

Executive Summary of Doctoral Dissertation
Roles and responsibilities of educational assistants in Ontario
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Introduction

During the school years 2006 – 2009 a research study entitled: **Roles and Responsibilities of Educational Assistants in Ontario Schools: implications for practice**, was conducted. Permission was received from numerous school boards, French, English, Public and Catholic to access the educational assistants (EAs) within their board. This is a summary of the results.

Impetus for the study

There are approximately 22,000 EAs working in Ontario schools. The number is an estimate based on the fact that there is no direct method of reporting exact numbers to the Ministry of Education. The position of EAs is known by a variety of names e.g. Teacher Assistant, Education Resource Worker, Paraprofessional etc., which adds to the difficulty of identifying exact numbers. The number of EAs has increased by 68.4% between 1999 and 2006 as compared to the growth of students receiving special education support of 10.79%. (Zegarac, 2008).

The assignment of an EA to a school or classroom is a much valued resource and never quite seems to match the perceived needs in any school. The allocation of an EA is typically reserved for the most complex and high-demand situations where students require intensive and ongoing supports and services, in other words our most vulnerable students. In spite of this reality, there are no Provincial standards for the training, hiring or supervision of EAs. Each school board determines the qualifications required and, in many cases, there are no stipulated requirements for training or supervision.

Purpose of the study

The success of students with exceptionalities within our schools is, to a large extent, contingent on the supports and services they receive. Given that one of the main supports provided at the school level is that of an EA, it is critical that we fully understand the roles and responsibilities assigned to them.

This study explored the following:

- Who are the educational assistants in Ontario?
- What are the roles and responsibilities they are currently fulfilling?
- What are the issues identified by the educational assistants?
- What are the implications of the findings for current effective practice?

Methodology

The data for the research was gathered using two main sources; an on-line survey distributed through school boards to EAs and a series of focus groups held across the Province. The on-line survey gathered demographic information as well as information on key roles and responsibilities. There was also opportunity for the participants to comment on current issues and areas of concern. The focus groups were comprised of EAs who had completed the on-line survey and who then volunteered their time to join a group in their region of the Province. Focus groups were held in five of the six regions as designated by the Ministry of Education; Toronto, Ottawa, London, Barrie, and Thunder Bay. A sixth group was held with the executive members of the Coalition of Educational Assistants of Ontario, this group represented several boards in southern Ontario.

The use of an ecological systems model to analyze the data resulted in a rich tapestry of descriptors for the complex role that the EAs fulfill. It was also the key to uncovering the dominant relationships that need to be addressed in order to focus on the issues that surfaced from the research.

Participants in the study

The on-line survey received 2,181 responses from all regions across Ontario. The focus groups had an average of eight members. The participants were representative of five of the six regions in the Province. School size, types of schools, and types of programmes (inclusive and self-contained) were represented in the sample as well as a full range of years of experience and number of years in the role of EA.

Findings

Who are the educational assistants in Ontario?

Ninety five per cent of the respondents were female and over 65% had a college diploma. The participants who only had a Secondary School Diploma represented 6.8% of the sample. The most frequently held diploma was that of ECE (25%), and the second most frequent was an EA diploma from a community college (18%). The other qualifications were from a wide range of disciplines including nursing, teaching, PSW, and DSW. The demographic profile described a well-educated group of female school workers, many of whom had been in the role for a considerable number of years. Thirty three percent of the sample had been in the role of EA for more than 10 years and 60% had worked in two to five schools.

What roles and responsibilities are they currently fulfilling?

Participants were asked to indicate the top three responsibilities they had in their current EA position. The following indicates the ranking of the eight categories that were identified.

Instruction (44%)

The role that was identified most frequently by the EAs was that of instruction. This finding would not be cause for concern if the instruction referred to was directed and supervised by the teacher. However, what was reported by many of the EAs was that they were, in fact, teaching individual or small group lessons on a wide variety of academic and functional skills and were at times administering tests and quizzes to the students without the support of the teacher.

The classroom teacher does not provide me with any materials. I search the internet for worksheets and I plan the student's daily work schedule.

Are we allowed to put teaching? We do teach.

I removed a student from French and taught him how to read. If I hadn't done it he wouldn't be reading.

Behaviour support (16.9%)

The second most frequently identified role was that of behaviour support. This role was described as behaviour management, crisis intervention, teaching anger management, restraint, and behaviour modification. In the focus groups, experiences with personal injury were cited and there was a general feeling of abandonment when it came to managing out of control behaviour.

I can't tell you the number of things that have been done to me. Who cares about me?

I tried to get help and no-one would come because they were afraid they would get hurt. There is no restraining protocol – if you do something it is on your back.

Personal Care (13.6%)

The third ranked role was that of personal care. This was to be expected as in most boards only students with extreme health and safety issues are the ones who generate an allocation of EA support. Included in this role description were toileting, personal hygiene, dressing, physical support, feeding, mobility, physiotherapy, and giving medications. There was much discussion in the focus groups about some of the health procedures that EAs were now being trained in. These included shallow-suctioning, catheterization, administering suppositories, and monitoring insulin levels. As can be seen from the quotes 'personal care' has many facets that go well beyond classroom support.

I used to be the head nitpicker, nit and lice expert in the school. Am I the only one who knows what a nit looks like?

I am the ambulance chaser for the school because I can leave and go. I stay with the child until the parent shows up. When the parent didn't show up I had to bring him back to school – was I supposed to do this?

Modifying/Planning (8.6%)

This category included the accommodation, modification and adapting of programmes. It was clear from the responses that many of these responsibilities undertaken by the EAs were those of the teacher.

I make up a lot of modified curriculum for my students. It would be great to have a plan of action made for them, this way it is available to us and we are prepared to get the most out of our students, be it academically or socially.

Meetings and reporting (2.4%)

Almost 40% of the respondents indicated that they did not attend any formal meetings held to discuss the students that they were supporting and only 24.4% reported that they attended IEP meetings. A slightly larger percentage reported that they did attend school team meetings (45%) but only 13% reported attending IPRCs. In general they felt that they were not a valued member of the team and although they spent more time than the teacher working with a student, the teacher would be the only one to provide input at the meetings. EAs commented that they sometimes had to 'prime' the teacher prior to the meeting so that she/he would have input to the decision-making.

The feeling is that your input is not required when decisions are made regarding a student's future and progress. (It is) the educational assistant who does the daily hands on delivery of the programme and (they) are often more in tune with the reality of the child's confidence, limitations and successes. It is a shame that this is not tapped into before major formal meetings or staff made available so that the educational assistant can have input at the meetings.

The other categories identified were; supervision (6.9%), social skills and advocacy (6.2%), and clerical (1.4%). Each of these categories had some implication in the issues identified.

Key Issues

It is important to note that the issues that arose from the research are consistent with those that have been and still are in the literature on Educational Assistants over the last 15 years. There is consistency in these issues in the U.S., U.K., and Canada.

Lack of teacher support and guidance

- Although the official policy, as outlined in the IEP resource guide, is that EAs work under the direction of a qualified teacher this is often not the case. EAs are designing, modifying and implementing programmes without the guidance or even support of a teacher and are often taking the major responsibility for the evaluation of the programme.

Skill set and training

- EA qualifications and skill set are frequently not matched to the skill set that they require for the work they have been assigned e.g. ECE qualification supporting students in Secondary School. Training is sporadic and is not matched to the skills needed on a 'just in time' basis. Access to training is inconsistent. There is no minimum requirement of training prior to taking on a new position in most boards.

Team membership

- EAs perceive that they are not seen as part of the school support team. Their input is not sought even although they may spend more time with a student than the teacher. EAs frequently feel undervalued and disrespected in the context of the school hierarchy.

Transitions

- Transition to working with a new student is seldom planned ahead of time. It is often the day before school or the week after school begins that the allocation of EA support is finalized. There is little opportunity to learn from the experience of the previous EA. Transition for the EA when moving to a new school is often on very short notice and there is little or no orientation offered in a new school setting.

Supervision and evaluation

- The responsibility for supervision and job evaluation is unclear to most EAs. School administrators seem to vary a great deal on how they view and conduct their roles and responsibilities in regards to the direction and supervision of EAs.

Home/School Communication

- When asked who had the primary responsibility for communication with parents 30.8% of the EAs indicated that they had this responsibility. The discussions in the focus group disclosed a wide variety of practice in terms of home/school communication. In some settings EAs were not allowed to contact parents and in others they were the key person to communicate regularly with the home. When

asked about the main mode of home/school contact 74.4% reported that communication books were the main mode. The survey did not ask them to specify who was responsible for writing in the books.

Implications for practice

Every aspect of the relationships of the EA and their work environment had implications for practice. Without any kind of road map it was not surprising that the data revealed many different routes and some off-road traveling. At each level there were different interpretations of what practice should look like. Roles and responsibilities were a bit like moving targets with expectations changing based on location, personnel or time of day. It is sometimes hard to equate this lack of direction with the fact that at the heart of this system are the most vulnerable students. The students who are least able to advocate for themselves and who rely so heavily on the adults in their world to provide the best care and support possible need the adults in the school to be clear and deliberate about their roles and responsibilities.

First Steps

School's readiness

It is the responsibility of all administrators and teachers to fully understand the roles and responsibilities that are appropriate to assign an EA. An open discussion on who does what must take place before the school year begins or as soon after school begins as possible. The school administrator needs to be fully aware of the types of EA supports that are being provided for each student so that this can be included in the IEP. The roles and responsibilities will vary according to student need and the skill set of the teacher and EA. It is important that training gaps are identified early in the school year so that the appropriate supports can be given to the teacher and EA on a 'just in time' basis.

Monitoring and Supervision

Early in the school year it must be established how and when monitoring and supervision will take place. The teacher should have the responsibility of monitoring the day to day work of the EA and the school administrator should have the responsibility of supervising and evaluating the work of the EA. An annual growth plan provides an opportunity for an EA to identify training needs that may go beyond immediate requirements.

Team membership

Clarification of how the EA will be involved in the education team is critical. Time to allow the EA to provide input in writing or in person to the team needs to be considered. Expectations in terms of documentation and data gathering need to be planned jointly with teacher and EA.

Communication

Clear lines of communication need to be established at the beginning of the school year. When and how the teacher and EA will meet for joint planning must be considered. Home and school communication protocols must be fully discussed and clarified – it is important that the teacher is aware of all communication that is going home. The communication that takes place between specialists and the teacher/EA team must be structured so that critical ‘treatment’ strategies are shared and understood by both.

Planning the roles and responsibilities

The scope of the support and services required by the students must be carefully planned so that the goal of independent living is always foremost. The types and intensity of support requires constant monitoring so that adjustments can be made as required. Proactive planning of support prevents ‘on the run’ decision making and ensures that the student is receiving only the supports that they require at any given time.

Putting the practice in place

There are numerous tools available to streamline the planning for the teacher/EA team. Time spent on planning at the beginning of the year will provide a strong basis on which to build an effective support system for the students. Role and responsibility clarification will prevent misunderstanding and allow for healthy discussion throughout the school year. Each teacher/EA team will develop their own unique working style to reflect their shared skill set and the unique strengths and challenges of the students.

Key recommendations from the research:

Professionalization of the role of EA.

- establish a professional organization for educational assistants implement the recommendations as stated in Special Education Transformation (Bennett & Wynne, 2006);
...establish standard that define roles and responsibilities for teachers’ assistants. Training requirements should be established following a review of current diploma/apprenticeship options. Training for teachers’ assistants should be accessible province-wide (p. 27).
- provide pathways for the professional growth of EAs which include mentorship opportunities.

The call for provincial standards and the delineation of roles for EAs was included in the recommendations of the co-chairs of the working table on special education (Bennett & Wynne, 2006). To date, these recommendations have not been implemented. This study group recognized the goal of “Improved learning for all students receiving special education programmes and services” (p. 8), and in light of the findings of this research

where much of the teaching is being conducted by an EA, it would seem critical that standards and clarity of roles are put in place immediately.

There are many excellent models across North America where pathways for growth have been developed for paraprofessionals. The National Education Association (NEA) is an example of one organization that has developed materials for the professional growth of paraprofessionals. The American Federation of Teachers has also developed materials that promote teamwork between teachers and paraprofessionals. It is imperative that Ontario develop similar resources to support the ongoing professional growth of the educational assistants in the Province.

Administrator preparation and training.

- prepare administrators for the supervision and management of the roles of the EAs assigned to their school as a component of the Principal Qualification Programme
- require all school boards to have a written protocol for the supervision procedures of EAs within the board
- require that the protocol for supervision of the EA within a school be clearly outlined in writing and shared with both the teacher and EA by the school administrator before the assignment to a school begins

The input from the participants in the research indicated the key role that the administrator played in the working conditions of the EAs. In the literature (Hess & Kelly, 2007) and in my personal experience as a qualified principal and trainer of administrators there is currently no specific training to prepare school administrators to manage and supervise the work of EAs assigned to their school. This raises a larger issue that falls outside the scope of the study—that there is no requirement for administrators to have qualifications in special education. This may in part explain their ‘hands-off’ approach to the work of the EA. The EA may be regarded as the expert by the administrator.

The inclusion of specific training on the legal and supervisory responsibilities of the administrator in a school in regard to educational assistant roles and responsibilities is a necessary component of any course designed to prepare principals. It is not unusual in a large school that there may be 8 to 10 EAs assigned to support students with exceptionalities. Gerlach (2009) clearly identifies the principal’s responsibility to set a school climate in which paraprofessionals have a professional identity and are part of instructional teams. “...principals are responsible for the administrative supervision, which includes the interviewing, hiring, preparation, evaluation, and dismissal of paraeducators.” (p. 47). In the some regions in Ontario hiring is conducted at a board level but all other functions are the responsibility of the school administrator.

It is important that the school administrator delineates his/her expectations in terms of roles and responsibilities and this can only be achieved when he/she has a clear understanding of the legal, liability and ethical issues associated with each role (French, 2003). A written protocol provided by the school board that outlines the way in which supervision will be carried out is essential if the discrepancies in practice are to be avoided.

Teacher preparation and training.

- require all pre-service teacher candidates to take at least one course in working with students with exceptionalities during their pre-service course work.
- provide teachers with clear direction as to their responsibilities in regard to managing and supervising the work of an EA and allocate time in the school day for collaboration and planning with the EA.
- provide training on programme specific strategies for students with exceptionalities to the teacher/EA team.

Teachers in pre-service or additional qualification courses are not instructed in the management and/or supervision of EAs (French & Chopra, 1999; French & Lee, 1988; French & Pickett, 1997; Morgan, 1997). Although this study did not involve teachers, it was clear from the survey input and the focus group data that many of the participants felt that the teachers they worked with were unclear of the role of the EA and in many cases gave no direction or supervision.

I'm tired, fatigue is not always related to kids – politics, ignorance of the teachers – they are not trained and they don't get it.

It is hard to work with the variety of teaching styles and sometimes their level of comfort working with you – it is like walking a tight rope.

When a classroom is assigned the support of an EA the teacher may or may not be involved in the decision. This may be the first time that a teacher has worked with another adult in his/her class; therefore, it is essential that an initial meeting with the administrator, teacher, and EA to clarify responsibilities and working conditions takes place. The administrator can model the type of collaboration that will be necessary for the teacher and EA to work as a team. It will be important that the teacher's role in supervision is clear and mutually acceptable times for the EA and teacher to meet are established during that initial meeting.

When a student with exceptional needs is joining a classroom, the planning for the transition is critical. A case conference or team meeting with the family can facilitate an exchange of information and the specific programming needs of the student can be reviewed. If the teacher and/or EA are not familiar with either the exceptionality or the programming strategies, it is incumbent upon the school administrator to access the required training for the teacher/EA team. In many school boards there are special education resource teams who can provide onsite “just in time” training. This strategy, borrowed from the business model that ensures supply of the needed components “just in time”, works well as it ensures that specific training is provided in a timely manner rather than the traditional broad sweep of training that does not address specific needs.

Parent education.

- Require the inclusion of roles and responsibilities of the EA in the parent information sheet on Special Education prepared by the school board
- Specify for parents the protocol for home/school communication to ensure that the teacher is aware of all communications with the home

The participants in the research expressed some concern that their role in relation to the students was not clearly understood by parents. One focus group participant commented that she felt insulted when she was referred to as the student’s ‘helper’ by a parent. Other participants expressed concern that they felt that the parent held them personally responsible for the safety of their child at all times in school. The role of the EA in relation to the teacher was also cited as one of ambiguity. Some parents only talked with the EA and had minimal contact with the teacher.

A meeting held with the teacher, EA, and the parent early in the school term would allow for a clear understanding of the respective roles. The inclusion of the description of the role of the EA for parents would correct the perception that an EA belongs to any one student.

Next Steps

The recommendations for changes in practice are long term goals that will involve decision makers at both the local and provincial level. However there are many steps that can be taken immediately at the school level to address the issues raised by the research participants.

Now is the time to look at the essential skills involved in promoting strong and effective teacher/EA teams. The collaboration skills necessary for an effective team are applicable to all education teams within a school.

Clarification of roles and responsibilities is only a beginning point. Clear lines of communication need to be established to ensure that the best interests of the students are considered at all times. The need for ongoing training of the team, rather than training in isolation is critical. The teacher is in charge of the classroom and with clear direction and supervision the team can have their training needs identified. With the support of the school administration the training can then be accessed in a timely way so that the student potential is fully realized.

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