

A RESOURCE FOR EDUCATION ASSISTANTS

by

Shona Sneddon

B.Ed., Acadia University, 1986

B.A., Acadia University, 1984

A PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

Special Education

VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY

May, 2012

## A Resource for Education Assistants

To meet the requirements of the Master of Education in Special Education, one could choose to write a thesis or create a final project. I decided on a project and completed the research necessary for the beginning of a thesis and used this work as my basis for designing this website and determining the content.

I started with a statement of what I saw as a problem.

### Statement of Problem

Education assistant (EA) support is one of many strategies a school may consider in their on-going endeavor to support learning. EAs are a fundamental part of the school system and are essential participants in the individualized programming for children with diverse needs. They play a key role in supporting students with special needs but who is supporting them?

I then moved on to examine the background of Education Assistants including the value of the EA in our schools, training and professional development.

### Background

Education assistants, also called teacher assistants or paraeducators, were first introduced into American classrooms in response to teacher shortages during the early years of the post-World War II baby boom. Since then they have been employed in countries all over the world and have a number of roles and responsibilities.

Human Rights Commissions throughout Canada have identified special education as a critical issue (Porter, 2008). Education in Canada is provincially mandated; therefore the use of education assistants is different in each province and local school board. EAs provide a range of services which include personal care, behaviour supports, and assistance with educational programs. As of 2008, there were 6472 educational assistants working in elementary and

secondary schools in Canada. Decisions about the use of education assistants can be effected more by factors such as politics, historical practices and advocacy, than by educational research or theoretical foundations. According to Giangreco and Doyle (2007) stressors on the educational system such as large class sizes and classroom teacher preparedness for the diversity presented by students with disabilities are among contributors to increased reliance on education assistants.

### Value of Education Assistants

The responsibilities for EAs are many and each day brings new challenges. As a member of a school team, each EA attempts to balance student needs, teacher expectations, and administrative requests. On top of all that, there is the skill of knowing when to work directly with a student and when to promote independence. The main goal of the EA in my school district is to appropriately challenge every student to make gains toward individual potential (SD#68, 2008). EA responsibilities can include gathering and sharing information about the student to support program design, assist students with learning activities according to the Individual Education Plan (IEP), implement the techniques and strategies outlined in the IEP, and assist in the collection of data for the purpose of evaluating student progress. EAs must consistently model appropriate social skills. Helping to facilitate friendships for students with disabilities can be one of the most difficult tasks anyone will undertake. EAs coach students to use effective communication skills. Daily living skills are a significant part of the day for students with multiple needs and EAs assist with all these tasks (Carroll, 2001). Some provide specialized personal, medical and physiological care and assist with the delivery of instruction to low incidence students. Some are visual language interpreters who provide interpreting for deaf and

hard of hearing students, classmates, and educational staff in order to support students in their school activities and their IEPs.

In my role of School Support Teacher (SST), I work part time in a school of approximately 100 students in Kindergarten to Grade 7. I provide direct assistance to students, assess and refer to district based or outside agencies if necessary, complete the paperwork associated with designations, IEPs and reporting, and collaborate with teachers on effective strategies to help students in the classroom. I also work with education assistants constantly to review the objectives on the IEP to ensure they are appropriate for the student so we will be able to see growth throughout the year. As one person in the role of School Support Teacher, I cannot deliver effective programming for the high numbers of students currently identified and designated in my school without the help of EAs. Education assistants can positively transfer attitudes, skills and learning for students with special needs. It is essential that education assistants receive the necessary training, professional development and opportunities for collegiality to become effective educational partners (Wasykowski, 2001).

According to the Teacher Assistant Guidelines put out by the province of Nova Scotia (Education N.S., 2009), the complexities of responding to the diverse strengths and challenges of the student population requires trained and qualified education assistants in order to support a range of options established by the program planning team.

### Training

The inclusion of students with an ever increasing range of disabilities and support needs in the regular classroom means that special educators often are dispersed across several classrooms. They are not physically present as much as in the past to provide on-the-job training and mentoring (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003b). One year I worked with a student with

autism who required a great deal of individual support. His regular EA had to leave for a two week period and a replacement was hired. Although he had the day plans, IEP and many notes, he found it difficult to maintain the programming standards that had been set. When I set aside other aspects of my job to work with both the EA and student and do some modeling and explanation of our strategies, each day became easier. If a more standardized system of mentoring/training existed, this would not have been necessary.

In some districts, there is a lack of training programs for education assistants. Giangreco conducted a study regarding the feelings of respect, appreciation and acknowledgment of educational assistants. An administrator in this study commented, “We are not showing them respect if we are not equipping them with the training they need” (Giangreco, 2001, p 493). EAs should be able to expect professional opportunities to help them develop skills just as teachers of students with special needs are able to access.

### Professional Development

Even with training from a college or university, the job of an EA can involve students with specific disabilities that require additional in-service opportunities. Although the education assistant is a critical member of the team, he or she is not the whole team and should be provided with appropriate guidance (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000).

In Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer (2001) two of the most frequently identified priorities for education assistants were on the job learning to match responsibilities and access to ongoing learning opportunities. As an EA who was involved in accessing web-based training materials wrote, “I feel that the material covered has helped me understand a broader view of my position as a paraeducator which will improve the quality of services to students” (Giangreco et al., 200, p. 70).

A program will run more smoothly if you make time for specific training with EAs, set up regular meetings and provide feedback. The quality of the services they provide is directly related to the training they receive (Carroll, 2001). When I was able to use a professional development day to show two EAs a computer program that would enable their students to write an account of their day to send home, they immediately implemented the strategy. The students, both with limited verbal skills, were able to share their daily experiences at school with family without the EA or teacher writing in the communication book.

Studies reviewed by Ashbaker, Young, & Morgan (2001) show that education assistants are highly motivated to receive training when it is offered to them in the form of a conference, distance-ed class or a district conference. Learning via the internet has expanded the ability to increase learning for people in all aspects of life. The internet has been shown to be an effective medium of instruction, with a number of advantages over other approaches to staff development. These advantages, according to Bugaj (2002) include time and place flexibility, potential to reach a global audience, easy updating of content and lower development and operating costs.

The idea that EAs who work in classrooms with students with disabilities should have sufficient skills and training for the duties they are assigned is supported by the BC Ministry of Education. The Special Education Policy Manual for British Columbia (Education B.C., 2011) states that in-service training should include opportunities to further develop skills in these areas. Wasykowski (2001) stressed that EAs cannot be effective educational partners if they do not receive regular and ongoing professional development that provides them with essential knowledge, strategies, and philosophical foundations to work in a competent and dedicated fashion with children with diverse learning needs.

EAs are often expected to engage in training and development opportunities that will enhance their abilities to satisfy the requirements of their assignments but in many cases training is offered outside of the school day and without pay. The ad-hoc nature of the EA role often means there is not time for adequate preparation or job-shadowing opportunities before their work assignment. In my district there is often the lack of continuity in employment, not because the EA wants to leave, but due to the nature of the collective agreement. There are some workshops offered during the school year for school teams to attend in order to support the learning of our low incidence students. Unfortunately the advertisements for these are not sent to EAs but to administrators and SSTs. If neither of these groups is interested, willing or able to attend, the professional development of the EA is not extended. Sometimes a small rearrangement in scheduling can mean an EA is able to attend a learning session or is able to take time during the school day to access information on the internet. I try to arrange lieu time for EAs that wish to take advantage of a course that would be beneficial to them and the school.

The final section of my introduction was the purpose of my project -to examine current resources in our district and construct an easily accessible website that can be used as professional development for Education Assistants.

#### Purpose

As increasingly greater numbers of students with moderate to severe disabilities are educated in the regular classroom, EAs will continue to play an important role in the provision of supports. Schools and districts must determine how to provide ongoing supports to allow EAs to provide quality supports (Downing et al., 2000). There may be simple interventions that can be investigated and interwoven into the fabric of the educational community that could inspire excellent performance (Wasykowski, 2001).

The purpose of my study is to examine current resources for professional development available for education assistants. I am interested in providing professional development for EAs with the emphasis on the specific disabilities they may come across and not be prepared for. SD 68 ensures that all personnel who work with students with special needs have access to relevant in-service training opportunities but the professional development days for the EAs are not often education based. The EA guidebook deals with the district vision and philosophy, safe schools, and the union collective agreement. It also contains sections on communication and forms that may be used but it does not provide suggestions on how to work with students with specific disabilities. My goal is to construct a resource that is easily accessible on the school district website and will be used by EAs for ongoing professional development.

Attracting and retaining educational assistants who experience productive levels of job satisfaction is an essential element of building the continuity of a school's capacity to support students with disabilities within general education classrooms.

Regardless of which direction the field or individual schools head, it is clear that EAs do important work in classroom supporting students with and without disabilities. They deserve respect, appreciation and acknowledgement (Giangreco et al., 2001).

As part of my review of the literature, I took a brief look at the role of the EA and the emerging issues occurring within that topic. The chapter concluded with an examination of what is currently available and what is wanted.

#### Role of the educational assistant in our current context

Students with special needs who are included in general education classes often require more attention and individualized assistance than the general education teacher has time to provide. Many areas in the United States are removing special classes and schools and are trying

not to remove supports for the students. Suter and Giangreco (2009) reported that Vermont has a high ratio of students with disabilities in regular classrooms and they attribute this to the extensive and increasing use of education assistants. The EAs are responsible for promoting independence in students while assisting them in accessing curriculum and social interactions.

Much has been written about the role of the EA in our present school system (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2000-2001; Ashbaker, Young, & Morgan, 2001; Carroll, 2001; Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, Aragon, Bernal, Berg De Balderas, & Carroll, 2004; Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; French, 2003; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Wasykowski, 2001). The studies show that the prominent role of the EA is to provide instruction to students. Trautman (2004) reviewed a number of books that provide information on roles and responsibilities of EAs. Role clarification continues to be debated in the literature and it seems that roles are better clarified within school teams.

EA concerns are in responsibilities, relationships and respect. Frequent changes or asking them to “cover” for awhile implies that their assigned role is not essential to the classroom learning process (Riggs, 2002). Although responsible for a number of assignments throughout the day, when Ashbaker et al. (2001) conducted a survey of EAs at conferences in the US, Canada and England, EAs reported that they spend the greatest percentage of their time instructing students. This is confirmed in many articles in the literature (Broer, Edelman, & Giangreco, 2002; Downing et al., 2000; French, 2003; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001a).

Blatchford, Koutsoubou, Bassett, Rubie-Davies, and Webster (2010) examined interactions of educational assistants with students compared with interactions of teachers with students in the UK. They discovered that EAs more frequently supplied students with answers and were more concerned with completing the task than working toward generating

understanding of the concepts with the students. This may lead to the idea that more training is required. EAs often did not understand the concept they were supposed to be helping the students learn, again pointing to additional training or professional development to help them provide the support to the students most in need.

Educational assistants and professional development: what is available and what is wanted?

Just as teachers of students with disabilities need skills and specialized knowledge, so do education assistants. They should be able to expect professional development opportunities which equip them to take on particular roles and tasks. Bourke (2009) in her article about the changing roles of education assistants in Australia says:

[P]rofessional development for any change, and especially the complex changes in culture needed for inclusive education, is about developing and managing a collaborative process of change through reflection on, learning about and sharing meanings and understandings about effective support for all students in ways that value the diversities and celebrate the differences in perspectives of the whole school community (p 824).

A program will run more smoothly if you make time to set up regular meetings, provide feedback and provide continuing professional development.

Although there is information on training for education assistants, there are few examples of continuing professional development specifically designed for EAs highlighted in the literature.

Ashbaker et al., (2001) states that EAs are motivated to receive training when it is offered to them in the form of a conference, distance education class or workshop. They feel that such training makes them more effective. In a study of issues and concerns about education assistant

supports, one person explained, "There are a number of seminars and things that come up that we can go to. But to tell you the truth, I don't know how close they come to really helping us in our jobs" (Broer et al., 2002, p. 59). In other districts, however, EAs expressed resentment about not being sent to conferences, in-service or other professional development opportunities because of funding (Chopra et al., 2004). Attendance at in-service training was reported much less frequently than on the job. Diminished access to these avenues of professional development may be influenced by factors such as: being paid by the hour; few opportunities made available during the school year and attendance not being mandatory; training perceived to be irrelevant; and attendance not translating into job advancement opportunities. In a study by Wall et al. (2005), every education assistant expressed an interest in furthering education. They identified the key area as lack of preparation for handling the behavioural or emotional issues of their students.

Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer (2003) provided follow up data on a tool used by educational teams. It reported that 32% of EAs said they wanted on the job training to match responsibilities. A reported outcome of this support tool was increased morale. As one EA stated, "I feel that I am a valued contributing member of the educational teams I work with." (p71). Just the use of the planning process itself provided a strong message of support and served to raise morale.

On the job training, the leading method in one survey (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009), can be accomplished through mentoring or peer coaching. Mentoring can be used as an "in-house support for professional learning" (Butcher, 2000) and usually includes peer coaching but is a more formal approach. Many EAs work in different physical spaces from their supervising teacher and therefore lack role models to follow or get feedback on their

performance. Peer coaching is a way to determine needs, design training and assess the impact of instruction (Swafford, 2000). Peer coaches form partnerships and work together to ensure the job is done. Consequently, the need to adequately equip EAs with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively serve and support students with disabilities is growing. By identifying key knowledge areas and task requirements in which EAs feel least competent, in-service can be more closely aligned with actual needs. More focused training is required to target what EAs will need to work with specific students in the setting in which they were assigned.

As the role of EAs continue to grow so too does the need for support from principals and classroom teachers. Schools should consider the needs of EAs when planning professional development. EAs want information that is usable and applicable to their work assignment. The program of professional development must have immediate applicability of skills or concepts.

Knowledge and skills that are taught but are not of immediate value tend to be forgotten. According to French (2003), more than a single workshop session is needed in order to apply skills to the classroom. Additional coaching and feedback is needed.

In order to perform their duties effectively, education assistants need specific knowledge and skills. One of the ways to ensure this is to provide relevant training opportunities and create a system where they can be compensated in some way for the time spent in training. Creative means to honour professional growth through training initiatives, educational partnerships and value in the community of education must be found (Wasykowski, 2001). As increasingly greater numbers of students with moderate to severe disabilities are educated in the regular classroom, education assistants will continue to play an important role in the provision of support. Schools and districts must determine how to provide ongoing support to allow education assistants to continue to provide quality support to students.

I want to be part of our district's efforts to provide ongoing support to education assistants. This website will help to provide some of the knowledge necessary to support students with disabilities.

<http://earesource.yolasite.com/>

## References

- Ashbaker, B. Y., & Morgan, J. (2000-2001, Winter). Growing roles for teachers' aides. Streamlined Seminar, 19, 1-3. Alexandria, VA, USA: National Association of Elementary School Principals.
- Ashbaker, B. Y., Young, J. R., & Morgan, J. (2001). Paraeducators: Their roles in the instructional process. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, (p. 15). Dallas.
- Blatchford, P., Koutsoubou, M., Bassett, P., Rubie-Davies, C. M., & Webster, R. (2010). Enhancing learning? A comparison of teacher and teaching assistant interactions with pupils. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 21 (4), 429-499.
- Bourke, P. (2009). Professional development and teacher aides in inclusive education contexts. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13 (8), 817-827.
- Broer, S. M., Edelman, S. W., & Giangreco, M. F. (2002). "That was then, this is now!" Paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Exceptionality*, 10 (1), 47-64.
- Bugaj, S. J. (2002). Improving the skills of special education paraprofessionals: A rural school district's model for staff development. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 21 (1), 16-25.
- Carroll, D. (2001, Nov/Dec). Considering paraeducator training, roles and responsibilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 60-64.
- Carter, E., O'Rourke, L., Sisco, L. G., & Pelsue, D. (2009). Knowledge, responsibilities, and training needs of paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, 344-359.

- Chopra, R. V., Sandoval-Lucero, E., Aragon, L., Bernal, C., Berg De Balderas, H., & Carroll, D. (2004). The paraprofessional role of connector. *Remedial and Special Education, 25*, 219-231.
- Downing, J. E., Ryndak, D. L., & Clark, D. (2000). Paraeducators in inclusive classroom: Their own perceptions. *Remedial and Special Education, 21* (3), 171-181.
- Education assistant guide. (2008). Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada: School District 68.
- Education, B. C. (2011, February). Special Education Services A manual of policies, procedures and guidelines. Retrieved July 2011, from British Columbia Ministry of Education web site: <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/ppandg.htm>
- Education, N. S. (2009). Teacher assistant guidelines/Nova Scotia. Halifax: Department of Education.
- French, N. K. (2003). Paraeducators in special education programs. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 36* (2), 1-16.
- Giangreco, M. F., & Broer, S. M. (2005). Questionable utilization of paraprofessionals in inclusive schools: Are we addressing symptoms or causes? *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 20* (1), 10–26.
- Giangreco, M. F., & Doyle, M. B. (2007). Teacher assistants in inclusive schools. In L. Florian (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of special education* (pp. 429-439). London: Sage.
- Giangreco, M. F., Backus, L., CichoskiKelly, E., Sherman, P., & Mavropoulos, Y. (2003a). Paraeducator training materials to facilitate inclusive education: initial field-test data. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 22* (1), 14-23.
- Giangreco, M. F., Ededman, S. W., & Broer, S. M. (2003b). Schoolwide planning to improve paraeducator supports. *Exceptional Children, 63*-79.

- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., & Broer, S. M. (2001a). Respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 67 (4), 485-498.
- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., & Broer, S. M. (2001b). Paraprofessional support of students with disabilities: Literature from the past decade. *Exceptional Children*, 68 (1), 45-63.
- Giangreco, M. F., Suter, J. C., & Doyle, M. B. (2010). Paraprofessionals in inclusive schools: A review of recent research. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 20, 41-57.
- Kitchenham, A., & Chasteauneuf, C. (2010). Teacher supply and demand: Issues in northern Canada. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 33 (4), 869-896.
- Porter, G. L. (2008). Making Canadian Schools Inclusive: A Call to Action. *Canadian Education Association*, 48 (2), 62-66.
- Suter, J. C., & Giangreco, M. F. (2009). Numbers that count: Exploring special education and paraprofessional service delivery in inclusion-oriented schools. *Journal of Special Education*, 43, 81-93.
- Trautman, M. L. (2004). Paraeducator Books. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 39, 181-182.
- Wall, S., Davis, K. L., WinklerCrowley, A. L., & Whaite, L. L. (2005). The urban paraeducator goes to college. *Remedial and Special Education*, 26 (3), 183-190.
- Wasykowski, J. (2001, August). Perspectives of teacher assistants working with students with diverse learning needs. Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.