

Resource Teachers' Perceptions of the Utilization of Educational Assistants
And Implications for Future Practice

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology
University of Manitoba
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Resource Teachers' Perceptions of the Utilization of Educational Assistants and Implications for Future Practice

ABSTRACT

Changing demographics, resulting from immigration and broadening eligibility criteria for special needs categorical funding has led school divisions to rely more heavily on the utilization of educational assistants to meet the diverse educational needs of rapidly growing student populations. The accepted practice of hiring and assigning educational assistants to students with complex educational needs was questioned. The purpose of this study was to determine resource teachers' perspectives of the utilization of educational assistants with students with disabilities in a rural Manitoba school division. The intent was to gain a better understanding of existing practices and how these practices compared to roles and responsibilities of educational assistants as outlined in current educational research. Resource teachers in the school division were surveyed using a 24 item questionnaire on the current practices in the utilization of educational assistants in their school. The data identified some commonalities in the reliance on educational assistants among the respondents. The results identified revisions needed in policy and general practice to better serve students with disabilities. Implications for improved future practice include clearly defined employment policies, improved training opportunities for educational assistants, and professional development for resource and classroom teachers on effective management of educational assistants.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The quality of a student's educational experience depends on the quality of the staff surrounding and supporting his/her learning. With changes in the Manitoba Public Schools Act (2005), providing appropriate educational programming for an increasingly more diverse population of students has become the focus of inclusive public education. In providing appropriate inclusive educational opportunities, educational teams are larger and more specialized. And as part of a more specialized educational team, educational assistants (EA) are key players in supporting the appropriate education of many students.

A major concern, particularly for school administrators and special educators, is the rising number of students eligible for some type of specialized educational funding. Some studies in the United States project nearly fifty percent of students are eligible for some type of specialized programs intended to serve students with disabilities (Villa & Thousand, 2005). In addition to general and special education funds, schools can access additional funds for gifted education, English as an additional language (EAL) education, at-risk education and alternative education programs (Villa & Thousand, 2005). Each program has its own eligibility criteria and funding formula.

Broadening eligibility criteria expands the number of students who are eligible for these specialized programs or additional funding. All of which usually result in the accepted practice of hiring additional EAs to serve students with some type of

exceptional educational needs. This phenomenon begs discourse on whether inclusive opportunities do increase when EAs are assigned to students with disabilities.

The growing diversity among students results from differences in language, culture, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and varied physical and intellectual abilities (Falvey & Givner, 2005). Not only do population growth and broadened eligibility criteria impact diversity, but also advancements in medical technology (Falvey & Givner, 2005; Thousand & Villa, 2005). Medical technology has given children with complex medical needs longer life spans and greater independence, allowing them access to the educational opportunities of other children. Schools have become responsible for teaching students with more complex learning characteristics.

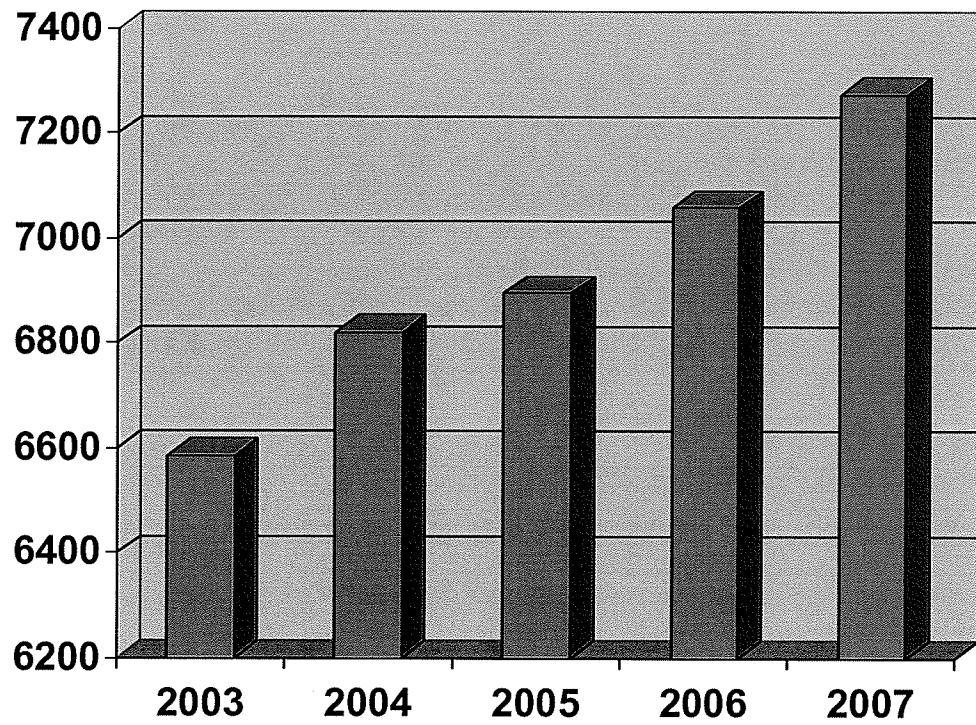
The Hanover School Division is a division in south eastern Manitoba. It is one of the few divisions in Manitoba that has experienced rapid population growth (Manitoba Education, Citizenship, & Youth, 2007). The increased population has been accompanied with the administrative challenge of hiring competent, qualified staff. This demographic trend has precipitated a corresponding increase in the practice of hiring EAs as an expedient solution to the rapidly growing population of students with diverse needs.

Over the past five years, the student population of Hanover School Division has steadily increased (MECY, 2007; MECY, 2006; MECY, 2005; MECY, 2004; MECY, 2003). This continual increase in population can be seen in Table 1.

With this increase in the general student population, there has been a corresponding increase in students with disabilities. This has lead to an increase in the number of EAs employed by schools, with many playing an increasingly prominent role in the instruction of students with disabilities (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). Classrooms have become overcrowded, not only from the increased number of students, but also from the resultant increased number of staff.

Table 1

Student Enrolment in Hanover School Division 2003 to 2007



This growing trend presents a few challenges for the decision and policy makers of school divisions. The challenge for principals and special education administrators is designing and implementing a service delivery model that meets the educational needs of students with a full range of disabilities within the context of the general education classroom (Downing, Ryndak, Clark, 2000; Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle, & Broer, 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

As student populations increase and more students with low incidence disabilities, such as autism, severe behavioural disorders and intellectual impairments, receive their education in general education classrooms, one of the most common service delivery responses has been to hire and assign more educational assistants to students with disabilities (Giangreco et al, 2004). This practice contributes to the increased numbers of EAs in schools and the corresponding costs. And simultaneously, proliferation of a service delivery model that is highly dependent on EAs for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities must be questioned.

The number of EAs continues to increase with an increasingly diverse student population, exacerbating the problem of overcrowding in schools and challenging a service delivery model so dependent on the use of EAs to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. So how are all these EAs being utilized? The purpose of this project is to answer that question.

The intent of this research project is to gather information regarding resource teacher's perceptions on the utilization of educational assistants with students with

disabilities in a rural Manitoba school division. I hope to gain a greater understanding of existing practices of the utilization of EAs and how these compare to the roles and responsibilities of EAs as outlined in current educational research. The purpose is to answer three questions.

- (1) How are EAs being utilized in the school division as perceived by resource teachers in Hanover School Division?
- (2) How do current practices compare to current educational research on the effective utilization of EAs with students with disabilities?
- (3) What improvements in policy and practice are needed to better serve students with disabilities?

There are three components to this research project. First, I will review the current educational literature on the utilization of EAs with students with disabilities. Second, I will look at existing practices in the utilization of EAs in the Hanover School Division. Each resource teacher received a questionnaire for their feedback on the utilization of EAs in their schools. The existing practices regarding the roles and responsibilities of EAs were examined in three areas: (1) proximity between the EA and the student, (2) ownerships of the student's educational program, and (3) the use and allocation of resources within schools. And lastly, I will discuss the findings in relation to implications for future practice in the utilization of EAs in supporting students with disabilities in schools.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The research literature addresses a variety of concerns that arise when schools rely on EAs as a primary support in ensuring appropriate education for students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco et al, 2004). One issue of concern is the appropriateness of assigning the least qualified staff member to provide the primary educational supports to students with the most complex learning challenges. Since this practice is deemed unacceptable for other students, who receive their education from certified teachers, not EAs, it should also be unacceptable for students with more complex learning needs.

A second questionable practice is assigning EAs to work individually, often in segregated settings, with students with disabilities (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle, & Broer, 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). The amendments to the Public Schools Act (2005) legislates that all students have access to the classroom in the catchment area of their residence and access to the provincial curriculum. Educational teams must consider these amendments when designing educational programming for students with disabilities. Although the initial approach to inclusion was to hire more EAs to work with individual students in classrooms, it allows some classroom teachers to avoid taking full responsibility of the diverse needs of their students (Godek, Shepherd-Furney & Riggs, 2005).

It is not my intent to minimize the contribution of the EA to the education of students with disabilities. EAs are an integral part of an effective school team and are a much needed support to the students to whom they are assigned, but the EA should be a supplementary support to the teacher and the student's education, not the primary provider. This issue is not one of EA value, but rather one of student ownership, professional responsibility, and accountability.

Because the educational literature on the role of the EA with students with disabilities is vast, I chose to concentrate on some specific areas in the educational literature. The literature review focuses on four areas of research: (1) the impact of an EA's presence on student learning, (2) EA qualifications and their perceptions of roles and responsibilities, (3) parental viewpoints, and (4) employment policies and training practices.

Impact of EA's Presence on Learning

The underlying assumption that the expanding use of EAs is necessary and inevitable, given the challenges associated with the increasing numbers of students with more complex needs in the classroom, is implicit in the educational research (Giangreco & Broer, 2007). Recent legislation, mandating access to both the classroom and the general curriculum for all students, will likely contribute to an expansion in the use of EAs. Many classroom teachers consider the use of EAs to accompany students with disabilities in their classrooms as an essential support, but the detrimental effects of this practice are well documented (Downing, Ryndak, &

Clark, 2000; Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle, & Broer, 2004; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

Educational assistants often remain untrained or under-trained for their responsibilities. Some responsibilities are questionable, such as making curricular decisions like instructional adaptations and modifications, planning lessons, and serving as liaisons with parents and families (Giangreco & Broer, 2007). These authors assert that the inappropriate utilization and excessive proximity of EAs to students with disabilities has been shown to interfere with teacher-student engagement, reduce peer interactions, stigmatize students, provoke problematic behaviour and develop co-dependence.

Assigning EAs to students has also been linked to lower levels of teacher involvement and teacher ownership of the student's education, key factors in successful inclusion (Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Giangreco & Broer, 2005). Teachers may forfeit their professional obligation toward students with disabilities when An EA is present in the classroom

A study by Chopra and French (2004) on parent-EA relationships confirms evidence that when EAs fail to exercise boundaries in their relationships with students and assume ownership of students, they become a barrier to the education of students. This study examined the benefits of the teacher's ability to lead and supervise EAs, as well as structure their relationships with parents, which improved student performance.

If EAs are not qualified or closely supervised, close relationships between EAs and parents can be precarious when they exist without teachers' involvement. Communication between parents and EAs regarding their children is common practice; however, the role of the teacher impacts the type of relationship between EAs and parents (Chopra & French, 2004). Boundaries established by the teacher that allow parents and EAs to exchange general information regarding the child's day or routines, leaves matters related to educational progress or behaviour to be addressed by the teacher, who is ultimately responsible for implementing the outcomes of the student's IEP.

Many classroom teachers consider the use of EAs, who accompany students with disabilities, where their roles become more and more instructional in nature, an essential support. Their responsibilities encompassed academic and behaviour support, individualized instruction, and reporting to parents on educational progress (Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Rather than one of many possible interventions, EAs seem to have become the only way to support students with disabilities, especially those students with the highest level of special needs categorical funding, such as multi-handicapped, significantly cognitively delayed, or autism.

Shifting responsibilities to EAs may temporarily relieve pressures on classroom teachers. Hiring EAs appears to be an expedient and cost effective solution to a rapidly increasing student population. EAs are burdened with greater responsibilities for students with disabilities because teachers are not assuming

enough (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). But there are other effective interventions to serve students with disabilities. These changes include improving teacher ownership of students with disabilities, addressing resource teacher caseload and working conditions, and building capacity in classroom teachers to design curricula and instruction for diverse groups of students (Giangreco et al, 2004).

Educational Assistant Perceptions

There have been a number of studies on EAs' perceptions of their qualifications and abilities to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Ghre & York-Barr, 2007; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) argue that understanding how EAs view their roles and responsibilities can assist resource teachers and principals in correcting misconceptions, establishing guidelines for job performance, and providing the appropriate supervision and training to support students effectively. Awareness of the disconnectedness between EAs' views of their role and the resource teachers' and principals' views of their role is imperative in bridging the gap between practice and policy.

Downing, Ryndak and Clark (2000) found that EAs performed a number of anticipated tasks, such as monitoring student behaviour, assisting with personal self care tasks, and providing individualized instruction, in addition to some of the highly recommended tasks, such as working with all students, not just the student with disabilities, collaborating with school team members, and facilitating peer interactions. However, these authors also noted that EAs expressed some feelings of

isolation in their work with students, often feeling compelled to make decisions in absence of the teacher. EAs, themselves, question their qualifications and training regarding their abilities to meet the needs of students. In fact, in this study, many EAs report that they received minimal training at the onset of the job, and even less after being in the position for a while (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). This perceived lack of training of EAs is unfortunate, especially at the onset of their jobs, as it may leave EAs feeling devalued as they work in isolation with little teacher direction.

With the Appropriate Educational Programming legislation (Public Schools Act, 2005), a collaborative team effort is needed for students with complex learning needs. Teachers must assume responsibility for ensuring that a student's program is appropriate and student outcomes as outlined on the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) are implemented. EAs are critical members of the school team and need appropriate direction from teachers. Working in isolation, with minimal direction, reinforces feeling devalued and excluded for both the EA and the student.

To provide quality programs that support students with disabilities, schools must ensure EAs are supported as well. Adequate training, prior to the onset of their job and ongoing supervision and feed back on job performance, is critical. New EAs need extensive direction and job embedded training to gain the knowledge and skills to support specific students. Consequently, the skill set depends on the complexity of the needs of the student's disabilities.

The lack of sufficient training and minimal ongoing support and direction are also primary causes of turnover and retention of EAs in schools (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007, Riggs & Mueller, 2001). A study by Riggs and Mueller (2001) found that because EAs are assigned to work with a wide range of student abilities, training was critical in the retention of EAs. EA turnover impacts educational programming, staff and students. The investment of time and money to improve training is essential to improving inclusive school practices. If EAs are important enough to the school team to hire, they're important enough to train. Retention is as important as the recruitment of trained staff.

Effective inclusive programming requires a full complement of staff, which includes qualified EAs. When understaffed, contingency plans are implemented to cover responsibilities, in which coverage is most often prioritized for students with the greatest health and safety needs taking precedence over instructional needs (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). Academic instruction becomes of secondary importance when EAs are absent or resign.

Another disruptive effect of EA turnover is the impact on relationships among team members (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Effective teaming is built on collaboration and good communication with EAs. Supervising teachers pave the road to successful working relationships (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Changes in staff can result in extra demands and miscommunications that have the potential to jeopardize effective working relationships. When EAs change, time is needed to develop new routines, relationships and understandings.

The third, and possibly, the most detrimental impact of EA turnover is the cost to the student (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). When students experience a strong positive relationship with their EAs, staff turnover results in significant feelings of loss for these students. Educational programming is disrupted most significantly when a change in personnel occurs during the school year.

EAs will continue to play an important part in the provision of appropriate education for students with disabilities, and adequate training will facilitate successful inclusive programming (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Helping EAs be valuable members of the school team is beneficial not only for the EA, but also the students they serve.

Parental Viewpoints

Parents of children with special needs, in accordance with the Appropriate Educational Programming (2005) legislation, must be included in the decision-making process and in the development of the student's IEP. In this process, the questions about the utilization of an EA may arise. Parents may assume an EA will be assigned to their child to implement and monitor the outcomes of the IEP, because that seems to be the accepted practice (Chopra & French, 2004). Most parents have positive perceptions of EAs working and interacting with their children.

Discontinuing or reducing the use of EAs could elicit some parental discontent, as parents see EAs as integral to the inclusion of students in the classroom, and often oppose cutting the use of EAs (Gessler-Werts, Harris, Young-Tillery, & Roark,

2004). In fact, the study by Gessler-Werts et al (2004) indicates that parents believe schools need more EAs, not fewer, and do not support budget cuts impacting services provided by EAs.

Parents identify three key functions of EAs in the classroom: (1) to provide academic help, (2) to keep students focused and on task, and (3) to assist with behaviour problems (Gessler-Werts et al, 2004). Many parents report that EAs have knowledge about their children's daily activities and academic difficulties and should be consulted when teachers are planning and preparing for individualized instruction (Gessler-Werts et al, 2004). Parents only want the best qualified and caring personnel working with their children.

EAs must be valued as critical members of the service delivery team, included in IEP meetings, and encouraged to inform teachers of difficulties or progress. However, it's the teacher who is responsible for any curricular adaptations or modifications and the development of the IEP. EAs should work under the direction of the teacher and not be asked to make academic decisions or plan instruction. This makes it even more imperative that EAs are properly trained and supervised by a certified professional.

Employment Policies and Training Practices

Some educational literature implies that the inclusive education challenges will be best addressed by improving hiring practices, enhancing training and orientation programs, and augmenting supervision of the continually expanding EA workforce (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Giangreco & Broer, 2007). There is no doubt

that improving working conditions, standardizing employment practices, clarifying educational requirements, and developing supervisory protocols that support EAs in the workplace are valuable management pursuits. However, these pursuits take time to develop and there continues to be a trend in which EAs are viewed as the expedient way of supporting students with disabilities in the classroom. The accepted practice appears to be to hire a half time EA for students with a lower level of special needs categorical funding and a full time EA for a student with a higher level of special needs categorical funding.

Schools and divisions must examine policies and practices regarding the employment, training, supervision, and responsibilities of EAs. Employment policies need to be developed to address EA competencies and qualifications. Educational programming policies outlining a service delivery model that does not rely heavily on EAs for students with disabilities is also needed. School divisions should develop training programs, where formal preparation programs are not available, such as in rural and northern Manitoba, that ensure the attainment of these basic competencies (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000).

Job embedded professional development can take many forms, including coaching in the instructional context, training at school team level in-services, and using multiple means of communication to share timely information (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). Orientation workshops for EAs at the onset of employment and prior to placement in the classroom, which include resource teachers, would ensure roles and

responsibilities are clearly defined, supervision schedules are planned, and job mentors are assigned.

Effective teaming and communication among educational team members is imperative in the attainment of inclusive education. To establish a sense of value and membership to a school team, sending EAs to workshops and conferences as part of a larger educational team would serve to acknowledge their important role in the process of inclusion, as well as promote the training of the team as a cohesive unit as opposed to offering individual training in isolation (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000).

Annual training that is mandated contractually would ensure that EAs, both novice and veteran, receive on-going professional development (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). A study by Ghere and York-Barr (2007) described one strategy shown to be effective. The strategy was to contractually require eight hours of professional development annually for EAs, and to set aside two hours per month for EAs to participate in team meetings and training. This practice would go a long way in developing cohesiveness among the school team and reinforcing the EA's important contribution to the classroom and students with disabilities.

Teachers play a critical role in EA development. Teachers must be trained to supervise EAs and convey information to EAs on a day to day and year to year basis (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Ghere & York-Barr, 2007). Along with improved EA training, resource teachers and classroom teachers need improved training in the management of EAs. Teachers should receive specific instruction and develop

competencies in training, managing and supervising EAs. If EAs are to successfully assume greater responsibility of students with disabilities in the classroom, it is imperative that teachers take a stronger leadership role in the classroom, as the Appropriate Educational Programming (2005) legislation dictates. Teachers must be the educational leaders in the classroom, providing guidance to others (EAs, parent volunteers, peer mentors) who support their students.

The study by Chopra and French (2004) indicated teacher preparation and in-service programs are needed in schools. Teachers need to recognize that parents and EAs are valuable members of the educational team but EAs, specifically, need support to be successful in their roles. Training programs are needed to prepare future teachers to be competent in supervision, teaming and collaboration, and leading, in order for them to effectively work with EAs.

The caseloads of resource teachers involved in inclusive practices should also be re-examined to ensure they have sufficient time to provide guidance and supervision to EAs. Caseloads should not be so large as to prohibit quality instruction time with students in the classroom (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). With increasing numbers of students with special needs and with increasing numbers of EAs, resource teachers are inundated with clerical tasks, such as: (a) rearranging schedules, (b) completing time sheets, (c) calling substitutes, and (d) typing and filing. Quality instructional time is most often sacrificed (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Villa & Thousand, 2005).

Concluding Thoughts

In the literature, I would like to focus on (a) effects of EA proximity to students with disabilities, (b) student ownership, and (c) deployment and utilization of resources and expertise in schools.

Proximity of an EA may impact the educational programs of students with disabilities. The presence of EAs may impede the development of independence, peer interactions, and may foster learned helplessness. The assignment of an additional adult to a specific student may inhibit the classroom teacher for taking responsibility for the student's educational program.

The role of parents in the education of their children can not be minimized. The literature suggests that parents' perceptions are positive and often advocate the utilization of EAs. A collaborative effort is needed, with the knowledge of all stakeholders, to ensure educational programming for students with disabilities maximize their potential through inclusive educational practices.

The three key functions identified by parents include provide academic help, help students stay focused and on task, and assist with behaviour problems, all of which are valuable strategies for EAs to use. Deploy these interventions to a greater number of students, as EAs circulate around the classroom, facilitate small cooperative learning groups, or encourage the use of peer tutors and study buddies would meet the needs of a diverse classroom population. Facilitating peer interactions could be beneficial to non disabled peers as well, as academic skills are solidified, social skills are practiced, and social responsibility are reinforced.

Although safety and assistance with self care are priorities for educational programming, student needs can be met through the better utilization of all resources found in a school. Implementing inclusive strategies by all members of the educational team (classroom teacher, resource teacher, EA, clinicians, peers) benefit all students in a classroom. Utilization of the diverse educational expertise and knowledge of all members of the team needs to be maximized. The expertise of resource teachers and classroom teachers should be used in direct service to students.

And lastly, the literature clearly indicates the need for professional development and improved training opportunities, both pre-service and job embedded, for all members of an educational team. Classroom and resource teachers need clarification of their roles and responsibilities, in-servicing on effective strategies for teaching to diverse populations, and the effective management of EAs. EAs need continual support and training as job expectations change and broaden to reinforce their sense of value as part of a larger cohesive educational team. Through professional development opportunities, ownership of a student's educational programming would shift from the EA to the classroom teacher, where it belongs. EAs will receive the direction and support needed to reduce the segregation of both students and staff. Students will receive appropriate education in the inclusive classroom.

Chapter III

Research Method

Setting

The purpose of this study was to gather information to identify a number of general practices regarding the utilization of EAs in a rural Manitoba school division. A survey of resource teachers was used to gather information to address the research question, how EAs are being utilized in the school division. The results were compared to current educational research to assist with making improvements in policy and practice within the school division to better serve students with disabilities.

The school division used in this study was located in south eastern Manitoba, with approximately 7200 students in both rural and urban settings. Five schools were located in an urban centre and the remaining eleven were in smaller rural communities within the school division. The schools spanned kindergarten to grade twelve as follows: five schools served kindergarten to grade 6, three schools were kindergarten to grade 9, two schools served kindergarten to grade 4, one grade 5 to 9 school, one grade 7 to 9 school, one grade 5 to 12 school, two grade 7 to 12 schools, and one large high school served grade 10 to 12 students.

Materials

A 24 item survey was used to gather information from all the resource teachers in the school division. Nineteen items required resource teachers to choose from “always” to “never” regarding common practices in their school, four items

gathered demographic information regarding grade assignments and formal education, and the one remaining question was an open ended question for additional written personal comments. See Appendix A.

Although demographic information regarding educational background, teaching experience, and grade levels served, was included in the questionnaire, names and schools were kept anonymous as this information was not pertinent to the study.

A number of factors were considered in the development of the questionnaire. Items were designed to identify how EAs are utilized in the division. Items were organized into three categories, (1) proximity to students, (2) student ownership, and (3) use of other resources. The examples and models presented in the literature by Giangreco and Broer (2007, 2005) and Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle and Broer (2004) were the basis of the development of the items on the questionnaire.

Role of Researcher

As a Student services administrator and from years of informal observation through visitation to schools, I have developed personal beliefs about the utilization of educational assistants for the successful inclusion of student with disabilities. These beliefs have influenced the development of the items on the survey and have impacted the lens through which I view the effective utilization of EAs in promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities. These beliefs were also the impetus behind my desire to explore how resource teachers perceive the utilization of EAs.

Through years of informal observation during school visits in the division, EAs were observed working individually with students often in segregated settings, such as the hallway, back of the classroom, in the resource room, or in the library. Resource teachers appeared so overwhelmed and busy with their daily routine that assigning an EA to a student was an expedient way to deal with students with disabilities. EAs seemed to be assigned to students before educational programming (IEPs), outlining meaningful curricular outcomes, were collaboratively developed among the student's school team. My role as the researcher was to develop an understanding of how EAs were utilized from the resource teachers' perspectives.

Participants

The participants were purposefully chosen. Twenty four resource teachers in the sixteen schools within the division received a questionnaire through the divisional mail.

The demographics of the sample were collected, which included years of teaching experience and formal training and education of the resource teacher. Of all respondents, seven resource teachers worked in kindergarten to grade six schools, and the remaining nine resource teachers worked predominantly in secondary grades. Three resource teachers provided service to grades five to nine, two respondents reported working with grades seven to nine, and four worked only with students in grades ten to twelve.

The participants reported a wide range of years of experience, but there was less variation in the highest level of education attained. Nine of the respondents

reported 20 or more years' experience, one reported between fifteen and twenty years experience, one reported fifteen to ten years experience and the remaining five respondents reported five to ten years experience in education.

The highest level of education attained was more consistent among participants, with the majority of ten participants having a baccalaureate degree in education (B.Ed.), four reported a post baccalaureate diploma in education (P.B.D.E.), and two respondents had a degree at the master's level (M.Ed.). Less than half (6 out of 16) of the participants had completed some type of post baccalaureate studies in education.

Procedure

The questionnaires were mailed along with an informational cover letter to 24 resource teachers in each of the 16 schools, requesting their voluntary participation. Completed questionnaires were returned through the divisional mail in a preaddressed envelope. Of the twenty four questionnaires distributed, 16 were completed and returned. The responses to each item were tallied and recorded on a summary sheet. Written comments were reviewed to identify common themes, beliefs and practices among participating resource teachers.

The data was analyzed to identify any trends or common themes in utilization of EAs with students with disabilities. First, the responses from the whole group were tallied to determine general practices among all resource teachers within the division. See Table 2. Secondly, the responses were separated into two groups to determine the presence of any significant differences in practices between elementary

and secondary resource teachers. The elementary group consisted of seven resource teachers who reported working in kindergarten through grade 6. The secondary group was made up of the remaining 9 resource teachers who reported working predominately in grades 7 to 12. See Table 3.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this research study. The value of the data is limited to the school division. The results are dependent upon the individual interpretation of items by each resource teacher. These findings are limited to the schools within this school division, and the value of the data is beneficial for improving existing policies and practices within the division. Some of the data is only applicable to specific schools, as there was a diverse range of answers from school to school on some of the items of the questionnaire.

Because only the resource teachers were surveyed, these results are further limited by the resource teachers' perceptions of what is happening in the classrooms in their specific schools.

Because of the size of the sample of participants, I was unable to do any statistical analysis of the data. The responses to items were counted out of a total of 16, a sample only representative of this particular division, further limiting the generalizability of the data.

Table 2

Summary of Questionnaire Responses

1 st	2 nd	3 rd
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Abbreviated item number	Always (n=16)	Frequent (n=16)	Sometimes (n=16)	Rarely (n=16)	Never (n=16)
Category 1: Proximity to students					
1. Spend day in close proximity to EA.	2	10	4		
2. Physically separated in the room to work with EA.	1	4	6	5	
3. Work individually in a separate location.		4	10	2	
9. Students unnecessarily dependent on EA.		2	9	5	
11. When EA absent, student experiences a "lost day".			5	8	3
12. When EA absent, the student given "day off".				3	13
15. Students spend lunch, recess with EA.		9	6	1	
Category 2: Student ownership					
4. EA aware of the IEP outcomes.	10	4	2		
7. Classroom teachers involved with students	3	2	7	4	
10. EAs communicate to parents.			2	7	7
13. EA decision to remove student when disruptive.		5	7	3	1
14. EA decision to change activity when difficult.	1	2	6	6	1
16. At IEP teachers rely on EA for student progress.		4	7	5	
Category 3: Efficient use of resources: time, skill sets, personnel, professional expertise					
5. Receive primary instruction from EA.	3	5	5	2	1
6. Resource teacher spend time with paperwork.	1	14	1		
8. EAs make curricular/instructional/ adaptations without teacher oversight.		1	3	8	4
17. Percentage of time doing clerical work.	> 90%	80 – 60% 2	50% 8	40 – 30% 5	<20% 1
18. Percentage of time on EA schedules.	> 90%	80 – 60% 2	50% 3	40 – 30% 10	<20% 1
Other: General interest question					
19. Increase in EAs because belief that primary intervention is to assign an EA.	Strongly Agree 5	Agree 10	Disagree 1	Strongly Disagree	

Table 3

Responses by Elementary and Secondary Resource Teachers

Abbreviated item number Elementary (n=7) / Secondary (n=9)	<i>Always</i>	<i>Frequent</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
Category 1: Proximity to students.					
1. Spend day in close proximity to EA.	1/1	4/6	2/2		
2. Physically separated in class with EA.	0/1	1/3	3/3	3/2	
3. Work individually in a separate location.		1/3	4/6	2/0	
9. Students unnecessarily dependent on EA.		1/1	4/5	2/3	
11. When EA absent, student experiences a “lost day”.			2/3	3/5	2/1
12. When EA absent, the student given “day off”.				1/2	6/7
15. Students spend lunch, recess with EA.		3/6	4/2	0/1	
Category 2: Student ownership					
4. EA aware of the IEP outcomes.	6/4	1/3	0/2		
7. Classroom teachers involved with students.	2/1	2/0	2/5	1/3	
10. EAs communicate to parents.			0/2	3/4	4/3
13. EA decision to remove a student when disruptive.		1/4	5/2	1/2	0/1
14. EA decision to change activity when difficult.	0/1	1/1	3/3	3/3	0/1
16. At IEP teachers rely on EA for student progress.		1/3	2/5	4/1	
Category 3: Efficient use of resources: time, skill sets, personnel, professional expertise					
5. Receive primary instruction from EA.	1/2	2/3	3/2	1/1	0/1
6. Resource teacher spend time with paperwork.	0/1	7/7	0/1		
8. EAs make curricular/instructional/ adaptations without teacher oversight.		0/1	0/3	4/4	3/1
17. Percentage of time doing clerical work.	> 90%	80 – 60% 2/0	50% 3/5	40 – 30% 2/3	<20% 0/1
18. Percentage of time scheduling EA assignments.	> 90%	80 – 60% 1/1	50% 1/2	40 – 30% 4/6	<20% 1/0
Other: General interest question					
19. Increase in EAs because belief that primary intervention is to assign an EA.	Strongly Agree 1/4	Agree 6/4	Disagree 0/1	Strongly Disagree	

Table 4

Comparison Items between Elementary and Secondary Teachers' Responses

1 st	2 nd	3 rd
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Abbreviated item number Elementary (n=7) / Secondary (n=9)	Always	Frequent	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Category 1: Proximity (physical and psychological) to students: isolation from peers, minimal autonomy, dependent on EA to meet social/learning needs.					
3. Work individually in a separate location. (Elementary)		1	4	2	
3. Work individually in a separate location. (Secondary)		3	6	0	
15. Students spend lunch, recess, playground with EA. (Elementary)		3	4	0	
15. Students spend lunch, recess, playground with EA. (Secondary)		6	2	1	
Category 2: Student ownership: teacher – student engagement, awareness of educational needs and instructional decision maker.					
7. Classroom teachers involved with students in their classrooms. (Elementary)	2	2	2	1	
7. Classroom teachers involved with students in their classrooms. (Secondary)	1		5	3	
13. EA decision to remove a student from class when disruptive. (Elementary)		1	5	1	
13. EA decision to remove a student from class when disruptive. (Secondary)		4	2	2	1
16. At IEP teachers rely on EA's input on student progress. (Elementary)		1	2	4	
16. At IEP teachers rely on EA's input on student progress. (Secondary)		3	5	1	
Category 3: Efficient use of resources: time, skill sets, personnel, professional expertise					
5. Receive primary instruction from EA. (Elementary)	1	2	3	1	
5. Receive primary instruction from EA. (Secondary)	2	3	2	1	1
8. EAs make curricular/instructional/ adaptations without teacher oversight. (Elementary)				4	3
8. EAs make curricular/instructional/ adaptations without teacher oversight. (Secondary)		1	3	4	1

Chapter IV

Discussion of Results

The data obtained from the questionnaires was summarized in Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4. The items were organized into the three categories, proximity to students, ownership of students' educational programming, and utilization of resources within the school.

Trends or common themes in utilization of EAs with students with disabilities were investigated. First, the responses from all the resource teachers were tallied to determine their perceptions of general practices. Secondly, the responses were separated into two groups to determine the presence of any differences in practices between elementary and secondary resource teachers.

Category 1 addressed proximity between the EA and the student with a disability. Proximity referred to both physical and psychological proximity, impacting student autonomy and accessing social interactions, the curriculum and classroom. Category 2 identified issues of ownership of the student's educational program, including teacher – student engagement, awareness of student needs, academic or social performance. Category 3 addressed the efficient use of school resources, maximizing the potential and strengths of the staff, personnel expertise, skills sets, and time and case management.

Table 2 summarized the data by number of responses for each item. The coloured gradient from darkest to lightest represented the first, second and third highest number of responses for each item. For example, in Item 1, “frequently”

attained the greatest number of responses (10) from resource teachers, represented by the darkest shade. "Sometimes" was the second most chosen response (4), represented by a lighter shade and "always" ranked third in number of responses (2), indicated by the lightest shade.

Table 3 separated the responses by grade levels served. Resource teachers who served kindergarten to grade 6 were categorized as elementary and resource teachers who served grades 7 to 12 were categorized as secondary. Analysis of the data in Table 3 identified variances in utilization of EAs between elementary and secondary resource teachers.

A number of items showed differences in responses between elementary and secondary resource teachers. Table 4 identifies specific questionnaire items where differences in responses between elementary and secondary resources teachers were evident. In Category 1, proximity to students, Items 3 and 15 were chosen. In Category 2, student ownership, Items 7, 13, and 16 were chosen. Items 5 and 8 were focused on in Category 3, utilization of resources. These particular items were chosen because the responses between elementary and secondary resource teachers changed the order of the coloured gradient. This variation between the two groups of resource teachers may indicate differing practices between elementary and secondary schools.

Proximity to Students

Items in Category 1 pertained to issues of proximity to students, both physical and psychological proximity. Proximity may impact student autonomy and interfere

with spontaneous social interactions. Items 1, 2, 3, and 15 indicate that EAs are “frequently” in close proximity to their assigned students during instructional and social time, such as breaks, recesses, and lunch hours; however, students “rarely” experience a missed day if the EA is absent, as seen in Items 11 and 12. These results suggested that the practice of assigning an EA to a student with disabilities is an acceptable practice of the resource teachers. This practice may impede student autonomy and limit spontaneous social interaction. Creating unnecessary dependence on the EA could lead to academic segregation and exclusion, for both the student and the assigned staff, enabling a relationship of codependence and academic learned helplessness.

In Table 4, a difference between the perceptions of elementary and secondary resource teachers was evident in Items 3 and 15. In Item 3, the secondary resource teachers responded that EAs “sometimes” and “frequently” work in segregated locations as compared to elementary resource teachers who responded “sometimes” and “rarely”. This suggested that EAs in secondary schools work more often with individual students in segregated locations as compared to their elementary counterparts. As seen in Item 15, students in secondary schools also spend more breaks, recesses, and time on the playground with EAs, as indicated by the high number of “frequently” responses by the resource teachers, than their elementary counterparts who “sometimes” spend recesses, breaks, and time on the playground with their students. This was interesting data, given that secondary schools do not generally have recesses and playground time in their schedules. This may imply that

students with disabilities have less unsupervised social time or the EA more closely shadows students at the secondary level.

Student Ownership

Items in Category 2 addressed ownership of the student's educational program. These items were designed to determine who of the school team was aware of the educational needs and made the educational or curricular decisions. These items were also intended to determine existence of teacher engagement with the student with disabilities. Responses to items in Category 2 pertaining to student ownership were predominately "sometimes". See Table 2.

Responses to Item 4 showed that resource teacher perceived EAs as "always" to "frequently" aware of the IEP outcomes. This may imply effective team collaboration and communication between teachers and EAs, or it could mean that ownership of the student's educational program belongs to the EAs. In Items 13 and 14, resource teacher reported that the EA "sometimes" makes decision regarding the lesson or activity and the location. Responses to Item 7, querying teachers' involvement with students with disabilities placed in their class, ranged from "always" to "rarely", with the dominant response being "sometimes". These responses indicated that resource teacher perceive minimal teacher ownership of a student's educational program or that teachers readily forfeit that responsibility to another staff member, the EA or the resource teacher.

How can a student be in a classroom and the teacher only be involved "sometimes"? Even "sometimes" seems to be insufficient teacher involvement. In

Item 7, four resources teacher responded “rarely” to the question pertaining to teacher involvement with students with disabilities. The perceptions of these four resource teachers is concerning.

In Table 2, Items 13 and 14 resource teachers suggested that EAs are making decisions only teachers should make, i.e. removing a student from class and changing the class activity. In Item 16 resource teachers perceived that teachers inappropriately relied on EAs to assess student progress. The above practices would be in violation of the Appropriate Education Programming regulation (2005). Responses to these items implied that teachers lack accountability to students with disabilities.

In Table 4, Item 7, three of the four “rarely” responses were from resource teachers who all serve a combination of grades seven to twelve. Elementary resource teachers responded differently to Item 7. They responded “always”, “frequently”, and “sometimes” all ranked equally, as compared to secondary resource teachers who predominantly chose the response, “sometimes”. The results of this item suggested that elementary resource teachers perceived that classroom teachers assume more responsibility for student ownership and were more involved with the students in their classroom than the secondary resource teachers.

Items 13 and 16 in Table 4 also evidenced differing opinions regarding student ownership between elementary and secondary resource teachers. In Item 13 secondary resource teacher implied that EAs “frequently” decide to remove students from class, whereas elementary resource teachers perceived EAs “sometimes” make

decisions to remove students from classrooms. The responses to Item 16 suggested that secondary resource teacher felt teachers rely on EA input on student progress more than their elementary counterparts.

Teacher engagement and student ownership may be more prevalent in the lower grades than in the higher grades. This could be attributed to the fact that students usually have only one teacher in the earlier years and multiple teachers after grade 7. In a grade five classroom, after five days of school with approximately six hours per day, a teacher has had thirty hours of contact time with the same group of students. In grade eight, a teacher sees a group of students one hour a day, five times a week. It will take six weeks for a teacher to acquire the same number of contact hours.

A common criticism of teachers at the secondary level has been that they teach subjects, rather than students. The discrepancies between resource teachers' perceptions of the utilization of EAs at the elementary and secondary levels suggested that students with disabilities are the responsibility of the EAs more than the teachers. The organizational structure of middle and senior year schools may impede the attachment between teacher and student. It reasonably follows that the EAs, who travel from classroom to classroom with students with disabilities, more readily take ownership of students' educational programs.

Regardless of how schools are structured, the question remains. Who is ultimately responsible for a student's educational program and accountable for its appropriateness? If resource teachers perceived that classroom teachers are forfeiting

ownership of student's educational programming to the EAs, professional responsibility becomes an issue. Schools may need to review the way teachers, classes and transitions are organized during the school day to maximize student – teacher contact time. More planning and student contact time may be needed for teachers to assume ownership and responsibility for a student's educational program.

Utilization of Resources

The items in Category 3 pertained to utilization of resources: time, personnel and professional expertise. In Item 5, resource teachers responded that students with disabilities “frequently” and “sometimes” received their primary instruction from EAs, but to Item 8 resource teachers responded that EAs “rarely” make curricular or instructional decisions. See Table 2. But when reviewing Items 5 and 8 from the perspectives of elementary and secondary resource teachers in Table 4, primary instruction and instructional adaptations by EAs was a more pervasive problem at the secondary level.

Clerical tasks and paperwork were consistent complaints among the resource teachers. Resource teachers were bogged down with paper work and clerical tasks, minimizing their availability to teach. In Table 2, Items 17 and 18 indicated that resource teachers put an inordinate amount of time in clerical work, in some cases 50% of their day, leaving the teaching to the classroom teacher or worse, the EA. It seemed classroom teachers delegated the paperwork associated with EA assignments and duties and the writing of students' IEPs to the resource teacher. I question the appropriateness of the resource teacher assuming responsibility for all this paperwork

as opposed to the classroom teacher and resource teacher collaborating on these tasks, lessening this arduous task. Are classroom teachers forfeiting accountability documentation as well as ownership of the student's educational programming? The efficiency of collaboration is in the even distribution of work to the many shareholders in the educational team.

One participant shared in the written comments,

“Although I could spend up to 50% of my day on paperwork, I am busy dealing with student needs. Paperwork is generally done outside school hours”.

Many of the respondents commented on the need for more time to effectively do their work, or need to do less work with paper in order to do more work with students.

Item 19 was a general opinion question, asking all participants if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the reason the number of EAs has increased in schools is because of a general belief that the primary intervention to support students with disabilities was to assign an EA. All participants, except one, responded “agree” or “strongly agree”. Resource teachers perceived reliance on EAs as a primary intervention for educating students with disabilities. If this is the perception, then resource teachers and classrooms teachers may need further training to expand their repertoire of strategies to teach diverse populations. Assigning EAs to students with disabilities may have become a “quick” solution for an overwhelmed resource teacher coping with rapidly increasing student populations and unmanageable caseloads.

Some of the participants added written comments regarding their personal beliefs in the utilization of EAs and their role in the inclusion of student with disabilities. Three main themes surfaced from these comments: (1) EAs are seen as an integral part of the educational team, (2), there was insufficient time in the school day to complete all expected tasks of a resource teacher, and (3), the responsibility of student ownership was unclear.

Two participants commented on the value of EAs and the important role they played in the inclusion of students with disabilities. One resource teacher's comments validated the need for role clarification and the need for teacher direction to provide appropriate educational programming for students with disabilities.

"EAs play a crucial role in a funded student's education. They must be given appropriate roles in the programming of the child. Strong direction by the teacher and resource teacher is crucial".

Insufficient time seemed to be another recurring theme in many of the written comments of the participants. Resource teachers feel inundated with paperwork required by the province or the school division, claiming up to 50% of their day is spent on clerical tasks and scheduling EAs into classrooms and assigning them to specific students. These tasks are viewed as more time consuming during specific times of the school year, such as beginning of the school year and times that coincide with provincial funding deadlines. As one participant commented,

"Timetabling for EAs is huge when assigning jobs in spring and August, and 50% of job (is) paper work required by province/division/school".

One participant combined the issues of student ownership and time together, claiming one is dependent upon the other.

“If we want teachers to be more involved, they need more time to effectively include all students in class”.

Other participants commented that changing practices with EAs had already begun. Recommended practices by Downing, Ryndak and Clark (2000), such as including the EA in more collaborative teaming for students with disabilities, using EAs with a whole classroom of students, rather than one student with the disability, and more direction by the teacher, is evidenced in a comment by one respondent.

“I would like to see all teachers and EAs ‘on board’ with the idea that they (EAs) are assigned to a class, not a particular student. Teachers are taking more ownership of their students with disabilities and, for the most part, work as a team with the EAs”.

The results of these questionnaires certainly supported some of the literature on the overreliance and ineffective utilization of EAs with students with disabilities, but a few participants seemed to be working toward changing the way EAs are utilized. EAs were perceived by resource teachers as the primary intervention for students with disabilities and make educational decisions without teacher input or direction.

Resource teachers were overwhelmed with caseloads and the requisite paperwork (IEPs, personal transportation plans, Unified Referral Intake System/URIS plans) that accompany these caseloads, reducing access to students. The paperwork was reported by resource teachers as consuming half of their work day (50%), time

that may be better spent with students, collaborating with educational teams and training and supervising EAs.

Chapter V

Implications and Conclusions

Some of the findings in this study are reflected in the educational literature that supports the need for some changes in policy and practice to reduce the use of EAs as the primary intervention for students with disabilities. If resource teachers feel EAs are essential to the successful inclusion of students with disabilities, the educational leaders need to provide strategies to EAs to promote academic and social inclusion by reducing segregation and the exclusion of the students they serve. Developing a greater repertoire of strategies for educational teams is needed to promote student autonomy, reduce dependency and learned helplessness, and strategies to increase social interaction, academic engagement with peers both in and out of the classroom. More professional development in these strategies is needed at the secondary level than the elementary level.

Professional development is needed to increase program ownership by the classroom teacher, accountability and professional responsibility, more so at the secondary level than the elementary level. Through continued classroom teacher education on EA management and supervision, the inappropriate decision making regarding removal from classrooms and altering curricular assignments and assessment criteria will be corrected. Increasing teachers' repertoires of strategies that make curricula and assessment procedures accessible to students with disabilities will result in students with disabilities staying in class with their peers.

Three areas of professional practice need to be addressed: (1) increase professional development opportunities for resource and classroom teachers, (2) explore alternatives to the utilization of EAs, and (3), provide EA training and in-servicing opportunities. Addressing these areas would improve services to students with disabilities by providing all members of the educational team, including EAs, with strategies that promote inclusive practices that ensure appropriate educational programming.

Professional development

Resource teachers and classroom teachers need in-servicing to clarify roles and responsibilities of team members and appropriate utilization and management of EAs assigned to their classrooms. Clarification of roles and responsibilities, including the role of the classroom teacher, creative allocation of resources, and effective time and resource teacher caseload management would initiate the shift of ownership of a student's educational program to classroom teachers.

In this study, resource teachers implied that ownership of a student's program oscillates between teachers and EAs. Teachers may forfeit ownership to EAs, allowing them to make educational decisions regarding lesson adaptations and setting or location. Teacher education and in-servicing should provide a greater repertoire of strategies and interventions for diverse populations, promoting the inclusion of students and the assigned EA in the inclusive classroom.

Appropriate professional development opportunities for divisions in rural Manitoba are needed to address emerging social and demographic trends (MASS &

MAST, 2006). The demographic trend specific to the division is the rapidly increasing population of students with diverse needs. Professional development could be promoted through the development of a professional learning community among the resource teachers. As a professional learning community, time could be allotted at each monthly resource teachers meeting to present and discuss new ideas on effective strategies in the education of students with exceptional needs. Topics could include EA management, teaching to diversity, and alternatives to the utilization of EAs. Allowing resource teachers to network with other resource teachers is professional development, but strategically allotting time to this task is essential, if change is the objective.

Inclusive environments demand the participation of all persons, professional and nonprofessionals alike, who possess knowledge about a student with a disability. The goal is to ensure that every student receives needed supports and services. A change is needed in the way specialized personnel deliver expertise (Villa, Thousand, Van der Klift, Udis, Nevin, Kunc, Kluth, & Chapple, 2005). Staff members that work alone and pull students out of classrooms are now asked to work together as collaborative educational teams around students with disabilities. The expectation should be that a student receives focused and intensive instruction in any location in the school that makes sense for the task. The delivery of the intensive instruction depends on many variables, from professional expertise and personal interest to relationship with the instructed student. This involves a willingness to become

models, coaches and members of co-teaching teams to pass on the essential elements of their specialty to other teachers, EAs, parents, and volunteers.

Teaching has been characterized as a “lonely profession”, but the rapidly increasing diversity of students within classrooms makes teaching in isolation absurd. Yet, schools continue to perpetuate the segregation of staff members and students because of inflexible expectations of the roles of persons with different labels, i.e., classroom teacher, educational assistant, resource teacher (Thousand & Villa, 2005). Redefining roles and responsibilities is paramount in the efficient use of resources in a school. Flexibility is needed when redefining roles and job responsibilities and is determined by student needs and complementary skill sets of staff. Job functions can change through system wide role redefinition. Thousand and Villa (2005) have suggestions for system wide role redefinition, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5

Changing Definitions of Responsibilities

Role	Traditional Responsibilities	Redefined Responsibilities
Resource Teacher	Provide instruction to students eligible for services in resource room and special classrooms.	Collaborate with classroom teachers and other support personnel to meet the needs of all learners. Team teaches with classroom teachers in regular classroom. Recruit and train students to be peer tutors and peers buddies for other students. Train and direct EAs in collaboration with classroom teacher.
Classroom Teacher	Refer students who do not "fit" into traditional classroom program and/or meet curricular outcomes for diagnosis, remediation, and alternate placement. Teaches students who "fit" the outcomes of the curricula.	Share responsibility with resource teacher and other support personnel for teaching all students. Seeks aid from resource teacher and other support personnel for students who are experiencing difficulties. Collaboratively plans with other members of school staff to meet the needs of all learners. Recruits and trains students to be tutors and peer buddies for other students. Trains and directs EAs in collaborations with classroom teacher.
Educational Assistant	Works in segregated settings. In classrooms, stay in proximity of and works only with students with special needs categorical funding.	Provides a variety of support to all students in the general education classroom under the direction of the classroom teacher. Facilitates natural peer interaction and support within the general education classroom.

Note. Adapted from "Organizational Supports for Change toward Inclusive Schooling," by J.S. Thousand and R.A. Villa, 2005, in *Creating an Inclusive School, 2nd Edition* by R.A. Villa and J.S. Thousand, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. USA.

The inundation of paperwork associated with resource caseloads is a common theme in the data presented in this research study. Resource teacher caseloads need to be addressed to allow sufficient time to do their job efficiently. Few resource teachers would disagree that paperwork dominates special education. This study reports that resource teachers spend 50% of their time with clerical tasks and 30 to 40% of their time arranging and rearranging EA schedules. Thousand and Villa (2005) state resource teachers devote an estimated 35 to 50% of their time on documentation related to students' IEPs. This huge amount of paperwork, including timelines, notices of meetings, timely development of educational outcomes, and annual review of IEPs, interferes with quality instruction time with students.

As knowledgeable professionals are occupied with these time intensive clerical tasks, students with complex learning needs are often left under the supervision of less qualified staff. Clerical tasks such as typing meeting minutes, updating IEP outcomes, and mailing and filing usually do not require specialized training and expertise. As recommended by Giangreco (2007), using one EA as a cleric frees up the resource teacher to work directly with students in the classrooms, team teach with classroom teachers, or supervise cooperative groups in a classroom.

Time is one resource that seems in short supply. Concerns about insufficient time were repeatedly voiced by many of the resource teachers in this study. The need for more time to plan, to collaborate, and to educate teachers is well documented in this study.

Time for resource teachers and classroom teachers to collaboratively plan, train and supervise EAs is often insufficient. Common planning time helps teachers share ideas and build the necessary collegiality and cooperation needed in an inclusive school (Malarz, 1996). Thousand and Villa (2005) provide some strategies for expanding time during the school day for these valuable tasks, as seen in Table 6.

Table 6

Strategies for Expanding Time for Collaboration and Teaming.

Borrowed Time	1. Arrange a 30 to 40 minute block of time before or after school. 2. Lengthen the school day by 15 to 30 minutes on four days, allowing for early dismissal on the fifth day.
Common Time	3. Schedule preparation periods at the same time for teaching teams.
Tiered Time	4. Layer preparation time with existing breaks such as lunch and breaks/recess to lengthen a block of time for teaming and training.
Rescheduled Time	5. Use professional development days for teacher teams to do more long term planning. 6. Build one team teaching day into every reporting period or month. 7. Lengthen the school year for teachers at the beginning of the school year.
Freed up Time	8. Engage parents and volunteer community members to conduct partial day craft or hobby sessions to free time for teams to collaborate and meet.
Purchased Time	9. Hire permanent substitutes to free educational teams for planning purposes during the day. 10. Offer teachers for spending vacation time on planning with compensatory time during non instructional school days.
Found Time	11. Use serendipitous times to plan (snow days, student assemblies).

Note. Adapted from "Organizational Supports for Change toward Inclusive Schooling," by J.S. Thousand and R.A. Villa, 2005, in *Creating an Inclusive School, 2nd Edition* by R.A. Villa and J.S. Thousand, Association for Supervision and Curriculum. USA.

Alternatives to Utilization of EAs

Creative use of other resources within a school can reduce the reliance on EAs as a primary support to student with disabilities. Items 6, 13, 14, and 16 to 19 reflect the over reliance on EAs for the inclusion of students with disabilities. EAs remove students from class, alter class activities and assignments, and assess student progress without classroom teacher insight, while resource teachers are typing and filing.

Giangreco, Halvorsen, Doyle and Broer (2004) identify a number of alternatives to the reliance on EAs as an intervention for students with disabilities in the classroom. Hiring qualified teachers and resource teachers in lieu of EAs, lowering resource teacher caseloads, and reassigning EAs to clerical tasks are recommended alternatives.

One effective alternative is to shift existing funds from the hiring of EAs to the hiring of resource teachers. The number of EAs positions that equal one resource teacher usually range from three or four EAs for one teacher, depending on a number of compensatory factors. This alternative increases the number of highly qualified staff members in schools. However, the challenge of this particular alternative is the insufficient supply of qualified resource teachers available in rural areas of Manitoba (MASS & MAST, 2006).

There are a number of documented benefits to exchanging EAs for teachers (Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Giangreco et al, 2004). Increasing the number of qualified resource teachers improves working conditions by reducing caseload size. Lower caseload sizes have a number of positive effects: (1) less paperwork, (2) more

time to train and supervise fewer EAs, (3) more instructional contact time between teachers and students, (4) more time for collaboration with teachers, parents, and social agencies, (5) narrower range of grade levels to which resource teachers are asked to provide services, and (6), greater retention of resource teachers in the field because of a manageable rewarding workload (Giangreco et al, 2004).

Another promising alternative recommended by Giangreco et al (2004) is to re-conceptualize an existing EA position from working individually with students to doing logistical and clerical tasks to alleviate the burden of some paperwork. Clerical tasks for EAs could include scheduling appointments and meetings, sending notifications to families and social agencies, photocopying, laminating, filing, typing IEPs, health care plans, personal transportation plans, and hearing and vision screening. Assigning mundane clerical tasks to an EA means more time with students for the resource teacher.

Peers are the most underused resource in schools. Peer support strategies are often effective in supporting students in the classroom, lunchroom, and on the playground at recess and breaks (Cozzuol, Freeze, Lutfiyya, & Van Wallegghem, 2004; Giangreco et al, 2004). Items 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, and 15 support the idea of using peers to facilitate the inclusion of students and academic and social activities. Some class activities could involve the use of cooperative groups that includes all students.

School staffs need to examine the roles of EAs that could be appropriately carried out by peers (Giangreco et al, 2004). Strategies that pair a student with a disability to a more abled peer, such as study buddies and recess buddies, would

address the proximity issue between EAs and students. The benefits of removing the EA from shadowing a student are improved student autonomy, increased opportunity for spontaneous peer interaction and reduced provocation of problem behaviours.

Nondisabled peers benefit from this “buddying” intervention as well. Classmates develop empathy, respect for diversity, responsibility, communication skills, and develop relationships that may otherwise have been missed (Cozzuol et al, 2004, Giangreco et al, 2004). Using peers to support students with disabilities for tasks usually assigned to an adult further promotes a nurturing classroom community and social responsibility.

Because peers tend to be less intrusive and stigmatizing than EAs, students with disabilities cooperate better with a peer than an adult. Using peer support also increases teacher involvement as some teachers are more comfortable directing the activities of students rather than another adult, i.e., the EA (Giangreco et al, 2004).

Employment practices and training opportunities

Developing policy and revising existing policy clarifying the roles of all member of an educational team are needed to better reflect the amendment to the Public Schools Act, Appropriate Educational Programming regulation (2005). Roles and responsibilities of the classroom teacher and principal are clearly defined in this legislation and should be reiterated in divisional policies.

The research literature documents EAs' perceptions of feeling under qualified, unsupported, and insufficiently trained, both orientation and job embedded training (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Ghre & York-Barr, 2007; Riggs & Mueller,

2001). Policy outlining roles and responsibilities of the EA and employment practices that clearly identify EA competencies need to be developed. Divisional and student specific training for EAs, both at the onset of employment and annually, is needed to ensure EAs working with students with disabilities have the skill sets to do so. Annual training would ensure EAs enhance qualifications as responsibilities broaden or change. Professional development opportunities with the larger educational school teams would promote a sense of value and belonging in EAs. Enabling a spirit of cooperation and a feeling of being valued will improve the retention of competent and confident staff.

The data from this study verifies that students with disabilities frequently receive their primary instruction from EAs. Therefore, it is imperative that EAs receive orientation and job embedded training to ensure they have adequate qualifications to work with students with complex educational needs. EAs are often the least trained staff member working with the most complex students (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco et al, 2004), making it the ethical responsibility of rural school divisions, where post secondary institutions are less accessible, to provide training to ensure highly qualified employees are working with students.

Employment policies should identify core competencies for an EA position, including the minimum level of formal training expectations. If the school division employs only certified teachers, similar practices need to be implemented for EAs.

Figure 1 outlines some hiring policies and training procedures that would ensure qualified EAs are recruited and retained. Procedures for the employment and

training of EAs are divided into three components: foundational knowledge, divisional training, and school/student specific training. Foundational knowledge outlines the minimal educational expectations prior to employment, which include core competencies and/or certificates and diplomas from credible educational institutions. Divisional orientation training refers to the training opportunities offered to all EAs, at the on-set of employment. Divisional training would include orientation workshops that present overviews of divisional practices, descriptions of duties and responsibilities, contractual issues and employment standards, and outlines of annual professional development opportunities. Professional development offered annually would ensure continued growth and improvement to enhance skills as responsibilities change and broaden. The school/student specific training refers to the job embedded training specific to a student or the school, including a mentorship component. Along with student specific training and school expected duties and responsibilities, the school specific training should address supervision procedures and job evaluation criteria.

Figure 1. Educational Assistant Employment and Training Practices.

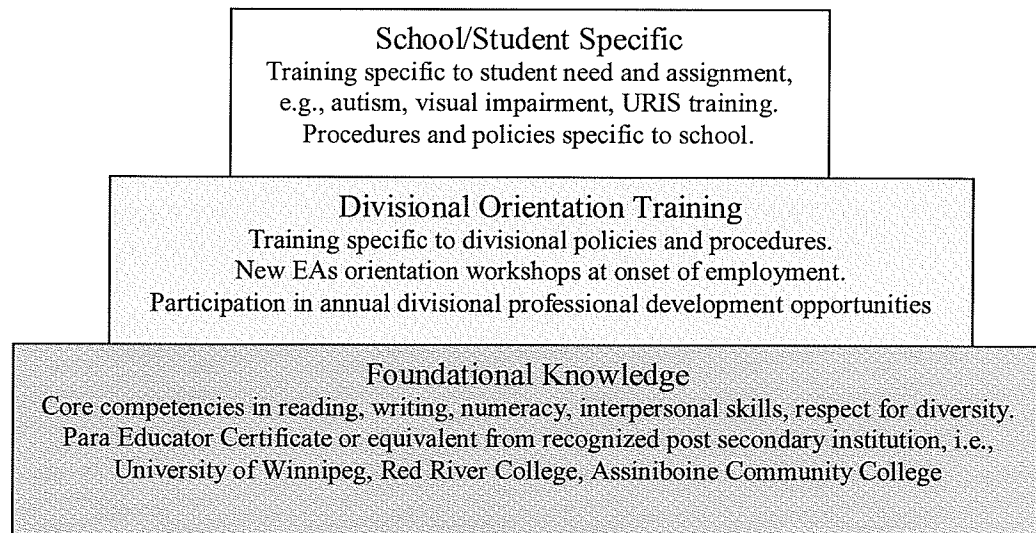


Figure 1 identifies a number of practices that need to be formalized to ensure qualified persons are working with all students. Candidates interviewed for EA positions should verify a number of core competencies and be accredited with a minimal amount of formal education and training. Core competencies in reading, writing, numeracy and interpersonal skills should be mandatory to be employed as an EA. Interpersonal skills include an ability to effectively communicate, cooperate and collaborate with school teams, a willingness to take initiative and learn new strategies, and a healthy respect for diversity of students.

Although retention and recruitment of qualified people for educational positions in rural areas has always been a problem (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; MASS & MAST, 2006), with our region having a satellite campus of Red River College easily accessible, expecting all candidates to have the Para-Educator Certificate prior to employment is not unreasonable. Divisional policy should clearly define criteria and identify the core competencies for employment as an EA. And because education is not stagnant, continuous training opportunities are needed to ensure continued growth as EAs' responsibilities broaden.

Conclusion

As student population increases and more students with disabilities receive their education in regular classrooms, one of the most common responses has been to hire and assign educational assistants to the students. This practice contributes to the escalating numbers of EAs in schools and simultaneously, challenges the

appropriateness of a school's dependency on EAs for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities.

This research study attempted to determine the utilization of EAs in a rural school division in Manitoba and how their roles compared to the roles and responsibilities of EAs as outlined in current educational research.

The utilization of EAs was examined in three areas, (1) physical proximity between the EA and the student, (2) ownership of the student's educational program, and (3), use and allocation of resources within schools. This study validates that schools rely on EAs as an intervention for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. Through some formal revisions to policy and professional development of all members of the educational team, more appropriate practices can be implemented to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Increasing student population is a demographic trend in this school division. These students come with a wide range of diverse academic, social-emotional and physical needs – English as Additional Language (EAL) students, gifted students, at risk students and socio-economic disadvantaged students. All of whom require additional support in the classroom. If the practice of assigning EAs to support students in classrooms is to continue, policy and decision makers must ensure that the highest quality of professionals are working together to ensure the best possible outcomes for all students.

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Appendix A

Reliance on and Utilization of Educational Assistants (EA).

For the purpose of this questionnaire, students with disabilities are those students who currently receive additional special needs categorical funding level two or three, in any category: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Emotional Behavioural Disorder (EBD), Other (OTH), Visually Impaired (VI), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (HOH) or Multi-Handicapped (MH).

<i>Thinking of one classroom in your school in which the Educational Assistant's responsibilities typify the general practice in your school. Please indicate (X) the most accurate response as it pertains to your school.</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>Frequently</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
1. Students with disabilities spend their day in close proximity to an EA.					
2. Students with disabilities are physically separated within the classroom, (e.g., back of room) to work with the EA.					
3. Students with disabilities work individually with an EA in a separate location from the classroom, such as the resource room or hallway.					
4. Educational assistants are aware of the IEP outcomes and the curricular expectations for students with disabilities.					
5. Students with disabilities receive their primary instruction from an EA.					
6. As a resource teacher, I spend most of my time with paperwork and managing EA assignments.					
7. Classroom teachers are involved with students with disabilities who are placed in their classrooms.					
8. Educational assistants make curricular or instructional decisions, make adaptations without teacher or resource teacher oversight.					
9. Students with disabilities are unnecessarily dependent on the EA.					
10. Educational assistants communicate concerns to parents of students with disabilities.					
11. When an EA is absent, the student to whom s/he is assigned, experiences a "lost day" because a substitute/spare will not know what to do.					
12. When an EA is absent, the student to whom s/he is assigned, is asked to stay home or is given a "day off".					
13. The EA makes the decision to remove a student with a disability from the classroom when the student is disruptive or the lesson is too difficult.					
14. The EA makes the decision to change the class activity for a student with a disability when the activity is too difficult.					
15. Students with disabilities spend lunch time, recesses and time on the playground with an EA.					

16. At IEP meetings teachers and resource teachers rely on the EA's input on student progress.					
17. I spend _____ percentage of time doing clerical tasks such as typing and filing.	> 90%	80 - 60%	50%	40 - 30%	< 20 %
18. I spend _____ percentage of time scheduling EA job assignments.	> 90%	80 - 60%	50%	40 - 30%	< 20 %
19. The number of educational assistants has increased in schools because there is a general belief that one of the primary interventions to support students with disabilities in classrooms is to assign an educational assistant.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	

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Demographic Information:

1. Number of years teaching experience	< 20		20 - 15		15 - 10		10 - 5		>2				
2. Number of years resource teacher experience	< 20		20 - 15		15 - 10		10 - 5		>2				
3. Indicate levels of education/training attained	B.A./B.Sc.			B.Ed.			P.B.D.E.			M.Ed.			
4. Indicate all grade level responsibilities	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

Please provide any additional comments regarding you personal feelings about inclusion and the utilization of EAs with students with disabilities.

Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire. Your input is greatly appreciated.



HANOVER
SCHOOL DIVISION

Appendix B

November 5, 2008

Ms. Geri Harder-Robson
Box 2307
Steinbach, Manitoba
R5G 1N8

Dear Ms. Harder-Robson:

Please be advised that the Hanover School Division Board approved your request to conduct a research study on *"Reliance on and Utilization of Educational Assistants"*.

The Board would appreciate hearing more about your findings at the conclusion of the project.

Best wishes as you continue your professional growth.

Yours truly,

Ken Klassen, Superintendent

KK/sf

c. Linda McLean

Appendix C



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APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

27 October 2008

TO: Geraldine Harder-Robson
Principal Investigator

FROM: Stan Straw, Chair
Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

Re: Protocol #E2008:095
"Reliance on and Utilization of Educational Assistants"

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by the **Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board**, which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement. This approval is valid for one year only.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.

Please note:

- if you have funds pending human ethics approval, the auditor requires that you submit a copy of this Approval Certificate to Kathryn Bartmanovich, Research Grants & Contract Services (fax 261-0325), including the Sponsor name, before your account can be opened.
- if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year approval; otherwise the account will be locked.

The Research Ethics Board requests a final report for your study (available at: http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/ethics/ors_ethics_human_REB_forms_guidelines.html) in order to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.