and Lynch, 2012).

Redefining citizenship: Love is all we need!

Sociology has traditionally examined inequality with a focus on the economic, the political and the socio-cultural systems through which equality and inequality can be produced (Baker et al., 2009). Additionally, a fourth domain, the affective system, is central to the organisation of any society (Baker et al., 2009; Baker et al., 2006; Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009). The function of the affective system is to provide and sustain

relationships of love, care and solidarity. Yet, it holds little significance in the public sphere despite the importance of care and love for human survival (hooks, 2000). As Baker et al. (2009) note:

> The analysis of inequality in sociological, economic, legal and political thought has focused on the public sphere, the outer spaces of life, indifferent to the fact that none of these can function without the care institutions of society.

While being deprived of the capacity to develop or engage in supportive affective relations is detrimental to human existence, affective inequality also occurs when love, care and solidarity work is unequally distributed, respected, recognised and rewarded (Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009) as is the case for SNAs.

Feminist scholars have highlighted the importance of affective care to justice and equality (Nussbaum, 1995; Kittay; 1999, 2011). If we are to adequately treat the people who need care and their caregivers, we must redefine citizenship in a manner that respects "a vision of society that is able to account for inevitable dependency relationships between "unequals ensuring a fulfilling life both for the carer and the cared for" (Kittay, 2011, p. 49).

Notwithstanding this, citizenship is defined by the neoliberal market-led system, a system in which the purpose of education is intrinsically linked to employability (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009; Lynch et al., 2012). Neoliberalism will never favour affective relationships in its quest to promote individualism and rationalism:

> In a market-led system, the student is defined as an economic maximizer, governed by self-interest. There is a glorification of the 'consumer citizen' construed as willing, resourced and capable of making market-led choices. Education becomes just another consumption good (not a human right) paralleling other goods and the individual is held responsible for her or his own 'choices' within it. (Lynch et. al., 2012, p. 14)

Moreover, neoliberal policies put affective relationships under pressure. Most notably, the austerity measures, which intensified precarious employment following the global downturn, are now accepted as a significant social problem in advanced, market-based societies (Bobek, Pembroke & Wickham, 2018). People working in precarious employment are "subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle" (Standing, 2011, as cited in Bobek et al., 2018, pp. 20-21).

In addition, public policy that promotes the liberal egalitarian idea of equality of opportunity is hugely problematic. As Kittay (2011) asserts, "ensuring equal opportunity to people is admirable when people are in a position to take advantage of the opportunities on offer…" (pp. 55-6). This is rarely the case in societies stratified by class, gender and other inequalities.

Baker et. al. (2006) argue for the importance of moving beyond liberal ideas of equality of opportunity to a more radical equality of condition which seeks to eliminate or greatly reduce inequalities in terms of "respect and recognition, resources, love, care and solidarity, power and working and learning" (p. 415). Furthermore, the quality of life of all people, particularly the most vulnerable, is enhanced when societies endorse the principles of equality of condition in public policy through "equalising wealth and incomes, endorsing respect and recognition principles, equalising power relations and supporting care work" (p. 415).

Gender Inequality in Ireland

The position of SNAs must be viewed within the broader context of the position of women in Irish society, where inequality continues to be a persistent feature of women's experience. Women who are disadvantaged in the labour market, carry the burden of paid and unpaid care work and are severely underrepresented in the political, economic and administrative systems (Barry, 2015). Although Ireland has a robust egalitarian legislative framework to protect against gender discrimination through its equality acts, this is often not borne out in practice (Barry, 2015). Work inequalities in Ireland, as elsewhere, continue to be strongly related to gender. While women's participation in the Irish workforce has increased, they are still disproportionately represented among part-time and low-paid workers (CSO, 2017). The vast majority of workers (83.5%) in the caring, leisure and other low-paid services sectors are female (CSO, 2017). Given women's traditional roles as care-providers and as primarily responsible for all unpaid domestic duties in the private sphere, when they are active in the labour market they persistently remain over-represented in low-paid and precarious work (Davaki, 2016).

Women are also significantly under-represented in decision-making structures in Ireland at both national and regional levels. Less than a quarter of TDs in Dáil Éireann are women (CSO, 2017). Despite European policy directives, occupational segregation and the gender wage gap remains a persistent challenge in Ireland and the EU with little progress over the past decade (European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 2017). With an average Gender Equality Index score of 69.5 out of 100 in 2015, Ireland still has a wide inequality gap between men and women (EIGE, 2017). The Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2017) uses its intersectional approach in measuring the differences in the situation of women and men within core domains, some of which are briefly discussed below as they are instructive for the positions of the SNA role in education occupational hierarchies:

Domain of Work

In the domain of work, women dominate occupations of education, human health and social work by 34.9% compared with only 8.3% of men.

Domain of Money

Income gaps have narrowed, but, on average, women still earn less than men. In 2015 the gender pay gap for full-time workers was around 15% to the disadvantage of women (EIGE, 2017).

Domain of Knowledge

While the percentage of women tertiary graduates outweighs men by 36.4% to 30%, women are over-represented in fields of education, health, welfare, humanities, and arts by a margin of 49.7% women to 25.1% men:

> Gender stereotypes and different expectations towards women and men, reflected in the educational choices of girls and boys, contribute to gender segregation in education. It further leads to gender divisions in the labour market and reinforces the undervaluation of work, skills and competences traditionally attributed to women.
>
> (EIGE, 2017)

Domain of Time

In Ireland, significant gaps are evident in the allocation of time spent doing care and domestic work. The gender gap relating to caring for and educating their children or

grandchildren, elderly or people with disabilities shows a gap of 44.1% women to 30.5% men. While the gap in their involvement in cooking and housework duties illustrates a gap of 88.7% women to 48% men (EIGE, 2017).

Domain of Power

There is a staggering gap in decision-making positions across the political, economic and social spheres. Only 20% of women are represented in political positions and corporate boards (EIGE, 2017).

Unable to locate data on the gender breakdown of the SNA workforce, which is very telling in its own right, I looked to the gender figures in an equivalent sector of early years education and childcare. The Early Years Sector Profile 2016-2017 (Pobal, 2016) indicates that only 2% of those working directly with children are male. This reflects the same average pattern in the early years sector workforce in Europe but is well below the 10% that experts agree should be working in the sector to combat gender stereotyping (Pobal, 2016).

You will recall in chapter one, many reports validate the extra pedagogical and behavioural work performed by SNAs. While the DES are concerned that SNAs are performing tasks beyond their remit, they do acknowledge that SNAs are undertaking these extra duties. However, SNAs are not being remunerated for this extra work which can be attributed to the broader context of "low status, female domination, and poor conditions and remuneration" associated with the care sector as outlined in Grieshaber and Graham's (2017, p.100) study on early childhood education in Australia. Within an Irish context, there is a major divide between the status of SNA and teaching roles. Primary teachers in Ireland currently start on a minimum salary of €35,958 or a casual hourly rate of €33.19 (DES, 2017a), while the SNA starting salary is currently €23,122 or €13.85 per hour (DES, 2017b). Care work across the care sector in Ireland attracts low remuneration. That said, it is interesting to note that, while the current qualification requirements are minimal (QQI level three or Junior Certificate), SNA workers receive better pay and conditions than their Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) counterparts, who require a minimum of a level five major award (eight modules) in childcare. In fact, the average rate of pay for an early childcare worker in Ireland is only

€10.27 per hour (Early Childhood Ireland, 2016). As Grieshaber & Graham's (2017) concluded, dominant economic imperatives sanction the way for policies to "enact power relations that create inequitable conditions" for childcare workers (p. 100). This analysis of pay conditions for those working in care-related roles in Irish education give a stark factual picture of the implications of the lack of recognition and status discussed in earlier sections for SNAs.

Chapter summary

The position of SNA workers in Ireland is clearly a complex issue, affected by multiple issues. The practice of care is awarded low status, recognition, power and resources and is noticeably absent in public discourse and policy. Yet, care is a fundamental ingredient necessary for the development of caring relationships which are central to education and human flourishing. This chapter has shown how care work receives little political attention in education, historically, and in particular under the current neoliberal project, which neglects the emotional and relational value of care in favour of the rational logic of individualism.

The world of caring is highly classed and gendered, yet, sociologists have mainly focused on class inequalities. This chapter has explored the affective domain to highlight the depth, complexity and multidimensionality of class and gender inequalities and how the affective system is deeply interwoven with the economic, political and cultural spheres.

The next chapter provides an explanation and rationale for the methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

Experiments in knowing

Introduction

This chapter outlines the development of the methodology for this research from the initial research idea to this final thesis. The study begins from a concern about the culture of 'carelessness' in education with a specific focus on the area in which I work. I am interested in exploring the care implications for female SNAs working to provide care support to children on the AS as explained in the opening chapter. This interest is located in a broader context of policy pertaining to the SNA scheme and a review of research relating to the TA role, nationally and internationally, in chapter one. This identified discrepancies between the policy and practice relating to the SNA role. A critical review of the literature in chapter two revealed the highly classed and gendered nature of care work and the neglect of education for the affective domain.

As outlined in the opening chapter, my concern is that SNAs and policy makers appear to have two quite distinct conceptualisations of the SNA role. This study aims to identify these differences and offer alternative understandings of the role which give voice to the SNA workers. The recognition of the tension between policy makers and practitioners led to the creation of the research question: How has the discursive gap between policy and practice informed the framing of the special needs assistant role?

This chapter outlines the methodology employed to explore the research question, beginning with a discussion of the major paradigms in light of this research. My philosophical position has formed from personal, professional, and academic experiences throughout my life. In planning this research study, I found it difficult to unearth a precise philosophical worldview that would fit neatly with one of the research paradigms. I find myself drawn to aspects of social constructivism, critical theory, and feminist research. Working through this complex web of assumptions led me to position myself in, what Creswell (2014) describes as, a 'transformative worldview' approach. I present a rationale for adopting the qualitative research approach to aid my

understanding of the nature and complexities of the SNA profession through a transformative approach. I then provide an overview of the participants, a summary of the methods of data collection, an explanation of how the data was analysed, an outline of the ethical concerns, a discussion on reflexivity, validity and reliability and the limitations of the study.

A Brief History of the Major Paradigms in Qualitative Research

Research is one of many ways of knowing or understanding. However, the nature of research has many different meanings depending on a researcher's underlying assumptions. Ultimately, the theoretical orientation has "implications for every decision made in the research process" (Mertens, 2005, pp. 3-4). While I am committed to a qualitative approach to this research, it is important for me to understand what that means and to interrogate the theoretical paradigms and their underlying philosophical assumptions.

A paradigm is a way of looking at the world. It is composed of "certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action" (Mertens, 2005, p. 7). Good qualitative research requires the researcher to explicitly affirm their worldview or set of beliefs that will, undoubtedly, inform and shape every aspect of the research study (p. 15). Researchers identify with the underlying assumptions of the paradigm that best matches their worldview in terms of ontology (nature of reality), epistemology (nature of knowledge) and methodology (approach to inquiry) to guide their thinking and practice (Mertens, 2005, pp. 8-9).

Research paradigms are often presented as opposites of each other, typically demonstrated as the conflicting philosophical assumptions of positivism and post-positivism. Positivism has traditionally dominated ideas about research, originating with the rationalistic and empiricist ideas of Auguste Comte (1798-1857). It assumes that the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural world and exists independent of how each of us experiences it (Crotty, 1998; Mertens, 2005). It is grounded in the belief that the social world has an objective reality and is best studied using the scientific method based on experiment and observation (Ryan, 2006). While the achievements of science cannot be criticised, it is the "status that positivism ascribes to

scientific findings" that is at criticised by those working from a post-positivist standpoint (Crotty, 1998, p. 29).

On the research methodology spectrum, I position myself on the opposite end to positivism because I believe that we cannot look for "causes of social phenomena 'outside' of the subjective view of the researcher" (O'Brien, 2015, p. 141). I am acutely aware that our social world is a complex place in which objectivity is impossible (O'Brien, 2015). This research is committed to seeking a subjective understanding of the participants lived experiences. To this end, it must seek a framework to examine "how the world is experienced rather than explained" (O'Brien, 2015, p. 142).

Post-Positivism

The positivist form of inquiry came in for criticism within the social research field, most notably by the post-positivist perspective that emerged in the 1960s. Critics of the positivist view argue that facts and values cannot be separated and, therefore, quantitative measurement cannot capture the real meaning of social behaviour (Robson & McCartan, 2016). A move beyond such positivist limitations and a recent emphasis on gathering subjective knowledge in social research have meant a shift in the understanding that the subject and the study are independent of each other (Lincoln & Guba as cited in Mertens, 2005). Post-positivists acknowledge that the worldview held by the researcher can strongly influence what is observed (Reichardt & Rallis, as cited in Mertens, 2005). Further, post-positivists recognise that rigorous scientific methods were not appropriate for research involving people and devised "quasi-experimental methods" that would be more appropriate than methods used to study the natural world (Mertens, 2005, P.12). Nonetheless, this paradigm holds that the researcher must remain neutral and strive for objectivity by following rigorous research methods (2005). Ultimately, a major critique of this paradigm is not that post-positivist researchers may use quantitative methodologies but, rather, their "attribution of objectivity, validity and generalisability to quantitative findings" is not suited to social research (Crotty, 1998).

Within post-positivism, the constructivist approach takes the critique of positivism further, rejecting "the notion of an objective reality that can be known" (O'Brien, 2015, p. 142).

This study is grounded in a philosophical position that is concerned with how people interpret, understand and experience their social world (Mason, 2002). To that end, I subscribe to the view that all "our understandings are contextually embedded, interpersonally forged, and necessarily limited" (Neimeyer, 1993, as cited in O'Brien, 2015, P. 142).

Social Constructivist Paradigm

Social constructivists question and theorise the underlying assumptions and methodology underpinning the post-positivist paradigm (Mertens 2005). It is far removed from objectivism affirming that all meaning is constructed and, therefore, "truth and meaning reside in their objects independently of any consciousness" (Crotty, 1998). In this worldview, individuals develop subjective meanings of their lived experiences. These meanings are formed through social interactions and the historical contexts that have shaped their lives (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2014). The constructivist paradigm stems from an interpretive philosophical understanding of meaning known as 'hermeneutics' (Mertens, 2005). As a researcher, I believe it is important to acknowledge how my own personal, cultural and historical experiences shape the interpretation of the meanings others have about my world. Data is gathered using qualitative methods consistent with the reality that "research can be conducted only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents" (Lincoln & Guba as cited in Mertens, 2005, p. 15). I believe that this interaction between the SNA participants and I (as researcher), helps to clarify that I am constructing a reality based on the interpretations I give to the data I have gathered, interpretations shaped by my own worldview (Mertens, 2005; Creswell, 2014).

That said, I believe that critical social theory is central to the methodology underpinning this research. While post-positivism and social constructivism are situated at the same end of the methodology spectrum that resonates with my position, I found myself searching for an approach that explores critical questions about power and exploitation with a particular concern for class and gender inequalities experienced by women. The transformative paradigm goes beyond a critical approach to include other perspectives such as feminist research.

Transformative Paradigm

The transformative paradigm represents a group of researchers including critical theorists, Marxists, Feminists, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups who prioritise social justice and human rights in their research (Mertens, 2005, 2010). The transformative ontological perspective holds that there are multiple versions of reality and these are determined by how we are socially positioned in relation to privilege, such as gender, race, class, and disability amongst others (Mertens, 2017). Transformative researchers are critical of the constructivist paradigm because of its limited emphasis on social action. Mertens (2005) emphasises that the central concern within this paradigm for research inquiry is that it is intertwined with politics and a political change agenda aimed at challenging social oppression (Mertens, 2005). While heavily influenced by critical perspectives, Mertens (2005) rejects the "critical theory" label for this paradigm, associating further approaches to the "transformative umbrella" (p. 16). Other perspectives include but are not limited to feminist and disability research.

Critical research holds a key concern for analysing power relationships in society and exposing the structural forces behind social injustices of oppression (Crotty, 1998). The foundations of critical inquiry are largely influenced by Marx's critique of society, his analysis of social structures of power and domination and his radical ideas about "destroying all the inhuman conditions of existence of present-day society" (Marx, 1961, p. 237). My view resonates with Crotty's (1998, p. 157) evaluation of critical inquiry in his assertion:

> It is at all times alive to the contribution that false consciousness makes to oppression and manipulation and invites researchers and participants (ideally one and the same) to discard false consciousness, open themselves to new ways of understanding, and take effective action for change.

Historically, transformative writers have drawn on the works of Marx and other critical writers such as Adorno, Habermas, and Freire. However, the transformative paradigm arose from a dissatisfaction with the dominant research paradigms and the awareness that sociological and psychological theories were largely developed from the "White, able-bodied, male perspective" (Mertens, 2005, p. 17). Feminist research developed new perspectives on gender inequalities challenging the structural basis for domination and control within a patriarchal society (Lather, 1991; Olesen, 2005). Moreover, critical

race theory, disability theory and queer theory reflect other diverse perspectives that aided the emergence of the transformative paradigm (Creswell, 2014). Given that these are diverse groups with no specific body of literature representative of the transformative paradigm, it is useful to view how Mertens (2005, p. 23) outlines the characteristics that differentiate it from the post-postpositivist and constructivist paradigms:

- It places a central concern on the lives and experiences of the diverse groups that, traditionally have been marginalized … [and calls for researchers to] study the way oppression is structured and reproduced.
- It analyses how and why inequalities based on gender, race or ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic classes are reflected in asymmetric power relationships.
- It examines how results of social inquiry on inequalities are linked to political and social action.

Ontological and Epistemological Position

My ontological position has formed from personal, professional, and academic experiences throughout my life. I am deeply aware of my own experiences of formal education as a working-class girl and the gendered and classed based inequalities I have encountered in working as a SNA. However, as mentioned above, in planning this research study, I found it difficult to locate myself within a particular philosophical worldview. I found myself drawn to aspects of social constructivism, critical theory, and feminist research. Working through this complex web of assumptions led me to position myself in what Creswell (2014) describes as a 'transformative worldview' approach.

Towards a Transformative Worldview

As mentioned, SNAs and policy makers, appear to have two quite distinct conceptualisations of the SNA role. The influence of liberal thinking on Western political decision making, under a guise of 'equality of opportunity', keeps low-status people in their low-status jobs. Under neoliberalism, care workers are experiencing poor conditions, lack of recognition, and precarious employment because the prevailing social, economic, and political climate has become increasingly cost-conscious. It is against this backdrop that this research seeks to understand the nature and complexities of the SNA role and the interplay between care work and inequality. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the highly classed and gendered nature of the SNA profession

and the structural forces that negatively impact on the lives of the SNA participants in their work caring for children on the AS.

This study aims to identify these differences and offer alternative understandings of the role, giving voice the SNA workers. It is important that the voices of these SNAs are heard so that their perspectives become central to our understanding of the dynamics of the practice itself.

Although I am aware that the contributions of this study may limited contributions, it was important for me to approach this research in such a way that it may be transformative and emancipatory in nature, both for me and for the research participants. The transformative worldview corresponds with my value system; one that seeks to address issues of power, social justice, discrimination and oppression (Creswell, 2014). Thus, methodologically, this transformative inquiry is influenced by critical, feminist and emancipatory research underpinned by my understanding that 'human suffering' results from social institutions and structures that impose inequalities on people (Wright, 2012, p. 2).

Research in the vein of critical inquiry is heavily influenced by Marx and Freire, as discussed in the literature review chapter. Both have been influential in the formation of my ontological and epistemological assumptions helping me to understand the significance of social structures in maintaining injustices against the powerless members of our society, including the conditions and status of SNAs. While Marx and Freire help me to critically understand class-based inequalities, they fail to address gender issues. Feminist research methods help me to research this aspect by highlighting that gender is a key dimension of personal, social and cultural life (Connell, 2002).

Feminist research questions traditional ways of knowing in order to create new meanings and it asks new questions that place the 'other' at the centre of social inquiry (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 3). Feminist research is essential to this study because it is important to document the experiences and concerns of the female SNA participants and to illuminate the gender-based stereotypes and biases that have shaped their lives. This study aimed to problematise the policy issues and the structural inequalities that frame

the oppressive situations faced by the six female participants. In feminist research, questions are posed relating to the centrality of gender in shaping our lives (Lather, 1991). For Lather (1991), the aim of research is to "correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal position" (p. 71). Making audible the consistently silenced voices of SNAs to enable their perspectives was fundamental in this research to aid the understanding of the dynamics of SNA practice. In the vein of transformative inquiry, it was also important that this research was emancipatory in nature, with the hopeful aim of empowering the women at the centre of the study to challenge the structures that oppress them. Lather (1991) advocates for praxis-orientated research which is premised on a transformative agenda to "add an important voice" to critical emancipatory research (p. 51).

As a researcher, it was important that I go beyond a critique of existing norms and structures. As the second chapter suggests, I believe it is important to challenge inequalities from an egalitarian perspective. Feminist theorists have been to the forefront in developing an emancipatory research approach (Baker et al., 2009). Lather argues that:

> The development of emancipatory social theory requires an empirical stance which is open-ended, dialogically reciprocal, grounded in respect for human capacity, and yet profoundly sceptical of appearances and 'common sense'. Such an empirical stance is, furthermore, rooted in a commitment to the long-term, broad-based ideological struggle to transform structural inequalities. (Lather, 1986, p. 269, cited in Baker et. al., 2009, p. 179).

Thus, the purpose of emancipatory research in this study was to enter into dialogue with the participants to unearth the unspoken inequalities they face in their daily working lives as SNAs and, in doing so, to guide them in seeing the possibilities for social transformation (Baker et al., 2009).

My decisions as a researcher are rooted in my experiences of working as a SNA and the inequalities I faced in terms of respect, recognition, training and income. This thesis develops its own analysis of these aspects of the SNA role while exploring the importance of 'love labouring' for egalitarian thinking and the gendered and classed character of affective inequality (Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009). It focuses on the subjective experiences of 'love labouring' to illuminate the inequalities faced by SNAs in their daily working lives caring for children on the AS.

Research Approach

This thesis explores the culture of 'carelessness' in education with a specific focus on exploring care implications for six female SNAs working to provide care support to children on the AS. As previously mentioned, there appears to be discrepancies between policy on one hand, and practice on the other. This study focuses on gaining an understanding of the real subjective lived experiences from the point of view of the participants who live them (Banister et al., 2011). Consequently, an approach based on qualitative research methods is used to guide and develop a deep understanding from the perspectives of each participant.

Qualitative research places emphasis on obtaining subjective experiences and personal beliefs from the research participants (Ryan, 2006; McDonald, 2014). The central tenet of qualitative research rests on the belief that social phenomena exist in the minds of people who attach meaning to what is going on in their social world (Robson & McCartan, 2016). To this end, this research focuses on the meanings the SNA respondents give to their environment, not the environment itself. Qualitative research is most commonly associated with those who work from an interpretivist sociological tradition (Mason, 2002). As a researcher, I recognise that my own personal, cultural and historical experiences shape my interpretation of the meanings the SNAs have about their lived experiences.

My decision to use qualitative research is rooted in its suitability to small-scale research. The most popular method of data collection in qualitative research is through in-depth, one-to-one interviews which are a difficult method to use in large-scale studies. This research method generally relies on interviews and describes the experiences of everyday life and people which make it relatable and accessible to readers (Denscombe, 2003). Interviewing was a personally rewarding experience because of the depth of information and the valuable insights I gained from listening to the SNAs as they shared their personal stories (Denscombe, 2003). The main critique of this method is in its lack of scientific rigour because of its emphasis on subjectivity and interpretation of the researcher rather than an analysis of objective, measurable data (Denscombe, 2003; Banister et al., 2011).

Data Collection Method

The methodology employed for this research was a qualitative approach based on semi-structured face-to-face interviews. As with Mason's (2002) suggestions, I felt it was important to exchange dialogue with the SNA participants in a non-formal conversational way rather than a formal question and answer format. The term 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984, cited in Mason, 2002) captures the semi-structured approach I used in interviewing each SNA. While using some predetermined open-ended questions, the semi-structured flexible design offered the possibility of modifying the line of questioning and following up on interesting or surprising responses (Banister et al., 2011; Robson & McCartan, 2016). As a qualitative researcher, I was operating from the perspective that "knowledge is situated and contextual", and, therefore, it was my job to focus on the relevant contexts to ensure that situated knowledge was produced (Mason, 2002, p. 62). A prior review of policy documents, current research and the literature guided me in composing pertinent interview questions in order to explore the subjective experiences of the SNA participants in their roles as carers supporting children on the AS. The questions followed a definite line of enquiry to explore issues of respect, recognition, training and income. For example, to elicit comparisons between the role as experienced by the SNAs on the ground and the SNA role as specified in the latest SNA circular (DES, 2014), the participants were asked the question, 'describe the duties you perform in your role as a SNA by talking me through your school day'. To stimulate conversation about class and gender-based issues, I asked the SNAs about their prior experience of education and what led them to pursue work in the caring field. In drawing up the interview questions, I was conscious of the use of language so as not to confuse, intimidate, or lead the respondents in any way. The open-ended nature of the questions offered the possibility to clear up any misunderstandings and encourage more engagement and a greater connection with the participants (Banister, et al., 2011; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Furthermore, it allowed for flexibility to maximise the contribution of each participant and to follow up on any unexpected responses. The participants were eased into the interview with short answer questions to elicit general information and build rapport. It became clear that the SNAs with the least amount of experience were quite hesitant at first and perhaps afraid of giving 'wrong' information. I felt a great advantage of the face to face interview format was in the way the I could

help the participants feel at ease by reiterating the confidential nature of the study and in assisting the SNAs to understand the questions fully by rephrasing where necessary.

Nevertheless, interviewing was a time-consuming process, requiring careful preparation and time management (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Formulating the interview questions required thoughtful consideration. I was further mindful to allocate enough time for scheduling appointments and for conducting and transcribing the interviews (Denscombe, 2003). I had the fortune of availing of a quiet meeting room in a hotel to conduct the interviews. The location was convenient, enabling me to schedule the appointments to suit the participants. From previous research, I understood the importance of conducting a pilot interview to trial run the interview questions and detect any other issues that may arise. Details of which are discussed in the next section.

Pilot interview

The pilot study helped me to correct any issues to do with the methodology being employed in the study (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Piloting was very useful because some questions were found to be ambiguous and were subsequently altered. In addition, it became clear that some questions had no relevance to the study at hand and these were omitted. Reflecting on the pilot interview led to an interesting discovery in that I felt my line of questioning was at times leading and I also became alert to the possibility of leading the interviewee through body language. These kinds of practicalities exposed during the pilot interview enabled me to reassess my research questions and critically reflect on the process before conducting the actual interviews.

Participant sampling

Both purposive sampling and convenience sampling were employed to recruit the participants. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose participants to elicit the most valuable data (Denscombe, 2003). To this end, I deliberately picked a sample of the six SNAs working in special classes to support children on the AS in a mainstream school and a special school. In selecting the women for interview, I wanted to choose women who I felt were representative of the majority of women working as SNAs. While there is a lack of adequate data on the backgrounds of SNAs, the profession reflects the childcare sector in so far as the majority of workers are white

working-class females. By interviewing women who had undertaken the course under the BTEI, I understood that to qualify for this scheme, they would have either been early school leavers or social welfare dependents. In addition, three of my colleagues were chosen. This convenience sampling method was useful in terms of recruiting the participants from the former study and because they were working in a nearby location, therefore, reducing the cost and time element of conducting research (Denscombe, 2003). However, the use of convenience sampling raises complex ethical considerations.

As mentioned, I had interviewed five of the six participants for the purpose of a previous study on the role and training needs of SNA. The sixth participant is male, and, on that basis, I excluded him from this current study. In retrospect, I feel that it would have been interesting to understand how he experiences working in a highly feminised caring role. However, I made the decision because I wanted to draw on women's narratives to reflect what might be common experiences for female SNAs and in doing so I avoided other variables that might introduce a host of other issues into the research. I also chose not to interview women of other nationalities. While there is no apparent research undertaken on the ethnic background of SNAs in Ireland, those working in the sector agree that the profile of SNA workers reflect the teaching profession in which the majority are of white Irish ethnicity (Keane & Heinz, 2016).

The recruited SNAs were at various stages in their career as outlined in the table below. This resulted in a variety of SNA experience to illuminate the research questions. Three participants were my former colleagues who work in two special classes for children on the AS in a primary school. The school is a primary school with eight mainstream classes and two special ASD classes. The other three participants work in special classes for children on the AS in a special school. This special school caters for children with moderate to profound levels of intellectual disability and has 12 special classes, seven of which are ASD specific. I had met the participants who work in the special school briefly when interviewing them for the purpose of my previous research study. While the participants were conveniently placed in terms of location to meet with me, they were appropriate for this study because of their occupations as SNAs working with children on the AS.

Participant profiles

The following table briefly profiles the SNA experience of the research participants. More detailed information about their lives is woven through our conversations in the next chapter. All names and identifying features have been changed to protect anonymity. I chose names of prominent feminist women who have inspired me during my studies and throughout my life.

Table: SNA experience of the research participants

SNA participants	Length of time in SNA role	Length of time supporting children with ASD	Number of students currently supporting and school setting
Betty (after Betty Friedan and my late mother)	9.5 years	7.5 years	6 pupils Mainstream school Special ASD class
Simone (after Simone de Beauvoir)	10.5 years	7.5 years	6 pupils Mainstream school Special ASD class
Hanna (after Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington)	1.5 years	1.5 years	6 pupils Mainstream school Special ASD class
Rosa (after Rosa Parks)	16.5 years	12.5 years	6 pupils Special school ASD class
Mary (after Mary Robinson)	14.5 years	9.5 years	6 pupils Special school ASD class
Gloria (after Gloria Watkins, otherwise known by her pen name, bell hooks)	1.5 years	1.5 years	6 pupils Special school ASD class

Ethical considerations

Ethics forms an integral part of any research study. Researchers must adhere to strict principles in participant recruitment and in collecting, analysing and disseminating the data they gather (Denscombe, 2003). Informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical research using in-depth interviews. The participants volunteered to take part in the study with the understanding that their data would be treated confidentially, held securely, and fully anonymised. No identifying details of the school or the individual participants were included in the study and will not be included in any presentations or publications arising. Pseudonyms were used to preserve the anonymity of each participant. All research data was securely stored for the duration of the study and electronic data was stored on a password-protected USB key. The voice recordings were deleted following the transcription process. Further, the participants were presented with both a plain language form (Appendix B) and an informed consent form (Appendix C) which explained their right to withdraw from the project at any time, gave the opportunity to voice any concerns through communication with the university ethics committee, and outlined the confidential nature of the study.

While no major ethical issues were foreseen in the conducting of this research, Mason (2002) cautions that "qualitative researchers should be as concerned to produce a moral or ethical research design as we are to produce an intellectually coherent and compelling one" (p. 41). Although the ethical guarantees outlined above are fundamental to good research, they did not guard against all of the ethical issues and dilemmas that confronted me as a qualitative researcher.

As mentioned above, the use of convenience sampling in this study raised complex ethical considerations. Three of the participants are former colleagues of the researcher and while the sample was most convenient to the researcher in terms of time and location, it had the potential of making the study vulnerable to bias and influences. Brewis (2014) explains the importance of researchers acknowledging that 'friend' respondents may be more forthcoming with information. Hence, the researcher was mindful of not formulating assumptions and conclusions based on the relationship with the participants.

In pushing myself to ethically understand the purpose of the research, I recognised that a fundamental reason was personal and academic gain in the form of academic credentials that would, ultimately, lead to advancement in social, cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). I became wary of exploiting the experiences of associates for academic gain (Brewis, 2014; Mason, 2002). I was also conscious that my former colleagues may have felt pressurised to participate in the research which would result in implications for the giving of informed consent. Consequently, it was important to explicitly reiterate, before and after the interviews, that the participants could withdraw at any stage in the process and raise any concerns with me or through communication with the university ethics committee. Participants were also assured that no explanation would be sought should they wish to withdraw.

To contend with some of the issues arising from interviewing colleagues, the researcher recruited three participants working in a special school who were not former colleagues. It was hoped that this process would achieve a varied level of data for analysis. I initially contacted these students through a former SNA student of mine who was working in the special school. Five participants emailed to express their interest in participating in the research. After speaking to them, I narrowed the selection to three SNAs because two were not working with children on the AS at the time. For ethical reasons, I decided not to recruit the former student, or any other students, from the courses I teach. Being sensitive to the imbalance of power relations is an important moral consideration in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

Another issue emerged during the research conversations when two SNAs disclosed some deeply sensitive personal information. I felt an obligation of care to ask the participants if they wished to stop the process. While they were happy to proceed, I followed up with phone calls after the interviews to ensure there was no emotional impact.

Another ethical concern that troubled me was in making the ‘familiar strange’ or, in other words, facilitating the SNA participants to move beyond their common-sense understandings of the world (Mills, 1959). I reflected on my right, as a researcher, to conjure up issues or dilemmas that may not have been considered problematic for the SNAs beforehand. Freire has been criticised for his ‘romantic’ proposition that insists

the process of revolutionary change should start with the oppressed (Newman, 1994). I acknowledge that I hold a responsibility to voice my concerns with policy makers directly. However, I agree with Freire's (1996) argument that some SNAs may not perceive the nature of their oppression, internalising the values of the oppressors. Thus, I consider that this research is a moral activity accompanied by ethical dilemmas throughout the process. To contend with this quandary, I was open with the participants, naming my standpoint. I also revealed my own life story and the marginalisation I felt throughout my schooling and while working as a SNA.

I also reflected on my role as an 'insider' researcher given my status as a former SNA and a current tutor on the SNA training programme. Insider research is deemed problematic in so far as the research may "not conform to standards of intellectual rigour because insider researchers have a personal stake and substantive emotional investment in the setting" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 60). Nonetheless, I concur with Brannick & Coughlan's (2007) conclusion that insider research "is not only valid and useful but also provides important knowledge about what organizations are really like, which traditional approaches may not be able to uncover" (p. 72). It was, however, important for me, through a process of reflexivity, to be mindful of my pre-existing understandings and use my "experiential and theoretical knowledge" to reframe my insider insights (p. 72).

Reflexivity, validity, and reliability

Reflecting on the assumptions I carried into the research process was a good starting point for conducting this study and I reflected on this in my journaling and in supervision sessions throughout the process. In my role as researcher, I was aware that my previous professional experience of working as a SNA and my work as an adult educator facilitating SNA training programmes gives me 'insider' knowledge of the education system. I acknowledge that this influences my judgements at every step of the research process. Thus, it was important that, as a researcher, I substantiated the validity and reliability of this study. Validity means the research is valid and that the researcher is "observing, identifying or 'measuring" what they say they are" (Mason, 2002, p. 39). Reliability involves the accuracy of the research methods to reliably produce data (2002). A key strategy to promote validity and reliability is "critical self-reflection by

the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation" (Merriam, 2002, p. 31).

As shown, many contradictions and tensions can arise while conducting social research (Lather, 1991; Ryan, 2015). Reflexivity is, therefore, essential in helping us tease out these challenges (Ryan, 2015). Reflexivity emphasises that the researcher must be critically aware of how they are connected and implicated in every step of the research process (Walsh, 2015). It entails a deep awareness of how we frame and respond to the world around us. It informs:

> Our actions, communications and understandings. To be reflexive we need to be aware of our personal responses to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world. (Etherington, 2004, p. 19, as cited in Walsh, 2015, p. 159)

For me, reflexivity involves an ongoing conversation about myself in and about my world. It means critically reflecting on every step of the research process and the understanding that issues and dilemmas emerge and may not always be resolved. For example, while I have advocated for a transformative approach, assuming I may be able to empower the respondents to contest their oppressive situations, I concede that, "An emancipatory intent is no guarantee of an emancipatory outcome" (Barry & Essevold, 1983, p. 431, as cited in Lather, 1991, p. 80).

Another way to safeguard the validity and reliability of the study was in providing adequate rich descriptions to "… contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situation matches the research context, and hence, whether findings can be transferred" (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). Consequently, it was important to invest sufficient time in collecting and analysing the data to ensure an in-depth understanding of the findings that emerged from this research.

Analysing the interviews

Researching and writing this thesis was a cyclical process. From the moment I started to think about the thesis question, read the literature and reflected on my own experiences of working as a SNA, certain categories started to emerge, as described by Ryan (2015). Keeping these categories in mind facilitated an informal process of analysis during the

interviews sessions as I listened carefully to the SNAs telling their stories. The formal analysis process began after each interview in my journaling of the sessions. When all interviews were completed, I commenced the transcription work. I found this process overwhelming and after a discussion with my supervisor, I began using a selective approach to transcription due to time-pressures. At this stage, I had fully transcribed three interviews and the themes had already emerged. I felt confident in my ability to gather the key data based on these themes.

The interviews were organised and coded into categories reflecting the focus of the research. I conducted this process by manually transferring the transcripts relating to each theme into separate files. Ryan (2015) explains that the selected analysis in the thesis write-up must be linked to the research question and researcher's theoretical interests. In writing up the findings and analysis chapters, I found it difficult to discard many interesting extracts. However, as argued by Ryan (2015), it is important to "strive for quality and key insights rather than quantity and easy generalisations" (p. 183). Furthermore, in fine-tuning the findings and analysis chapters, I became aware of gaps in the literature review and this prompted further research, amendments, and additions to the theoretical framework. New ideas emerged such as emotional intelligence and human freedom.

Limitations

This qualitative study is limited in scope due to the small number of participants. A major limitation rests on the fact that the six SNA participants came from only two schools. The researcher acknowledges that if the SNAs had been randomly selected from six different schools the findings may be more robust. However, it was not the intention of the researcher to present definitive answers to the question posed in this thesis, rather, the objective was to provide a 'snapshot' of the subjective experiences of SNAs who are caring for students on the AS. It is recommended that an in-depth research study is carried out on a wider scale to seek more robust conclusions.

Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the methodological approach adopted for this research. The transformative paradigm, based on elements of critical, feminist and emancipatory

research, underpins my philosophical position. I employed semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore the nature and complexities of the SNA profession and the subjective experiences of the SNAs themselves. While there are a number of ethical considerations as outlined above, the overall qualitative approach adopted gave voice to the SNA participants, unearthing their lived experiences while framing them in the wider political, social and cultural context.

.

The next chapter lends voice to the SNA participants through a presentation of the key findings from the interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hearing silenced voices

> There are times when personal experience keeps us from reaching the mountain top and so we let it go because the weight of it is too heavy. And sometimes the mountain top is difficult to reach with all our resources, factual and confessional, so we are just there, collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach that highest point. Even this yearning is a way to know.
>
> (bell hooks, 1994)

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the 'real life' experiences of the participants at the heart of this research. Six women were interviewed to explore how they experienced the role of a SNA working to support children on the AS. The study sought to address the following research question: How has the discursive gap between policy and practice informed the framing of the special needs assistant role?

As mentioned, this research study initially set out to explore the role and training needs of SNAs working in classes for children on the AS. While these topics were explored, the interviews unearthed broader underlying inequalities that impact on the career paths and the position of SNAs in the Irish education system. Class, gender and affective inequalities are key themes that emerged throughout the conversations.

The findings are structured according to the themes that emerged from the discussion which reflect a range of inequalities in the circumstances and conditions that impact the lives of SNAs. To truly represent the context of the findings extracts from the recorded interview dialogue have been used extensively.

Research participants

This research includes the contributions of six women. These contributions were voiced through in-depth semi-structured interviews. As mentioned, the study targeted SNAs who had completed the Special Needs Assisting level five course through the BTEI programme. The respondents were at various stages in their career resulting in a variety of SNA experience to illuminate the research question. Three participants were my

former colleagues in two special classes for children on the AS in a primary school. The other three participants work in a special class for children on the AS in a special school. While the participants were conveniently placed in terms of location, they were appropriate for this study because of their occupations as SNAs working with children on the AS. In addition, each respondent had completed the SNA course through the BTEI. Owing to the fact that I teach the SNA course through this programme, I was interested to ascertain if they felt the SNA module offered through this programme prepared them adequately for their roles.

The conversations were rich and varied with a number of key themes emerging. The initial questions about their motivation for returning to learning to become SNAs, their previous educational experiences and a discussion about starting in their SNA roles highlight that class is central to these women's subjectivities. While not explicitly stating that they are from working-class backgrounds, their accounts of schooling and family life illustrated how their social and cultural positioning generated particular path-ways for them. In addition, gender emerged as a key theme during the interviews. The women's stories clearly reveal that they carry the burden care work in their domestic and working lives.

Motivation for studying special needs assisting

The six women had completed the QQI (formally Further Education & Training Awards Council (FETAC)) level five SNA course through the BTEI programme in an Education and Training Board (ETB) (formally Vocational Education Committees) in their local areas. However, special needs assisting was not their planned career pathway. Rosa, Betty, Simone and Hanna had been on job-seekers allowance and seemed to drift into special needs assisting after been enrolled on the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) award through their ETB by the Department of Social Protection (DSP). Gloria and Mary enrolled after seeing an advertisement that stated the course was free to those who had less than upper-level secondary education. Remarking on their motivations to enrol on the SNA module, Rosa explained:

> *Well I didn't have much of a choice really, the DSP decided that childcare would be the best job for me, so they sent me off to the do the childcare award. Well, it was either that or they said I could do office skills, but I had worked in an insurance company for years and I hated it and I didn't want to go back to that type of work.*

Betty had a similar story:

> *I was told that I had to either do the childcare or the healthcare course. I went for the childcare course because I had young kids and I thought I might be good at it. A lot of my friends were working in creches and playschools, so I thought that would be nice.*

When asked why the DSP decided on that career path, Rosa said, "*well, to be honest I think they send every woman to do childcare or healthcare because there seems to be jobs in it".* Mary and Gloria decided to enrol on the course when they saw it advertised under the BTEI. Gloria remarked:

> *I kinda fell into it. I was in the queue in the post-office one day and there was an advertisement for an SNA course in the adult education place in the town. It said that if you didn't have your leaving cert. you could get it for free, so I called in and got a place and I'm delighted I did because I was minding kids for years and was fed up with that.*

The question around motivation for studying the SNA course unearthed a lot of discussion about their past educational and working experiences.

Previous educational and working experiences

Betty was the only women out of the six to complete a course straight after school. She did a FETAC office skills module. The other five women went straight into the labour market after school. Simone explained, "*I left school … and I started working in a local factory"*. When asked why went straight into the work force rather than continue her education, she remarked:

> *It's what we all did really, well all my family and friends in any ways and I worked in that factory for 23 years. I couldn't wait to leave school, so it was grand, and the money was ok but I didn't really like the job. It was so boring, I was literally putting together computers parts for 23 years!*

Hanna spoke about her negative experience of school saying, "*God, I hated that place [school], the nuns were bitches and I couldn't wait to get out"*. When asked if she considered going to college she went on to say:

> *God no, I didn't want to go to college to have to do more of all that. It was great to start earning me own few bob and I didn't know meself. I was working in Roches for years and then I moved to Dunnes until I had the kids.*

She expanded when asked what she meant by *"more of all that"* explaining that

> *Well, I suppose, it's just in school it was awful, they'd treat you like babies and not listen to you. Like, they just were always on our case telling us what they wanted us to do and if you dared to ever question them, they'd absolutely kill ya.*

Betty was keen to leave school to start earning a salary. She left school after her Junior Certificate. Asking her why she didn't proceed to upper secondary schooling she mentioned:

> *I just felt it was time to go and get a job, a couple of my friends got work as hairdressers, but my ma didn't want me to do hair dressing. She said I could leave if I did a secretarial course so I could get a job in an office. I think she thought that was posher [laughs].*

Asked if she did do a secretarial course she said:

> *Yeah, I did a FETAC office skills course and I learned how to type and use Word. It was a good course and I ended up getting a job in a heating and plumbing place for years…I did all the typing and answering the phones and reception and all that. It was a good job.*

Betty gave up work after the birth of her second child:

> *I just couldn't afford the creche fees and all that, it was so expensive to get them minded and I was basically working for nothing when I paid all that, so we were better off with me not working.*

Mary's experience of schooling was positive, *I didn't mind school really, I actually liked going but I just wasn't that good at it*. She went on to say:

> *I was sorta a bit stupid when it came to maths and I was no good at Irish and French. The only things I liked were art and PE but even art got hard because we had to learn all about the history of art and I just liked painting and drawing. I loved PE and most of my friends hated it but I was sport mad and, you know, I'd loved to have done sports physio or something like that but I wasn't smart enough.*

Mary pursued her passion for sport procuring work in a gym after she left school:

> *I got a job in a gym and I was basically doing all odd jobs at first. Then, they sent me on a fitness course in town one day a week and I became an instructor. I was at it for years but it closed down and I was out of work. Well I was minding kids and that but not really working if you know what I mean.*

Rosa justified her decision not to pursue further education after leaving school early, *"Aw well none of my friends went to college, it was just the nerds in school that did that [laughs]. But, to be honest, I actually didn't know how to go about applying and all that".* When asked to expand on that point, Rosa said:

> *Well, nowadays everyone nearly goes to college and it's all about the CAO form and you know the schools call the parents in to explain it but there was nothing like that when I was in school, I didn't know that there was such a thing.*

She went on to say:

> *Anyway, there were six of us and I don't think my parents could've afforded it. I was lucky to get a job after* [school]*, I kinda felt I was great at the time having my own money but now I think I should've gone.*

Mulling over that for a moment she revealed that because she left school early college was not an option for her at the time, however, she furthered her education as an adult:

> *You know, when I did the SNA course and other courses like that I got on really well and got good marks. I went on to do a diploma in psychology* [years later] *and I've done autism courses. You know, sometimes I think I'm doing a better job than the teacher in the class but I just don't have the piece of paper to get the better wages, but sure that's the way [laughs].*

Becoming respectable

As shown above, the women had little educational capital to trade after leaving school and this resulted in them obtaining low-status and poorly paid jobs. Some left the work-place to become stay at home mothers while others did child-minding work along-side rearing their own kids. Betty went on to complete a FETAC major award in childcare which she said helped her "*self-esteem and confidence"*. Their class and gender positions determined the type of courses they six women were offered and ultimately their caring career paths. The women were asked about their experiences of becoming SNAs and what that it meant to them to work in this field. This question revealed rich and moving discussions about their sense of value and a feeling of becoming, as Gloria put it, "*respectable"*. Gloria's story was particularly emotive. She recounted how working as a SNA made her feel valued:

> *I actually felt I mattered. I was after being at home for so long and I got this new lease of life when I became an SNA. I felt really proud about it you know. For the first time I felt I had a proper job.*

Asking her why she felt the work she did as a single mother minding her own and other children was not valued she said:

> *Well, it's just that you feel that anyone could do it and it's no big deal. When people asked me what I did, I would just say that I was lucky enough to stay at home and be able to raise my kids but I didn't really feel like that. I was a bit ashamed if I'm honest.*

Betty had been a stay at home mother and was minding kids "*to earn an extra bit of cash"* for herself. After completing the eight childcare modules as part of her FETAC childcare course, Betty got a job in a pre-school:

> *It was great to get out of the house and meet people, but you know, I earned more minding the kids. I was only getting a tenner an hour in the preschool and I only worked 3 hours per day but it was handy that I could drop and collect my kids from school.*

Asked why she moved to the SNA role, she said:

> *I saw a couple of jobs advertised in my kids's school. I done the SNA module as part of the childcare course, so I had what they were looking for and I just applied and got it. I couldn't believe my luck because the salary was around 23,000 starting off and I got paid for all the holidays. In the playschool, I literally only got paid for the three hours a day and then had to sign on during the holidays…It was a big step up for me.*

Betty was surprised to learn that the DES educational requirements for the SNA role is Junior Certificate or an equivalent level three qualification:

> *That's mad, I thought you needed the one SNA module for the job…well the school I'm in wanted you to have it. But, it's crazy that you need eight* [modules] *to work in a preschool or creche and the pay is worse, it doesn't make much sense. I think a lot of women in childcare jobs are coping on and trying to get SNA jobs now.*

These conversations exposed the gendered order of caring and gender developed as another central theme throughout the interviews.

Women's work

On asking women why they felt men were underrepresented in SNA work, the six women were unanimous in rationalising the role as women's work. Simone reasoned, "*I think that the SNA role is seen as a mammy role as there's a lot of emphasis on care needs like feeding and toileting and I'd say that puts men off".* Betty argued that "*traditionally, teaching and caring roles are carried out by women. I think that these positions would not be of interest to men. Although you do see more and more male teachers now".* Mary remarked that:

> *Women have a motherly instinct. You know, they can empathise more and can multi-task which is important. They seem to have a drive to want to make a difference in the children's lives. I also feel that women are more comfortable with intimate care which is a big part of the job.*

Rosa commented that *"the pay scale is relatively poor and there is virtually no job security, so I think that would put men off from applying for the positions".* Asking Rosa why the pay and security would not deter women from SNA work she expressed her view that:

> *Well, the women tend to mind the kids while the men are the main earners so in my case it was me taking care of the kids and then when I got a job it was a real bonus. I could fit the job around my home life so it's a win-win really.*

Asking her if she had any ambition to further her education or career after completing the diploma in psychology, she divulged:

> *I would've loved to go on a do a degree and maybe even do teaching, but I couldn't with the kids and all that, it would've been too expensive and taken too long. Ah, I'm happy enough with everything, the job hours are great, and I can be home to do the dinner and the kids homework and then taxi drive them around to their activities [laughs].*

Hanna considers the salary as "*too low for men to support a family"*. She also mentioned the topic of masculinity:

> *I don't think men would feel it was a manly enough of a job, they'd probably be slagged by their mates and to be honest, I think it's a bit odd if men want to work as SNAs. Although I do think they are needed to deal with the really bad behaviours.*

Gloria's view on the topic of why men are underrepresented in SNA roles was:

> *The pay isn't great so a man supporting a family couldn't survive. It is looked upon mainly as a women's role because you are working with children. I think especially in special schools with challenging behaviour they will need men in the roles cause there are too many injuries occurring.*

This lead me on to ask about their daily work as SNA's supporting children on the AS. Asking each SNA to talk me through their school day revealed the broad and varied work these six SNAs do which are far beyond the remit of the role in accordance with the latest circular on the SNA scheme (DES, 2014). The SNAs were asked to discuss the role and responsibilities they perform during a typical school day in supporting children on the AS. These were considered in terms of three categories: supporting care needs, supporting behavioural needs, supporting educational needs.

The SNA role in supporting care needs

All six participants provide care assistance to teachers with supervision in the classroom, school grounds and on out of school activities. All respondents indicated that they have been left in full supervision of the class at times. Interestingly, the SNAs in the special school revealed that they are regularly left to fully supervise their classes because, as Rosa explained, "*it's very hard to get sub. teachers and there have been times, even a few days in a row where you are the SNA and the teacher"*.

In both schools, the SNAs play a key role in the supervision of pupils on the AS in the school yard and grounds and on social training activities in the community, such as learning how to take public transport, road safety, buying goods in the shop and eating in restaurants. All participants indicated that the children in their classes required a significant level of support in social situations. Gloria explained how *"the noise level alone can have a huge impact on them and we have to prepare with ear defenders and reinforcers"*. When asked how they might prepare the children who find yard and other social activities difficult, Hanna said, "*I'd normally talk to the child before we go out and explain the rules or show visuals of kind hands, kind feet, nice voice"*. Mary said she would use positive reinforcement supported with a visual "*First/Then board with something like First: Nice Playing in Yard and Then: iPad"*.

Assistance with the supervision of pupils is a primary care responsibility of the SNA. Nevertheless, five participants overwhelmingly indicated that they provided the least level of support in terms of assistance with self-care needs such as feeding, toileting, dressing and general hygiene. However, this was not always the case, the children in the special class in the mainstream school range in age from eight to twelve years and through the care support afforded them by SNA staff over the years they have become independent in self-care. Likewise, the three Special School SNAs are also working in classes for older children on the AS, ranging in age from nine to 17 years, who have also learned independence in care skills over the years. While all six SNAs carry out duties relating to care needs, they have indicated that the level of support needed for these cohorts of pupils has reduced over time. The six SNAs mentioned that their care role mainly entails promoting independence as was summed up by Mary, "*we promote independence a lot by shadowing and constantly prompting them to do things themselves like hanging up their own coats and taking out their lunches"*. All six SNAs

outlined their ongoing care assistance in terms of helping pupils to move around the school and to navigate to and from the school buses. However, Rosa was the only one who supported a child with care needs relating to a significant mobility and medical issues.

The SNA role in supporting behavioural needs

All six SNAs indicated that they provide the most support for pupils with behavioural related needs. In the mainstream school, the SNAs reported that they normally support just one pupil at any one time and these pupils tended be "*quite challenging"* (Betty). Simone spoke about her role in supporting the behaviour and educational needs of one particular child "*who has a lot of challenging behaviour so most of my day would be spent one-to-one with that child in a room off the classroom or even two-to-one at times".* She further disclosed how she implements "*behaviour strategies and PECS and he must be escorted everywhere he goes because he is a flight risk".* She explained that she learned about behaviour strategies and PECS from teachers and other SNAs by "*asking questions and reading some things online and just* [through] *trial and error".*

The special school reported similarities in terms of SNAs being assigned to work with the children who have the most behavioural difficulties. While the class teachers and SNAs discuss and plan the behaviour strategies together, the SNAs are often responsible for their implementation. Two of the teachers in the special school are highly experienced in comparison with the teachers in the mainstream school and this came across when SNAs spoke about their collaboration with teachers. Teacher experience is deliberated on in the analysis section. Rosa spoke about working with a boy on a one-to-one basis who can be aggressive towards other children. She uses positive reinforcement strategies to manage his behaviours which she said she "*picked up over the years* from teachers and SNA staff. Gloria stated that she "*wasn't prepared for the behaviour end of things…I really just have to learn as I go along how to intervene and what works and what doesn't".*

The SNA role in supporting educational needs

Five participants reported that they offer a significant level of educational support in terms of planning and implementing work and helping teachers to devise Individual

Education Plans (IEP) for the pupils. The high level of educational needs in special classes for children on the AS means that team-work is essential. Rosa spoke about the range of educational difficulties in her special school asserting that "*the SNAs and the teacher pretty much do the same amount of educational stuff with the children and have a huge input in their work"*. Mary was the only SNA to state that the teacher she is working with takes "*full control over planning and implementing the lessons for the kids and the SNAs wouldn't have a role in that"*. However, she stressed how this conflicts with standard practice within the special school stating that "*SNAs normally play a major role in educating the students"*. When asked about the type and level of support they give to students on the AS, all participants recounted similarities in encouraging pupils and helping them stay on task. Hanna recounted how "*most of these kids with ASD find it hard to stay focused and unless you're constantly there to prompt them and keep them motivated and on task they tend to wander off"*. Simone explained how she needed to provide support in the planning and implementation of lessons due to the teacher's lack of experience in SEN, "*I have worked with this particular child for a couple of years whereas the teacher is only new and never worked in special ed. before so I would lead that part"*. When asked to detail the educational duties she performs, she said that she often helps the teacher to source worksheets and activities and they work together in modifying content to present the lessons "*in a simpler way and breaking down the tasks to suit him … I know what he can and can't do so I would often make resources to suit his needs"*. She explained how she would lay-out work that the child has already mastered as independent work and would collaborate with the teacher to "*teach him new maths and English activities"*. Two SNAs in the special school reported similar responsibilities in terms of helping teachers in the planning and preparation of lessons. Team-work like this allows teachers time to plan and deliver other educational lessons while SNAs sometimes work on activities such as art and cookery. Rosa said, "*I would plan and prepare for some activities, for example, cookery. I would often decide what we are going to cook and I'd get everything ready for the lesson"*. She went on to explain that this involved, "*doing out visuals to break the lesson down into steps, then talking them through it…helping them measure out ingredients and some would need hand over hand assistance*".

Five of the six SNAs regularly set out previously mastered independent work for the pupils, correct work and report on progress to the teachers. Rosa said her role involved,

"*correcting homework and class worksheets and I'd let the teacher know how the kids are getting on so she can record it in their communication books"*. These tasks allow teachers to perform other essential educational activities such as one-to-one teaching and assessment. Although all six participants considered that teachers have the overall responsibility for planning and implementing lessons, Mary was the only SNA to remark that this was entirely the case in practice, *"in my class, the teacher plans all the work and does the IEP…we just follow her lead…of course we have to keep the kids on track but that's mainly because of their ASD issues"*. It was clear that less experienced teachers, particularly in the mainstream school, tended to rely more on SNAs to support them in planning and implementing lessons.

Training Received

Participants were asked about their SNA and ASD related training pre-employment and since commencing in their role as SNAs. The topic is considered below in terms of SNA experience, qualifications, and the training they have received.

Level of experience

The experience of the SNAs ranges from eighteen months to 16.5 years. Four of the SNAs had previous experience of supporting children with SENs before taking up their role in supporting children on the AS. Two of the SNAs had experience in supporting children with SENs in mainstream classes but felt ill-prepared and *"panic"* (Simone) when starting in the class for children on the AS. Similarly, two SNAs in the special school had been working with children with severe to profound level of intellectual and physical disabilities. Rosa said she felt, "*it was totally different working in the autism class…I wasn't aware of all the difficulties they have"*. However, Mary felt that they had the comfort of being able to *"ask for help from SNAs and teachers who had lots of ASD experience"*. The two SNAs with the least experience learned about how best to support the children from the teachers and SNAs in their classes. Gloria said that she welcomed the advice she received from teachers and SNAs stating how she needed to "*quickly learn everything on the job because I hadn't a clue where to start*. Hanna said she was *helped by the SNAs who have lots of experience and I shadowed them to try and get up to speed"*.

Training and qualifications pre-employment

As mentioned above, all six SNAs had completed the accredited Special Needs Assisting module before commencing their employment and Betty had completed the full childcare award. The participants were asked if they felt their formal SNA qualification prepared them for working with children on the AS. Overall, the SNAs felt the training was more applicable to working in a mainstream class. Simone managed fine in a mainstream class but felt overwhelmed with she moved to the ASD class explaining that most of the six children presented with "*huge challenging behaviours, I wasn't prepared at all and had to learn on the job".* Gloria had the least SNA experience in her school, she recounted how her SNA "*course covered ASD strategies, but theory is one thing and the actual practice is a lot different"*. When asked for an example, she said, "*learning about task-analysis and the chaining strategy was great in theory but when you try and put that into place with a child who has behaviours, it's very difficult"*.

Induction

The participants were asked if they had received any induction in their schools on taking up their employment. Only one SNA had received any form of induction or training. Gloria explained that it had recently become mandatory to do manual handling and crisis intervention training before starting employment at her special school. She explained how *"the induction was good because we learned about dealing with challenging behaviour and manual handling but, then again, it's difficult to put it in to practice when a child is acting out, so we should get ongoing training really".*

Training during employment

The SNAs in the special school have completed one or two-day autism awareness courses in the school. Mary commented that the courses were "*good basic courses but the autism awareness just went over what ASD is and all the stuff we knew already"*. When asked what training they felt they required, Rosa said, "*we need to do all the courses the teachers do with the SESS[2] like PECS and TEACCH[3] and ABA[4], that's what would really help us"*. Delving into this topic further, the SNAs were asked how the

[2] SESS – Special Education Support Service
[3] TEACCH - Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children
[4] ABA - Applied Behavior Analysis

teachers passed on their knowledge in these areas. The SNAs disclosed that due to the nature of the student's difficulties, the job is extremely busy and subsequently teachers and SNAs do not get time to formally discuss strategies learned during training or for joint planning. Mary divulged that their methods for sharing information is "*very informal…things crop up during the day and we ask questions and we tend to copy what the teacher is doing but we don't share information in any formal way"*.

The SNAs in the mainstream school have not attended any specific training courses. When asked how they support the children on the AS without specific training, Simone explained that before the unit opened "*the SNAs and teachers went to an ABA school and observed there for a few days and that was useful to see how positive reinforcement works"*. Betty summed up the sentiments of all six participants when she remarked, *"it's disgraceful that SNAs don't get training like the teachers do, like you know, we're the ones trying our best to manage the behaviours…it's all down to saving money at the end of the day".*

Training needs

The SNAs were asked to indicate the specific ASD related training they required. The overwhelming majority indicated that the most pressing training need was behaviour support for children on the AS. Simone disclosed, "*if we could get the behaviours under control then we can work on the social skills and learning"*. Similar sentiments were expressed by the SNAs in the special school with Rosa maintaining, "*it really is up to us SNAs to look after the behaviours so we are the ones that should be getting the training in this area not the teachers"*. Across both settings, the SNAs agreed that ASD related training should be provided by the SESS for SNAs. When asked to identify the specific ASD related training courses they required, both schools specified they required training in evidence-based strategies and approaches such as Positive Behaviour Support, ABA, PECS, TEACCH and Social Stories. Two SNAs in the mainstream school further identified that training in assistive technology would be beneficial.

Barriers to training

Four SNAs, two in each school, identified financial constraints as the main barrier to training. Their overall sentiments are captured by Simone who said:

> *teachers get sent off during school hours and we get sub cover and they don't lose a day's pay…there's no incentive for SNAs to do courses because we are not supported by the Board or the Department and have to fork out for them ourselves.*

Time constraints were highlighted by all participants as another barrier with Mary explaining that "*the only way to attend training as an SNA is on your own time and our work is very tiring and challenging as it is so it would be hard to give up our weekends".* Simone suggested that if SNAs, like teachers, could attend training over the summer months and "*get days in lieu it would be far more attractive and doable".*

Another notable barrier was the issue of recognition for professional development. Four SNAs emphasised, as summed up Rosa, the "*lack of recognition by the Department and the BOM for any upskilling".* Betty described how she is, *"worn down by it all, it's awful that they won't support us, and the unions don't seem to be able to do anything much either…it's the kids that are losing out".* Gloria was the only SNA who had undertaken any certified CPD courses because she wanted to "*to improve my skills quickly because I'm so new and was out of my depth".* Hanna disclosed how she would:

> *love to become more qualified in areas such as PECS because the kids are using it and we are not properly trained but it's well over €300 and I'd have to take 2 days unpaid leave*

Respect and Recognition

It became apparent from the above conversations that SNAs are carrying out duties far beyond their remit with inadequate training and poor remuneration. In trying to draw out deeper reflections about the reasons for lack of support and training, the participants were asked to consider the following question: Are SNAs respected and valued in your school? Rosa was quick to point out, "*sure if they were to train us they'd have to give us more money and they're not going to do that".* She went on to say:

> *It's the children that are being let down, they* [DES] *say that we are to support their independence and inclusion and even with their communication difficulties but how can we do that if we have no training and what's gas is, the parents don't even realise we don't have proper training, they think we know what we're doing.*

Echoing Rosa's comments, Mary expressed her anger with the system:

> *It's not right that we are not given training and are treated like dirt. Like if the teacher can attend training, why can't we? Well, it's to keep us in our place I suppose and there's not a thing we can do about it, the unions are crap, they do nothing.*

Hanna reflected for a moment before commenting:

> *No, SNAs are not valued like teachers are. We are really at the bottom and can be treated like skivvies at times. Like, the principal would ask us to do jobs that have nothing to so with working with the kids.*

Asked what kind of jobs, she went on to say, "*well I was often asked to clean out the staff room fridge, clean out presses, clean out the resource and photocopier room and generally tidy up after the mess the teachers make".* Gloria spoke about SNA's emotional wellbeing and the impact of working in stressful circumstances:

> *I feel that SNAs are worked to the bone. The same staff are left in very difficult classes for many years until they are burned out. There is nowhere or no one really to go to if you're feeling stressed.*

Gloria further reflected on training:

> *I don't feel that the Dept. give any time or thought into training or supporting staff in these difficult schools. All the focus is on the teachers and yet it is the SNAs who deal with most of the challenging behaviours. I think the SNAs are doing all they can but it's very difficult when there are not enough resources available…they work hard with what they've got and there's not a lot we can do about it.*

Betty reiterated the sentiments about SNAs not being able to do anything to change their situations, her response summed up the general view of all six women:

> *Look, we're at the bottom and we just have to get on with it, they're never going to listen to what we want or need. All we can do is our best and we do do our best for the kids. Look, don't get me wrong, I'm really happy to have this job and I love the kids and the hours really give me a lot of time at home to do my second job [laughs] so you know, I'm a lot luckier than most.*

Simone was the only SNA to say she felt respected at times:

> *The principal does value her staff at times. You are always told if you are doing a good job. Most teachers respect the SNAs but there is a couple that look down on you and don't listen to your ideas. At the end of the day I feel I'm only a number and will be replaced at any time if needed.*

The precarious nature of the SNA job was mentioned by the Hanna and Gloria, who are the most recently appointed SNAs in each school. Hanna's sentiments summed up what many newly appointed SNAs must feel coming to the end of the school year:

> *It's really awful you know…I was waiting to find out the SENO's allocations and they were not published til July* [last year] *so I didn't know if I had a job to go back to. I'm last in so it's last in first out and it's always on your mind. I*

> *hope the allocations will be earlier this year because I'm not sure I can take the stress.*

Gloria felt that the unions should do better to tackle this issue:

> *The unions have been putting pressure on the Department to issue the allocations earlier but that's not enough, they need to be putting pressure on to ensure that SNAs once employed don't loose their jobs. Like, there's always going to be kids that need help so they should just leave us in the schools and let us have security.*

Chapter summary

The findings outlined in this chapter gives a rich and insightful sense of the lives and status of each of the six SNA participants at the heart of this study. The interviews revealed the wide and varied work the six women carry out in their roles supporting children on the AS. The conversations also unearthed the broader underlying class and gender inequalities which impact on the career paths and their position in the education system.

The next chapter analyses and discusses these findings in light of the literature to explore the tensions between how the SNA role is perceived in policy and how it is actually experienced on the ground.

Chapter Five

Beyond rhetoric: Seeing through the gap

Introduction

This chapter explores how the six women at the heart of this research study view their roles as SNAs working to support children on the AS. It builds on the findings discussed in the last chapter that explored how these SNAs are valued, recognised, and respected in their daily work. It further examines how class and gender shape their identities and how they make sense of their social positions. As discussed in chapter two, class, gender and affective inequalities affect how people experience employment in terms of their agency and social mobility. This chapter examines how these inequalities relate to the specific experiences of the SNAs.

In the previous chapter, the findings can be considered in two ways. First, it presents a lucid account of how the SNAs perceive their caring roles and their training needs, and the policy practice divide. Second, the findings reveal wider issues of class, gender, and affective inequalities that expose the structural and agentic tension between care and education. This chapter discusses and analyses how the six women perceive, value and experience their roles as SNAs in two sections. The first section considers the juxtaposition between the policy underpinning the role and how the SNAs experienced it in practice. In doing so, it links to the policy literature outlined in chapter one. The second section considers how the participants develop, express and live their class and gender identities in their professional lives. It draws on the literature in chapter two to highlight the impact of class, gender, and affective inequalities on their career paths and their positions in the education system. In the process, it reconnects with the research question: How has the discursive gap between policy and practice informed the framing of the special needs assistant role?

Section I: The policy practice contradiction

> *"Look, we're at the bottom and we just have to get on with it, they're never going to listen to what we want or need" (Betty).*

Betty's sentiment reflects the overall resignation of the six women who feel powerless in their ability to change their professional circumstances. The exploration into the subjective experiences of SNAs supporting students on the AS yielded several key findings relating to DES conceptualisations of the role of SNAs, and the actual practice on the ground which is explored in the following section. This draws on the evidence from policy and literature as well as the generalised findings from the SNAs interviewed for this research.

Care Support

Firstly, while the SNAs do support the care-needs of the children they work with, it is a small element of the overall work they are performing daily. This conflicts with DES policy which outlines self-care needs in the areas of feeding, toileting, and general hygiene as some of the primary care needs requiring SNA support (DES, 2014). As mentioned in chapter one, several research articles raise concern over the care only role as prescribed by the DES and the actual practice on the ground (DES, 2011; Keating & O'Connor, 2012, Government of Ireland, 2016; NCSE, 2018). In this study, SNAs expressed that their primary role involved supporting the behavioural and educational needs of the children they work with. These findings resonate with previous research that found the SNA role consists of pedagogical and behavioural management duties in addition to care tasks (DES, 2011; Keating & O'Connor, 2012, Government of Ireland, 2016; NCSE, 2018). Likewise, the findings echo international research results which suggest that SEN support staff are performing duties far beyond their remit (Sharma & Salend, 2016). It must be reiterated that the pupils in this study were older and had learned independence in care skills over the years with support from the SNAs. Moreover, care needs in AS classes are often structured into the school day, for example, toileting may be set in the pupils' schedules for before snack, before lunch and before home. This leaves time for SNAs to carry out other duties during their working day, such as helping the teacher to implement educational activities and behavioural strategies. However, this is not acknowledged at a policy level in their work description nor role status.

Behavioural Support

All six SNAs reported that they provide the greatest support to the most 'disruptive' pupils and hold responsibility for implementing behavioural strategies. The SNAs are largely relying on evidenced-based trial and error methods to determine what works best and reported implementing interventions such as ABA techniques, Social Stories and PECS without having any formal training. This contradicts DES (2014) policy which states that overall behavioural support lies with the classroom teacher and that SNA support should only be provided if behavioural management strategies have been unsuccessful. The circular (DES, 2014) further states that SNA support is considered as an assistive measure in supporting teaching staff to improve behaviours in a systematic way as outlined in the NEPS (2007) Continuum of Support model. However, the Continuum of Support model is not relevant to special classes or special schools and this may indicate a gap in relation to the implementation of appropriate behaviour support measures for children on the AS. Good practice guidelines merely suggest that SNAs should contribute to pupils' Personal Pupil Plan (PPP) and assist in monitoring progress by means of observation schedules (DES, 2014). However, the duties reported in this study extend far beyond this remit with SNAs illustrating full responsibility for the implementation of behavioural strategies for some pupils who are non-verbal and display challenging behaviours. It is a worrying finding given that the SNAs have no formal training or professional supports in evidence-based strategies and approaches.

Recent research findings have highlighted the need to focus on renewed thinking regarding the level of assistance provided by support staff (NCSE, 2018). The provision of a focused set of specialist knowledge and skills for support staff can enhance the support given to pupils with difficulties and lead to more inclusive practices (Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Giangreco et, al. cited in Rispoli et al., 2011). Rispoli et al. (2011) argue that pupils on the AS often require specialised interventions to address communication and social deficits, and interventions to support challenging behaviours. The SNAs remarked that only teachers can enrol on CPD courses but felt that because they also assist in the management of pupils' behaviour, they might be able to better support and understand the children they work with if they had access to ASD specific specialist courses. This echoes the conclusions from the review of international literature on best practice for pupils on the AS which proposed that practitioners need

specialist knowledge and mandatory training to understand the specific needs of pupils with ASD (NCSE, 2009).

Educational Support

Five SNAs reported on the significant level of educational support they give the students they work with. The SNAs often work with one pupil at a time and assist teachers in a range of pedagogical support including planning and implementing lessons, encouraging and prompting students, reporting progress to teachers, correcting class work and homework, and differentiating work. These findings contradict the DES circular documents which specify the role of the SNA is non-teaching in nature and sanctioned to provide for the care needs for pupils with a diagnosed disability (DES, 2002; 2014). The findings of this study mirror previous and current research on how the role of the SNA extends well beyond care duties encompassing a range of pedagogical activities (Keating & O'Connor, 2012; Kerins et al., 2015, Government of Ireland, 2016; NCSE, 2018). The fact that SNAs are carrying out educational duties is a perturbing finding given the pedagogical qualifications necessary in undertaking any educational role which should only fall under the remit of qualified teachers, as emphasised in the VfMR (DES, 2011). However, two SNAs referred to their essential educational role due to the fact that the teachers they work with are new to the area of SENs and rely on SNA experience to support them. In the mainstream school, there is a continual movement of teachers from mainstream into the autism classes with teachers typically spending just two years in the special classes. This finding resonates with Moran's (as cited in Travers et al., 2010) study which revealed that teachers, due to lack of experience and training, often feel ill-prepared to teach children with SEN and more complex SENs. This highlights how the broader structural issues occurring across the educational system impact on the role of SNAs

Interestingly, the care related duties outlined in the circular on the SNA scheme (DES, 2014) were not identified as key training requirements by the SNAs apart from supporting pupils' communication needs. This diverges from the NCSE recommendations which suggest that the DES should arrange for a national training programme to address the core skills required to work as a SNA in accordance with the care role (NCSE, 2015; 2018). All six SNAs, irrespective of experience, identified the

need for training in evidence-based interventions to ameliorate the communication, social and behavioural difficulties associated with ASD, and two further expressed the need for training in assistive technology. SNAs reported on the lack of SEN trained and experienced teachers, and the issue of being left in charge of classes due to teacher absences which leads to them adopting a teaching role. This may validate the findings of the Kerins et al. (2015) study which suggests that the lack of suitably qualified SEN teachers warrants training for SNAs as part of their professional role. However, it must be noted that the nature of the difficulties experienced by pupils with SEN may require teachers to leave the classroom for brief absences to deal with certain issues that arise. Absences such as these or absences due to teachers attending out of school CPD courses would warrant a need for suitably trained staff to ensure continuity of approaches and protocols in the classrooms. The SNAs remain the consistent staff in the classrooms and this may also explain the level of educational and behavioural support they provide. This continuity of presence needs to be taken into account in formulations of the SNA role in the school structure.

Despite the reported benefits of training in evidence-based strategies and approaches, the SNAs identified financial constraints as the main barrier to training, which correlates with similar findings in the Kerins et al. (2015) study. Time constraints surfaced as another barrier to training. Time for collaborative planning between teachers and SNAs within school hours is essential but due to the busy nature of SEN work, there is little time for formal discussions between staff. Although informal training takes place between staff who share their experiences and the strategies they have learned from courses or on the job, it would be difficult to measure its effectiveness. The recent NCSE review proposes that SNAs should be provided with educational opportunities relevant to the current role to enhance the school experience for students with SENs (NCSE, 2018). However, time for outside school SNA CPD training was also cited as a significant barrier to training given that SNAs currently need to undertake this in their own time. The lack of SNA CPD recognition from school BOMs and from the DES is an additional barrier to training. These obstacles are likely to continue unless the DES clarify specific qualification requirements pertaining to the SNA role and develop a training course structure (DES, 2011; Government of Ireland, 2016; NCSE, 2018).

The findings in this section suggest that the role of the SNA is inconsistent with DES policy and there is a convincing case to reconsider the current description of the post. The discoveries suggest that more in-depth research is needed to examine the efficacy of SNAs. Furthermore, if SNAs continue to hold pedagogical and behavioural management duties they must receive adequate training to obtain the necessary skills to perform the role effectively.

It is my belief that the lack of recognition for the diverse range of work SNAs carry out on a daily basis, and the wholly inadequate training they receive, is directly related to the fact that SNA work is a highly classed and gendered profession. Furthermore, the deep ambivalence to care in education and the over emphasis placed on reason over emotion generates affective inequalities in the distribution of love and care work which is explored in the following section.

Section II: The intersectionality of inequalities

Class inequality

This section considers how the participants view and value themselves in their roles as SNAs. It further discusses how the women are poorly regarded in the education arena and how this can be directly linked to class, gender and affective inequalities. As this is closely linked to their own sense of subjectivity and identity, quotations are used throughout this section to illustrate the impact of these inequalities.

Class was central to the women's subjectivities. While not explicitly pointing out their working-class positions, it was implicit in the deliberations about their motivations for studying to become SNAs and their previous educational attainments. Their class positions (alongside gender positions) were omnipresent throughout much of the conversations as they reflected on their social positioning as the 'other' in the social hierarchy.

It will be recalled in chapter two, that in a class-divided society like Ireland, care work is considered "low status work generally undertaken by low status people" (Lynch and Walsh, 2009, p.35). I concur with Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh's (2009) argument

that deep inequalities in the doing of care work are reflective of the inequalities produced within and through the social systems of a society. As evidenced in the rich narratives shared by the respondents, as well as from my own experience of the education system, and as the literature suggests, the social institution of education imposes inequalities on these already marginalised group of SNAs resulting in what Wright (2012) terms "human suffering" (p. 2).

Appropriate education and training is an essential prerequisite for decent work (Baker et al., 2009). However, as shown in chapter four, the women had little educational capital to trade after leaving school, and this resulted in them obtaining low-status and poorly paid jobs. Hanna said, *"it was great to start earning me own few bob and I didn't know meself. I was working in Roches for years and then I moved to Dunnes until I had the kids"*. This comment echoes many of the findings from these SNAs which is reflective of the broader economic and social structures that frame their lives and is also telling of the patriarchal society in which they live. This is discussed later in this chapter.

Betty was an early school leaver who "*felt it was time to go and get a job"*. Her mother wanted her to get a "*job in an office"* feeling it was a more respectable occupation than hairdressing. This indicates an awareness of class position and shows how it may inform the women's subjectivities. It was not openly recognised "but rather, was displayed in their multitudinous efforts *not to be* recognized as working class" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 74). Simone's story reflects what was expected of her social and cultural position, "*It's what we all did really, well all my family and friends in any ways and I worked in that factory for 23 years".* Her structural position is defined by her work and demonstrates how class inequality is reproduced.

Hidden in their acceptance as low status and poorly paid employees, are telling narratives of historical and structural inequality. Bourdieu (1984, 1986) reasons that inequalities occur when people do not have access to economic, social and cultural capital. On this basis, I argue that the structural positioning of the six SNAs limits their acquisition of forms of capital that would shape their habitus to enable them to shift to a more advantageous position in the organisational field of education. Skeggs (1997) contends, "access to knowledge is a central feature of class reproduction" (p. 75). The process of learning is closely related to employment, and those who hold good academic credentials will be rewarded with decent jobs (Baker et al., 2009). But, as

shown in chapter four, the respondents had limited access to accredited forms of knowledge. Four of them were early school leavers, and while two had completed their leaving certificate, they did not progress to further or higher education mainly because of their negative experiences of school. Betty, who was an early school leaver, did complete a FETAC office skills course which enabled her to secure work as a receptionist. All six were employed in low-status positions and, consequently, we can classify their class positions in terms of the proletariat, as opposed to the bourgeoisie, in the division of labour (Marx and Engels, 2001). Rosa's disclosure about her reasons for not furthering her education after second-level speaks from a position of powerlessness within the system:

> *Aw well none of my friends went to college, it was just the nerds in school that did that [laughs]. But, to be honest, I actually didn't know how to go about applying and all that.*

Her reflection reveals a level of acceptance that tertiary education was for the 'other' and the system ensured that it was. Bowles and Gintis argue that social inequalities are maintained and reproduced through the rational and functionalist nature of social institutions, such as the educational system (2011, p. 11). The approach to curricular selection and the organisation process in schools serve to create, in working-class people, a sense of being inferior. School "perpetuates particular cultural traditions at the expense of others, and in doing reinforces images of what is culturally valuable in a given society" (Lynch, 1999, p. 17). Functionalist educational policies ensure that the purpose of education is to produce an obedient and compliant workforce. Betty, for example, "*couldn't believe [her] luck because the salary was around 23,000 starting off and…It was a big step up"*. A person's economic success, therefore, is less to do with the cognitive skills learned at school and more to do with the socialisation process through a 'hidden curriculum' that ensures students learn their position in the "… hierarchical structure of the modern corporation or public office" (Bowles & Gintis, 2011, p. ix). Schools ensure this through, what Bowles and Gintis term, the "correspondence principle", in other words, "… structuring social interactions and individual rewards to replicate the environment of the workplace" (2011, p. x). Schools cultivate 'justifiable' inequality through the "… meritocratic manner by which they reward and promote students, and allocate them to distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy" (Bowles and Gintis, 2011, p.11). So, schools motivate students through the reward of qualifications and the threat of failure which "… mirrors closely the role of

wages and the spectre of unemployment in the motivation of workers" (p. 12). Thus, economic and social class disparities become normalised and accepted as inevitable in society and education works to legitimise and create class through a complex web of covert processes (Lynch and Lodge, 2002, p. 38). Indeed, in the so-called meritocratic education system, one that promotes liberal equality of opportunity rhetoric, students learn they must embrace the cultural and intellectual practices of the dominant class in society (Lynch, 1999). Nevertheless, as Lynch (1999, p. 17) points out:

> If one's cultural traditions and practices are not a valued part of the education one receives, if they are denigrated or omitted, then schooling itself becomes a place where one's identity is denied or one's voice is silenced.

But, if class is so important in shaping our lives, why do more people not realise its significance? The answer rests in the fact that those who hold economic hegemony - the ruling class – shape every aspect of thought and perception of the subject class – the oppressed - leading them to accept an 'ideology' that is taken for granted as real and true (Crotty, 1998). This ideology distorts reality to justify the status quo as a "free society" and mobility as a consequence of meritocracy and individual effort (Freire, 1996, p. 120). It perpetuates myths that serve the dominant class, making "class privilege seem like something that one earns, not something that it is deeply embedded in the institutions of society" (Andersen & Collins, 2004, p. 93).

Education plays a powerful emancipatory role for oppressed groups if permitted to do so (Freire, 1996). On the other hand, education also plays a key role in the distribution of privilege (Baker et al., 2009; Lynch, 1999). As mentioned in chapter two, Freire (1996) heavily critiqued the non-democratic non-dialogical nature of 'banking' pedagogy as an instrument of oppression. It is my sense that the overall experience of the six SNAs is conveyed in Hanna's narrative below. Her position kept her from questioning the manipulative forms of power and control perpetrated by the church and state as they colluded to preserve the status quo:

> *…in school it was awful, they'd [nuns] treat you like babies and they'd not listen to you. Like, they just were always on our case telling us what they wanted us to do and if you dared to ever question them, they'd absolutely kill ya*

The conversations further illuminated Freire's (1996) insight into the hidden processes that lead powerless groups to adapt and accept the dominant rules of society. Scattered

throughout the conversations were remarks such as, "*but sure that's the way*" (Rosa), "*there's not a thing we can do about it*" (Mary), and "*there's not a lot we can do about it*" (Gloria). As working-class students, these six SNAs were more likely to experience an antidialogical pedagogy as opposed to a critical dialogical one; one that may help them to come into consciousness of their oppressive situations. As mentioned in chapter two, Freire's antidialogical theory describes how the ruling class use conquest, divide and rule tactics, manipulation and cultural invasion to discourage unification, promote individualism and ultimately penetrate the culture of the subordinate group (1996). So, in this way, the system stifles their cultural authenticity and the students respond to the values of the dominant middle-class educators as they learn their position in the social hierarchy.

Part of the problem is the emphasis that is placed on linguistic, logical-mathematical forms of intelligence and abstract reasoning as the only types of intelligences "that have typically been valued in school" (Gardner, 1999, p. 41). Gardner proposes that humans have other forms of intelligences classified as musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal (pp. 42-43). However, you will recall that while Mary actually liked school, her creative talents were not nurtured and valued and her ambition to further her education was not supported:

> *I was sorta a bit stupid when it came to maths and I was no good at Irish and French. The only things I liked were art and PE … I'd loved to have done sports physio or something like that but I wasn't smart enough.*

Education continues to draw on Piagetan thinking placing primacy on linguistic and mathematical reasoning abilities to service the employment market (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009). Mary's athletic and creative intelligences would never be nurtured in a system that has a narrow view of intelligence. As a result, Mary joined the workforce straight after school, securing a low paid, low status job in a gymnasium.

Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition that social, emotional and ethical competencies are essential for participation in democracy and for overall well-being. (Cohen, 2006). These skills are also crucial for humans to develop their capacities for love, care and solidarity (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009). Ironically though, while there is a focus in the academy on the measurement of emotional intelligence along with educational credentials as necessary capabilities in the employment market

(Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009), it is very narrowly conceived. At the heart of this is the neoliberal idea of the self-sufficient rational citizen. This completely discards the importance of relational life and our interdependency as human beings. Relational care and affective equality is not valued by our system of education as these women's stories illustrate.

So far, I have considered how class is central to the women's subjectivities. The main argument I make through an analysis of their narratives, supported by theories of class, is that these women are constrained by historical and structural inequalities and lack the forms of capital to access opportunities in education and the labour market (Skeggs, 1997). Yet, class is only one aspect that has shaped their identities. There is a need to explore how class and gender intersect in the care domain.

The intersectionality of class and gender in the care domain

Andersen & Collins (2004) assert that class and gender are "intersecting categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life" (p. 7). The stories in chapter four demonstrate how the six participants were constrained by historical and structural inequalities to succeed in the labour market. Skeggs (1997) argues that under achievement in formal education and lack of capital can motivate women to pursue courses and employment in the caring domain to facilitate the production of responsible and respectable identities. There was a strong sense that the women felt their SNA roles were, as Betty put it, "*a big step up"* from their previous positions, whether inside or outside the home. Gloria clearly conveyed this in her moving sentiments*:*

> *I actually felt I mattered. I was after being at home for so long and I got this new lease of life when I became an SNA. I felt really proud about it you know. For the first time I felt I had a proper job. (Gloria)*

Before becoming a SNA, Gloria felt a sense of shame about her unpaid care and domestic work, expressing that she felt that "*anyone could do it and…* [felt] *a bit ashamed"* of her position.

Gloria's words are significant in two ways. First, she was well aware of the recognition of others and their value judgements regarding her social class and gender position. Skeggs points out that "recognition of how one is positioned is central to the processes of subjective construction" (1997, p. 4). Respectability is central to our understanding

of moral authority and is certainly not the property of working class 'unemployed' single mothers (Skeggs, 1997). Second, Gloria's unpaid familial responsibility was not recognised in patriarchal structures, but she feels that her 'responsible' caring occupational role as a SNA is given value as a paid role and provides her with a sense of respectability.

Nonetheless, it is not by mere chance that Gloria chose this path. Employment and educational hierarchies tend to be premised on the sexual division of labour guiding women into the care domain (Skeggs, 1997). As shown in chapter four, the DSP offered four of the women courses based on their gendered and classed educational capital. Rosa explained that she "*didn't have much of a choice really, the DSP decided that childcare would be the best job for me…to be honest I think they send every woman to do childcare or healthcare…". Similarly,* Betty was told that she "*had to either do the childcare or the healthcare course".* Institutional structures and processes worked to ensure that these women were being corralled into caring roles. As evidenced in the findings, these women were guided to complete care courses to service a highly feminised employment sector. Rosa and Betty had little control in the matter even though "women's political, cultural and economic designation as carers is constructed as 'free choice'" (Lynch & Lyons, 2008). As pointed out in chapter two, 98% of those doing the care work in Ireland are female (Pobal, 2016). This is unlikely to change as long as the moral imperative to care is largely confined to women (Lynch & Lyons, 2008; O'Brien, 2005).

Gender inequality

As mentioned in chapter two, there are deep inequalities in the doing of care work. Women, and in particular working-class women, do not enter a level playing field in the labour market (Skeggs, 1997). Evidenced throughout chapter four, is a strong gendered narrative about care work. All six women held a deep-rooted view that women were natural nurturers. Mary's belief is that "*women have a motherly instinct…they can empathise more and…seem to have a drive to want to make a difference in the children's lives".* Similarly, Simone reasoned, "*I think that the SNA role is seen as a mammy role as there's a lot of emphasis on care needs like feeding and toileting and I'd say that puts men off".* Betty argued that "*traditionally, teaching and caring roles are carried out by women. I think that these positions would not be of interest to men".*

Furthermore, the burden of both her paid and unpaid care and domestic responsibilities severely impacted on Rosa advancing in her career:

> *I would've loved to go on a do a degree and maybe even do teaching, but I couldn't with the kids and all that, it would've been too expensive and taken too long. Ah, I'm happy enough with everything, the job hours are great, and I can be home to do the dinner and the kids homework and then taxi drive them around to their activities [laughs]*.

What the above comments show, is that these women disproportionately bear the burden of care work, both paid and unpaid, under the cultural assumption that it is their moral imperative to do so (O'Brien, 2005). To this end, women are much more likely to be 'care footsoldiers' and men 'care commanders' (Lynch, Lyons & Cantillon, 2009, p. 133).

It is further interesting to note the women's overwhelming view that the SNA salary was not appropriate for men. Comments like, "*the pay scale is relatively poor and there is virtually no job security…men are the main earners"* (Rosa)*, "the pay isn't great so a man supporting a family couldn't survive"* (Gloria) and the salary is "*too low for men to support a family"* (Hanna). The topic of masculinity was also raised by Hanna, "*I don't think men would feel it was a manly enough of a job, they'd probably be slagged by their mates".*

Although Ireland has a strong egalitarian legislative framework to protect against gender discrimination, the rich narratives above demonstrate that it is not borne out in practice. The stories have highlighted the classed and gendered nature of SNA work and the overall subordinate position of these six women in the occupational and cultural sphere. As discussed in chapter two, women in Ireland, as elsewhere, carry the primary responsibility for care and domestic duties in the private sphere and are also over-represented in low-paid and precarious paid work (Davaki, 2016). Despite European policy directives, occupational segregation and the gender wage gap remain a persistent challenge in Ireland and the EU (EIGE, 2017).

As stated in chapter two, historically, women were silenced because sociological thought was dominated by men who remained bound to assumptions that there are innate differences between them and women (hooks, 2000, pp. xxv-xxvi). However,

feminist research has moved social research beyond a class analysis of inequality, highlighting the neglect of women's lives and experiences, particularly in the affective domain (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009).

Affective inequality

All people are dependent in different ways at various stages throughout their lives, however, many people with conditions such as ASD, are continually dependent on others. The findings highlight the high level of SNA support required by the children in their care. Simone mentioned one particular boy on the AS that needs "*one-to-one* [support] … *or even two-to-one at times…and he must be escorted everywhere he goes because he is a flight risk"*. Although inclusive education is a key agenda in political rhetoric, discourses and policy do not acknowledge the wide range of work and level of SNA support needed to bring this to fruition. In fact, SNAs and the children they are supporting are viewed as "unproductive and vulnerable… in a strong capitalist society" which is explained by the lack of respect for care work in society (Lynch & Lyons, 2009a, p. 79). But, as Kittay asserts, a truly inclusive vision of society is able to account for "inevitable dependency relationships" to ensure a "fulfilling life both for the carer and the cared for" (2011, p. 49).

While circulars and guidelines are issued to schools, the absence of policies relating to the SNA scheme is indicative of the lack of respect and recognition given to the importance of this caring work. Although care features prominently in the instruction given to schools about how to manage SNA staff, it is care in the sense of carrying out physical care duties, such as toileting and feeding. There is no talk of caring qualities and competencies in the relational sense; the hugely important aspect necessary for the development of caring trusting relationships that ultimately have the power to help students reach their full potential (Rogers, 1995; Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009). In addition, the findings clearly show that the six women actively care about the children they are supporting, yet, they are deprived of adequate training and remuneration. To this end, affective inequality occurs because the burdens and benefits of their love, care and solidarity work are unequally distributed, depriving these SNAs of respect, recognition and care itself (Lynch, Baker, & Lyons, 2009).

In chapter four, we saw how the respondents acknowledged the lack of respect and recognition they receive when they spoke about their inadequate training and remuneration. Comments like, "*sure if they were to train us they'd have to give us more money and they're not going to do that"* (Rosa), *"It's not right that we are not given training and are treated like dirt* (Mary), *"No, SNAs are not valued like teachers are. We are really at the bottom and can be treated like skivvies at times"* (Hanna), *"I feel that SNAs are worked to the bone"* (Gloria), and "*Look, we're are at the bottom and we just have to get on with it, they're never going to listen to what we want or need"* (Betty). However, Simone was the only SNA to say she felt respected at times "*The principal does value her staff at times…Most teachers respect the SNAs but there is a couple that look down on you".* The precarious nature of the SNA job was also expressed by Hanna, whose sentiments must reflect how many newly appointed SNAs must feel coming to the end of the school year as they await the publication of the SNA allocations:

> *It's really awful you know…I was waiting to find out the SENO's allocations and they were not published 'til July, so I didn't know if I had a job to go back to. I'm last in, so it's last in first out and it's always on your mind.*

Recollecting the points made in chapter two, the trivialisation of love, care and solidarity and the elevated importance of reason, has a profound influence on education. The neglect of care in education arises because the "model citizen at the heart of classical liberal education is a 'rational' (in the narrow sense) citizen…" (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009). This citizenship is defined by the neoliberal market-led system, a system that will never favour affective relationships in its quest to promote individualism and rationalism (Lynch et. al., 2012, p. 14).

SNAs have developed a deeply emotional and relational understanding of the children they are supporting and are doing their best to support them in becoming independent caring individuals. Yet, relational caring human beings are not valued in neoliberal discourses and policies that assume the primary function of education is to prepare students for "economic, political and cultural life" (Lynch, Baker, Cantillon & Walsh, 2009).

Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed and analysed how the participants perceive, value and experience their roles as SNAs. It considered the policy practice contradiction and, in doing so, linked it to the policy literature outlined in chapter one. It reveals the misrecognition and undervaluing of the diversity of care, educational and behavioural work which SNAs undertake in their professional work. This calls for the need to reconceptualise the professional role of SNAs to acknowledge the wide scope and depth of the care, educational and behavioural work in which they engage. This must be contextualised within the broader educational system especially in light of the roles and needs of other staff involved, especially the teachers who were constrained in what they could do. This formal consideration of the SNA role also needs to be accompanied by training and CPD.

This chapter further considered how the participants developed their class and gender identities, drawing on the literature in chapter two to highlight the impact of class, gender, and affective inequalities on their career paths and their positions in the education system. This placed the professional role of the SNA in the broader class and gender context of Irish education and society.

The next chapter outlines the conclusions and reflections drawn from the research and makes recommendations based on the key findings.

CHAPTER SIX

The whole of the moon

I pictured a rainbow

You held it in your hands

I had flashes

But you saw the plan

I wandered out in the world for years

While you just stayed in your room

I saw the crescent

You saw the whole of the moon

(Mike Scott, 1985)

Introduction

The title of this chapter is drawn from the emotions I felt when I listened to The Killers rock band cover The Waterboys song 'The Whole of the Moon' at a concert during the final week of this research journey. The song holds special memories for me as a teenager. But, as I sang along under the moonlit Dublin sky, the lyrics fuelled a new significance for me. As I listened to the opening verse, I was struck by the connection the lyrics had to my research concern as they exemplified the policy practice contradiction. I thought about my journey through education, as a working-class student and in my working life as a SNA. While SNAs and those doing the essential work of love and care may visualise better working lives, – or "picture a rainbow" - the findings suggest that they are silenced and feel powerless in achieving this vision. Policy makers disregard the language of love and care, and the importance of affective care relations to human flourishing and development. Instead, they promote a neoliberal rhetoric of individualisation and the idea that the model citizen is a rational economic one. The policy makers, therefore, hold the power - "hold it in [their] hands" – to generate and reinforce inequalities in the affective domain.

This chapter presents a summary of the findings of this research and discusses them in the context of the research question and literature, attempting to address the 'whole of the moon' for SNAs as holders of affective relations in education. I then make recommendations, discuss the limitations of this study and suggest areas for further research before offering my final reflections.

Research findings

The key contribution of this thesis for adult education is its focus on a marginalised and mis-recognised group of carers in our education system. The findings bring to light the complexities and multidimensional nature of the practice of SNA work. More importantly, the findings give voice to a silenced and marginalised group of care workers in education, and in doing so, highlights the importance and impact of affective equality and care in education. It further highlights the implications of affective inequalities to the inclusion of students with SENs and also to learning, when care and the wider affective and relational domains of life and knowledge are often neglected in favour of the emphasis on academic capabilities.

The findings of this study demonstrate how the six women at the heart of this research perceive, value and experience their roles as SNAs. The findings give voice to the often silenced SNAs and, in doing so, illuminated the research question: How has the discursive gap between policy and practice informed the framing of the special needs assistant role?

The findings were presented and analysed in two ways. The first section considered the juxtaposition between the policy underpinning the role and how the SNAs experienced it in practice. The second part considered how the participants developed their class and gender identities and highlighted the impact of class, gender, and affective inequalities on their career paths and their positions in education.

The policy practice contradiction

Inclusive education is a key educational policy objective for children with special educational needs (SEN) in Ireland. The escalating rate of individuals being diagnosed

with ASD necessitates the increased level of inclusive educational provision. SNA support has risen dramatically since the inception of the DES scheme in 1998 with a significant level of support given to children on the AS. Nevertheless, the role and qualification requirements of SNAs have remained largely unchanged. The findings of this study suggest that the SNA role extends well beyond the remit as outlined in policy. Yet, SNAs are not afforded an increased status, salary, training or recognition for their extra work.

The findings illustrate that the current role, as described by these SNAs, takes responsibility for not only the physical care of the students they are supporting, but also pedagogical and behavioural management duties. This reaffirms many national and international research results which suggest that SEN support staff are performing duties far beyond their remit. The study suggests that existing policy on the role of the SNA only acknowledges a small element of the work being done by this cohort of support workers in Irish schools. It indicates the need for renewed policy to recognise the pivotal role taken by SNAs in the pedagogical and behavioural support of students on the AS by outlining guidelines that truly reflect the nature of SNAs work and for the implementation of appropriate training and CPD opportunities. This diverse and complex role needs to be reviewed and included in policy definitions and guidelines for SNAs in Irish education to recognise and compensate their work properly, as well as provide relevant training and support for them. Accompanying this needs to be a policy review which considers the caring role of teachers who work alongside SNAs. For all educators working with students with SNAs, a holistic support model that recognises the caring and education needs of students needs to be developed which can work holistically for students' development.

As discussed in chapter one, recent research findings have highlighted the need to focus on renewed thinking on the level of assistance provided by support staff and how a focused set of specialist knowledge and skills can enhance the support given to pupils with difficulties and lead to more inclusive practices. Clearly, SNAs could better support and understand children on the AS if they had access to ASD specific specialist courses. For this to happen, however, the barriers to accessing training would need to be addressed. Financial and time constraints along with lack of recognition for SNA professional development are likely to remain, unless the DES clarify specific

qualification requirements and a structured and relevant training programme pertaining to the current SNA role.

The above findings discussed the lack of recognition for the diverse range of work the SNAs perform on a daily basis and the inadequate training they receive. In chapter five, I argued, with the support of the literature, that the key reason for the low status and recognition for SNA work lies in the fact that the role is highly classed and gendered along with the deep ambivalence for care in education. These, together, generate affective inequalities in the distribution of love and care work which is discussed next.

The intersectionality of inequalities

The findings illustrate how the participants view and value themselves in their roles as SNAs. They further highlight the impact of class, gender, and affective inequalities on their career paths and their positions in the education system.

Class was central to the women's subjectivities and the findings clearly illustrate how they are constrained by historical and structural forces. Their lack of economic, social and cultural capital determined the education they received and their opportunities in the labour market (Skeggs, 1997). They did not have access to the resources and types of capital that would support them in education and employment pathways (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition, their class and gender positions were key factors in orientating them taking on caring roles (Skeggs, 1997) boosted by employability and training initiatives that seem to narrowly assign courses based on social and gender positions. While some think their SNA roles bring about a certain level of respectability, this is only felt in their own social and cultural circles. They are deeply undervalued and disrespected in their work, evident in the low remuneration, lack of recognition for the wide and varied work they perform, and by the fact that they receive no training.

A key finding that is echoed in many of the women's stories is the moral imperative they feel to do care work (O'Brien, 2005). This is reflective of our patriarchal society, in that the gendered care order is so deeply internalised that it is regarded as an innate disposition (Connell, 202; Lynch & Lyons, 2009c). As discussed in chapter two, the position of SNAs is reflective of women's subordinate position in Irish society, where

inequality continues to be a persistent feature of women's experience. Women who are disadvantaged in the labour market carry the burden of paid and unpaid care work and are severely underrepresented in political, economic, and administrative systems in Ireland (Barry, 2015).

The conversations gave insight into how marginalised groups, such as this group of SNAs, come to accept their subordinate positions believing they had little power to exercise choice. Of course, as argued by Freire (1996), this is the goal of the dominant class. The participants' educational experiences, particularly at second level, revealed the manipulative form of 'banking' pedagogy which upholds neoliberal ideas of meritocracy and 'equality of opportunity, conforming students to accept dominant middle-class values.

The overall findings reveal the complete disregard for care in education. As deliberated on throughout this thesis, human existence, well-being, and flourishing is dependent on loving and caring relationships. Yet, there is little recognition for the important caring and relational aspects of SNA work in education and for the value of caring and affective relations in education more widely. Neoliberal polices drive the over emphasis placed on academic rational mathematical and linguistic knowledge to prepare model citizens for the labour market. The consequence is that the affective and relational domains of life and knowledge are completely undermined, and this has major implications for all students, but most particularly in the case of this research the students that SNAs are supporting, as well as undermining the affective scope of learning and knowledge itself.

Implications of the findings

In focusing on a group of SNAs, who are a marginalised group of care workers in our education system, this study has highlighted the importance and impact of affective equality and care in education which has major implications for SNAs, the students they are supporting and for learning.

Implications of the findings for SNAs

This thesis has highlighted the ways in which the doing of care work is a form of affective inequality that is exacerbated by class and gender structures. The lack of respect, recognition, and remuneration for SNA workers exacerbates the class and gender-based inequalities related to care work where women continue to be over represented and burdened with care responsibilities. In addition, because of their low-status in society, intensified by their lack of capital to enhance their life chances, SNAs are powerless to exercise any change to the conditions under which they work. Therefore, they continue to be disempowered by policy makers and 'care commanders' who set the conditions for their work as the 'care footsoldiers'.

Implications for students with ASD and other SENs

Because the work of care is relational, the children that SNAs care for are implicated when the people charged with their care are exploited and oppressed. As outlined in chapter one and above, the educational policy of inclusion is not evident or achievable given the low status and conditions afforded to SNAs, whose role is to support and care for vulnerable children. How can, for example, students who are non-verbal, be fully included in school to socially and emotionally interact with their peers if the SNAs, who have a key role in providing "assistance with severe communication difficulties" (DES, 2014), do not receive any training in augmentative and alternative communication systems? How can SNAs truly 'care-for' (Noddings, 2002) students when the burdens of paid and unpaid care work leave them physically and emotionally exhausted? Again, the findings reveal that class and gender are important structural forces in affective inequalities when the burdens of paid and unpaid work fall on and impact the lives of working-class women.

Implications for learning

What is clear from the conversations with the participants is that caring is a key feature of their identities. But, as mentioned throughout this study, within education, caring and the wider affective and relational domains of life and learning are often neglected in favour of academic rational logical and linguistic capacities. In this way, the education system 'excludes' those without these capabilities while locating the problem for their low-status firmly with the individual under the guise of 'equality of opportunity'. The

onus is on the SNAs, therefore, to improve their career pathways and their life circumstances which is next to impossible given that they do not hold the economic, social or cultural capital necessary to climb the social and occupational ladder. The neglect of care in education is, therefore, reinforcing and reproducing inequalities in society.

Key recommendations

The findings illustrate that the current SNA role in practice takes responsibility for a much wider remit than the policy suggests, consistent with many national and international research studies. This indicates the need for renewed policy to recognise the pivotal role taken by SNAs in the pedagogical and behavioural support of students on the AS by outlining guidelines that truly reflect the nature of SNA's work. This policy must also include recognition and recompense of the complex role duties performed by SNAs and analysis of the relationship with all staff working with students on the AS, as well as the implications for the work of these educators. For all involved, the professional roles of educators and SNAs must include recognition of the complex and intertwined nature of care and education.

Recent research findings have highlighted the need to focus on renewed thinking on the level of assistance provided by support staff and how a focused set of specialist knowledge and skills can enhance the support given to pupils with difficulties and lead to more inclusive practices. Clearly, SNAs might better support and understand children on the AS if they had access to ASD specific specialist courses. For this to happen, however, the barriers to accessing training would need to be addressed. Financial and time constraints along with lack of recognition for SNA professional development are likely to remain unless the DES clarify specific qualification requirements and a structured training programme pertaining to the current SNA role. This training needs to begin from and include the experiential learning of SNAs who have a wealth of knowledge as revealed by the stories of these six SNAs in this research.

The women imparted an abundance of deep and meaningful experiences to enrich this study. While the above recommendations are necessary for the day to day support of the children in their care, the most pressing recommendation is at a much broader structural

level. Policy makers must address the affective equality deficit by changing structures and institutions that inhibit SNAs opportunities to develop loving and caring affective relationships. This would involve the reorganising of economic, political and cultural systems to allow the affective equality to thrive (Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009). Overall, it involves moving beyond liberal ideas of equality of opportunity to a more radical equality of condition which seeks to eliminate or greatly reduce inequalities in terms of "respect and recognition, resources, love care and solidarity, power and working and learning" (Baker et. al, 2006, p. 415). Furthermore, the quality of life of all people, particularly the most vulnerable, is enhanced when societies endorse the principles of equality of condition in public policy through "equalising wealth and incomes, endorsing respect and recognition principles, equalising power relations and supporting care work" (p. 415). Key to this is making sure that the work involved in caring for children on the AS and other SENs is properly recognised and supported, that SNAs are recognised and remunerated appropriately for the hugely valuable work they do, and that the burdens of care work are shared equally between women and men in society.

Limitation of the research study

This qualitative study is limited in scope due to the small number of participants. It was not my intention to present definitive answers to the question posed in this thesis, rather, the objective was to provide an overview of the SNA role and their position in education, which I feel is reflective of SNAs generally. As mentioned, the major limitation of this study rests on the fact that only a small number of participants were selected from only two schools.

Further research

To overcome the limitation of this research study, as discussed in the previous section, I recommend that an in-depth research study is carried out on a wider scale to seek more robust conclusions on the professional role and experiences of SNAs in Ireland.

This research has focused on a group of marginalised care workers in education. However, those being cared for are also a marginalised group whose voices are often silenced. Therefore, further research to understand the subjective experience of children

on the AS and with other SENs in education is important for a true vision of inclusive education.

Another suggestion for further study is to research the Adult & Further Education sector to consider its role in the facilitation of caring courses, with a particular focus on women who are re-engaging in education through courses linked to gendered low pay work.

There is an urgent need to carry out research on the social and political structures that facilitate the marginalisation of SNAs in education. Such research needs to be recognised and addressed in political discourse so that policy makers will better understand the importance of moving beyond liberal ideas of equality of opportunity to a more radical equality of condition, which seeks to eliminate or greatly reduce inequalities. Only then, will the quality of life of all people, particularly the most marginalised, be enhanced.

Concluding reflection

Completing this MEd thesis has been an overwhelming, albeit often gruelling, stage in my lifelong learning journey. I will always be indebted to the women at the heart of this research who afforded me the opportunity to question my whole thought process and critically appraise the assumptions I hold. Through the process of researching and writing this thesis, I have become more critically aware of the structural forces that have shaped every aspect of my personal and professional life.

One of the most surprising aspects of my experience on this MEd journey was the realisation that I completely take gender for granted in my everyday life and arrange everything around the distinction between men and women. I feel a sense of embarrassment when I think of my own gender blindness as a woman in twenty-first century Ireland but, then again, “the arrangements are so common, so familiar, that they can seem part of the order of nature” (Connell, 2002, p. 3). Reflecting on this awareness has been a transformative experience. I am more committed to a vision of society that is loving and caring, and I feel a strong responsibility to challenge the structural power

inequalities that exist which legitimise dominant patriarchal structures in society and lead to the marginalisation of some groups.

My learning experiences throughout this MEd process has helped me to explore connections between theoretical frameworks and the assumptions that underpin my practices as an educator. It has enabled me to cement my own philosophy of teaching further and I feel inspired to encourage learners to develop a critical awareness of themselves and a consciousness about the social world in which they live. My philosophy of teaching is inspired by the work of critical educator, Paulo Freire, centering on the belief that the learner should become empowered through a participative, problem-posing classroom that fosters dialogue, critical thinking, reflection, and transformation. I wholeheartedly believe that education is the most powerful tool we have to challenge economic, political, cultural and affective inequalities and in doing so, establish the conditions for a truly inclusive society in which affective relationships can thrive.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th Ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Andersen, M. L., & Hill Collins, P. (2004). *Race, class, and gender*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning.

Baker, J., Lynch, K., Cantillon, S. & Walsh, J. (2006). Equality: Putting the theory into action. *Res Publica 12,* 411-433.

Baker, J., Lynch, K., Cantillon, S. & Walsh, J. (2009). *Equality: From theory to action* (2nd Ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Baker, J. & Lynch, K. (2012). Inequalities of love and care and their theoretical implications. *Social Justice Series 12* (1), 1-22.

Banister, P., Bunn, G., Burman, E., Daniels, J., Duckett, P., Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., Parker, I., Runswick-Cole, K., Sixsmith, J., Smailes, S., Tindall, C., & Whelan, P. (2011). *Qualitative Methods in Psychology: A research guide* (2nd Ed.). Berkshire: Open University Press.

Barry, U. (2015). The policy on gender equality in Ireland update 2015: In-depth analysis for the FEMM committee. Brussels: European Parliament.

Bernstein, B. (2000). Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research, critique. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Koutsoubou, M., Martin, C., Russell, A., Webster, R., & Rubie-Davies, C. (2009a). *Deployment and impact of support staff in schools.* London: DCSF.

Blatchford, P., Basset, P., Brown, P. & Webster, R. (2009b). The effect of support staff on pupil engagement and individual attention. *British Education Research Journal, 35*(5), 661-686.

Bobek, A., Pembroke, S. & Wickham, J. (2018). *Living with uncertainty: Social implications of precarious work*. Dublin: TASC.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J.G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L.J.D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. (2011). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life.* Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.

Brewis, J. (2014). The ethics of researching friends: On convenience sampling in qualitative management and organization studies. *British Journal of Management, 25*, 849-862.

Central Statistics Office. (2017). Women and men in Ireland 2016: Employment. Retrieved from http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wamii/womenandmeninireland2016/employment/ [accessed 24th May 2018].

Clancy, P. (2007). 'Education.' In S. O'Sullivan (Ed.), *Contemporary Ireland: A sociological map*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Cohen, J. (2006). Social, emotional, ethical, and academic education: Creating a climate for learning, participation in democracy, and well-being. *Harvard Educational Review, 76* (2), 201-237.

Connell, R.W. (2002). *Gender: Short introductions*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th Ed.). California: SAGE Publications Inc.

Crompton, R. (2010). Class and employment. *Work, Employment and Society 24,* (1), 9-26.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in research process*. NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Daly, T. (2008). School culture and values-related change: Towards a critically pragmatic conceptualisation. *Irish Educational Studies, 27*(1), 5-27.

Davaki, K. (2016). *Differences in men's and women's work, care and leisure time. Study for FEMM committee*. Europarl, Brussels. Retrieved from http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/556933/IPOL_STU(2016)556933_EN.pdf [accessed 20th April 2018].

de Beauvoir, S. (1952). *The second sex*. New York: Vintage Books.

Denscombe, M. (2003). *The good research guide for small-scale social research projects* (2nd Ed.). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Department of Education and Science. (1993). *Report of the special education review committee*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science. (1998, November 5). Major initiative in special education services: Move marks breakthrough for integrated education and children. *Press Release by Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin, T.D.* Dublin: Author.

Department of Education and Science. (2000). *Learning for life: White paper on adult education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science. (2001). *Educational provision and support for persons with autistic spectrum disorder: Report of the task force on autism*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department for Education and Skills. (2002). *Autism spectrum disorders: Good practice guidance*. Nottingham: DfES Publications.

Department of Education and Science. (2002). *Circular 07/02: Applications for full-time or part-time special needs assistant support to address the special care needs of children with disabilities.* Dublin: The Stationery Office

Department of Education and Skills. (2011). *A value for money review of expenditure on the special needs assistant scheme.* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Skills (2012). *Guidelines for effective planning and delivery of back to education initiative outreach provision*. Retrieved from: https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Back-to-Education-Initiative-BTEI-/ [accessed 28th June 2018].

Department of Education and Skills. (2014). *Circular 0030/14: The special needs assistant (SNA) scheme to support teachers in meeting the care needs of some children with special educational needs, arising from a disability*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Skills (2017a) Circular 0083/2017. *Revision of teacher salaries with effect from 1 January 2018*. Retrieved from https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0083_2017.pdf [Accessed 1st July 2018].

Department of Education and Skills (2017b) Circular 0073/2017: *Revision of salaries for special needs assistants (SNAs) with effect from 1 January 2018.* Retrieved from https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0073_2017.pdf [accessed 1st July 2018].

European Institute for Gender Equality. (2017). Gender equality index 2017: Measuring gender equality in the European Union 2005-2015 report. Retrieved from http://eige.europa.eu/rdc/eige-publications/gender-equality-index-2017-measuring-gender-equality-european-union-2005-2015-report [accessed 24th May 2018].

Farrell, P., Alborz, A., Howes, A., & Pearson, D. (2010). The impact of teaching assistants on improving pupils' academic achievement in mainstream schools: A review of the literature. *Educational Review*, *62*(4), 435-448.

Finnegan, F. (2008). Neo-liberalism, Irish society and adult education. *The Adult Learner*, 54-72.

Fitzsimons, C. (2015). *Re-Kindling Community Education in Neoliberal times*. PhD Thesis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

Florian, L. (2014). What counts as evidence of inclusive education? *European Journal Of Special Needs Education, 29* (3), 286-294.

Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education*. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey.

Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.

Gardner, H. (1999). Intelligence reframed multiple intelligences for the 21st Century. New York: Basic Books.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gilligan, C. (1995). Hearing the difference: Theorizing connection', *Hypatia 10* (2), 120-127.

Griffin, S. & Shevlin, M. (2007). *Responding to special educational needs: An Irish perspective*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.

Grummell, B. (2007). The "second chance" myth: Equality of opportunity in Irish adult education policies. *British Journal of Educational Studies,* 55 (2), 182-201.

Grummell, B. (2017). Love, care and solidarity in the changing context of Irish education. *AISHE, All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 9 (1), 3141-3149.

Government of Ireland. (2000). *The education (welfare) act*. Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Government of Ireland. (2000). *The equal status act*. Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Government of Ireland. (2003). *Report of the special education review committee*. Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Government of Ireland. (2003). *The disability act*. Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Government of Ireland. (2004). *Education for persons with special educational needs act*. Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Government of Ireland. (2016). *Report of the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection on the Role of the Special Needs Assistant*. Retrieved December 10, 2016, from www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/committees/educationandsocialprotection/SNA-Report.pdf
.

Grieshaber, S. and Graham, L. (2017). Equity and educators enacting the Australian early years learning framework, *Critical Studies in Education, 58* (1), 89-103.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Retrieved from https://ebookcentral.proquest.com [accessed 25 May 2018].

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). *Handbook of feminist research: theory and praxis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Hesse-Biber, S. N. & Leavy, P. (2007). *Feminist research practice: A primer*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2000). *All about love*. New York: William Morrow & Co.

Irish Government Economic & Evaluation Service. (2016). *Focused policy assessment of data on special needs assistants.* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Keane, E. & Heinz, M. (2016). Excavating an injustice?: nationality/ies, ethnicity/ies and experiences with diversity of initial teacher education applicants and entrants in Ireland in 2014, *European Journal of Teacher Education, 39*(4), 507-527.

Keating, S. & O'Connor, U. (2012). The Shifting Role of the Special Needs Assistant in Irish Classrooms: A Time for Change? *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 27*(4), 33-544.

Kenny, L., Hattersley, C., Mollins, B., Buckley, C., Povey, C. & Pellicano, E. (2015). Which terms should be used to describe autism? Perspectives from the UK autism community, *Autism, 20*(4), 442-462.

Kerins, P., Casserly, A. M., Deacy, M. E., Harvey, D., McDonagh, M. D., & Tiernan, B. (2015). *Investigating the Training Needs of Special Needs Assistants in the Border, Midland and Western Region*. Research Study, St. Angela's College, Sligo. Retrieved March 3, 2017, from http://www.stangelas.nuigalway.ie/Downloads/Departments/CSENID/1_2015.pdf

Kittay, E. F. (1999). *Love's labor*. New York: Routledge.

Kittay, E. F. (2011). The Ethics of care, dependence, and disability. *Ratio Juris, 24*(1) 49-58.

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the post-modern*. New York: Routledge.

Lather, P. (2009). Against empathy, voice and authenticity. In A.Y. Jackson & L.A. Mazzei (eds). Voice in Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging conventional, interpretive, and critical conceptions in qualitative research (pp. 17-26). London: Routledge.

Lindsay, G. (2007). Educational psychology and the effectiveness on inclusive education/mainstreaming. *British Journal of Educational psychology, 77*, 1-24.

Lynch, K. (1999). *Equality in education*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd.

Lynch, K. (2006). Neo-Liberalism and marketisation: The implications for higher education. *European Educational Research Journal 5*(1), 1-17.

Lynch, K. (2007). Love labour as a distinct and non-commodifiable form of care labour. *Sociological Review 54*(3), 550-570.

Lynch, K. & Lyons, M. (2008). The gendered order of caring. In Barry, U. (Ed.) *Where are we now? New feminist perspectives on Women in contemporary Ireland.* Dublin: New Island Press, pp. 163-183.

Lynch, K. Baker, J. & Lyons, M. (eds.) (2009). Affective equality: love, care and injustice. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lynch, K., Baker, J., Cantillon, S. & Walsh, J. (2009). Which equalities matter? The place of affective equality in egalitarian thinking. In Lynch, K., Baker, J., & M. Lyons. (eds.) *Affective equality: love, care and injustice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 12-34.

Lynch, K. & Lyons, M. (2009a). Care-less citizenship? Public devaluation and private validation. In Lynch, K., Baker, J. & M. Lyons. (eds.) *Affective equality: love, care and injustice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 78-92.

Lynch, K. & Lyons, M. (2009b). Love labouring: Nurturing rationalities and relational identities. In Lynch, K., Baker, J. & M. Lyons. (eds.) *Affective equality: love, care and injustice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 54-77.

Lynch, K. & Lyons, M. (2009c). Gender, social class and lone caring: The intersectionality of inequalities. In Lynch, K., Baker, J. & M. Lyons. (eds.) *Affective equality: love, care and injustice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 93-113.

Lynch, K. & Walsh, J. (2009). Love, care and solidarity: What is and is not commodifiable. In Lynch, K., Baker, J. & M. Lyons. (eds.) *Affective equality: love, care and injustice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 35-53.

Lynch, K., Lyons, M. & Cantillon, S. (2009). Time to care, care commanders and care footsoldiers. In Lynch, K., Baker, J. & M. Lyons. (eds.) *Affective equality: love, care and injustice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 132-157.

Lynch, K., Grummell, B. & Devine, D. (2012). *New managerialism: Commercialization, carelessness and gender.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Marx, K. (1961). *Selected writings in sociology and social philosophy* 2nd ed. (T. B. Bottomore & M. Rubel eds.) Hardmondsworth: Penguin.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (2001). *The communist manifesto* [e-book]. London: Electric Book Co Ltd. Available from: ebrary academic complete [Accessed 15 April 2018].

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

McDonald, B. (2014). *An Introduction to Sociology in Ireland* (3rd ed.). Dublin: Gill Education.

Merriam, S.B. (Ed.). (2002). *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mertens, D. M. (2005). *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology 2nd Edition.* California: Sage Publications, Inc.

Mertens, D. (2010). Transformative Mixed Methods Research. Qualitative Inquiry 16(6) pp. 469-474.

Mertens, D. (2017). Transformative research: personal and societal. *International Journal for Transformative Research*, 4(1), 18-24.

Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Munck, R. (2007). 'Social class and inequality.' In S. O'Sullivan (ed) *Contemporary Ireland: A sociological map*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

National Educational Psychological Service. (2007). *Special educational Needs: A continuum of support: Guidelines for teachers.* Dublin: The Stationary Office.

National Council for Special Education. (2009). *International review of the literature of evidence of best practice provision in the education of persons with autism spectrum disorders*. Trim: NCSE.

National Council for Special Education (2011). *Inclusive education framework: Guide for schools on the Inclusion of children with Special Education Needs*. Trim: NCSE.

National Council for Special Education. (2015). *Supporting students with autism spectrum disorders* in schools: *Policy Advice Paper No.5*. Trim: NCSE.

National Council for Special Education. (2016). *An evaluation of education provision for students with autism spectrum disorder in Ireland*. Trim: NCSE.

National Council for Special Education. (2018). *Comprehensive review of the special needs assistant scheme: A new school inclusion model to deliver the right supports at the right time to students with additional care needs.* Trim: NCSE.

Newman, M. (1994) Defining the Enemy: Adult Education in Social Action. In S.B. Merriam and R.S. Caffarella *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (2nd Ed.) (p. 336). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Noddings N. (2002) *Educating moral people: a caring alternative to character Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Noddings, N. (2003). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd Ed.). Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Nussbaum, M. (1995). Emotions and women's capabilities. In *Women, culture and development: A study of human capabilities*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Brien, Maeve (2005) Mothers as educational workers: Mothers' emotional work at their children's transfer to second-level education. *Irish Educational Studies 24* (2-3), 223-242.

O'Brien, M. (2009). The impact of economics, social, cultural and emotional capital on mothers' love and care work in education. In Lynch, K., Baker, J. & M. Lyons. (eds.) *Affective equality: love, care and injustice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 159-179.

O'Brien. A. (2015). Selecting a methodology: A case study. In. Walsh, T. & Ryan, A. (eds). Writing your thesis: A guide for postgraduate students. Maynooth: MACE Press.

O'Buachalla, S. (1988). *Educational policy in twentieth century Ireland*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press.

Olesen, V. (2005). Early millennial feminist qualitative research: Challenges and contours. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). The Sage handbook of qualitative research (3rd Ed., pp. 235-278). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pobal. (2016). *Early years sector profile 2015-2016*. Retrieved from: https://www.pobal.ie/Publications/Documents/Latest%20Early%20Years%20Sector20Profile%20Published.pdf [accessed 17th June 2018].

Rispoli, M., Neely, L., Lang, R., & Ganz, J. (2011). Training paraprofessionals to Implement interventions for people autism spectrum disorders: A systematic review. *Developmental Neurorehabilitation, 14*(6), 378-388.

Ritzer, G. (2003) *Sociological theory*. 6th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Robson, C. & McCartan, K. (2016). *Real world research* (4th ed.). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Ryan, A. B. (2006). Post-Positivist approaches to research. In M. Antonesa, H. Fallon, A.B. Ryan, A. Ryan, T. Walsh & L. Borys (Eds.), *Researching and writing your thesis: a guide for postgraduate students*. Maynooth: MACE.

Ryan, A. B. (2015). Post-positivist approaches to research. In. Walsh, T. & Ryan, A. (Eds.), Writing your thesis: A guide for postgraduate students. Maynooth: MACE Press.

Schuller, T. (2004). 'Studying benefits.' In J. Preston, C. Hammond, A. Brassett-Grundy, and J. Bynner (eds) *The benefits of learning.* London: Routledge Falmer.

Scott, M. (1985). *The whole of the moon*. On This is the sea: The Waterboys [music album]. England: Island.

Sharma, U. & Salend, S. (2016). Teaching Assistants in Inclusive Classrooms: A Systematic Analysis of the International Research. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 41*(8), 117-134.

Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of class and gender*: *becoming respectable*. London: Sage.

Skeggs, B. (2004). Context and background: Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class, gender and sexuality. In Adkins, L. & Skeggs, B. (eds.) *Feminism after Bourdieu.* Oxford: Blackwell, pp.19-34.

Standing, Guy (2011). *The Precariat: The new dangerous class*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Symes, W. & N. Humphrey. (2011a). The deployment, training and teacher relationships of teaching assistants supporting pupils with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) in mainstream secondary schools. *British Journal of Special Educational, 38*(2), 57-64.

Symes, W. & N. Humphrey. (2011b). School factors that facilitate or hinder the ability of teaching assistants to effectively support pupils with ASD in mainstream secondary schools. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 11*(1), 153-61.

Travers, J., Balfe, T., Butler, C., Day, T., Dupont, M., McDaid, R., O'Donnell, M., & Prundy, A. (2010). *Addressing the Challenges and Barriers to Inclusion in Irish Schools.* Dublin: St. Patrick's College.

Thorpe, H. (2009). Bourdieu, feminism and female physical culture: Gender reflexivity and the habitus-field complex. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 26*, 491-516.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (1994). The Salamanca declaration and framework for action. Paris: UNESCO.

United Nations. (1989). UN convention on the rights of the child. New York: UN.

Walker. M. (2006). Towards a capability-based theory of social justice for education policy-making. *Journal of Education Policy, 21* (2), 163-185.

Walsh, T. (2015). Using narrative research. In. Walsh, T. & Ryan, A. (eds). Writing your thesis: A guide for postgraduate students. Maynooth: MACE Press.

Weber, M. (1978). Economy and society: an outline of interpretive sociology. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Willis, P. E. (1977). *Learning to labour: how working class kids get working class jobs*. Farnborough, Hants.: Saxon House.

Wright, E. O. (1985). Classes. London: Verso.

Wright, E. O. (2012). Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias, *American Sociological Review XX*(X) 1–25.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Excerpt from DES Circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014)

Primary Care Needs Requiring SNA Support

The Primary care needs which would be considered significant – and which might require SNA support are:

1. Assistance with feeding: where a child with special needs requires adult assistance and where the extent of assistance required would overly disrupt normal teaching time.
2. Administration of medicine: where a child requires adult assistance to administer medicine and where the extent of assistance required would overly disrupt normal teaching time.
3. Assistance with toileting and general hygiene: (including catheterisation) where a child with special needs cannot independently self-toilet, and until such time as they are able to do so.
4. Assistance with mobility and orientation: on an ongoing basis including assisting a child or children to access the school, the classroom, with accessing school transport (where provided, school Bus Escorts should, in the first instance, assist a child to access school transport), or helping a child to avoid hazards in or surrounding the school. (Every effort must be made by the school to provide opportunities for independence e.g. the removal of hazards.)
5. Assisting teachers to provide supervision in the class, playground and school grounds: at recreation, assembly, and dispersal times including assistance with arriving and departing from school for pupils with special needs where the school has made a robust case that 6 existing teaching resources cannot facilitate such supervision.
6. Non-nursing care needs associated with specific medical conditions: such as frequent epileptic seizures or for pupils who have fragile health.
7. Care needs requiring frequent interventions including withdrawal of a pupil from a classroom when essential: This may be for safety or personal care reasons, or where a child may be required to leave the class for medical reasons or due to distress on a frequent basis.

8. Assistance with moving and lifting of children, operation of hoists and equipment.
9. Assistance with severe communication difficulties including enabling curriculum access for pupils with physical disabilities or sensory needs (See also section 9) and those with significant and identified social and emotional difficulties. Under the direction of the teacher, this might include assistance with assistive technology equipment, typing or handwriting, supporting transition, assisting with supervision at recreation, dispersal times etc. (DES, 2014, pp. 5-6)

Secondary Associated Tasks

The following tasks are the type of secondary care associated tasks which SNAs will often

perform, but only once they have been allocated on the basis of the primary care support tasks listed above.

1. Preparation and tidying of workspaces and classrooms or assisting a child who is not physically able to perform such tasks to prepare and tidy a workspace, to present materials, to display work, or to transition from one lesson activity to another. To assist with cleaning of materials.
2. Assistance with the development of Personal Pupil Plans for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on developing a care plan to meet the care needs of the pupil concerned and the review of such plans.
3. Assist teachers and/or Principal in maintaining a journal or care monitoring system for pupils including details of attendance and care needs. Assist in preparation of school files and materials relating to care and assistance required in class by students with special needs.
4. Planning for activities and classes where there may be additional care requirements associated with particular activities, liaising with class teachers and other teachers such as the resource teacher and school principal, attending meetings with parents, SENO, NEPS Psychologists, or school staff meetings with the agreement and guidance of class teacher/principal.

5. Assistance with enabling a pupil to access therapy or psycho-educational programmes such as anger management or social skills classes, under the direction of qualified personnel, including class teachers or support teachers.
6. Assistance to attend or participate in out of school activities: walks, or visits, where such assistance cannot be provided by teaching staff. (DES, 2014, pp. 6-7)

Appendix B: Plain Language Form for SNA Participants

Participant's name

February 2018

Dear X,

I am currently studying for the Master of Education Degree with the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. As part of my studies, I am required to carry out a research thesis. Below is a summary explaining the nature of my research. I am hoping you will agree to become involved.

The aim of the study is to explore the caring role of Special Needs Assistants (SNA) working in special classes for children on the autism spectrum. I would like to interview you, along with a group of other SNAs, to explore if your experiences of working with children on the AS agree with the Department of Education and Skills policy in relation to the role of the SNA. I would also like to understand your motivation for completing the SNA course and why you chose to work as a SNA.

The group interview will be audio recorded and will commence in February 2018. The interview session will be conducted outside school hours at a place, time, and date that is suitable for you and the group.

No identifying details of the school will be included in the study or in any presentations or publications arising. In an effort to ensure anonymity, your name will be changed. All research data will be securely stored for the duration of the study with hard copy data stored in a locked filing cabinet and electronic data on a password-protected USB key. The audio recordings will be deleted following the transcription process.

It is hoped that this study will formulate recommendations that may lead to the improvement of the educational needs of support staff working with children on the AS.

Thank you for taking the time to read this statement. If you wish to withdraw as a participant at any stage or have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Mairéad McHale

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form for SNA Participants

Research Study Title

An exploration of the caring role of special needs assistants working in special classes for children on the autism spectrum.

Purpose of Research

The aim of this small-scale study is to explore the caring role of special needs assistants working in special classes for children on the autism spectrum. It will endeavour to highlight the nature and complexities of the SNA profession and the lack of recognition SNA workers receive. In addition, it will seek to understand the role of adult education programmes in facilitating courses linked to SNA work.

For the SNA, this will involve:

Participation in an audio-recorded focus group face-to-face interview session.

Confirmation that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

I am aware that if I agree to take part in this study, I can withdraw from participation at any stage. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the research study have been completed. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data prior to the completion of the thesis, in which case the material will be deleted. I understand that my disguised extracts from the focus group interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below.

Confidentiality

No identifying details of the school or the individual participants will be included in the study or in any presentations or publications arising. Pseudonyms will be used to preserve the anonymity of each participant. All research data will be securely stored for the duration of the study with hard copy data stored in a locked filing cabinet and electronic data on a password-protected USB key.

SNA Participant – Please complete the following:

(Circle Yes or No for each question).

Have you read or had read to you the Plain Language Statement? ***Yes/No***

Do you understand the information provided? ***Yes/No***

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? ***Yes/No***

Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? ***Yes/No***

Do you give consent for the interviews to be audio recorded? ***Yes/No***

I have read and understood the information in this form. The researcher has answered my questions and concerns, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Questions 2016/17

General information

1. How many years have you worked as an SNA?

2. How long have you been working as an SNA in a special class for children on the autism spectrum?

3. How many SNAs are employed in your school?

4. How many students on the AS are you currently supporting in your special class?

Role and Responsibilities

5. Describe the duties you perform in your role as an SNA by talking me though your school day. Are your duties the same each day? Are you every asked to do something unusual? If yes, what? Are there any tasks that you have been asked to do that you do not believe form part of your role? If yes, what? Are there any tasks that you think you should be asked to perform because you have the skills?

6. In which area of need do you provide the most support for children on the AS?
    - supporting care needs
    - supporting behavioural needs
    - supporting educational needs

    Describe the support you give in these areas in more detail.

7. How would you describe your professional relationship with the teachers you work with? How are lessons planned and prepared for and are you involved in this process?
8. Have you implemented any ASD specific approaches and strategies with the children you are working with? If yes, can you talk me through these approaches and strategies? How did you learn about these methods?

9. How do you provide feedback and communicate with your SNA and teacher colleagues about your working day in terms of a discussion on things that went well or not so well?

10. How might you and your colleagues share information with each other in terms of knowledge and experience of working with children on the AS.

Qualifications and Training

11. What is the highest level of educational qualification you held on taking up your job as a SNA?

12. If you undertook training prior to taking up your role as an SNA, what type of course was it? Was it an accredited course? What was the level of the course in terms of the national framework of qualifications? If you undertook training prior to taking up your role as an SNA, do you feel it prepared you for your role as a SNA? Are you using the skills you acquired during the training?

13. What training or induction, if any, did you receive when you commenced your employment?

14. Have you received any specific training with regard to working with children on the autism spectrum? If you did, who provided it? If not, how did you know what to do?

15. Have you engaged in any autism related training or professional development outside of school since becoming an SNA? If yes, what form of training was it? Where did it take place? Was it an accredited course? Who funded the course?

16. What are your thoughts on specific ASD training for SNAs working with students on the autism spectrum? Would you like to undertake training courses? Is there anything preventing you from doing courses.

Appendix E: Interview Questions 2017/18

Why did you decide to complete the SNA course?

Tell me about your experience of becoming a SNA?

Describe the duties you perform in your role as a SNA by talking me through your school day.

Does working in this role influence other areas of your life – family, leisure etc?

Tell me about your experience of the SNA role – do you feel respected and valued in your school and by the DES?

What are your thoughts about the working conditions of SNAs?

As you reflect on your role now, what are the particular things that come to mind?

What else would you like to say about your working life as a SNA?