

Dynamics of Special Needs Assistants' Roles in the Implementation of Inclusive Education in Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education in elementary schools requires educators, including Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), to adapt their roles so that students with diverse learning needs receive equitable support. Yet, the expansion of SNA responsibilities often lacks clear professional definitions and institutional reinforcement. This study examines the evolving role of SNAs through a qualitative literature review design. Data were gathered through a systematic search across multiple academic databases using relevant keywords. Identified studies were screened through title and abstract reviews, followed by full-text evaluation to ensure alignment with the research focus. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in role development and constant comparison to ensure coherence across studies. The findings show that SNA responsibilities have expanded from technical assistance to more complex pedagogical, collaborative, and coordinative functions. However, this evolution remains constrained by limited continuous training, imbalanced student-assistant ratios, restricted resources, and the absence of institutionalized collaboration mechanisms. The study concludes that strengthening professional capacity, enhancing institutional support, and clarifying role expectations are essential to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of inclusive education in elementary schools.

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Introduction

Inclusive education at the elementary school level in Indonesia has gained increasing prominence as national policies place greater emphasis on fulfilling every child's right to equitable learning opportunities (Efendi, 2018; Mulyadi, 2017). Although the government has issued a series of regulations to strengthen inclusive practices (Spandagou, 2025), implementation across schools continues to reveal substantial challenges in accommodating the diverse needs of learners (Choi et al., 2020). Limitations in the number and professional competence of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), insufficient supportive facilities, and the suboptimal adaptation of curricula remain among the most frequently reported obstacles in elementary school settings (Rizqianti et al., 2022; Siregar et al., 2024). At the same time, the growing presence of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms demands that the education system respond more adaptively and holistically. This reality demonstrates that inclusive education is not merely a pedagogical concern but also a reflection of broader social dynamics and the nation's capacity to guarantee fair access to meaningful learning for all students.

Within this context, the role of SNAs becomes particularly strategic, as they serve as intermediaries between the individual needs of students with special needs and the instructional processes that take place in regular classrooms. The responsibilities of SNAs have evolved far beyond physical assistance, expanding into multifaceted functions such as facilitating individualized instruction, supporting classroom teachers through pedagogical consultation, mediating communication between schools and families, and conducting both initial and ongoing assessments to inform appropriate instructional planning (Mahya et al., 2024; Yunitasari et al., 2024). Numerous studies highlight that SNAs contribute significantly to identifying special needs, designing individualized education programs (Dubé et al., 2016), adapting instructional materials (Anaby et al., 2020), and fostering safe and inclusive learning environments (Donaire et al., 2024; Taufiq et al., 2025). Nevertheless, these roles are frequently performed in less-than-ideal circumstances, such as mismatches in educational background, disproportionate workloads, or minimal institutional support conditions that often diminish the potential impact of their contributions.

Although research on inclusive education is expanding, studies that examine the dynamic nature of SNAs' roles remain notably limited. Most existing research tends to describe the functions of SNAs in normative terms, without exploring how these roles have changed in response to evolving educational policies, increasing professional demands, and shifting pedagogical approaches in elementary schools. Moreover, both national and international studies reveal discrepancies between expectations placed upon SNAs and the professional capacity they possess, particularly in relation to collaborative practices, specialized competencies, and the adequacy of preparatory training (Gilson, 2024; Rahmanullah et al., 2021; Walker, 2020). These discrepancies

highlight a significant gap between the ideal conditions envisioned for inclusive education and the realities encountered in schools. This gap underscores the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how SNAs' roles are shaped, transformed, constrained, or expanded within everyday educational practice.

The urgency of examining these role dynamics becomes even more pronounced when considering the direction of inclusive education policy in Indonesia, which increasingly promotes differentiated instruction, authentic assessment, and cross-stakeholder collaboration. Elementary schools face growing challenges, including heightened learner diversity, uneven availability of resources, and varying levels of readiness among classroom teachers to accommodate students with special needs. These conditions further highlight the central role of SNAs as key actors who ensure the continuity and coherence of inclusive education services. Without a deep understanding of how SNAs' roles shift in response to systemic demands, it becomes difficult for policymakers and educational institutions to design appropriate training programs, professional support mechanisms, or collaborative structures that enhance the effectiveness of inclusive practices.

In light of these complexities, the present study seeks to clarify the strategic position of Special Needs Assistants within the implementation of inclusive education at the elementary school level. Rather than merely listing their tasks, this study focuses on how their roles are formed, enacted, expanded, and challenged within the everyday realities of schooling. It also emphasizes the importance of identifying structural and pedagogical barriers that influence the effectiveness of SNAs, thereby providing a conceptual foundation for strengthening professional capacity, informing policy development, and enhancing institutional support. Ultimately, this introduction provides the conceptual and contextual groundwork for a deeper exploration of the evolving, multidimensional responsibilities of SNAs and their significance in shaping genuinely inclusive learning environments for all students.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review design to comprehensively examine the evolving roles of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) within the implementation of inclusive education at the elementary school level. A qualitative orientation is selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of conceptual and empirical findings from previous studies, while allowing the researcher to interpret the dynamic and context-dependent nature of SNA roles in pedagogical and social settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The literature review is structured to identify patterns, gaps, and major scholarly contributions within the body of research published over the past decade, thereby offering a holistic understanding of how SNA roles have emerged, expanded, and transformed.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic search across reputable academic databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and SINTA, covering publications dated between 2014 and 2024. Keywords such as “special needs assistant,” “inclusive education,” “elementary school,” and “role dynamics” were used to filter relevant studies. The inclusion criteria required that selected articles focus on inclusive education at the elementary level, explicitly discuss SNA roles, and be published in peer-reviewed journals. The selection process followed two main stages: title/abstract screening and full-text evaluation guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page, 2021), which ensures transparency and rigor in the identification, selection, and synthesis of literature.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This technique allows the researcher to identify core themes, categorize emerging patterns, and interpret thematic relationships to develop a deeper understanding of SNA role dynamics. The analytical procedures involved repeated reading, initial coding, theme generation, theme refinement, and the systematic development of final interpretations. To enhance the credibility of the synthesis, the study employed the principle of constant comparison (Miles et al., 2014), continually comparing findings across sources to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation. This methodological approach was selected due to its strengths in clarifying conceptual developments and variations in practice, enabling the study to comprehensively address the research aim concerning the evolving and multidimensional roles of SNAs in inclusive education.

Result

The synthesis of the selected literature demonstrates that the role of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in inclusive education at the elementary level has expanded substantially over the past decade. SNAs are no longer viewed merely as individual aides but have taken on broader responsibilities as instructional facilitators, emotional-support agents, and key partners in coordinating learning activities. The reviewed studies show increasing expectations for SNAs to adjust instructional materials, support differentiated teaching, and manage classroom dynamics involving students with diverse learning needs. This shift illustrates a growing recognition of SNAs as professional collaborators who contribute meaningfully to the construction of inclusive learning environments.

The PRISMA flow diagram illustrates the structured selection process through which the final body of literature was formed. Initially, a large number of studies were identified; however, many were excluded due to duplication, irrelevance, or misalignment with the focus on elementary-level inclusive education. The title and abstract screening significantly reduced the number of eligible studies, while full-text evaluation further refined the selection to include only research that explicitly discussed SNA roles or

described the implementation of inclusive practices. The resulting corpus represents a concentrated set of studies that are methodologically suitable and conceptually aligned with the aim of capturing the evolving nature of SNA roles. This structured filtering process ensures that the findings presented derive from a coherent and analytically robust foundation.

The synthesis reveals that the roles enacted by SNAs are deeply shaped by the structural conditions of the schools in which they work. Variations in student–assistant ratios, availability of learning spaces, training opportunities, and resource adequacy contribute to the uneven implementation of inclusive practices across different contexts. Many SNAs develop independent adaptive strategies to compensate for structural constraints, such as creating alternative learning materials or relying on informal collaboration with classroom teachers. While such strategies demonstrate strong professional initiative, they also lead to inconsistencies in practice due to their reliance on individual capacity rather than institutional systems. The quality of collaboration among SNAs, teachers, and parents emerges as a critical factor in supporting inclusive education, though this collaboration is often irregular and not embedded within school-wide structures.

Overall, the findings show that SNA roles are situated within a dynamic and evolving landscape shaped by policy, school readiness, and professional demands. Their expanding responsibilities reflect the real needs of inclusive education but simultaneously highlight the urgent requirement for clearer role definitions, stronger professional development systems, and more stable institutional support. These results offer a comprehensive overview of how SNA roles develop, expand, and encounter challenges, underscoring the importance of systemic alignment to ensure high-quality inclusive practices across educational settings.

Table 1. Summary of Main Findings

Focus of Findings	Description
Development of SNA roles	Shift from individual assistance to broader pedagogical and collaborative responsibilities.
Implementation challenges	Limited training, competence gaps, resource shortages, and unequal workloads.
Collaboration dynamics	Contrast between structured partnerships and inconsistent interaction patterns.
Influence of school context	Structural readiness strongly affects how roles are enacted.
Implications	Highlights the need for clearer regulations and stronger institutional support systems.

Discussion

The expansion of Special Needs Assistants' (SNAs) roles identified in this study aligns with findings from earlier research that similarly documents a shift from technical, individual support toward more strategic pedagogical functions. For example, Yunitasari et al. (2024) show how SNAs increasingly participate in material adaptation, behavioral support, and differentiated instructional facilitation, while Mahya et al. (2024) highlight their growing involvement in initial assessments and individualized learning plans at the elementary level. Together, these studies indicate that the evolving responsibilities of SNAs reflect a broader systemic transformation within inclusive education rather than isolated adjustments at individual schools. This observation supports the argument that rising expectations must be matched with strengthened professional capacity to prevent role expansion from becoming counterproductive.

The gap between expectations and institutional support identified in the present synthesis is consistent with observations by Rizqianti et al. (2022) and Walker (2020), both documenting that SNAs frequently assume responsibilities exceeding what their formal preparation has prepared them for. This mismatch generates considerable professional pressure, especially in contexts where classroom teachers rely heavily on SNAs to manage complex cases without structured supervision mechanisms. The discussion thereby emphasizes that without established institutional frameworks covering training pathways, supervision structures, and standardized procedures the role of SNAs will continue to evolve in unpredictable and uneven ways across different school settings. Strengthening institutional governance is essential to ensure that SNAs' contributions are consistent, sustainable, and aligned with the goals of inclusive education.

The present study also confirms prior findings that school structural conditions significantly shape the effectiveness of SNA roles. Rahmanullah et al., (2021) report that student–assistant ratios and the availability of learning resources directly influence the quality of support provided. Similarly, Siregar et al. (2024) demonstrate that schools with stronger infrastructural support tend to implement inclusive instructional practices more consistently and effectively. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing SNA performance not merely as a matter of individual skill but as contingent on structural readiness within schools. Differences in resource allocation across schools lead to unequal opportunities for delivering inclusive services. This reveals that systemic investment rather than individual initiative determines the sustainability of high-quality inclusive practices.

The role of collaboration among SNAs, classroom teachers, and parents emerges as another critical dimension supported by research from Gilson (2024) and Walker (2020). Both studies demonstrate that structured communication and documented coordination significantly improve the effectiveness of intervention strategies. On the other hand,

Mahya et al. (2024) note that in many schools collaboration remains informal and personality-driven rather than institutionalized. This finding highlights the need for a shift from collaboration dependent on personal initiative to mechanisms embedded within school policy. Without formalized procedures such as regular planning meetings, joint development of individualized education programs, and multidisciplinary involvement, collaboration remains inconsistent and difficult to evaluate.

Professionalization emerges as a central theme in both the findings of this study and in prior research. Continuous, practice-oriented training has been shown to enhance SNA competence more effectively than one-time workshops, as demonstrated by Yunitasari et al. (2024). Meanwhile, Rahmanullah et al., (2021) emphasize the importance of mentoring systems within schools to support SNAs in assessment and curriculum adaptation. These findings collectively suggest that long-term professional development supported by mentoring and reflective practice is indispensable for enabling SNAs to meet the growing demands of inclusive education. Short-term interventions are inadequate when responsibilities continue to expand in depth and complexity.

Taken together, the synthesis of findings from this study and the literature illustrates that SNA roles are situated at a critical intersection between policy-driven expectations for inclusive education and the limited capacity of schools to support such roles effectively. The implications of this synthesis point toward several strategic priorities: formalizing role definitions and competency standards for SNAs, establishing sustained professional development structures, improving resource availability and staffing ratios, and institutionalizing collaborative mechanisms. Evidence from earlier studies reinforces the urgency of these recommendations and supports the conclusion that strengthening SNA roles requires systemic rather than individual intervention to ensure equitable and effective inclusive education across diverse elementary school contexts.

Conclusion

The findings of this review indicate that the role of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in elementary-level inclusive education has expanded considerably, shifting from technical assistance to more complex pedagogical, collaborative, and coordinative responsibilities, although this evolution remains constrained by limited structural readiness, unclear professional role boundaries, and insufficient continuous training. Accordingly, stakeholders should establish clear competency standards, strengthen practice-oriented professional development programs, improve student–assistant ratios, ensure adequate infrastructural support, and institutionalize structured collaboration mechanisms to enable the implementation of inclusive education that is consistent, effective, and sustainable across diverse elementary school settings.

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