

## **Better Practices for Enhancing the Role, Practices and Preparedness of Educational Assistants in Inclusive Classrooms**

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Walk past any classroom within a k-12 school and you are more than likely to find an additional adult in the classroom aside from the classroom teacher (Giangreco et al., 2010). With the growing number of students with exceptional needs within the classroom, there is a growing presence of educational assistants. “Educational assistants have a vital role in helping students learn in an inclusive, safe and supportive environment” (Auditor-General, 2018). The use of educational assistants has increased nationally (Abbott, 201; O’Rourke 2015) and to put that into perspective, the need and request for educational assistants have increased by 19% in the past five years (2013-2018) here in the province of New Brunswick, Canada (Auditor-General Report, 2018). With continued growth in the usage of educational assistants, there has been a focus on research around their professional role, effective team approaches for working with educational assistants, training and supervision, and professional growth for educational assistants (Sharma, 2016; Giangreco, 2013).

I set out to examine what common practices are in place to support the role of educational assistants, practices, and preparedness to ensure the continued growth of their role. I began with the question: *What are better practices for enhancing the role, practices and professional preparedness of educational assistants in inclusive classrooms?* I explored what educational research presented regarding my question and then set out to gain the perspectives of selected New Brunswick educators (administrators, teachers and district staff) and paraprofessionals to develop promising and emerging ways of effective practices to better understand the role of educational assistants.

The research I conducted was in February and March of 2020. A literature review was performed, and four professionals were consulted in the area of educational assistants. After reviewing the literature on the role, practices and professional preparedness of educational assistants and the interviews with professionals actively working in the New Brunswick education system, I compiled a comprehensive list of better practices for the effective use, practices, professional growth and policy development of educational assistants in the inclusive classroom. The following 27 statements serve as a summary of insights obtained from the research and first-hand knowledge from the participants. The statements of better practices have been organized into four main categories:

**Statements 1-9:** Structuring the Role of Educational Assistants

**Statements: 10-14:** Fostering Collaborative Relationships

**Statements 15-20:** Professional Preparedness and Growth of Educational Assistants

**Statements 21-27:** Guidelines and Policies

It is hoped that these better practice statements outlined below serve as a useful planning guide for teachers, school administrators, district office staff, as well as other educational stakeholders involved with enhancing the role, practices, and preparedness of educational assistants.

### **Better Practices for Structuring the Role of Educational Assistants**

This first group of better practice statements examines how to structure and enhance the role of educational assistants in the inclusive classroom. Much of the research reviewed addressed the need for clarifying and defining the roles and responsibilities of educational assistants and other team players. Many researchers have described their role as critical to the effectiveness of inclusion, by providing individual support for students with disabilities within the mainstream classrooms. (Abbott, 2011; Harris, 2015; O'Rourke, 2015). Although the role of an educational assistant has changed over the years, one would think clearer roles, responsibilities, expectations, frameworks for professional learning and embedded coaching would be the common practice; but these are the exception rather than the norm (Giangreco, 2010; Ruthford, 2015; and Webster, 2012).

#### **1. Role Clarity**

**Recognize the importance of role clarity of educational assistants based on the role document.**

School Administrators should be communicating and ensuring that all professionals adhere to the guidelines and practices of the educational assistant. This should consist of what an EA can do within the boundaries of their role and also what does not fall under the provision of their responsibilities.

#### **2. Appropriate Roles**

**Provide oversight to EA-teacher relationships.**

The administrator strengthens the roles of the supervising teacher and educational assistant by providing clear guidelines, support, and supervision to both parties.

#### **3. Scope of Practice**

**Ensure educational assistants are working within their scope of practice.**

Administrators must ensure that the EAs are not taking on responsibilities or given responsibilities that are beyond their scope of practice and/or role and responsibilities.

#### **4. Role of Supervising Teachers**

**Enhance the clarity and understanding of the role of the supervising teacher in relation to EA professionals.**

The supervising teacher must direct and plan for the EA assigned to their classroom to carry out their role effectively. The information teachers need to communicate with EAs are students' profiles and characteristics, as well as the learning needs of certain learners. Educational programming should be based on evidence-based approaches, classroom expectations and procedures, and detailed lesson plans.

## **5. Basic Knowledge**

**Ensure the EAs possess or acquire essential knowledge required for their role.**

It is essential that the educational assistant have a basic understanding of their role and relevant policies to carry out the supplemental programming directed by the supervising teacher. The essential basic knowledge includes the ability to interact and manage students, knowledge of exceptionalities, knowledge of different types of evidence-based teaching approaches and behavioural techniques.

## **6. Fostering Independence**

**Enhance understanding among all school personnel regarding EAs' professional role.**

It is critical for school staff to understand the dynamic of the teacher and EA complement in the classroom. Under teachers' directions and planning, the primary role of educational assistants is to support, build and foster skill development in students with exceptional needs. Their role is to maximize the learner's independence, not impede it.

## **7. Level of Support**

**Provide educational assistants with the knowledge of the best type of support to provide.**

Educational assistants must be knowledgeable of their role and involvement needed when providing both class-wide and one-to-one support. Educational assistants can have detrimental effects on the students to whom they are assigned by providing too much assistance.

## **8. Competency-Based Training**

**Provide ongoing professional development opportunities for educational assistants to acquire new areas of learning to support their evolving role with students.**

These skills would include building new knowledge around specific exceptionalities in the area of intellectual, physical, behavioural and childhood development.

## **9. Drive to Learn**

**Recognize the importance of encouraging EAs to develop their professional learning goals and plans.**

It is essential that EAs recognize the benefits of actively engaging in their professional development. As professionals, we must be always actively engaged in self-improvement to

enhance our skills. Educational assistants should take the initiative to drive their professional learning.

### **Better Practices for Fostering a Collaborative Environment**

Collaboration amongst team members, especially the paraprofessional and teacher, are essential for ensuring that all students are accessing the highest quality of service possible (ELK, 2013). Being able to plan, see eye to eye, and be in one another's space day in and day out, are essential ingredients for success for teachers and paraprofessionals. Being knowledgeable about one another's roles, how to work with one another, and what is expected of one another is crucial to making this relationship work. DeVecchi and Rouse's research highlights the importance of collaboration by acknowledging that "truly inclusive schools and communities work to support the inclusion of not only students but also the adults who work with them" (DeVencchi et al., 2010, p. 93). The following better practices statements address the essential qualities that foster effective, collaborative relationships and environments.

#### **10. Process for Communication**

**Implement a process to maximize the communication between teacher and educational assistant.**

Both the EA and the teacher must have the skills to communicate with one another. Open lines of communication allow for building rapport, fostering role clarity, cultivating better classroom organization and setting clearer boundaries. With solid communication in place, EAs will not be left feeling underprepared for their assignment or left with the feeling of being undervalued.

#### **11. Scheduled Meeting Times**

**Establish a school-wide timetable that incorporates meeting times between EAs and teachers.**

It is essential that there is a school-wide structure established by the administrator where set meeting times are scheduled at the beginning of the year to ensure time is set aside for the EA and the supervising teacher to meet. Establishing collaborative meeting times in their daily schedules between the EA and the supervising teacher is essential for discussing student learning profiles, goals and programming and times to provide feedback. Establishing time to meet will reduce the need for 'meeting on the fly' or at the last minute. This will also support EAs' understanding of what is being taught that day, and how they can support lessons.

#### **12. Building Rapport**

**Foster and strengthen the relationships between the EA and teacher by taking the time to build rapport.**

Effective communication is essential to fostering a successful collaborative relationship between teachers and EAs. EAs and teachers should establish a relationship with one another where they seek information to get to know one another's area of strengths, background, and interest.

### **13. Acknowledgment of Voice**

**Foster an environment where educational assistants' voices are acknowledged.**

It is imperative that EAs voice their thoughts and that teachers acknowledge their voice with respect. The supervising teacher and other members of the ESS team must acknowledge educational assistants' thoughts, feedback and/or recommendations to foster positive collaborative relationships. Educational assistants can provide invaluable observations that only enhance the students' learning.

### **14. Include EAs in professional collaborations**

**Cultivate an inclusive environment** by ensuring school administrators and teachers include educational assistants in meetings about students with whom they work, in faculty meetings, and in staff professional learning days.

## **Better Practices for Professional Preparedness and Growth of Educational Assistants**

No one can deny the important role that educational assistants play in the learning and success of students with exceptionalities. Educational assistants are heavily relied upon to supporting students with diverse learning needs in and outside the inclusive classroom (Giangreco, 2010). This is worrisome because they are rarely adequately prepared or supported to carry out such an important job (Bowles 2017; Webster 2010). In fact, some EAs are not prepared to face the day-to-day responsibilities of their assignments because often they are given responsibilities that they are not trained for (Butt 2012; Brenton 2010). Several studies have reported that when professionals take the time to meet with, train and supervise paraprofessionals, those paraprofessionals are capable of gaining new knowledge, acquiring better skills, and implementing what they have learned resulting in improved academics, social and behavioural outcomes for students (Brock, 2013; Giangreco et al., 2010). However, much of the research identified that a frequent challenge that paraeducators face is the lack of guidance around lessons (lesson planning), training, professional learning and feedback regarding their job performance (Webster, et al., 2013). This section will address better practices focusing on how to adequately prepare EAs for their day-to-day job responsibilities.

### **15. Day-to-Day Preparedness**

**Enhance the day-to-day preparedness of educational assistants by providing detailed lesson plans to effectively carry out their daily duties.**

It is essential that teachers provide a detailed plan for EAs to follow to support the learning of students. It is not up to the EA to develop goals and outcomes. When plans are provided, EAs are not put in a place where they need to make pedagogical decisions. These plans also allow for an EA to be proactive rather than reactive in their teaching and approach. Providing lesson plans also offers EAs with additional knowledge around approaches that should be used in the class.

#### **16. Taking Directives**

**Enhance the clarity and understanding of educational assistants on how to take and receive directives from supervising teachers.**

The role of the supervising teacher is to provide direction, monitor and supervise the EA. EAs should receive training on how to take direction from teachers and be aware of this in the hiring process.

#### **17. Ongoing Professional Learning**

**Implement a system for ongoing professional learning opportunities for educational assistants around specific and targeted skills related to their current role.**

EAs support a variety of students with a wide range of complex needs. It is imperative that on top of post-secondary education, EAs have access to ongoing professional learning that is specific and targeted to their role and specific to the learner they are working with. This could include advanced training around communication, behaviour approaches, reinforcement, and training on condition and syndromes. This additional training would benefit the students in the type of support they receive and boost the confidence and self-esteem of the EA.

#### **18. Practice**

**Provide opportunities for educational assistants to apply/practice skills learned on professional development days to ensure generalization of skills.**

EAs should also have the opportunity to practice/apply the skill(s) based on the knowledge provided through professional learning sessions. The teacher should support skill application through modeling and coaching of new skills.

#### **19. Ongoing Coaching**

**Structure and implement a school-wide system where supervising teachers are providing targeted ongoing coaching.**

In order for EAs to maintain a level of proficiency and to continue to building skills, the supervising classroom teacher must provide ongoing supervision and coaching.

#### **20. Growth Goals**

**Recognize the importance of co-constructing /co-creating professional growth goals with the EA.**

In addition to performance feedback, it is common practice for an EA to create growth goals around performance feedback in collaboration with the supervising teacher.

**Better Practices for Enhancing and Developing Policies and Practices**

There is a need for policymakers, school departments and administrators to review the current policies and guidelines that support the work of EAs, the allocation of EAs, and the ongoing professional development and supervision that EAs receive. Much of the research indicates that there is a need for policymakers to review and refine the current documents in place or address the lack of guidelines and practice documents that support the work of EAs. This section identifies better practices for enhancing and refining current policies and changes that need to occur to enhance the use of educational assistants. (Porter et al, 2012; Harris, 2014; Webster, 2012)

**21. Framework for Performance Feedback & Evaluations**

**Design a system for the provision of professional feedback as part of regular supervision.**

In collaboration with policymakers, department heads, school administrators and other school professionals, a framework should be designed to ensure that EAs are given timely feedback and evaluations to ensure fidelity to the standards of the profession. There is a lack of supervision and performance feedback given to the educational assistants who work with students with exceptional learning needs. It is essential that EAs receive ongoing feedback from their supervising teachers to enhance their skills.

**22. Refine the Roles Document**

**Refine the document for Guidelines and Practices of Educational Assistants.**

This document would replace the 1994 *New Brunswick Teacher Assistant Guidelines for Standards and Evaluation*. Revised guidelines would clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of EAs, the roles and responsibilities of the supervising teacher, performance feedback and EA evaluations.

**23. Framework for Ongoing Professional Development**

**Create a framework for professionals learning for EAs.**

The School District/Department must create a framework that supports ongoing professional development & training of educational assistants. This framework would allow for opportunities for EAs to build their skill sets. This framework would include building upon and maintaining current core competencies.

#### **24. School-wide Lesson Plan Policy**

**Ensure the development of teacher plans for EA classroom collaborations.**

Implement a school-wide policy where teachers must provide daily detailed lesson plans to educational assistants to support their daily job responsibilities.

#### **25. Deployment and Allocation**

**Develop policies where the assignment of EAs in schools or classrooms is based on student need and essential EA skills required to support student learning.**

Policymakers and unions need to examine the practices for assigning and allocating EAs to the school building. As it stands, schools are assigned EAs based on their needs in the building. However, EAs are not being assigned based on skill sets but based on seniority. This leads to an issue when you have students with particular needs in the building, but the schools do not have trained staff to meet the needs of that learner.

#### **26. Training for Supervising Teachers**

**Provide coaching to teachers on effective ways of collaborating with EAs.**

Implement a school-wide system where teachers are coached on how to effectively manage and supervise educational assistants.

#### **27. Student and EA Assignments**

**Implement a school-wide practice where the school administrator and the Educational Support Services Team take into consideration the skill sets of an EA when assigning to the classroom teacher and learner.**

Educational assistants are equipped with a variety of skill sets and offer a wide range of work experiences. These skill sets and previous work experiences should be considered when placing students with an EA.

### **Conclusion**

Years of research have been dedicated to clarifying and enhancing the role of educational assistants. Research has clearly identified that educational assistants play a vital role in supporting an inclusive environment. With such an important role to play in the success of inclusion, EAs deserve role clarity, training, and feedback to effectively engage in their work. As one researcher stated, "Educational assistants <play a> gluing, quilting and genuinely cementing role-one that has become increasingly vital to put in to practice the philosophy of inclusion" (Abbott, 2011, p. 228). Knowing what invaluable support EAs provide to ensuring



that inclusion works, it is essential that they are provided with the tools to carry out such an important job.

In closing, I will leave you with this final thought. Not only has our province of New Brunswick, Canada seen a rise in the request for and use of educational assistants, but there has been a rise globally (Auditor General 2018; Bowles et al., 2017). The rise in educational assistants only proves that this form of support will not be phased out or disappear from our school systems anytime soon (Ginegreco, 2013). Therefore, how we work with, involve and train educational assistants requires our attention from school to school, province to province and nationally. Policymakers, education departments and administrators need to come together to examine the research on how to enhance and make necessary changes to the current role, practices, and preparedness of educational assistants.

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