The Importance of Continual Professional Development Opportunities Being Offered to Educational Assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdioceses in Both Elementary and High Schools

by

Josipa Zdrllic

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We accept this Thesis as conforming to the required standard.

Michael Hammond-Todd, Thesis Faculty Supervisor
Faculty of Education,
Vancouver Island University

Dr. David Paterson, Dean, Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University
Abstract

The research thesis provides a brief history and background knowledge regarding the lack of clear roles and responsibilities for educational assistants within today’s British Columbian school system. Educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese (CISVA) completed an online survey regarding their prior knowledge and training that relates to their current students. 43 educational assistants also comment on their own perspectives and needs regarding professional development opportunities within the CISVA. A mixed method approach was used which included qualitative and quantitative research questions which unsurprisingly showed that educational assistant within the CISVA would like more relevant professional development opportunities to be offered. Base on the study’s results, it is recommended that the CISVA and the public schools within British Columbia offer more professional development opportunities to their educational staff during school hours. It is also recommended that more schools hire certified educational assistants and have the certified educational assistants work with the students who have special needs. This is deemed important because of their background knowledge and prior training which directly affects the students learning success.
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Thank you.
Dedication

To my babies, dream the biggest dreams possible and chase them. Never let anyone tell you that they are too large or out of reach. You can achieve anything you set your minds to. I did this for you. Anything is possible if you allow yourself to dream it. I love you more than life itself.
Chapter 1: Introduction

“With an education you all have everything you need to rise above all of the noise and fulfill every last one of your dreams”. - Michelle Obama, June 16, 2015

The role of an educational assistant is becoming more and more prevalent in today’s classrooms due to the increase of students with special needs. In many classrooms, the classroom teacher is no longer the only adult in the room which was not the case until recent years. Together, the classroom teacher and educational assistant work towards achieving a classroom space that is safe, comforting and inclusive for all the students. In this chapter, the unclear roles and responsibilities of an educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese and within the field of research will be discussed. Background knowledge and, personal experiences will be shared along with research data that shows how unclear the duties of an educational assistant are and how educational assistants themselves are stating this new era of inclusive classrooms is causing blurred boundaries between the classroom teacher and them. It is important to recognize and acknowledge the unclear roles and responsibilities of an educational assistant in order to understand why educating and training educational assistants with more professional development opportunities is a must. Literature and government policy both clearly state that educational assistants need to be better professionally developed for numerous reasons which will be discussed further in this chapter. This research was inspired by questions educational assistants were asking regarding professional development opportunities within the CISVA. The problem of the lack of
professional development opportunities leads to my research question which is shared later in this chapter.

**Background Knowledge**

The roles and responsibilities of educational assistants throughout the years have been very unclear. As French and Chopra (1999) state, “Current research is limited to a small number of studies clarifying the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals” (p. 259). Due to this lack of clarity, many problems and questions have been brought forth in special education literature and discussions. Without a clear definition and role description, educational assistants and the classroom teachers with whom they work with feel unsure of their daily roles and responsibilities. Giangreco et al., (2010) states “Many [educational assistants] felt they were asked to perform duties that were unsafe, tasks for which they were untrained, or tasks beyond the reasonable expectations of the job” (p. 44). This unfortunately, in my experience, has become a disservice for all the students that require EA assistance. When there is a lack of clarity, educational assistants can find themselves taking direction from special education teachers, directors, classroom teachers, and principals which directly impacts the vision of the classroom. As such, the educational assistants are being pulled in different directions and are being required to adapt their roles and duties to meet these expectations because “while teacher assistants engage in a wide variety of duties (e.g., clerical, personal care, social/behavioural support, supervision of students), their roles have become increasingly instructional over time” (Giangreco, 2013, p. 95). In my opinion, this can cause even more confusion regarding role clarity and it raises the question if the educational assistants have the educational background to be teaching students so directly.
The underlying issue, in my personal experience and in the research literature is that many of the classroom teachers and principals do not have any extra training in special education and in working with educational assistants, “few training programs for teachers working with paraprofessionals have been developed; further, little empirical research has been conducted to identify the skills and knowledge that teachers or other professionals need for successfully supervising the work of paraprofessionals” (Wallace et al., 2001, p. 527). As a result, the educational assistants are taking directions from individuals who do not have the tools or knowledge to properly guide the educational assistants or know how to properly utilize them in the classroom. As stated in Wallace et al. (2001) “Teachers, however, are rarely prepared through preservice on in-service training to effectively work with paraprofessionals in a way that will improve student performance” (p. 522). In order to have classroom teachers and educational assistants work together collaboratively and more effectively, professional development opportunities need to be given to both parties. At the same time, by doing this, both parties will have a clearer understanding of each other’s roles and responsibilities within the classroom and have realistic expectations of each other. By having realistic and clearer expectations laid out for educational assistants, in my opinion, everyone especially the students, in the classroom will reap the benefits. An example of this would be when an educational assistant enters a classroom, he or she knows exactly what their task is. Tasks could include; helping a specific student in the classroom, which may or may not be designated or attending to a small group of students that need the extra one to one support. By establishing clear expectations prior to class, the educational assistant is not standing around the classroom waiting for guidance or direction from the teacher; instead, their time is being used meaningfully and effectively.
Personal Context

I started my journey as an educational assistant within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese before I began my career as a special education teacher. I was an educational assistant for five years prior to becoming a classroom teacher, which eventually lead to my current role as the Student Services Department Head. My time as an educational assistant was extremely insightful and valuable. I hold such value to this experience because I was able to see the different working layers of a classroom. My interactions with the students were dependent on the classroom teacher and the expectations they had set out for me. I had very little discussions with the classroom teachers about my role and my place within their classroom setting, which was confusing at times. Other educational assistants have also expressed confusion which was stated in the study done by Riggs and Muller (2001), “Even when written job descriptions were provided, paraeducators felt they did not adequately describe the job responsibilities. One paraeducator laughing commented, ‘my job description lists the things I do and also says things like, ‘whatever else happens today’’” (p. 58).

When I began working as an EA, I was not only young but also had very little EA training. At the time, I had just completed my Bachelor’s degree and needed a break from school. Becoming an educational assistant opened my eyes to the realm of special education and the need for well-trained and educated employees. When I began working as an educational assistant, I received no official training from the school. Unfortunately, I did not receive any information on school policy, procedures, school expectations and staff dynamics. No professional development opportunities were offered to me directly; instead, I was asked
to do busy work around the school while teachers attended workshops on professional development days. I was not given a clear definition of what my role and responsibilities were, nor any real guidance was ever provided with regards to the different needs of students that I would be working with. I quickly learned how to make decisions that would impact my student’s education and later hoped that these decisions were the right choices. As stated in Giangreco and Broer (2005), “nearly 70% agreed that they are making curricular and instructional decisions without always having oversight by a teacher or special educator” (p. 23). In addition to these issues, because of the lack of clarity around the role of an educational assistant, classroom teachers were often using their educational assistants as their personal assistants, rather than utilizing the EA in a way that was best suited for the student.

In many schools, paraprofessionals are assigned to teachers at a specific time of day, one or more times each week. Paraprofessionals go from one room to the next, coming into classroom and hoping that they can jump in and help. Teachers are working harder than ever to ensure that all students make adequately yearly progress. Planning for the multiple needs I their classrooms leaves little time for teachers to plan for meaningful small-group work with a paraprofessional that comes and goes from the classroom. It’s little wonder that paraprofessionals sometimes simply help teachers get caught up on copying materials, putting up bulletin boards, and scoring assignments. (Cobb, 2007, p. 687)

Working with special needs students can be very trying and exhausting but rewarding at the same time. An educational assistant, in my opinion, has the hardest job within a
classroom setting. Educational assistants must think on their feet quickly, adapt as they receive assignments/projects and manage their student(s) behavior, meanwhile trying to figure out their place within a classroom. The concept of an inclusive classroom should not stop at just the students. Instead it should extend to the educators, which include the classroom teacher and the educational assistant.

This was reflected in how paraeducators attempted to ensure that the teacher was not ‘burdened’ by the inclusion student. In other words, they wanted to ensure that the experience of having an inclusion student would be a positive one for the teacher. Further, most of the paraeducators felt that their own success would be defined by how well the teacher accepted the inclusion student. (Marks, Schrader & Levine, 1999, p. 319)

It is important to note that the current British Columbian educational system is moving away from this idea of having a “burden” (p. 319) with the implementation of the new redesigned curriculum. As the new curriculum is being implemented, it lends to the many different learning styles and levels that are found within a current typical inclusive classroom. Government policies throughout the years have also changed to reflect inclusion, equality and diversity which is seen in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982): “every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability” (Section 15). By having such diverse classrooms in today’s world, the mindset of special education is shifting, this enables the potential growth that can affect the lives of many
future students. However, in my experience, this was not the case; instead, educational assistant tasks would constantly change to suit the best interests of the classroom teacher, rather than the student they were designated and trained to work with.

Statement of Problem

The British Columbia Ministry of Education Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines (2016) describes staff development:

An ongoing staff development plan is essential for all staff, so they can more successfully meet the special needs of students. Districts should ensure that all personnel who work with students with special needs have access to relevant in-service training opportunities in order to foster evidence-informed practice. For specialized personnel, there is a need to focus on opportunities within their area of specialty and the specific roles they play in the service delivery system. (p. 14–15)

This definition clearly defines what is expected from school communities with regards to professional development; however, Giangreco, Edleman, Broer & Doyle (2001) state that educational assistants lack staff development opportunities, “The non-database literature suggests that preservice training for paraprofessionals is virtually nonexistent and in-service training continues to be insufficient” (p. 52-53). In my personal experience within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese, the lack of professional development training is seen with the actual lack of professional development workshops being offered to the educational assistants. Not many workshops are offered through the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese central office during school hours, or in my experience, if a
School has an onsite professional development workshop, educational assistants are often asked to stay at home in order to save the school money or asked to participate in a professional development seminar that has no relevance to their current position. To me, this is unacceptable. Schools should be taking advantage of professional development opportunities more by sending their educational assistants to workshops that will better them as EA’s which in turn, will allow the educational assistants to provide better services to the students. This is an important issue that needs to be further discussed by teacher, educational assistants’ principals and school districts. The EdCan Network (2015) states;

One of the clearest findings from modern research is that “one-time” workshops have little long-term impact on how someone teaches. Research also confirms that all forms of Professional Development require a sustained commitment of time and resources; that teachers need to have the chance to put what they learned into practice and to reflect on how new ideas and teaching approaches work within their classrooms; and that students are more successful when teachers have meaningful, ongoing, Professional Development opportunities.

This statement can be paralleled with educational assistant’s professional development opportunities because many professional development workshops provide new strategies and special education programs that reflect current research which otherwise many EA’s would not be exposed to. Most educational assistants are not given time to reflect on the new research and strategies because they are needed so desperately in the classroom. By providing time to EA’s and the necessary resources, the implementation process of these new programs and strategies
will be smoother, which in turn affects the student(s) education. This will then positively affect student learning; the growth of student progress will be reflected within the classroom setting.

Another current issue that is present in our schools is that teacher professional development workshops are being offered to staff but many of the topics that are being discussed are often not applicable to educational assistants. Why is a specialized option of professional development not being offered towards educational assistants? Specifically, why is there a lack of educational assistants’ workshops within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese? Why must educational assistants give up their own personal time to be better educated meanwhile, the expectation for teachers is opposite. This imbalance of professional development opportunities is seen strictly with the actual number of workshops being offered throughout the school year. Within the CISVA, educational assistants are offered two specific workshops a year. These specific cornerstone workshops run between the times of four to eight at night. The educational assistants are not paid extra to attend these professional developments workshops instead, it is expected that the EA’s work a full day of work at their school then attend this workshop on their own personal time if they want to gain any extra training/knowledge. Many educational assistants are asking to be in-serviced by their schools because of their ever so demanding roles and responsibilities (Figure 1.1). Very little emphasis is placed on the education and training of educational assistants because the primary focus of the school is to in-service the teachers. This is a problem. (Table 1.1)
Figure 1.1: Professional Development Opportunities

Question posed: Would you like to be offered professional development opportunities for your field of work?

Table 1.1: Problems Vs. Challenges Vs. Opportunities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of emphasis being placed on training educational assistants</td>
<td>Allowing for time off to attend training sessions</td>
<td>Meaningful program implementation that benefits the student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allowing for meaningful time to process and reflect upon the training session</td>
<td>Better service provided to the school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities to be offered during work hours</td>
<td>Being certified or recertified in programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staffing</td>
<td>Employees feeling valued and respected</td>
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<td>Budget</td>
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The problem with not providing enough professional development opportunities or specific training workshops for educational assistants affects the specials needs students directly. Research and programs are constantly changing in special education that reflect new research
(Council for Exceptional Children, 2019). It is critical for students to be provided with the most up to date information because they are the ones being directly affected by it. More time needs to be allotted in a term for professional development and time to reflect upon the information that was presented. Not allowing for this is a disservice to the students, educational assistants and the schools because the information that was provided is not being implemented meaningfully.

Special needs students are very complex and have needs that are very specific, which causes research to change quickly. Shouldn’t educational assistants be the first to receive the most up to date training since they are the ones working so closely with the students? If the lack of in-service is present in today’s schools, how then can this issue be solved? How can the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese, the public-school system, and the individual schools come together, and provide their employees with the most up to date education and or training?

**Rationale for Study of Problem**

Tews and Lupart (2008) draw upon the research from French and Pickett (1997) which states, “Paraprofessionals have been found to be engaging in a broad range of tasks for which they were untrained to perform” (p. 39-40). In recent years, there has been an increase of educational assistants preforming tasks within school settings for which they are not properly trained to execute. For example, as stated by Ken Durkacz (2018):

It was noted repeatedly that educational assistants felt students with whom they were supposed to be working with in academic achievement were being short changed, because educational assistants were spending so much time on students with profound behavioural issues. Many of these students are not identified but
their behaviours are so outrageous, they are taking up more and more time.

Educational assistants are called away from their charges regularly, any time chaos occurs.

Since there is no BC standardization of education for educational assistants, it is hard to know which educational assistants have the correct skills and which have been grandfathered into the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese system without any type of specific education and/or training. To offer our students the best education possible, it is important to continuously educate our school staff, especially educational assistants.

One of those most fundamental conceptual and practical problems associated with the heavy reliance on teacher assistants to support the academic and social needs of students with disabilities is the simple truth that we are assigning the least qualified personnel to student who present the most complex learning challenges.

(Giangreco, 2013, p. 97)

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research study is to acknowledge the current issues that educational assistants face in their daily school life. The purpose of this research is to try and solve these discrepancies found within the current Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese system and related it to the public-school system. I will be conducting a survey research through Google Forms. A mixed methods research design will be used, which consists of quantitative and qualitative questions. Participants will be recruited through an online email and/or a survey invitation that will be placed in the educational assistants’ mailboxes. Principals and/or learning assistance teachers from each Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese were
contacted by the researcher. Each principal/learning assistance teacher were asked to distribute the survey via email or through a staff announcement during a staff meeting. There are 40 elementary schools and eight high schools within the CISVA. One elementary school and three high schools were contacted, even though they are considered non-diocesan but follow the CISVA regulations. In this current study, 43 educational assistants participated.

Limitations of this Study

The survey is to be completed on a voluntary basis therefore not all Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese educational assistants participated in the study. Each participant gave consent before they begin the survey. Since all schools within the CISVA were contacted, which is a total of 52 schools, educational assistants from my present school were also asked to participate. It was made clear in the email invitation that participation was voluntary and anonymous; however, the researchers identity was disclosed therefore could have deterred participant from that one school.

The sample size of the survey is small. 43 educational assistants completed the survey, even though there are over 300 educational assistants employed within the CISVA system. The scope of the study can also be considered narrow due to the fact that only schools within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese were asked to participate. Since the researcher works within the CISVA, the research was meant to reflect that system of education.

Principals and some learning assistance teachers were contacted by the researcher and were asked to announce the survey to their educational assistant staff. It is assumed that all principals/LAC teachers extended the survey invitation, however; due to the small sample size, it can be assumed that not all principals/LAC teachers made the announcement. By not knowing if
all principals/LAC teachers extended the survey invitation, this must be considered as a limitation as well.

Lastly, the survey is web based which can be considered a limitation. If an educational assistant is unfamiliar with online surveys or the process of answering questions online, then they might have a difficult time navigating themselves through the survey. Despite these limitations, the research gathered from the survey provides important information to the CISVA central office and to the field of special education in British Columbia. Currently, there is a limited amount of research being done on educational assistants and professional development opportunities within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese. In order to service our students, the best way possible, it is important that continued research be done on this topic. By bringing attention to the topic of professional development opportunities and the need for more training workshops, it is my hope that more chances will be given to the educational assistants within the system to attend these workshops. By having more EA’s educated and trained in specific topics, the level of service towards special education students will raise therefore, causing a raise in the quality of service delivery that is being provided to the students within the CISVA system.

**Potential Value of Findings**

The findings of my study were based upon a mixed methods approach. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected. By having both types of data collected, it allowed the educational assistants to express their opinions while being asked specific questions regarding professional development opportunities. Based upon the results and the number of participants who completed the survey, I was able to establish data trends and interpretations. Based upon
these data trends and interpretations, generalizations were made. From these generalizations, recommendations were made for the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese and the public-school system. It is my intention that the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese will make changes to the current system of professional development opportunities and implement the workshops that the educational assistants are requesting and provide the necessary time to reflect upon the new knowledge learned in order to provide better service delivery.

This research will also contribute to the field of special education beyond the CISVA and the local public-school in British Columbia. The research indicates a larger problem in British Columbia. A larger emphasis should be placed on certification programs and the prior knowledge needed to work with special needs students. The role of an educational assistant needs to be further clarified and outlined in government documents that all schools must follow. Higher expectations need to be placed on educational assistants and their educational level. The expectations between teachers and educational assistants should be the same in regards to having the proper educational background in order to work with students who have various needs. The Ministry of Education must re-evaluate the question if non-certified educational assistants should be working with special needs students. Would parents of these special needs students approve knowing their child is receiving support from someone that has zero background knowledge in the area of special education? Probably not.

The Provincial Government of British Columbia also needs to reassess its current standards regarding educational assistants and the lack of professional development opportunities that are being offered within their various districts. It is important that the
government places an importance on professional development and that all staff within the school setting has the right to attend these opportunities regardless of school budgets. If the government places an importance on this matter, districts and principals will be forced to follow these guidelines and educational assistants will have equal opportunities to professional development opportunities and equal opportunities to further their knowledge.

This research highlights the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese and the needs that their educational assistants are asking for within their system; however, their points of views speak volumes and can be transcended into all educational models within Canada. In order to best service our special needs students, the various Provincial governments and even the Federal government need to reconsider the current model of practice and ask if the students’ needs are truly being met and if the students are receiving the best possible education. It is essential that all students regardless of special needs, obtain the same educational standards from their instructors and schools.

Research Importance

It is my intent that the educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese will express their feelings and knowledge regarding their professional development needs and desires. These professional development needs and desires will be shared with the CISVA central office who creates, develops and hosts professional development workshops for educational assistants. The research can be further expanded to the public schooling system in British Columbia, where current educational assistant professional development opportunities practices can be reviewed and revised.
This study will also give the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese an insight to what their employees want are within the realm of professional development. Furthermore, this will provide information regarding prior knowledge that an educational assistant has or would need while working with special needs students within the CISVA system. Due to the lack of research regarding the topic within the CISVA, this research will also provide insight and allow the CISVA central office to review their current procedures regarding hiring, role, responsibilities and training needs. Lastly, this research is intended for the contribution to the literature in the field on knowledge, roles, responsibilities and special education.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored how educational assistants have increased their presence in today’s classrooms. Their roles and responsibilities have continued to change throughout the years which has caused lack of clarity regarding educations, training and boundaries. Educational assistants are lacking the professional development opportunities when compared to classroom teachers. This difference is evident in the actual amount of professional development workshops being offered within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese. The criteria regarding education and training for an educational assistant is dependent on the school within the CISVA. Some schools within the system seek diplomas/certificates in special education, while some schools simply accept single courses. There is no standardization of education within the CISVA therefore; how does a school really know if an educational assistant has the correct knowledge and training to suit their school’s needs? This thesis looks at educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese and asks them for their personal opinions regarding professional development opportunities and training workshops.
In the upcoming chapter, a literature review will show the gaps in research regarding the clarity of roles and responsibilities for educational assistants. Different perspectives will also be provided which gives insight to the whole school community regarding special educations and special needs students. In chapter three, an overview and explanation will be given regarding the methods and methodology used to justify this research thesis. The study’s limitations and participants will also be further discussed. In chapter four the data from the online survey will be revealed. The data has been put into various charts and graphs that correspond to the research questions and allows the results to be interpreted easier. The thesis concludes with chapter five where the data is analyzed and discussed in further depth. Recommendations are made to the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese, public school system within British Columbia and to the field of literature.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go”.

- Dr. Seuss, 1978, p. 27

This chapter focuses on research studies that were conducted regarding educational assistants and the lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities and the lack of preservice training. This chapter is divided into sections based upon the different perspectives within a school community. The different perspectives looked at are; the school perspective, the educational assistant perspective, the student perspective and finally, the parent perspective. With the data provided by these studies, feedback and recommendations were given regarding educational assistants and the need for more professional development and clearer role definitions. I conclude this chapter with the explanation of gaps found within current literature related to the study of educational assistants and the lack of professional development opportunities, role clarification and clear responsibilities.

History of Educational Assistants

In 1975, the United States of American passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which protected students with disabilities rights to attend public school. Until then, most students with disabilities were homeschooled. The role of the educational assistant within a classroom emerged in the 1980s. It began because parents were demanding their special needs child to be included in a regular classroom. In today’s environment, a regular classroom is better known as an inclusive classroom (Caustin-Theoharis and Kluth, 2014, p. 3). In the 1990’s, schools were seeing an increase in students who required extra support; as a result, an influx of
educational assistants being hired was seen. From the 2000’s to present, multiple different types of acts and legislation laws were passed which demanded inclusion within schools.

*Table 2.1: Policies Since 2000*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislation Law/Act/Resource Guide</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Child Left Behind Act</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual with Disabilities Act</td>
<td>Created: 1975 Revised: 2004</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Education Planning</td>
<td>Created:1996 Revised: 2009</td>
<td>British Columbia, Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for students with special needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Services: A</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>British Columbia, Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manual of policies, procedures,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and guidelines</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within Canada, the role of an educational assistant can be still considered fairly new. In 1995, the British Columbian Teacher’s Federation and CUPE BC met to discuss the role and responsibilities of an educational assistants. However, this committee was unable to establish a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities until 2001. In 2009, the committee once again met and revised the roles and responsibilities. This current document outlining roles and responsibilities is still in place. The province of British Columbia also revised their Individual Educational Planning for Students with Specials Needs resource guide. This guide is a resource for teachers who are implementing Individual Education Plans (IEP’s) and educational assistants are mentioned within the document regarding classroom collaboration. The Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese currently does not have a document on their website that outlines the roles and responsibilities of an educational assistant.
A past history of the emerging role of an educational assistant within the CISVA system is also not given on the website. Very limited information is given by the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese regarding educational assistants. This can be due to the fact that individual schools within the system have the right to oversee educational assistants however they see fit. Due to this internal inconsistency, not all educational assistants have the same privileges. It is unclear why the CISVA central office has not made a document outlining the roles and responsibilities for an educational assistant.

**Description of Field**

There is limited research on educational assistants and the need for in-service training and professional development training. A reoccurring theme, however within the research, is the lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities of educational assistants. In order to look further into the roles and responsibilities of an educational assistant and the need for more in-service training, one must look at policies and documents that were put into place regarding inclusion and the role of the educational assistants in an inclusive classroom.

The British Columbian government:

Promotes an inclusive education system in which students with special needs are fully participating members of a community of learners. Inclusion describes the principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their education programs (2006).

The BC government believes that a collaborative approach needs to be taken when working within an inclusive setting. The members that are listed by the government are; teachers, parents, educational assistants, students and administrative staff. All members are to be active in the
planning process of the student’s Individualized Education Plan, better known as an IEP. It is outlined that, “there is collaboration and ongoing consultation among teachers, administrative and support personnel, parents, students and representatives if district/community/regional agencies” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p.12). Inclusion promotes all collaborative members to be active.

The Ministry of Education states, “Parents play a vital role in the education of their children with special needs by working in partnership with educators and other service personnel” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 10). Parents have the opportunity to provide feedback and insight into their child’s educational plan, which usually occurs during the students IEP meeting. Parents see behaviours from their child which can be different compared to a classroom environment; therefore, their input is valuable. Including parents in their child’s education is vital because it allows them to feel included and active members of the team.

Administration should also be included in program planning. Many principals or vice principals attend IEP meetings or other school-based team meetings. It is important that administration attends these meetings because the school is held liable for all the goals and objectives that are listed on the student’s IEP. The Ministry of Education explicitly states, “principals should ensure that a school-based team is operational in the school and facilitate the collaborative efforts of the members in meeting the special needs of students” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 9). It is important that the administration be knowledgeable with choice about their students and their educational plans.

Two vital roles in an inclusive classroom belong to the classroom teachers and the educational assistants. Both see the student on a regular basis therefore are most knowledgeable
about the student’s strengths, weaknesses and actual abilities in the classroom setting. The
British Columbia Ministry of Education Special Education Services: A manual of policies,
procedures, and guidelines (2016) goes on to outline the role of an educational assistant:

Teachers’ assistants play a key role in many programs for students with special
needs, performing functions which range from personal care to assisting the
teacher with instructional programs. Under the direction of a teacher they may
play a key role in implementing the program. While teachers’ assistants may
assist in the collection of data for the purpose of evaluating student progress, the
teachers are responsible for evaluating and reporting on the progress of the
student to parents. (p. 10)

The government sets out clear expectations for roles and training needed for both
teachers and educational assistants by stating, “teachers are expected to design programs for
student with special needs” and “in cases where teachers’ assistants perform health-related
procedures they should be given child-specific training by a qualified health professional” (p.
10). Teachers and educational assistants work together to provide the student with the best
services possible within an inclusive classroom. It is not the role of the EA to plan for the
student; instead, that responsibility lies on the teacher. It is important that new educational
assistants are aware of these guidelines because they should not be making educational,
program-based decisions without the proper training and guidance.

The School Perspective

This section will discuss the role and relationship of the classroom teacher and the
educational assistant and how these relationships affect student learning. Based on the
redesigned BC curriculum, the curricular competencies allow the classroom teacher to be freer with their service delivery. Since today’s classrooms are filled with such diverse learning needs, service delivery should be reflective of that and a collaborative teaching approach should be taken. By taking a collaborative approach, the classroom teacher should be more involved with the actual program planning process for all their students, which includes their special education students. An educational assistant should be helping with the implementation of the program and/or providing feedback regarding the program that has been designed by the teacher and other specialists. Even though educational assistants work closely with their students, they do not have the same educational background of a classroom teacher, therefore, should not be designing student programs.

Giangreco, Broer & Edelman (2001) discussed the issue of classroom teacher and educational assistant engagement. The purpose of the study was to show how educational assistants were used within two different types of classroom settings. They hypothesized that different settings would affect the engagement level of the classroom teacher. The researchers compared teacher engagement with students who had one-on-one educational assistant support and a program-based educational assistant support. The study used a descriptive, qualitative method. Data was collected through interviews, observations and questionnaires. All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. The collected data was then coded into 24 different codes by a computer application. The participants of the study belonged to 4 different schools found in the state of Vermont from various elementary, middle and high schools. Participants were contacted based upon another research study that was previously conducted by different researchers.
Common themes indicate that the educational assistants who worked one-on-one with students, showed a lack of teacher engagement between the student and classroom teacher. The educational assistants carried most of the academic responsibilities and the classroom teacher and educational assistant did not work together. Program based educational assistants worked closely with the classroom teacher and “general classroom teachers were more engaged with students with disabilities when those students were supported by a program-based paraprofessional. Conversely, classroom teachers were less engaged with students with disabilities when those students were supported by one-on-one paraprofessionals” (p. 78). These findings provide insight to a very important topic. The more involved a school-based team is with the student’s learning needs, the more engaged the teacher is and the role of an educational assistant becomes more defined. The researchers provide a valid point. A team approach is more valuable than an one-on-one approach. Students benefit more from active teacher engagement.

It is important to have team collaboration when working with students who have disabilities. The study once again clearly outlines how the educational assistant’s roles and responsibilities need to be clearly outlined to keep the classroom teacher engaged, which in turn, positively affects the students.

Giangreco, Broer and Edelman (2002a), examined if educational assistants were being properly utilized within the classroom. A plot study was used to gather information by using interviews and questionnaires. The study’s participants were educational assistants, special education teachers, parents, administrators and general classroom teachers.

The participants indicated that priority needed to be placed on educational assistant roles and responsibilities, increase training opportunities and better work environments. The schools
rated themselves on their abilities prior to implementing new programs for educational assistants. They then rated themselves once more after using the same criteria a year later. All participating schools rated themselves higher after the implementation of new EA programs. A self-rating scale was used. The study concluded that no other comparable processes or data was found within the special education field and suggested that more research needed to be done on the planning process between schools and staff.

Both studies tried to fill the research gap about teacher engagement with students who had disabilities. The studies demonstrated how unclear the roles and responsibilities were between general classroom teachers and educational assistants. With unclear roles and responsibilities, educational assistants end up doing more individualized teaching without having the proper training or education while the classroom teacher’s role was less involved. It is important to work as a team and keep the student’s best interests in mind when collaboratively working on a student’s education plan.

The Educational Assistant Perspective

This section discusses the educational assistant perspective and how they view themselves within the school system. It is important to note that all studies below have a reoccurring theme of increased professional development opportunities need to be offered by the schools. If educational assistants are openly expressing their need/want for more up to date training, then they should be given the opportunity. Since the demand for training is there, why are schools and administrators not listening to these demands and implementing more professional development workshops?
Downing, Ryndak & Clark (2000) examined and questioned job roles, training needs and team relationships. The research goal was to have educational assistants describe their own personal work experiences. The study gathered first-hand information regarding the lack of appropriate training, “correcting possible misconceptions” (p. 172) and establishing clear roles between staff members.

Sixteen educational assistants were recruited based upon special education teacher referrals. To participate, the educational assistants had to work with moderate or severe student needs for at least 50% of their work day. A semi-structured qualitative method of research was used. Individual interviews were conducted as a way of collecting data. Guided questions were used and recorded, which were later transcribed and checked for accuracy. The results of the study were broken down into five themes. Each theme discussed the roles and responsibilities of educational assistants within the classroom. It also stated that there was a lack of support and guidance for educational assistants. The was a reoccurring theme about properly training and providing up to date professional development training for educational assistants. The finding could inform potential policy and professional development decisions.

Educational assistants and their role perception were the focus of Riggs and Mueller (2001) study. The research explored the EAs perception of conditions relating to their employment. A mixed method approach was used to collect data. A quantitative survey was used along with a qualitative interview method.

Participants of the study came from school districts that implemented or were implementing inclusive classrooms in New England. The participants were divided into two groups. One group completed a survey, while the others were interviewed. Once all the data was
collected, seven subgroups were developed. These groups were demographics, duties and responsibilities, job description, training and professional development, rate of supervision, evaluation and respect within the community. The survey data showed that educational assistants wanted more training. It further stated, “paraeducators reported that their districts provided little, if any, introductory training or orientation” and that “they needed more systematic, structured training to perform their jobs effectively” (p.57).

The study allowed for personal opinions to be expressed, which is important when conducting a study about educational assistants and their working conditions. This study however, only included elementary schools. Riggs and Muller (2001) posed the question, why educational assistants were being trained by other educational assistants who were relatively untrained as well? It was also questioned, how the school systems could ask under trained educational assistants to work with their most challenging students? The theme of training and role clarification is once again brought to the reader’s attention.

Marks, Schrader & Levine (1999) also discussed the educational assistant perspective. The study interviewed multiple “highly qualified” (p. 320) educational assistants and discussed the educational assistant’s perspective on roles and responsibilities, training needs and staff relationships. The study contained similar results as the Giangreco et al. (1997) study, which stated, “both studies raise serious dilemmas about how paraeducators meet their job responsibilities; and both studies, for the most part, arrived at the same conclusion” (p. 323).

The study explained that the roles and responsibilities of the EAs were still unclear and that many educational assistants felt they were “[assuming] tutoring roles” (p. 320). By assuming
these roles, teachers became distant from the student, and did not take charge of curriculum planning.

The study posed questions regarding roles and responsibilities and training needs. The importance of well trained teachers and educational assistants were discussed; “further training for paraeducators, teachers and school personnel is absolutely necessary” (p. 326). The study concluded with a strong statement. “In the absence of such resources, paraeducators will likely continue to assume roles that others more qualified should assume” (p. 327).

William Breton (2010) further discussed preservice training for educational assistants. The study investigated educational assistants past training, delivery of instruction, supervision needs and their effectiveness and the educational assistants perceived training needs. The research was conducted through a quantitative survey but at times, it did provide the opportunity for the participants to make commentary and recommendations. The participants of the study were educational assistants that worked within the state of Maine.

The findings of the study stated that, “paraprofessionals frequently were given responsibilities for which they had not received adequate training. Thus, one could continue to argue that the least qualified school instructional personnel were frequently being used to provide primary instructional supports for students with the most complex educational needs and challenges” (p. 43). The study reiterated the point of needing proper educational assistant training and more professional development opportunities. Educational assistants are continuously being asked to complete tasks that they are not properly prepared for, even though policies such as the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act or better known as IDEA (2004), state all special education personnel be “adequately prepared and trained” (p. 34)
An ongoing staff development plan is essential for all staff so they can more successfully meet the special needs of students. Districts should ensure that all personnel who work with students with special needs have access to relevant inservice training opportunities in order to foster evidence-informed practice. For specialized personnel, there is a need to focus on opportunities within their area of specialty and specific roles they play in the service delivery system. (p. 7)

All the studies recommend that much more preservice and training be offered to educational assistants. Having thoroughly trained educational assistants in school systems can tap into a resource that is cost-effective and efficient in providing various instructional needs to their special needs students. Throughout the studies, the educational assistants commented on the need for more training and asking their school districts to provide these training opportunities. It is important that everyone in the school community be provided with the necessary tools to be able to complete their job the best way possible.

**The Student Perspective**

It is always important to keep the student perspective in mind when discussing educational assistances and their place within the classroom. The students work first hand with the educational assistants therefore their opinions matter. If a student does not have a positive relationship with the EA then their working relationship is no longer beneficial. An in-depth look as to why their relationship is no longer positive and conducive must be taken. Students should see their educational assistant as an additional tool that helps them learn. Students should not see
the educational assistant as their primary teacher. It is important to keep the classroom teacher as the primary instructor because they have received the proper training through teacher training school for executing the curriculum correctly, educational assistants have not.

Tews and Lupart (2008), discussed educational assistant roles and responsibilities and the impact they have within an inclusive classroom setting. A semi structured interview qualitative inquiry research method was used. The participants were students from various age groups that were classified as special needs. The severity of the disabilities varied, and the interviews were conducted at home.

The students stated that they spent most of their day with an educational assistant instead of a classroom teacher. The students viewed the EAs as a benefit and were satisfied with the educational assistant role within their classroom setting. The study showed that the educational assistant was the primary instructor to the student with special needs but Tews and Lupart (2008) question, “Given the limited research on the efficacy of paraprofessional use to enhance student outcomes, the questions remain why they are increasingly assuming great responsibilities for instructional decision-making and what impact does this have on exceptional students” (p. 40).

Like Tews and Lupart (2008), Whitburn (2013) discussed educational assistant support in an inclusive classroom but through the lens of visually impaired students. Whitburn asked visually impaired students if having educational assistant support was a hindrance in an inclusive classroom. Students were interviewed for the qualitative study. When the interviews were complete, the data was interpreted, coded and then generalized.

The students expressed that having “heavy” (p. 147) educational assistant support was considered a hindrance compared to “light” (p. 147) support. The students preferred “light” (p.
147) support because it allowed them to have a social life along with the opportunity of completing the task or assignment at their own pace. The “heavy” (p. 147) support was considered a hindrance because it brought attention to the student’s disability and it took away from their freedom.

It is important to keep in mind that these students are speaking on behalf of their own experiences. In this study, the roles and responsibilities of educational assistants were undefined. Students were commenting on how they wanted more independence; however, they were not receiving it because of the educational assistant’s perception of what their roles and responsibilities should be. An emphasis needs to be place on the student experience instead of classroom perceptions.

Broer, Doyle & Giangreco (2005) completed a study that interviewed students with intellectual disabilities regarding their perceptions of having an educational assistant within their classroom setting. This descriptive study used qualitative data that included semi-structured interviews. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded for data analysis. 16 students were interviewed that graduated from various high schools within the last five years. The study was completed in the United States. The study’s limitations included a small sample size, single interviews that relied on students that had simple vocabulary abilities and a data collection process that needed to be re-evaluated.

The interviews revealed four themes that related to the perceptions of educational assistants. The four themes identified the educational assistants as; mother figures within the classroom, a friend within the school setting, a protector from bullies and finally, their primary teacher. Many students stated that they did not like the support of an educational assistant
because of the perception it gave off to other student. One student stated: “I was kind of getting embarrassed because I always had, like a mother right there. People were like looking at me and stuff, and saying, ‘why do you always have this person with you who is twice as old as you’” (p. 420). Another student stated they lacked social interactions because of EA presence, “That’s why I didn’t have any best friends or a girlfriend in high school because I always had a mother on my back”’ (p. 421).

In regards to program support, some students stated they enjoyed having the educational assistant with them in class, otherwise they would not receive the support they needed academically from their classroom teacher. A student indicated “we got too many kids in the classroom; we can’t just deal with you” (p. 423). The study further went on to state, “the study participants reported that when they were in general education classes, most often, it was the paraprofessional, rather than the classroom teacher, who interacted with them and functioned as their primary teacher” (p. 423).

This study produced important information regarding student perceptions with intellectual disabilities of educational assistant support within an inclusive classroom. The student insights further confirmed the fact that not all students want the support that they are given. Also, the fact that the students are identifying the educational assistants as their primary teacher confirms that fact that educational assistants are participating in roles and responsibilities they are not properly trained to perform. This is unfair to the educational assistant and to the student.

It is important to listen to the student’s perspective because they are the ones being directly affected by the educational assistant support. Special education students are receiving
direct instruction from the educational assistants, who have not been trained to perform such duties. Instead, it should be the classroom teacher providing the instructions. Many students can view educational assistant support as a hindrance to their educational experience because of their proximity; however, it is the school community’s duty, to provide the students with positive and pleasant experiences as a collaborative team.

The Parent Perspective

French and Chopra (1999) provided a parent perspective. The research question probed parents for their perceptions regarding educational assistants. Until this study, there was no other research found on this topic. Participants of the study were parents of children who received special education services. A phone survey was used to conduct research as well as one to one interviews.

The study stated parents were anxious regarding educational assistant training and knowledge level; “parents were concerned about paraprofessional competence on tasks that specifically related to their child’s needs: ‘They have no training. These are the children who confuse special ed. teachers and you have these paras who have no training . . .’” (p. 269). The study further stated that “parents strongly suggest that the school district is responsible for training paraprofessionals” and “Parents expect the new paraprofessionals to be included in some basic orientation to the school, the students, the program, and their roles” (p. 269). If parents could see the gaps in the lack of educational assistant training and are asking for change, I ask again, how can the school systems ignore the issue?

The concerns regarding educational assistant training is once again discussed, however, the authors note that the parents expressed a great deal of respect towards the educational
assistants because they understood the difficulties they faced on a day-to-day basis. Community learning is highlighted throughout the study.

Parents are expressing their concerns regarding educational assistant training, yet the school districts are not providing more professional development opportunities that would ease this concern. As a school, it is important to listen to parents and their concerns because they are the ones advocating for their child, which they cannot be faulted for. Showing parents that their voices are being heard, will improve school and home relationships, which will create a better educational experience for the student.

**Gaps in Knowledge**

According to Hall, McClannahan & Krantz (as cited in Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000), there was a limited amount of research on the topic of educational assistants and the expectations of roles and responsibilities within the classrooms. The researchers state, “limited research exists on skills paraeducators need to be effective in their role of supporting students, especially students with severe disabilities, in general education classrooms” (p. 172). Giangreco (2013) states there is a disconnect between classroom teachers and the special needs student because of the lack of educational assistant role clarity. Many educational assistants are taking the primary lead on instruction for their students therefore, “It is not uncommon for teachers and special educators to ask the teacher assistant about a student’s educational performance because the assistant is more knowledgeable about the student’s educational progress than the professional educators” (99-100). Educational assistants are being asked to perform tasks that they are untrained and uneducated for therefore causing further confusion to their role clarity, “some students with disabilities are
provided with extra tutorial support from teacher assistants who acknowledge that they are unskilled and/or uncomfortable in the subject matter being supported” (p. 100). The field of special education is fast paced due to new research and better methods of diagnosis. In the face of these changes, why is there a lack of research regarding educational assistant’s roles, responsibilities, and knowledge levels?

All studies discussed a reoccurring theme of role clarification, appropriate responsibilities and an improvement in training needs. Recommendations are made that schools and school districts provide educational assistants with more training. Throughout this chapter, it was seen that educational assistants were continuously asking to be provided with more professional development opportunities. All these studies share recommendations that highlight that there is a great need for role clarification, role responsibilities and better professional development opportunities for educational assistants.

These studies contributed a great deal of influence to this current study. Past studies and literature clearly states that there is a lack of clarity within the field that needs to be further researched. By researching and seeking out educational assistants for their points of view on this matter, it is my hope that I can contribute to the field of special education research and provide some clarity in area that is asking for clear and concise expectations, responsibilities and equal opportunities.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored educational research connected to the perspective of teachers, educational assistant, students and parents as it related to educational assistants. They outlined individual viewpoints that stressed the importance of collaboration, training, and independence.
It is important to keep in mind that educational assistants themselves are stating that they need more professional development opportunities to better service their students. The students themselves are viewing the EA as their primary educator, which shows the lack of relationship they have with their classroom teachers. This should not be the case in current BC inclusive classrooms. A collaborative approach that includes all important members coming to a table and discussing the student’s needs, must be happening on a regular basis. Everyone needs to be playing an active role.

In the next chapter, the study’s methods and research design will be discussed. An in depth look at data collection, the recruitment process and the actual description of participants will be discussed as well. The study’s limitations, validity and ethical issues will also be further examined by the researcher. Finally, the organization of data and how it will be generalized is shared with the reader.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

“A well-educated mind will always have more questions than answers”.

- Helen Keller, n.d.

Methods Overview

In this chapter, the research methods of the study will be discussed. Each element of the research study is discussed and focuses on the importance of collecting quantitative and qualitative data for the study without causing any undo harm to the study’s participants. A closer look will be placed on the recruitment process and the participants. Finally, an explanation regarding as to why this method type was chosen will be discussed and further justified.

To address the issue of educational assistant’s lack of preservice educational training and the lack of professional development opportunities, this study poses the research question of, “What knowledge and skills do educational assistants need when working with special needs students in an inclusive classroom”? The additional question also posed to educational assistants, “Are educational assistants provided with relevant professional development opportunities within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese?” A mixed methods research approach was used to gather data. This chapter will include a description of the study’s setting, participants, explain any potential ethical issues, data collection and data analysis procedures used.

Research Design

According to John Creswell, “Mixed methods research is a research design (or methodology) in which the researcher collects, analyzes, and mixes (integrates or connects) both
quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or a multiphase program of inquiry” (as cited in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 119). Both qualitative and quantitative data was taken during the study. Rumill, Cook, et al. (2011) describe qualitative research as, “[being] conducted in natural settings where people live, work, and play” and “the data that emerge[s] from a qualitative study is descriptive and reported in words or pictures rather than in numbers” (p. 155). Quantitative research can be defined as, “The numerical expression of information for purposes of summarization, classification, interpretation and generalization” (Rumill, Cook, et al., 2011, p.118). Table 3.1 further describes the two types of research methods in regards to the data collection process found in this research study.

Table 3.1: Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Location:</strong> EA’s were able to complete the survey from work or home</td>
<td><strong>Data type:</strong> Nominal data was collected. EA’s were asked to choose from multiple choice responses throughout the survey. EA’s were unable to further explain their choice due to the closed ended responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data type:</strong> Descriptive data was collected. EA’s were allowed to answer some open-ended questions within the survey. They were able to express their own personal opinions and experiences within the CISVA.</td>
<td><strong>Data:</strong> Is objective. The EA’s did not know the perspective of the researcher regarding research topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data:</strong> Data is collected and given codes to find patterns and similarities</td>
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The data provided by the survey was analyzed separately. Each question was looked at individually and analyzed based upon the qualitative or quantitative nature of the question. Once analyzed, the qualitative and quantitative information was gathered and looked at as a whole. Once all the data was gathered, it was calculated and each question was converted into a percentage if applicable. The various Figures that show the data within the study depict the percentages that were calculated based upon the educational assistant’s responses. All Figures
had 43 participants, which means 100% of the educational assistants answered the questions. From these percentages, interpretations were made by the researcher. The interpretations led to generalizations. From these generalizations, recommendations were made from the gathered information. Once again, it is important to note that both types of data (qualitative and quantitative) were collected from the same online survey.

Based on a mixed methods methodology, which can be described as, “mixed methods research holds greater potential to address these complex questions by acknowledging the dynamic interconnections that traditional research methods have not adequately addressed” (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p.2). The mixed methods design, “uses both quantitative and qualitative data to answer a particular question or set of questions. This combination of methods ‘involve[s] the collection, analysis, and integration of quantitative and qualitative data in a single or multiphase study’” (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p.3). Figure 3.1 visually depicts the mixed methods approach.

A nominal scale was also used in the study. Nominal scale can be defined as, “statistics a discrete classification of data, in which data are neither measured nor ordered but subjects are merely allocated to distinct categories” (Dictionary.com, 2018). Subsequently, the qualitative data was gathered, read, reviewed and then grouped into codes. These codes were then named and the data was placed in a figure to represent these codes.

Coding can be defined as “identifying and organizing categories as they emerge from the data” (Rumrill, Phillip, et al., 2011, p.167). Codes emerge from trends found within open ended responses. Both types of data were triangulated to see overlapping trends. From these trends, relationships and connections were made.
The concept of triangulation was used in this study. This method of triangulation allows the study to provide insights to the knowledge level, training needs and professional development opportunities offered to all educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese. It allows for greater knowledge and information to be shared within the field of special education, since there is a lack of insight regarding professional development needs for EA’s in current research. The model of triangulation will be further discussed in the data analysis section.

*Figure 3.1: Mixed Methods*

As seen in Figure 3.1, both types of data were collected and analyzed separately. Once analyzed, the data was compared and an interpretation was made. Based upon the interpretation, the researcher made generalizations. From these generalizations that were based upon responses given from the educational assistants, recommendations for the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese and the public-school system in British Columbia will be made. Further questions and thoughts will be posed to the field of special education based upon this information as well. It is up to the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese to implement these recommendations and the other school districts located in BC.
The methodology of mixed methods, which uses qualitative and quantitative data was appropriate to use for this study because of the number of educational assistants found within the CISVA system and based upon the model of the online survey. It is estimated by the CISVA central office that there are over 300 educational assistants within the system. By providing an online survey for the participants, it allows the educational assistants from across the lower mainland to participate. It also allowed the educational assistants to provide feedback and personal comments. It is important to note that by not interviewing the participants, their identities were kept anonymous and would invoke more honest response regarding particular questions.

**Participants**

The participants of this study completed an online survey that was conducted through Google Forms. This online survey was used because it provided confidentially encryptions and it was convenient for the participants to complete. The online survey allowed the participants to complete the survey in the comfort of their own home or at any other location such as, their school. All participants were classified by their school as educational assistants who are currently employed by the CISVA. Both elementary and high school educational assistants were asked to participate however, no specific question within the survey asked what type of school setting they currently worked in. Table 3.2 shows the possible different type of educational assistants that could be working in the CISVA system.
Table 3.2: The Different Types of Educational Assistants Found Within The CISVA

The Different Types of Educational Assistants Found Within The CISVA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Educational Assistants</th>
<th>A Brief Description of the Different Educational Assistant Standards</th>
<th>Elementary/Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certified educational assistant</td>
<td>Educational assistant diploma/certificate from various accredited colleges such as; Kwantlen Polytech University, Capilano University, Stenberg College</td>
<td>Elementary/Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-certified educational assistant</td>
<td>Not accredited from a college or university</td>
<td>Elementary/Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational assistant with a degree</td>
<td>A university degree (major/minor in any subject area)</td>
<td>Elementary/Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trained in various programs/workshops</td>
<td>ReadWell, DIBELS, Fast ForWord, Orton-Gillingham</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trained by health care provider</td>
<td>Diabetes, feeding tubes, personal hygiene</td>
<td>Elementary/Secondary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Time constraints were not factored into the survey because of the online component; however, an estimation of completion time was given to the educational assistants in the recruitment email and letter. Since participants were not interviewed, this study is free of any bias or errors that could be interpreted during the interview and transcribing process. Everyone who participated in this study, participated voluntarily and were able to freely answer the survey questions without any outside influences. Specific questions such as grade allocation, gender and years of experience were not asked in the survey to protect EA identities. For further survey specific questions, please refer to the thesis appendices. Figures 3.2. and 3.3 list the background experience that the educational assistants possessed at the time of the survey. At all times, the participants we able to leave the study.
Figure 3.2: Prior Experience with High Incidence Students

*Question posed:* Do you have prior experience working with high incidence students?

Figure 3.3: Prior Experience with Low Incidence Students

*Question posed:* Do you have prior experience working with low incidence students?

Data Collection

“The goals of purposeful sampling include (a) identifying similarities and differences in the population being studied, (b) examining specific conditions of a particular phenomenon, and/or (c) establishing controlled comparisons” (Rumrill, Philip, et al., 2011, p.164). The participants of this study were educational assistants that worked within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese. No public school educational assistants were contacted to complete this survey due to the fact that the researcher works within the CISVA and
wanted to gather data regarding the CISVA specifically. The Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese gave the necessary permission needed to conduct the study. Principals and/or learning resource teachers from each school were contacted and were asked to provide the survey link to their educational assistant’s staff during a general staff meeting or through email. Principals also were asked forward the recruitment email to their learning resource teachers if they were unable to forward the email directly to the educational assistants. If the education assistants were not present during their staff meeting, principals were advised to send the survey link by email. Both the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese head office and principals were given an overview about the study. The participants were not given any incentives to complete this survey. The participants could only complete the survey once and could not change their answers once the survey was submitted. However, the participants were able to review their answers before they submitted the completed survey. The educational assistants who completed the survey worked within a Kindergarten to Grade 12 classroom range. The identities of the participants remain anonymous and the survey can be accessed in the appendices.

**Ethical Issues**

The identities of the participants were kept anonymous. Participants chose to answer open ended questions that could reveal their personal feelings and/or experiences or they were able to write no comment in the space provided. No personal questions such as age, gender, years or experience and work location were asked in order to keep the participants identities anonymous. The information gathered from the study was kept secure on the researcher’s computer that has a password login. The online survey website also kept the information secure
through a login password format. Before providing the educational assistants the link to the online survey, the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese head office and individual school principals gave consent to the survey. The educational assistants also gave consent before participating in the survey and were told that they were able to leave the survey at any point. The study itself did not have any financial conflict of interest.

As the primary researcher, I did not directly recruit participants. However, participants from my current place of employment were asked to complete the survey. My current position at the school is Department Head of Student Services. In order to avoid undue stress or conflict, the survey, recruitment email and letter listed my name as the researcher. If the current staff of educational assistants at my school felt uncomfortable filling out the survey, they did not need to complete it. I, as the researcher, gave the option of allowing all the educational assistants the ability to participate.

The issue of Power Over in educational research needs to be addressed. Since the researcher asked participants from every school within the CISVA to participate which includes educational assistants in her own school, a possible power imbalance needs to be considered. In traditional qualitative research, there is a division between the researcher and the participant, “Qualitative inquiry draws on a critical view of hierarchical relations of power between researchers and participants: ‘In traditional research, the roles of researcher and subjects are mutually exclusive: the researcher alone contributes the thinking that goes into the project, and the subjects contribute the action or contents to be studied’” (Karnieli-Millerm, Strier & Pessach, 2009, p. 280). The two do not usually interact. One might think that some educational assistants
felt obligated to complete the survey because of the power over issues; however, that is not the case.

The quantity and quality of the data shared with the researcher depend in part on the relationship that develops between the researcher and various participants. The research must try to elicit the participants’ stories as much as possible, their experiences, and their wealth of knowledge of the research topic. One measure of the interviewer’s success is the ability to retrieve and receive the participant’s story and permission to use it in the research (Karnieli-Miller, Strier & Pessach, 2009, p. 282).

All participants were told numerous times that the survey was anonymous therefore, the researcher would not know which educational assistants completed the survey. Also, participants were able to leave the survey at any time. If an educational assistant felt uncomfortable while completing the survey, then they were free to leave the survey at any point. Once again, the researcher would be unable to decipher which participant left the survey. It was important to include all educational assistants within the CISVA because a larger lens on training and professional development opportunities was needed. Since there is fewer high schools than elementary schools within the system, it was important to include and recruit all high school educational assistants, even the ones that worked in the researcher’s school. The high school point of view needed to be expressed. Elementary and high school duties may vary for every EA; therefore, the presence of the high school EA was very important to this research.

Recruiting participants from the researcher’s school can be seen as a conflict of interest due to the current position of the researcher, which is Department Head of Student Resource.
The researcher never directly recruited any of the participants or discussed the survey with the participants. The Director of Student Services sent the recruitment email directly to educational assistants. If any of the educational assistants had any questions or concerns regarding their participation or their identities being exposed, they were asked to directly speak to the Director of Student Services or the school principal to voice their concerns. They were told not to directly contact the researcher in order to keep the integrity of the research survey.

**Instrumentation and Data Collection**

Data collection can be defined as, “developing a holistic and contextual understanding of participants’ ‘lived experiences’ and perceptions about those experiences” (Rumrill, Phillip, et al., 2011, p.166). Both closed and open-ended survey questions were used for the study. Open ended questions “allows the respondent to express a broader range of ideas” (McNiff, Jean and Whitehed, 2009, p.162) as well, “open ended response is a window of opportunity for respondents to shed light on an issue of course” (Cohen, Louis, et al., 1993, p.393). For closed ended questions, “the answers are easier to tally” (McNiff, Jean and Whitehed, 2009, p.162) because a numerical value is attached to the response. The purpose of survey research is to gather generalized information that can be later characterized and interpreted for the general population. Online surveys allow for a large participant population to be reached and allows the information to be gathered in a timely fashion. This survey consisted of 31 questions that were completed by educational assistants. The data was collected during a 10-week span between the months of October, November and December 2018.

**Data Analysis**
Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected during the survey. For further clarification regarding the differences between the two types of data, refer to Table 3.3. The survey used a nominal data format to collect the quantitative data, which was discussed in a previous section. The Carugi method of triangulation (Figure 3.2) was used in this research.

Table 3.3: Quantitative vs. Qualitative Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities of Quantitative Data</th>
<th>Qualities of Qualitative Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews are used to gain data</td>
<td>Questionnaires/surveys are used to collect data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed personal descriptions or participant reflections are given</td>
<td>Study aims to classify data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data can be in words, pictures or objects</td>
<td>Data is numbers and statistic based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretations are made off of participant stories, reflections, insights</td>
<td>No need for personal interpretation of data because it is number based</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Carugi “refers to the use of multiple sources of qualitative information, quantitative information, and data collection and analysis methods to arrive at evaluation findings or conclusions. ‘In research, [triangulation] is usually done either to validate the results in a study or to deepen and widen one's understanding and insights into study results’” (National Academy of Sciences, 2014). Since the research used both qualitative and quantitative data and conclusions were made based upon the data, it was appropriate to use the Method of Triangulation by Carugi. Figure 3.4 is a depiction of the method triangulation by Carugi.
Limitations for Data Analysis

Participation in this study was based upon a voluntary basis. Before the participants began the survey, it was stressed that it was to be done voluntarily and that the participants were able to leave the study at any given time. This study only used one instrument (a survey) to collect and examine the topic at hand. Only using a survey, allowed for other factors to be missed or not considered by the study. A potential limitation of the study was that others could have participated in the survey, who were not considered educational assistants. Since some principals advertised this study during staff meetings or through a group staff email, classroom teachers could have taken the survey. Instructions were given to the principals that the survey was meant for educational assistants only. In the recruitment letter, it was also stated that participants were to be active CISVA educational assistants. Before starting the survey, EA participants were asked to confirm their role as an educational assistant within the CISVA. The researcher was unable to confirm if all participants were educational assistants because of the website confidentially format.

Another potential concern that could have arose was that some educational assistants were unable to access the survey due to their lack of computer knowledge and/or internet
knowledge. It was assumed that the participants were able to access the survey through work computers, home computer and/or mobile devices therefore, knew how to navigate themselves through the survey website. The wording of the survey questions could have also been misinterpreted by the participants which could have affected data interpretations. If an educational assistant was new to the field or if English was not their first language, the language and terminology used throughout the survey could have been misinterpreted. Simple sentences were used throughout the survey to avoid any type of confusion or misinterpretation. If an educational assistant was unsure of a word definition or phrase, the researcher did not discourage the usage of a dictionary for further explanation and/or clarification. Finally, the questions that will be posed through the survey could influence the responses that the participants give.

Validity

According to Creswell and Plank Clark (2011) validity in a mixed methods research approach can be defined as, “employing strategies that address potential issues in data collection, data analysis, and the interpretations that might compromise the merging or connecting of the quantitative and qualitative strands of the study and the conclusion drawn from the combination” (p. 239). Some potential issues that could have affected the data are sample size, personal bias due to the self-reporting aspect of the survey and the fact that only Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese educational assistants were surveyed. The wording of the survey questions could have also been misinterpreted by the participants which could have affected data interpretations if English was not their first language.

Chapter Summary
This chapter presented the mixed methodology approach that would be used within the research study. An explanation regarding qualitative data, quantitative data and mixed methods was given in this chapter. It was noted that qualitative and quantitative data were both collected in the online survey that was hosted by Google Forms. A mixed methods approach was used because it allowed for more information to be presented regarding the research topic. Personal opinions could be given, along with simple data that could be easily interpreted. The method of Carugi’s triangulation was also discussed in this chapter. The importance of triangulation within this study was explained and how it affected the data analysis portion of the study. The participants of the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese remained anonymous throughout the study. Both high school and elementary educational assistants were asked to participate in the study. Participants were able to leave the survey at any time. No undue harm, stress or power over issues were placed on the participants because the completion of the survey was completely voluntary as stated previously, ethical issues, validity and limitations were also considered and discussed by the researcher.

In the next chapter, the results of the online survey will be condensed and summarized. The responses from the survey were grouped based upon the two questions posed by the researcher that were stated in the beginning of this chapter. Each question posed by the researcher is answered by the data that was collected. Graphs and charts were made based upon the educational assistant’s responses.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis & Results

“There’s no learning without trying lots of ideas and failing lots of times”.
- Jonathan Ive, May 23, 2012

Data Analysis Overview

In this chapter, the results of the online survey will be discussed. The data provided a look into the personal opinions and experiences of educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese. The survey was opened to all educational assistants within the system in October. The participants had a ten-week period to fill out the survey. The survey was closed in December. The quantitative and qualitative data will be broken down individually and analyzed separately. Once analyzed the data will be assigned to the corresponding research question. Once all the data has been discussed, then recommendations will be made to the CISVA and field of literature.

The survey was designed with qualitative and quantitative questions, which can be considered a mixed methods approach to data collection. The quantitative questions were multiple choice questions that the participants responded to. The participants were unable to explain and expand on their choice, due to the closed ended nature of the question. The qualitative responses needed to be coded because of the open-ended nature of the question. The participants were asked to expand on their comments and/or opinions. The codes that were established were based upon key words that were found within the statements given by the educational assistant. The researcher went through individual responses and created codes accordingly. The responses were grouped by their codes and then put into figure or table form.
for easy viewing and interpretation. If responses were irrelevant to the questions, then they were coded as being irrelevant and included in the figure or table as well. The researcher then used the method of triangulation to interpret the results. Based upon this Method of Triangulation by Carugi (2014), the researcher was able to make educated recommendations because of the data trends found within the information. It is important to note that some qualitative questions asked within the survey were not completed by all the participants. This was also noted in all Figures and tables.

Lastly, it is important to note that 43 participants participated in this survey. This is a relatively small sample size considering there is over 300 educational assistants employed by the CISVA. The opinions and reflections given by the educational assistants are anonymous. The data reflects their personal experiences within their current schools which then should be extended to the CISVA central office in order to make the necessary changes.

Questions Posed

The study used a mixed methods approach which includes quantitative and qualitative data. Both types of data were important to the study because it allowed for the educational assistants to express their own viewpoints and opinions while still answering simple closed ended questions that were easier for the researcher to interpret. Also, the mixed method methodology was used because it allowed for the purpose of examining what knowledge is needed to be an educational assistant and how educational assistants perceived the professional development opportunities being offered by the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese in a more in-depth manner. The quantitative and qualitative data additionally allowed the researcher to use the method of triangulation to interpret the results. The
interpretation of the results allowed the researcher to see trends and make generalizations based upon these trends. Finally, these generalizations led to recommendations to the CISVA and public-school system which will be discussed in the next chapter.

In this chapter, the results and findings of the study will be discussed. The findings will be organized according to the research questions that were disclosed in the previous chapters. The results of the online survey will also be organized and discussed according to the main questions posed. The quantitative and qualitative questions were analyzed separately. The following are the research questions:

1. **What knowledge and skills do educational assistants need when working with special needs students in an inclusive classroom?**

2. **Are educational assistants provided with relevant professional development opportunities within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese?**

**Demographic Data**

43 educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese completed the survey. All participants agreed to the terms of the survey and were able to leave the survey at any time. Gender specific questions were not asked. As stated before in Figures 3.3 and 3.4, the participants disclosed their prior experience working with either high or low incidence students. Participants were also asked why they chose the profession, which is disclosed in Figure 4.1. The majority of the participants chose the profession because they felt enjoyment when working with children.
In Figures 4.2 to 4.5, the educational assistants were asked if their current students were classified under as being, physically, cognitively, behaviourally or learning/other/combination dependent. The majority of the educational assistants were working with students who were classified as being learning/other/combination dependent. This showcases how educational assistants must be adaptable to the multiple needs of a student. The minority group that the educational assistants worked with were classified as being physically dependent. In order to be classified as being physically dependent, the student must have difficulties with mobility such as being wheelchair bond or needing crutches to walk to different school locations. The survey shows that not many students within the CISVA fit this criterion. If a student is physically dependent, then it is necessary that the educational assistant receive the proper training in regards to lifting a student safely. Every school should have a protocol procedure in regards to lifting students safely. It is important to have this procedure in place in order to prevent any types of physical mishaps towards the student or the educational assistant.
Results

In order to answer the primary questions of, what knowledge and skills do educational assistants need when working with special needs students in an inclusive classroom? Several questions regarding training needs were asked in the survey.
Educational assistants were asked if they received specialized training for the current student they were working with. Subsequently, they were asked to disclose the type of training they received. Figures 4.6 and 4.7 illustrate the educational assistant’s responses.

*Figure 4.6: Have You Received Specialized Training?*

![Chart showing responses to Have You Received Specialized Training?](chart)

**Figure 4.7: List of Training Specializations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Specialization</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHOSE NOT TO DISCLOSE</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEHAVIOUR INTERVENTION SEMINAR</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I DO NOT WISH TO ANSWER</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MULTIPLE TRAINING SPECIALIZATIONS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRAINED BY HEALTH CARE PROVIDER</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA CERTIFICATE/DIPLOMA</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POPARD</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seven of the educational assistants stated that they received multiple training specializations. Some examples from the survey were: educational assistants were considered certified and received Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and Related Disorders (POPARD) training, POPARD training and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) training,
occupational therapy and behaviour intervention, and finally, POPARD training along with first aide training. It is also important to note that 15 educational assistants received no specialized training. By not receiving any specialized training, the student with whom the educational assistant is working with is missing opportunities for better academic, social, and/or behavioural growth. It is also not utilizing the role of the educational assistant within a classroom setting to its fullest.

Both the student and the educational assistant are at a disservice by the lack of training and professional development opportunities. How can a school expect an educational assistant to properly teach or implement programs that they have not been educated and/or trained in? How can students be successful in their educational journey if the proper measures are not taken to make sure these programs are being properly implemented and ensured that they are successful? The research states that 35% of the educational assistants within the CISVA have basic knowledge to no knowledge regarding specialized training. Why are these educational assistants being placed with students that have the highest and most complex needs? Why is such an educational responsibility being placed on the educational assistants? This is not fair to either party. This issue needs further clarification and justification by the CISVA central office, individual principals that approve this placement and public schools. All parties need to realize the disservice they are supporting by these placements and further discuss how to resolve this issue because the educational system is currently failing these students.

In Figure 4.8, educational assistants were asked if they felt adequately trained for the current student they were working with. The majority of the educational assistants did respond
with an affirmative response; however, other EA’s responded with the feeling of being somewhat adequately trained. All participants answer this question.

*Figure 4.8: Do You Feel Adequately Trained?*

![Figure 4.8 Do You Feel Adequately Trained?](image)

Figures 4.9 and 4.10 depict how supported educational assistants felt within their own school settings regarding administration and if administration understood their emotional needs. The majority of the educational assistants felt supported by their administration; however, the response was not overwhelming. All staff members should feel 100% supported by their administration staff. This is important to note because the burn out rate of educational assistants is very high as stated in previous research referenced above. Many educational assistants in previous research studies as listed in chapter two, have noted that they were not well supported by administration; therefore, the turnover rate was high in many school districts due to the lack of support. Educational assistants felt underappreciated for their roles and stated that they did not receive the same amount of respect from staff as other teachers did. By acknowledging the role of an educational assistant and the hardships they sometimes endure in an everyday classroom, it provides the educational assistant with self-worth, acknowledgment and confidence. When an employee feels confident, well supported, fulfilled and happy in their workplace, their attitude
transcends to others and is reflected in their work ethic. The student benefits greatly from this. It is important that all administration regardless if they are in the CISVA or public system, increase their efforts to emotionally support their staff. In order to provide the best possible education to our students, the change must start with the school principals. If they lead by example regarding compassion, empathy and knowledge, then the staff will follow and the learning environment will also change.

Figure 4.9: Do You Feel Adequately Supported by Administration in Regards to Your Current Student?

![Figure 4.9: Do You Feel Adequately Supported by Administration in Regards to Your Current Student?](image)
Many educational assistants are asked to work with students who have physical behavioural issues. Physical behaviour issues can entail, kicking, punching, throwing objects and name calling. At times, the behaviour can escalate to an abusive nature if not dealt with properly and quickly. Figure 4.11 outlines if the educational assistants have been trained to work with these types of students. The data shows that nearly half the educational assistants have not received specialized training in physical behaviour management. This finding means that educational assistants are not being properly trained for their own safety which can cause workplace injuries and for the safety of others. At times, a student might need to be restrained in order to keep themselves and other safe, but how can an educational assistant restrain a student safely if they have not been trained? This opens the school and educational assistant up to major liability issues. It is the job of the school to ensure that all students are safe within their school setting but with this response rate, it shows otherwise. The schools and CISVA should be striving to have a 100% of their staff trained in this as it would be crucial in providing a safe environment for the aggressive student, staff and the general population of the school.
When asked about being paired with a student that best suits their EA training, the majority of educational assistants expressed they felt they were properly trained which is seen in Figure 4.12. Criteria was not given to the EA’s regarding what ‘best suited’ meant. This percentage was based upon personal opinion which can be bias based upon the EA’s self-image and self-worth. In Figure 4.13, the educational assistants were asked if they felt they were unqualified to work with their current student. The overwhelming response shows that the educational assistants felt that they were qualified to be working with their student. The word ‘qualified’ was not defined; therefore, educational assistants used their own opinion to answer the question. Considering 15 educational assistants did not receive any type of specialized training (as stated above), one must wonder what they based their response on. Was it based upon personality, gender, age or sex? Further information was not asked or provided by educational assistants.
Finally, when asked to compare themselves to their colleagues regarding training levels, the educational assistants showed a bit more diversity within their responses which is seen in Figure 4.14. Half of the educational assistants felt that they were equally trained as their colleagues; however, ten educational assistants felt less educated than their colleagues and five educational assistants felt more trained than their colleagues. Based on these findings, it is hard to know which educational assistants are well versed in the different special education programs. This is also important to note because the inconsistency amongst staff training makes it difficult for the other staff members to know who they can rely on as an accurate resource. When
providing a service, it is important that the implementation process of the program is consistent. Therefore, if one educational assistant is trained and another is not, the program will not succeed or reach its potential because of the inconsistencies; or if a teacher is asking an educational assistant for some advice or guidance regarding a student, one educational assistance might make a suggested based upon their knowledge and past experiences, meanwhile one might make a recommendation based upon their personal views. In a situation where a student is physically aggressive, this could be the breaking point of escalation or de-escalation. This furthers the point of why certified and well versed educational assistants should be working with students that have high needs because they have the knowledge and training background to keep everyone in the school safe or to push the students to their academic limits.

*Figure 4.14: How Do You Compare Your Colleagues Training Level?*

As stated in Chapter 2, many educational assistants believe that more in-servicing training needs to be done in order for them to perform their jobs adequately. The subsequent research question that is going to be addressed is, are educational assistants provided with relevant professional development opportunities within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese?
In this section, educational assistants answered questions specifically regarding their own personal professional development experiences within their own school setting and within the larger setting of the CISVA. In Figure 4.15, educational assistants stated if they have asked their principal for professional development opportunities within the last two years that were student specific. The majority of the educational assistants asked their principal for specific training. The educational assistants can be asking for specialized training for numerous reasons such as, they realize they are not servicing the student properly, they realize that their safety and the safety of others can be in danger or they want to gain a larger knowledge base in order to better service future students. Regardless of the reason, these educational assistants should be given this opportunity.

*Figure 4.15: Have You Asked Your Principal for Pro-D Opportunities Regarding Your Student?*

When asked if their current school offers professional development opportunities during professional development days geared towards special education, the majority of the EA’s response was positive. Most schools within the CISVA are offering professional development opportunities to their special education staff, which can be seen in Figure 4.16. However, all
schools should be offering special education professional development opportunities because all schools have special needs students. Every school and staff member should be knowledgeable in basic special needs programming since the classroom teachers are being asked to complete the students individualized program and individual education plans.

*Figure 4.16: Has the School Provided Pro-D Opportunities Geared Towards Special Education?*

![Figure 4.16: Has the School Provided Professional Development Opportunities Geared Towards Special Education?](image)

When asked specifically for what types of professional development opportunities the educational assistants would want in the upcoming years, the educational assistants expressed numerous programs. Figure 4.17 shows all the requests the educational assistants made. As an administrator, it is important to listen to all the requests because the educational assistants are expressing what knowledge and programming is needed to best service these students. The lack of professional development opportunities being offered is seen in the number of suggestions that the educational assistants are making in the figure below.
In Figure 4.18, the educational assistants expressed what types of training opportunities they would like to be offered from the central CISVA office. An overwhelming number of educational assistants requested a basic program/training workshop that is provided by the Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and other Related Disorders (POPARD). Since the number of students with autism is increasing in our school system, it is important to educate and train all educational assistants so that all students with autism are being serviced better. If an educational assistant is not working with a student with autism, it is still important to be knowledgeable in the different strategies and programs because it allows continuity and consistency in the event that an educational assistant is away.
Educational assistants were asked how often they would like to receive professional development opportunities within their school setting which is seen in Figure 4.19. When asked if the educational assistants would like to receive specific professional development workshops regarding special education during the yearly Catholic Educators Conference, the response was overwhelmingly positive (Figure 4.20).

Figure 4.18: What Type of Training Would You Like to Be Offered?

Figure 4.19: How Often Would You Like Professional Development to Be Offered?
Educational assistants were asked to leave comments regarding their own personal professional development experiences within their individual schools. Figure 4.21 reflects the personal experiences educational assistants partook in at their own schools. Ten out of the 43 educational assistants reported that they felt supported by administration regarding professional development opportunities or that they had a good experience within their school. Six out of the 43 educational assistants felt that they were offered minimal professional development opportunities or that more professional development opportunities needed to be provided by their school. An educational assistant stated, “Very minimal” and another identified their professional development options, “extremely sporadic”. One educational assistant out of the 43 reported that they have to seek out and pay for their own professional development; “I have either sought out and paid for my own advancement in professional development/school”. While another educational assistant stated that they must find their own professional development opportunities. Two other educational assistants felt they could not comment to the question
because they just started at their school/job. One educational assistant commented that more professional development opportunities are needed to be offered at the high school level, “many talks or programs that they had attended were usually geared towards elementary and not high school”. Eight out of the 43 educational assistants did not answer the question in a relevant manner; therefore, their answers could be not interpreted. Finally, 14 out of the 43 chose to not answer the questions, which was the majority of the participants.

*Figure 4.21: Individual School Experiences Regarding Professional Development*

The majority of the educational assistants did not answer the final question of the survey which specifically addresses their Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese professional develop experiences. However, eight out of the 43 participants that did respond, stated that they would like more professional development opportunities to be offered by the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese. Some participants even specifically named which workshops they would like to be offered including: POPARD, positive behaviour support systems and anxiety disorder related workshops.
Six out of the 43 stated that they had a positive experience within the CISVA and were content with their professional development opportunities, some feedback was, “there have been many offerings for professional development throughout my six years of working with the CISVA”, and “I feel that CISVA is good at recognizing the need for professional development”. Two educational assistants stated that they were too new to the CISVA system to make a comment. Six responses were not relevant to the question therefore were not interpreted into the results. Finally, one educational assistant stated that “most talks were geared towards teachers” when reviewing their experience within the CISVA.

Other feedback stated by educational assistants regarding professional development opportunities was, “very minimal”, “not enough professional development experience provided” and finally, “I would love to see more offered at the CEC that is geared towards EAs”. Another participant stated, “I feel that the CISVA should host another POPARD pro-d for new staff, as every year we are growing, and only a handful of people have been to POPARD. I believe this is one of the most important pro-d’s an EA should attend.” Figure 4.22 states that there is a need for more professional development opportunities within the CISVA.

*Figure 4.22: Professional Development Experiences Within the CISVA*
Chapter Summary

Throughout the chapter, the data has shown that more professional development and training workshops need to be offered to educational assistants. Many educational assistants are working with student who are physically aggressive yet are not trained to cope with these types of student behaviours. It is also important to provide all staff members with copious amounts of professional development opportunities because it enhances the service delivery of programming to the students. The results also stated that educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese do feel that they are adequately supported by their administration. Educational assistants stated personal opinions regarding specialized training and their training level compared to their fellow colleagues. Finally, the data shows that educational assistants do want more professional development opportunities to be offered by their individual schools and by the CISVA central office. Some educational assistants specifically name which training workshops they would like to be offered and which professional development topics they would like to be further discussed.

An in-depth look and analysis of the data will be done in the next chapter. Considerations and recommendations to the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese and the public-school system will also be discussed. Recommendations will be put forward which will help benefit the educational assistants and their requests for more professional development opportunities. Further questions and comments will also be posed to the research field of special education. The conclusion of the chapter will hopefully inspire change to our current special education system.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Future Recommendations

“Don’t let you learning lead to knowledge. Let your learning lead to action”.

- Jim Rohn, n.d.

Introduction

In this chapter the results from the online survey will be summarized. Based upon these summarizations, recommendations will be made to the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese and to the public-school system of British Columbia. 43 educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese system completed the survey which expressed their prior knowledge regarding special needs students and their experiences within the system. The survey allowed educational assistants to discuss their own perceptions and experiences within the system. The educational assistants also expressed the types of professional development opportunities they would like to be offered by their individual schools and/or by the CISVA central office. Based on the requests made by the educational assistants, recommendations will be made. These recommendations will be brought forward to the CISVA central office where they decide which professional development opportunities will be offered throughout the year to these educational assistants. The intention behind this research endeavour is to make educated recommendations that are for the betterment for our students and for the betterment of service delivery programming. Recommendations were concluded from the information that was provided by the educational assistants within the survey. Based on this research, a recommendation would be; more professional development opportunities within the
school system; proper time needed to implement meaningful programs; and it is important to understand that these recommendations can have a positive effect on our current educational system, which in the end have a positive effect on our students. Meaningful professional development opportunities need to be taken advantage of and provided for all educational assistants. This is essential to our students and support staff.

**Significance of Research**

The purpose of the research was to examine how educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese articulate their experiences within their current employment setting which includes elementary and high schools. This research will give our current schools, whether they are independent or public, the opportunity to reassess their current school practices regarding knowledge and professional development opportunities as well. By having someone well-educated and trained, the educational assistant is able to access their prior knowledge and experiences, which in turn, affects the student’s learning outcomes and success. By having an educated and trained educational assistant, an inclusive classroom is able to run much more efficiently, which in turn causes a more collaborative working environment.

The research specifically, posed the following questions:

1. What knowledge and skills do educational assistants need when working with special needs students in an inclusive classroom?

2. Are educational assistants provided with relevant professional development opportunities within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese?

**Discussion of Results**
The majority of the educational assistants classified themselves as working with students that were learning/other/combination dependent. This means that an educational assistant could be working with a student who is designated with a learning disability or gifted label however; also struggles with ADHD or ADD or other behavioural issues. Many students within the school system have complex needs. Therefore, an educational assistant might expect to work with a student because of their learning challenges, yet they will also be expected to deal with the student’s other needs/behaviours. It is hard for an educational assistant to know what type of support a student will need prior to working with them therefore; having a well-educated and trained educational assistant is an asset to any school system; private or public.

When the educational assistants were asked about their current student(s) and if they received any type of specialized training, 60% of the EA’s responded “yes” (Figure 4.6, p. 69). Even though the majority responded affirmatively, the response was not overwhelming. When asked if educational assistants felt adequately trained to be working with a specific student, 56% of the educational assistants responded with “yes”, 35% responded with “somewhat”, and 9% responded with “no” (Figure 4.8, p. 71). The fact that so many educational assistants do not have specialized training is alarming. These findings demonstrate show the importance of offering continued professional development opportunities to EA’s. It is clear that more educational assistants need to be specialized in a variety of areas given the increased areas considering they are working with such specific students who have specific needs. The fact that many educational assistants were open and honest regarding their specialized training is also telling. By being so honest, the educational assistants are expressing to the CISVA and their individual schools that
they are not fully qualified to be working with these students and that they need and are willing to receive the training.

As stated before, the complexity of student needs is only growing within the school system; given, the results, schools within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese are generalizing their students’ needs and hope that the hired educational assistant will be able to cope, assess and adapt to the student based upon generalized knowledge that the educational assistant may or may not have. Depending on the educational assistant’s prior education level, the knowledge level might be minimal, which does not benefit the student. The importance of professional development and meaningful training workshops are a necessity in today’s school system. Therefore, it is recommended that the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese and the public schools of British Columbia allow and make mandatory that all educational assistants have to access to the various programs, training and workshops that are offered within the Province of British Columbia. Educational assistants should not be turned down by their school administrators when they ask to be professionally developed regardless of the financial burden it may place on the school. This recommendation is critical to the success of special education programing and student success.

If an educational assistant is working with a student with various specialized needs, it is essential that the educational assistant be properly and appropriately trained. By not having specialized training for all educational assistants, which is clearly specified in the above section with 40% of educational assistants expressing they did not have any specializations, we as an educational system are failing our special needs students (Figure 4.6, p. 69). The CISVA central office and the various British Columbian school districts need to place a higher level of
importance on the specialized educational training. Districts, individual schools, and principals need to be held responsible and accountable for the professionals they have hired. If this emphasis is continually placed on the principals, they then will realize the importance of professional development. Principals need to allow more allotted time for professional development opportunities because they will see the importance of it. The general school staff need to see that a greater effort has to be placed on educating and training educational assistants since they are working so closely with the neediest students.

Out of the 43 educational assistants, only six educational assistants stated that they have a certificate or diploma that specializes within special education (Figure 4.7, p. 69). Based upon this information given within the survey, principals of the individual schools are not hiring educational assistants based upon certification qualifications, instead; the majority of educational assistants, are assumed to be uncertified based upon the data provided. This begs the question, how many educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese system are working with students that they have not been educated for or have been simply grandfathered into a school because of the lack of BC government/CISVA regulations? Would a parent of a special needs student feel comfortable knowing this? Would the parent be okay knowing that an educational assistant who works with their child on a daily basis lacks specific training? The recommendation of continued professional development is once again seen to be extremely important.

Parents may request an educational assistant based on qualifications but the school should not be obligated to fulfill this request. If a parent has a child who has autism and is receiving additional support from outside services such as ABA therapy, then logically, it would
make sense to have an educational assistant that is ABA trained work with this particular student for continuity reasons. If the school does have someone on staff that is trained in this program, then it would make sense to pair the educational assistant and the student together. With that being said, if the school has numerous students that “need” this educational assistant, then the school should be sending more educational assistants to be trained in this program. It is obvious that the need is there. If the demand in specific program planning/training is in the best interest for the whole student population, then the school should be sending their educational assistant staff for professional development. It is important to always keep the student’s best interest in mind when planning their programs because as educators, it is our job to do so.

The research conveys that the majority of educational assistants want to be trained in programs that would benefit the student they are working with. This is a simple request that needs to be fulfilled by all the schools in British Columbia because it makes sense to fulfill this request on so many levels. By having more educational assistants trained in programs that are student specific, the better the individualized programming becomes. If the student’s needs are being met academically, socially and/or emotionally because of this programming/training then the school system is doing their job and allowing their students to achieve their greatest potential. As educators, that is all we can ask for from our students; we want them to try their best and to achieve their individualized goals with or without our direct help.

As discussed below, staffing issues should always come secondary to student program planning process. All student programs should be executed according to knowledge and training level not because of availability. Staffing should always reflect the best suited educational assistant, which can be difficult at times. By best suited, this means; knowledge and training
specialities are looked at first then other qualities such as age, personality and gender are discussed and seen if they are an appropriate match for the student. It is recommended based upon the data, that educational assistants be paired with students that they are educated and trained for not based on school convenience.

When asked about physical behaviour management, only 55% of the educational assistants felt that they were trained in this area (Figure 4.11, p. 74). However, 79% of educational assistants did express that they felt “well suited” for their student’s needs and 81% felt that they were a good match for their student (Figure 4.12, p. 75). Based on what has been stated above, there is a discrepancy between the actual definition of “well suited” verses personal opinion. How can an educational assistant be considered well suited for a student if they themselves feel they do not have the proper training (i.e. behaviour management) or background knowledge? What is “well suited” based upon? Personality, age, size and/or sex? Further information needs to be gathered to answer this question. In my opinion “well suited” should be based upon the educational assistant’s education and training background. Students needs should be the top priority when pairing an educational assistant and a student. There is no current procedure in place which explains how schools pair students with educational assistants. When a teacher is hired, most have a general area of specialization that a school follows. If a teacher is primary trained, then they tend to be hired for primary grades. If a teacher is high school trained, they will not be placed in a Kindergarten class because it is not best suited for the students. This type of logic does not exist for educational assistants because there is no standardization on their educational level.
When an educational assistant is assigned to a student, it is usually the learning assistance teacher who makes the match. It is based on personal opinion. Some schools in the CISVA have their principals involved in the process; however, this is a personal choice on the principal’s part. There needs to be a standardization process that all schools within British Columbia follow when pairing students. This recommendation would greatly benefit all the students. Unless the EA is trained properly or extremely knowledgeable, they should not work with the special needs student. By enforcing this rule, more principals and schools would offer professional development opportunities and training workshops to their educational assistants throughout the school year. This would also increase the number of educational assistants who feel as equally trained as their colleagues.

When educational assistants were asked to compare themselves to their colleagues regarding training levels, 51% of the EA’s reported that they felt equally trained and 23% felt less trained, 12% felt more trained and 14% did not want to answer (Figure 4.14, p. 76). There is a broad range of results to this posed question. It was left up to personal interpretation for the meaning behind “trained”. How can some educational assistants feel equally trained as their peers when only six stated they were certified? A more specific question regarding training and the definition of training should have been asked in the survey to better understand and to better interpret these results.

When the educational assistants were asked about professional development and if their needs were being met within their individual schools and the CISVA, the results varied. When asked about individual schools offering professional development workshops geared specifically to special education, 68% of the educational assistants stated that they received this opportunity,
30% stated they did not receive this opportunity and 2% did not wish to answer (Figure 4.16, p. 78). The majority of the educational assistants are receiving some type of professional development opportunities from their schools; however, the survey did not ask if the principal took the initiative to provide these opportunities or if the staff ask for these specific workshops due to their school population/dynamics. The survey also did not ask what type of professional development workshops were provided that were specifically related towards special education. The survey also asked the educational assistants to disclose if they themselves took the initiative to ask for professional development opportunities that were specifically geared to their students. 53% of the educational assistants stated they asked their individual principals for professional development opportunities regarding their current student, 42% of the educational assistants stated they did not ask for specific professional development opportunities regarding their student and 5% did not wish to answer the questions (Figure 4.15, p. 77). Why some educational assistants did not ask for more specific training is unclear; however, later in the survey, educational assistants were asked for the specific types of training/professional development opportunities they would like to receive in the future.
Figure 5.1: What type or Programs Would You Like to be Offered During Pro-D Days?

Figure 5.1 states all the different types of professional development workshops that the educational assistants would like to receive. Since the survey included elementary and high schools, the responses were broad; however, the majority of the educational assistants requested workshops that were related to Autism Spectrum Disorder or Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) therapy, which is a type of Autism therapy. Since more children are being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Keyes et al., 2012), the results of the survey reflect the need for increased professional development workshops dealing with Autism. Table 4.18 (p.80) also states that the educational assistants wanted more Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and Related Disorders workshops/training sessions to be offered. An interesting finding is that high school educational assistants requested more professional development opportunities geared towards high school students/teens. Many of the workshops offered by the CISVA are elementary based with pockets of applicable information that can be applied to a high school setting. Piggybacking on the idea of having more teen driven professional development workshops, many educational assistants were also asking for more mental health and emotional
support workshops, which is also seen in Figure 4.18 (p. 80). 32% of the educational assistants requested emotional support training which came second to POPARD training which was requested by 56% of the educational assistants. All of the options of professional development that were given by the educational assistants are important topics that need to be further discussed and requested by educational assistants, individual schools and the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese.

Understandably it is difficult and expensive for one single school to host all these professional development opportunities. It is unrealistic to think that all schools have an unlimited budget that would allow their employees an endless amount of professional development. One way to address this is to offer important professional development workshops, such as POPARD yearly. If it is known by all schools that this professional development opportunity will be offered every May, then schools can plan for this ahead of time and allot a certain amount of money in their yearly budget. Obviously not every educational assistant can attend this workshop; therefore, a rotation process should be implemented within each individual school. Each educational assistant’s name goes on a list and every year two or three EA’s attend the workshop. Within three to five years, all educational assistants will be trained in this particular program and then the school can rotate a new program.

Also, many schools within the CISVA that are located close to each other. These schools can come together and mutually host a professional development opportunity for their educational assistants. This way not one school carries the entire cost and it allows for networking opportunities. Ideally, if multiple schools come together, then a professional development day can be held where students do not attend classes that day and the entire day is
devoted to the program at hand. This way all educational assistants can attend without service
disruption to the students and schools spend less money. This idea is already being implemented
in the public-school system when they have district professional development days. All staff
including teachers and educational assistants attend various workshops to further their individual
professional development needs at least once a year.

When asked how often educational assistants would like to be offered professional
development opportunities, the majority with 56% requested once per term (Figure 4.19, p. 80).
Since most school years are divided into three terms, the educational assistants ideally would like
to attend three workshops a year. Understandably not many schools could afford this
professional development demand. This is where the Province of British Columbia should offer
free professional development workshops/training sessions within every school term to any
individual who is seeking it out. Every term the government should designate a day where these
workshops/training sessions are being held and it is up to the school to send the individual
educational assistants. An alternate solution would be that the school cancels class for the day
and all employees can attend. A good example of this is when the Catholic Independent Schools
of Vancouver Archdiocese holds a two-day Catholic Educators Conference (CEC).

This conference is held every year at the exact same time so that parents are aware of it
months in advance and can make any necessary childcare arrangements. The CEC can be
included as a term professional development opportunity. During this conference, multiple
sessions regarding various educational topics are discussed. Currently there is no specific session
grounded towards educational assistants but it is important to note. This is an impeccable
opportunity to educate and to train a large group of educational assistants. Figure 4.20 (p.81)
shows that 86% of the educational assistants would like special education sessions to be offered during the conference. This is a simple request that can be easily fulfilled if the CISVA listens to their employees. It is important to note that as it stands now, each individual that attends the CEC conference is able to choose their own session of interest. A variety of sessions are held at the same time to allow for specific interest diversity. The opportunity for better training and educating is possible during the CEC; however, it is up to the CISVA central office to make it available to all employees. The CEC is a great opportunity for meaningful education.

**Key Points of Research**

*Table 5.1 Key Research Findings*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Findings</th>
<th>Recommendations and Future Research Actions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not all educational assistants within the CISVA have a certificate or diploma in special education</td>
<td>Require educational assistants to acquire this accreditation in order to work with special needs students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not all educational assistants within the CISVA have specialized training in various programs</td>
<td>All educational assistants should have specialized training. Schools should give time to educational assistants so that they can specialize in various programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not all educational assistants within the CISVA felt adequately trained to be working with specific students</td>
<td>If an educational assistant is working with a specific student(s), it is essential that the educational assistant be properly trained in that program that is being used with the student(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational assistants within the CISVA are asking for more professional development opportunities to be given throughout the school year</td>
<td>Every school within the CISVA should allot a certain amount of days for educational assistants to participate in professional development opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational assistants specifically asked for more professional development opportunities during the yearly CEC conference</td>
<td>The CISVA should make changes to the CEC format and allow for sessions that are specifically geared towards educational assistants.</td>
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The research states that within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese, not all educational assistant who work within the system are certified. Although certification is an asset to have, it is not essential. This is also seen in the public-school system. In the Burnaby school district, a job posting states the requirements for an educational assistant, “successful completion of a recognized program in special needs assistance; one year of relevant experience; or an equivalent combination of training and/or experience.” (Burnaby School District, 2019) The fact that not all educational assistants are fully certified places an even larger importance on professional development. By lacking prior knowledge, as many educational assistants do, educational assistants are forced to learn as they go, which does not benefit the student. By providing more professional development opportunities at a provincial level, more students will be serviced meaningfully and educational assistants’ knowledge and skill levels will increase. This is beneficial for all parties. The provincial government needs to place a larger emphasis on professional development opportunities. The greater education an educational assistant possesses, the greater chance of change in the learning outcome for the student will be. Table 5.1 further outline the key points found within the research data.

**Recommendations and Future Activities**

Given the information that was provided from educational assistants who completed the online survey, based upon prior and current training needs and their experiences within the
Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese regarding professional development opportunities, the following recommendations can be given to the CISVA and to the field of research.

When hiring new educational assistants within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese, the central office should interview every educational assistant applicant just like how they interview every teacher candidate. By interviewing the educational assistant candidates, the central office will be aware of how many candidates are certified and how many have experience working with students with special needs and if any have prior knowledge. This will be very telling information to the central office because as stated before, the majority of educational assistants hired within the system are not certified. During the interview, a standard set of questions, which is formulated by someone who has educational assistant experience and a special education background, the central office will make recommendations to the CISVA principals whether or not the educational assistant candidate is a good fit for the system. After this, it is up to the individual principal to contact the educational assistant candidate and further the hiring process. This is standard procedure for teacher candidates; therefore; educational assistants who work with such diverse needs, should also be screened by the central office. If a principal decides to interview an educational assistant based on the CISVA recommendation, the central office should then provide questions that a principal could/should ask the educational assistant during the interview. Not all principals within the system are familiar with special education and the expectations regarding the position; therefore, some principals might not know what types of questions to ask. By having a standardized method of hiring within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese for educational assistants, the discrepancies
found among the schools within the system should decrease. Roles and responsibilities should be made clear to the classroom teachers and the educational assistant upon hiring. By listing the responsibilities immediately, there is no confusion among staff. It should also be noted to the educational assistant candidates during the interview process, that educational assistants that are certified will be given priority over non-certified EA’s. By hiring certified educational assistants within the system, the quality of prior knowledge and experience should also increase.

When it is recommended that schools hire certified educational assistants, one might wonder what a certified educational assistant might look like. In order to be classified as a certified educational assistant, the EA must have a certificate or diploma in special needs from an accredited British Columbian institute. By having this accreditation, it demonstrates to the school/principal that the educational assistant has prior knowledge to the various types of special needs and that they have had a practicum experience in a school environment. Experience they can further build upon during the interview. Depending on the institute, some educational assistants might also have additional certifications along with their diplomas/certificate such as First Aide. Having a clear definition and outline of what an certified educational assistant is, the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese can provide consistency within the system.

Even though the above recommendations are being made towards the CISVA, it would also be beneficial for the public-school system to adopt this system as well. By having very clear expectations that are province wide, it would force more schools to hire certified educational assistants because that would be the standard. More educational assistants would want to better themselves by attending workshops and training sessions because they would want to be up to
date with new programs and research as their colleagues. If the time for professional
development is given provincially, then more educational assistants will make usage of it and
depend less on their schools to offer it.

Many educational assistants within the survey requested more in-service training from
the Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and Related Disorders. Although POPARD does
offer training workshops throughout the year at their office location, the CISVA does not bring
in POPARD training workshops on a yearly basis that is specifically geared towards the
Independent schools. It is important to bring in these workshops to the CISVA educational
assistants because it allows the EA’s to share experiences that are unique to the CISVA. As
stated before, Autism is on the rise, therefore better in-service training is essential if the
educational assistants are working so closely with these students, which also leads to increased
professional development opportunities in general within the CISVA. It is recommended to the
field of research that future research be done on a narrow student population such as Autism or
Down Syndrome and conduct a study based upon that student population and their specific
professional development needs.

**Conclusion**

The number of professional development opportunities for educational assistants within
the CISVA is limited especially when it is expected that they attend workshops after school
hours without being paid for their overtime. Many educational assistants are unable to devote
this extra time due to personal reasons; however, would like to attend more training workshops if
they were during school hours. The concern from the central office is that if educational
assistants are given professional development options during school hours, then many
educational assistants would sign up and schools would be left without adequate support for their special needs students, which is a legitimate concern. However, in order to avoid this concern, principals should allow one to three educational assistants per term on a rotating basis to attend workshops and hire substitute educational assistants to cover position or internally find coverage for their students. It is so important that educational assistants not be withheld from professional workshops because of internal scheduling or financial issues. The more educated and trained education assistants are, the more value they hold within the school and for their individual students.

Although it was not specifically mentioned in the survey feedback responses, it is suggested that the CISVA offer more networking opportunities for educational assistants. Teachers are offered these days; however, it is up to the individual principals to make this decision for their educational assistants. Many schools within the CISVA do not request that their educational assistants attend these workshops for a number of reasons. It is extremely important for educational assistants to network with each other and discuss their individual experiences. By doing this, EA’s are able to discuss various strategies that work and do not work for their students, discuss experiences that have improved their students learning and offer emotional support to each other. It is important that educational assistants feel well supported by others since the turnover rate is so high. Being able to share ideas is extremely valuable and beneficial. If the CISVA and/or principals are unwilling to give this day to educational assistants because of scheduling issues, offer this day to educational assistants in the summer. It is expected that all staff within the CISVA attend workshops in the last week of August, which they receive days in lieu for. By adding an extra day in August, educational assistants could
receive an extra day in lieu or they could choose to be paid for this extra day. Either way, it does not affect scheduling and student learning.

Another recommendation is that more professional development opportunities be offered to high school educational assistants. Since elementary and high school environments are so different and at time service such different needs, it is important to keep these needs in mind when planning future workshops. The high school community within the CISVA is very small therefore, very specific workshops can be offered. It is suggested that workshops that touch upon the topics of teenage mental and emotional health, bullying, life skills and challenging behaviours be offered. High school educational assistants need to be better equipped with strategies that pertain to their student’s ages. These types of workshops could be offered numerous times throughout the year by the CISVA so that educational assistants are able to rotate their attendance or attend the workshop that best suits their students scheduling. Greater attention needs to be paid towards educational assistants within the high school setting since they are working with students that will be soon become active community members.
Table 5.2: Final Recommendations Summary

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Final Recommendations Summary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Standardized the interview/hiring procedures for all educational assistant within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage more individual schools within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese to hire certified educational assistants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese offer yearly Provincial Outreach Programs for Autism and other Related Disorders (POPARD) training workshops for educational assistants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allow educational assistants to attend workshops/training sessions during school hours when they are paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese should offer more networking opportunities for educational assistants</td>
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<tr>
<td>More professional development opportunities for high school educational assistants</td>
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Educational assistants play a very important role in today’s inclusive classrooms. They help educate students who have exceptional needs and work alongside the classroom teacher. By having clear expectations of roles and responsibilities for an educational assistant, it allows the educational assistants to focus on the student and the student’s needs. Having well trained and educated educational assistants is extremely important. By having access to prior knowledge, it allows the educational assistant to think quickly on their feet and troubleshoot any problems that may come their way. Continuous professional development workshops should be accessible to all educational assistants regardless if they work in the independent or public-school system.

It is my hope that the educational assistants regardless of which system they choose to work for are given the opportunity to explore the different professional development opportunities within their system. The worth of a well-educated and knowledgeable educational assistant is enormous to any school. The more schools that are willing to professionally develop
their staff, the better the education system will be. Meaningful implementation of various programs will increase and it will allow more students to be affected positively by these programs. The student’s interests and education need to be kept in mind at all times. We as a province, need to increase our knowledge regarding special education and the various programs that are associated to this field. Knowledge is power and the more knowledge we give our educational assistants, the better off they will be in preparing students with specials needs in post-secondary life.

The field of special education is always changing therefore; continuous professional development is essential for educational assistants. Educational assistants need to maintain their skills and continually add to their repertoire. In conclusion, having a well-rounded educational assistant in a classroom can provide positive services to the school, classroom and especially the student. As we move forward in the world of education, it is important that educational assistants feel their worth within the school community and are continuously acknowledged. Their professional development and training needs need to be met in order to provide the best service possible to all of our students.
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Glossary

Throughout this research thesis, several important terms will be referred to. These terms have been chosen because of their importance and frequency used within the special education field. Based upon my research topic, I have chosen to use the British Columbia Ministry of Education Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines to define these important terms and the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese website.

Classroom teachers (CT): “The teacher responsible for a student with special needs is responsible for designing, supervising and assessing the educational program for that student” (Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines, 2016, p. 9).

Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese (CISVA): “The Catholic School shares in the mission of the Church to proclaim and build the Kingdom of God. The Catholic School, as a faith community, is committed to excellence in Catholicity and in all areas educational assistants that promote the development of the whole child to his or her full potential. The Catholic School strives to develop Christian leaders, responsible citizens and life-long learners”. (Retrieved from https://Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese.bc.ca/info/mission-statement/)

Educational Assistants (EA), Teacher’s assistants (TA), Special Education Assistants (SEA), Student Support Worker (SSW) or Certified Education Assistant (CEA): “Teacher’s assistants play a key
role in many programs for students with special needs, performing functions which range from personal care to assisting the teacher with instructional programs. Under the direction of a teacher they may play a key role in implementing the program” (Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines, 2016, p.10).

Inclusive classrooms “Describes the principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their education. The practice of inclusion is not necessarily synonymous with integration and goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others” (Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines, 2016, p. V).

Individual Education Plan (IEP): “Is a documented plan developed for a student with special needs that describes individualized goals, adaptations, modifications, the services to be provided, and includes educational assistance for tracking achievement” (Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines, 2016, p. V).

Learning assistance: “Learning assistance provides a co-ordinated and integrated set of support services that include school-based consultation, collaborative planning and co-ordination with the school-based team, and instruction” (Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines, 2016, p. 31).

Learning assistance teachers (LAT): “Learning assistance teachers typically help to organize, maintain, and integrate service in the school and, as part of a school-based team, provide a major link with support services available at the district level” (Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines, 2016, p. 31).
Special needs categories: “Special needs categories are established to assist school districts in identifying the needs of the students and providing appropriate education programs to them. These categories are designed to focus on the educational needs of the students regardless of the original cause(s) of those needs” (Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines, 2016, p. 40).

School-based team (SBT): “Is an on-going team of school-based personnel which has a formal role to play as a problem-solving unit in assisting classroom teachers to develop and implement instructional and/or management strategies and to co-ordinate support resources for student with special needs within the school.” (Special Education Services: A manual of policies, procedures, and guidelines, 2016, p. VI).
Appendix 1: Ethical Conduct for Research Certificate

Certificate of Completion

Josipa Zdrilic

This document certifies that

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of issue: 22 January, 2018
Appendix 2: Recruitment Email

Dear Participant,

My name is Josipa Zdrilic and I am currently a graduate student enrolled and working towards a Master of Education in Special Education and a teacher who works within the CISVA. As part of my graduate program at Vancouver Island University, I am conducting a study on educational aids and the professional development opportunities being offered within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese. I would like to see what is working well within the system and what additional support is needed to improve the system. I am inviting educational aides to complete a brief online survey. The survey is anonymous and will take approximately, 15 to 20 minutes.

I am hoping that you could please pass on this information to other EAs with the CISVA system. Please find attached the survey URL:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf8MR35NwPeGBbsEdT8XW_251cj0KEYX8XhY1oqvZIUMQ1fQ/viewform

This survey is being hosted by Google Forms. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. At any time, you may exit the survey and you are able to decline any question you wish not to answer. While the survey is open to participants, data will be securely stored through encryption on Google servers. Upon closing of the survey, the information will be exported to a USB drive and the data will be deleted off of the Google servers. The USB will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. On December 31st, 2021, the data will be deleted off of the USB and then the USB will be destroyed. For further privacy questions, please refer to the Google privacy policy at https://policies.google.com/privacy.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the Vancouver Island Research Ethics Board along with the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese. For more information, you can contact myself or my supervisor, Michael Hammond-Todd (Michael.hammond-todd@viu.ca).
Thank you for your participation,

Josipa Zdrilic
researchercisva@gmail.com
Recruitment Invitation
Appendix 3: Survey Information to Participants

Appendix G: Survey questions

Participants will be recruited through individual CISVA schools. The researcher will send out a recruitment email to a teacher/EA representative at each school. The representative will then make an announcement regarding the study at a staff meeting. Survey summary and link will be given at the staff meeting. Also, the representative will place an invitation for the study in individual EA mailboxes. On the invitation it will give the survey link and a brief description about the survey. A reminder will be given regarding the study at the following staff meeting.

Title of Study: The Importance of Continual Professional Development for Educational Aides.

Name: Josipa Zdrilic
Master of Education in Special Education: Vancouver Island University
E-mail: josipazdrilic@hotmail.com

My name is Josipa Zdrilic and I am currently a student in the Master of Education in Special Education program at Vancouver Island University (VIU) who works within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese (CISVA). As part of my program, I am conducting research on the importance of continual professional development for education aides. The intent of this study is to extend current knowledge about professional development and educational aides. It is hoped that the new knowledge gained will explore the perceptions of the needs and skills required by educational aides. In particular, how do complex needs of student’s impact knowledge and skills needs of educational aides.

This survey should take 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Research participants will be asked to complete online survey questions regarding various professional development perceptions. Participation in the study will be anonymous, meaning that there will be no way to identify your data or know whether or not you participated.

Consent Form and Confidentiality Agreement:
Your participation in this survey is voluntary. At any time, you may exit the survey and you are able to decline any question you wish not to answer. All survey information will be stored on the google form secure server until it is deleted on December 31st, 2021.
Risks:
The information collected during the survey is likely to be uncontroversial, and thus the research is unlikely to cause harm to participants. There is a risk that you may feel unduly influenced to complete this survey because of the recruitment process. Please understand that no one will be able to identify your participation because the survey is anonymous. Depending on the information you provide, there is a risk that you may be identifiable to those who know you if that information is quoted in the research write up. There is a small risk that some of the questions might elicit emotional or mental distress based on your experiences. If that happens, I encourage you to close the survey.

Management of Data:
Your participation in this survey is anonymous. As such, there is no way for me or anyone else to access any identifying information or record of your participation. This survey is conducted on Google Forms and all questions and responses will be stored on Google Forms and a secure USB. This is the privacy and security policy of google forms [https://policies.google.com/privacy](https://policies.google.com/privacy). While the survey is open to participants, data will be securely stored through encryption on Google servers. Upon closing of the survey, the information will be exported to a USB drive and the data will be deleted off of the Google servers. The USB will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. On December 31st, 2021, the data will be deleted off of the USB and then the USB will be destroyed.

The results of this study will be published in my Master’s thesis, and may also be used for conference publications, presentations, and published in peer-reviewed journals.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study by exiting the survey. You may omit any question(s) you do not wish to answer. However, once data has been submitted, you will be unable to withdraw, as the data is unidentifiable. Please find below the survey link:
[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf8MR35NwPeGBbsEdT8XW_251cj0KEYX8XhY1oqvZIUMQ1fQ/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf8MR35NwPeGBbsEdT8XW_251cj0KEYX8XhY1oqvZIUMQ1fQ/viewform)

You may wish to print a copy of this consent form before you proceed.

Contact:
If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study you can contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca. You can also contact my thesis supervisor at VIU, Dr. Michael Hammond-Todd at: Michael.Hammond-Todd@viu.ca.

* 1. I consent to the data I provide being used for the research study as described and to my answers being quoted?
Yes   No (if respondent answers no then survey ends)
Appendix 4: Survey

Educational aides and professional development needs survey:

Please fill out the below survey. At any point, you may leave the survey or leave questions unanswered. All submitted responses are confidential. This survey is for research purposes.

Please note: This survey is made and hosted by Google Forms. To review Google’s privacy policy, please visit the following site: https://policies.google.com/privacy  My name is Josipa Zdrilic and I am a student in the Master of Education in Special Education program at Vancouver Island University (VIU) who works within the Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese (CISVA). As part of my program, I am conducting research on the importance of continual professional development for education aides. The intent of this study is to extend current knowledge about professional development and educational aides. It is hoped that the new knowledge gained will explore the perceptions of the needs and skills required by educational aides. In particular, how do complex needs of student’s impact knowledge and skills needs of educational aides.

This survey should take 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Research participants will be asked to complete online survey questions regarding various professional development perceptions. Participation in the study will be anonymous, meaning that there will be no way to identify your data or know whether or not you participated.

Consent Form and Confidentiality Agreement: Your participation in this survey is voluntary. At any time, you may exit the survey and you are able to decline any question you wish not to answer. While the survey is open to participants, data will be securely stored through encryption on Google servers. Upon closing of the survey, the information will be exported to a USB drive and the data will be deleted off of the Google servers. The USB will be stored in a locked cabinet. On December 31st, 2021, the data will be deleted off of the USB and then the USB will be destroyed.

Risks: The information collected during the survey is likely to be uncontroversial, and thus the research is unlikely to cause harm to participants. There is a risk that you may feel unduly influenced to complete this survey because of the recruitment process. Please understand that no one will be able to identify your participation because the survey is anonymous. Depending on the information you provide, there is a risk that you may be identifiable to those who know you if that information is quoted in the research write up. There is a small risk that some of the questions might elicit emotional or mental distress based on your experiences. If that happens, I encourage you to close the survey.

Management of Data: Your participation in this survey is anonymous. As such, there is no way for me or anyone else to access any identifying information or record of your participation. This
survey is conducted on Google Forms and all questions and responses will be stored on Google Forms and a secure usb. This is the privacy and security policy of Google Forms https://policies.google.com/privacy. The survey account and all data provided will be deleted on December 31st 2021.

The results of this study will be published in my Master’s thesis, and may also be used for conference publications, presentations, and published in peer-reviewed journals.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study by exiting the survey. You may omit any question(s) you do not wish to answer. However, once data has been submitted, you will be unable to withdraw, as the data is unidentifiable. You may wish to print a copy of this consent form before you proceed.

Contact: If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study you can contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca. You can also contact my thesis supervisor at VIU, Dr. Michael Hammond-Todd at: Michael.Hammond-Todd@viu.ca.

* Required

I give consent to the researcher (Josipa Zdrilic) to use my responses for research purposes *

yes

No

Reason for choosing profession

Your answer

Do you have prior experience working with high incidence students?

yes

No

I do not wish to answer

Do you have prior experience working with low incidence students?
yes
No
I do not wish to answer

Is/are your current student(s) classified as physical dependent?
Yes
No
I do not wish to answer

Is/are your current student(s) classified as cognitively dependent?
Yes
No
I do not wish to answer

Is/are your current student(s) classified as behaviourally dependent?
Yes
No
I do not wish to answer

Is/are your current student(s) classified as learning?/other/combination dependent?
Yes
No
I do not wish to answer
Would you like to share any additional information regarding the last question posed?

Your answer

Have you received specialized training for your current student(s)

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer

If yes, please specify

Your answer

Within the last 2 years, have you asked your school principal to provide professional development opportunities that are related to your student(s)?

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer

In your opinion, do you feel adequately trained for your student(s)?

Yes

No

Somewhat

I do not wish to answer

In your opinion, do you feel adequately supported by the administrative staff in regards to your student(s)?
Yes

No

Somewhat

I do not wish to answer

In your opinion, do you feel emotionally supported by your administrative staff?

Yes

No

Somewhat

Not enough

I do not wish to answer

In your opinion, has your school provided specific professional development opportunities geared towards special education?

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer

Would you like to be offered professional development opportunities for your field of work?

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer

Please specify what professional development programs you would like to be offered.
Your answer

How often would you like to receive professional development opportunities?

Once per term

Once per year

Once every two years

Not necessary

I do not wish to answer

Would you like to be offered the opportunity to attend sessions at the Catholic Educators Conference that are specifically geared towards Educational Aides?

Yes

No

Undecided

I do not wish to answer

What training would you want to be offered the most? Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and Related Disorders CPR training Crisis Prevention training Emotional support training

I do not wish to answer

Would you like to be offered Fetal Alcohol Syndrome training?

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer
Would you like to receive training for students that have behavioural issues?

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer

Have you already received training for physical behavioural management?

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer

What other professional development opportunities would you like to be offered in regards to behavioural intervention?

Your answer

In your opinion, do you feel that your colleagues are ..... compared to your training level?

less trained

equally trained

more trained

I do not wish to answer

In your opinion, do you feel that you are paired with a student that best suits your training?

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer
In your opinion, do you feel that you are paired with a student that you are not qualified to work with based upon your training?

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer

Do you think there should be a limit as to how long an EA should be able to work with a particular student?

Yes

No

I do not wish to answer

Please leave a comment below regarding your professional development experiences within your school

Your answer

Please leave a comment below regarding your professional development experiences within the CISVA

Your answer

Submit