

Position Paper on the Roles and Responsibilities of Teacher Assistants Within an Inclusive Education System

New Brunswick Association for Community Living/Association du Nouveau-Brunswick pour l'intégration communautaire

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Introduction

Over the past two decades New Brunswick has come to be seen internationally as a forerunner in building an inclusive public education system. Since the passage of Bill 85 in 1986, a cornerstone of its education policy has been the unconditional acceptance of all children into regular classes and the life of the school. Since then, one of the most valuable supports made available to schools has been the teacher assistant. Teacher assistants in regular classrooms have enabled students with disabilities to participate in a far greater variety of educational experiences with their non-disabled peers than they ever did when taught in separate classrooms. Teacher assistants very quickly became highly valued by teachers, parents, administrators, and the students themselves. In addition, they have unquestionably made the classroom teacher's job even more effective.

NBACL hears many positive comments from parents who are more than satisfied with the help that teacher assistants provide to their sons and daughters. At the same time, however, NBACL hears from other parents of their concerns and frustrations about the way teacher assistants work with their children. These concerns suggest that the manner in which teacher assistants are used can build undesirable dependency and can interfere with student learning.

The concerns around the role, supervision, training, and scheduling of teacher assistants are not exclusive to the New Brunswick educational system. They are well documented in educational research. In fact, they are often expressed by teacher assistants, and classroom and resource teachers, themselves, who are frustrated by lack of clarity about their roles and expected working relationships, and the lack of structures to promote the kind of communication necessary to establish an effective working relationship. Michael Giangreco, a prominent international educator and researcher on inclusion from Vermont has summarised the situation this way:

The proliferation of instructional assistants in public schools often has outpaced conceptualisation of team roles and responsibilities, as well as [their] training and supervision needs...We are concerned that some current approaches to providing instructional assistant support are counterproductive. (Giangreco et al., 1997).

Although schools undoubtedly provide parasupport with the best of intentions and in the belief that it will help students, little evidence suggests that students do as

well or better in school, academically or socially when they are taught by paraprofessionals. (Giangreco, 2003).

The purposes of this position paper are:

- (1) to identify the most frequently voiced concerns of parents and others; and
- (2) to make recommendations regarding the use of teacher assistants within an inclusive school setting.

NBACL feels that the recommendations contained in this paper are do-able; build on existing practices and school structures already in effective schools; and are supported by research and will be effective in ensuring student learning, the development of a positive school climate, and a healthy inclusive school. A description of the role of the teacher assistant which NBACL sees as appropriate and effective for assisting teachers in promoting learning for all children is given in Appendix A. It is an excerpt from the book, *Achieving Inclusion: A Parent Guide to Inclusive Education in New Brunswick*, published by the NBACL (2000). It also includes a description of the dangers of over reliance on teacher assistant support for students with disabilities.

Concerns

NBACL is appreciative of the concerns expressed by a number of students, parents and educators. These are documented in Appendix B. It should be noted that these concerns are not the result of a formal survey, but rather stem from anecdotal evidence and information gathered by NBACL in recent years. As noted earlier, the concerns have been identified in formal research studies conducted elsewhere. In general, they fall into the following consistent themes:

1. Sometimes students receive most of their instruction from the teacher assistant

This is referred to as “teacher disengagement” and often leads to or is exacerbated by the following:

- It can interfere with the ownership and responsibility of the classroom teacher;
- It can create an over dependence by the student on the teacher assistant (particularly if a student is “assigned” to one teacher assistant throughout the school day);
- The teacher assistant can be left adapting lessons "on the fly" and sometimes without being privy to student's SEP or to specific curriculum objectives.
- At times when a student is out of the classroom and with a teacher assistant in a separate room, it appears to be without instructional rationale, i.e. apparent "babysitting”.

2. Some parents and educators equate inclusion with teacher assistant support

Over the years the belief has developed that the inclusion of many students with disabilities in regular schools and classrooms depends on the presence and active involvement of a teacher assistant. While teacher assistant support is an important aspect of inclusive education, the increasing demand for teacher assistants to support students with disabilities has become unsustainable. NBACL believes that this demand stems from:

- A lack of understanding on the part of parents of the roles and responsibilities of teacher assistants in an inclusive education system. This includes a lack of understanding of the potentially negative impacts on students with disabilities of over-dependency on teacher assistants.
- A lack of knowledge and skills on the part of regular teachers and resource teachers to effectively teach students with diverse learning styles and circumstances. This lack of skills was acknowledged by educators during recent “co-operative studies” of student services in school districts 6 and 8.
- The assignment of inappropriate rolls to teacher assistants in support of students with disabilities (for example, teacher assistants as primary instructors of certain students).

3. Unnecessary and excessive proximity between the student and teacher assistant

As one parent voiced, *"The teacher assistant and my son appear to be joined at the hip."* This excessive proximity can result in the following:

- It hinders the student from developing personal management skills and personal accountability, which are explicit curricular goals for other students.
- It increases the challenge for the student to develop healthy and mutual friendships with classmates,
- It stigmatises the student in the eyes of his or her peers (particularly in middle school and high school), and
- When the teacher assistant and student sit "on fringe" of a circle or in the back of edge the class, the student is in effect segregated from his or her classmates.

4. Lack of training and supervision

Teacher assistants often do not have formal training to fulfill the roles they are assigned. In addition, teacher assistants may lack an understanding of their roles as “facilitators” of inclusion for all students. In some respects, teacher assistants are not seen as “career people”. Training and “professional” development for teacher assistants is not an obvious priority, even though these positions are given significant responsibilities in support of students with disabilities. The lack of appropriate training and supervision on the part of teacher assistants can mean that:

- The teacher assistant can create or reinforce dependence on the part of the student.
- The teacher assistant can be unaware of ways to use opportunities to promote friendly interactions with other students or peer support between students.

- The teacher assistant is sometimes seen to do most of the lesson for the student, i.e. "going through the motions", without engaging the student (*one teacher assistant remarked that this was what she thought the teacher expected*).
- Sometimes poorly qualified teacher assistants are hired. While parents often speak highly of teacher assistants whom they realize have no formal qualifications; they see others who do not display what is felt to be minimum qualifications.

Many teachers also lack training on inclusive school practices such as differentiated and multi-level instruction, and on ways to encourage peer support between students. This lack of skills and knowledge can create more dependence on teacher assistants to undertake duties that focus on specific students with disabilities rather than the classroom as a whole. Teachers may also lack training on ways to properly supervise the day-to-day activities of teacher assistants as part of school based teams.

5. Scheduling issues and the lack of consistency in the assignment of teacher assistant support

The assignment and scheduling of teacher assistant support can also interfere with the rights of some students with disabilities to attend school on an equal footing with other students. This in large part relates to the issue of dependence (or over dependence) on teacher assistants and the assignment of teacher assistants to support individual students rather than classrooms or specific teachers. It is reflected in the following:

- Some students with disabilities have to arrive later or leave school earlier because teacher assistants are often paid for working for 5 or fewer hours a day.
- Some students with disabilities are asked to stay at home when a teacher assistant is sick.
- Some students with disabilities finish school up to 2 weeks earlier than other students because teacher assistants are not hired to work during exam time.

On some rare occasions, specific students with disabilities require a higher degree of consistency in the provision of teacher assistant support. This can occur when students have particular conditions (such as medical issues) that require either specialized assistance or the involvement of teacher assistants who have certain skills or an important history with a student that should be respected. Experience has shown that it is often very difficult for school district administrators to make assignments of specific teacher assistants in these circumstances. Often, this stems from restrictions that arise under a collective agreement.

Recommendations

The objectives of the *Quality Learning Agenda* state the following: (1) ensuring students achieve at the highest standards of excellence, (2) giving attention to the development of the whole child, (3) promoting strong, successful schools within involved communities,

and (4) supporting successful transitions to further learning and training. NBACL offers the following recommendations in the belief that these will help ensure that students with exceptionalities also benefit from these objectives.

1. ***Consistent implementation of inclusive school practices.*** Issues relating to the roles of teacher assistants can best be addressed when there is a clear understanding of inclusive education and the implementation of known best practices for inclusion. This means that the roles of teacher assistants must be seen within the context of an overall inclusive education system. This will require that district and school administrations, supported by the Department of Education, will see that:
 - (a) All staff understands the goals, principles and relevant best practices of inclusion within the broader vision of the school.
 - (b) Time is scheduled for the classroom teacher, teacher assistant, and resource teacher to collaborate for the purpose of developing an effective working relationship, and to plan for student learning and evaluation.
 - (c) Teacher assistant issues are regularly addressed within the overall school improvement efforts.
 - (d) When a student requires a teacher assistant for a good portion of the day, all are clear that the role is to provide supportive assistance while the classroom teacher is still responsible for primary instruction.
 - (e) Students with exceptionalities have the same length of day as other students, are adequately supported when a teacher assistant is absent, and that they participate in evaluation during exam period as teacher and parent feel appropriate.
2. ***Role Clarification.*** Clarification of the important roles of classroom and subject teachers, resource teachers and teacher assistants is crucial. This clarification should be based on:
 - (a) Explicitly acknowledging at all levels the role of the classroom teacher “as the instructional leader in the classroom including their roles and responsibilities as the teacher for their students with disabilities” (Giangreco, et. al., 1997).
 - (b) Ensuring that times and mechanisms are established for the teacher and teacher assistant so that they may “*work out a common set of values, beliefs, and assumptions about education, children, family and professionals*” (Doyle, 2002), and clarify their roles in order to establish a framework for an effective working relationship.
 - (c) Parents and school staff reaching an agreement on when students require the close proximity of a teacher assistant and when support can be provided naturally. Parents have a right to know when, for how long and where a teacher assistant is assisting their child. As well, the classroom teacher, resource teacher and teacher

assistant need to agree on the mechanism for the continuing communication that is essential to ensuring the ongoing progress of the student.

(d) Using teacher assistants in regular classrooms in ways that involve supporting all of the students in the class, rather than only students with disabilities.

(e) Clear guidelines for deciding on the use of teacher assistant support that:

- attempt to build capacity in the school to support all students,
- consider teacher assistant supports judiciously,
- clarify the reasons why teacher assistant supports are being considered,
- attempts to match identified support needs and the skills of the person to provide the supports,
- explore opportunities for natural supports,
- consider school and classroom characteristics,
- consider the assignment of teacher assistant support to free up time for teachers to provide educational instruction time with students with disabilities,
- consider whether teacher assistant support is a temporary measure (Giangreco, et. al., 1999).

3. ***Education and Training for Educators.*** In order for school personnel to build capacity in dealing with the diversity of student needs and learning styles, classroom teachers need on-going education and training on inclusive education practices. In addition, teachers should receive pre-service and in-service training on ways to provide on-the-job training and supervision for teacher assistants. Teachers need to know how to train and mentor teacher assistants in following areas:

- the goals, principles and relevant best practices for inclusion,
- how to implement curricular and academic modifications,
- how to effectively use positive behavioural support strategies,
- how to carry out a systematic plan for promoting student independence, including when and how to fade cues and prompts, and how to make more effective use of natural prompts, i.e. other students, other school support staff such guidance counsellors, librarians, bus drivers, etc.
- how to facilitate interactions and friendships with peers, and
- maintaining confidentiality.

4. ***Direct education and training for teacher assistants.*** In addition to the training provided by teacher supervisors, teacher assistants should receive direct “competency-based” training (both pre-service and in-service) on the areas identified in Recommendation 3. All school districts, with the support of the Department of Education, should provide more “para-professional” development days for teacher assistants during the school year that coincide with educator development days.

5. ***Education and awareness for parents.*** In order for parents to better understand the roles and responsibilities of teacher assistants, a provincial education and awareness

strategy should be developed and implemented. This strategy could include a number of approaches such as parent workshops, educational brochures and videos, and school based efforts to inform parents on teacher assistant issues. An education and awareness strategy should:

- Promote an understanding of inclusive education and the roles and responsibilities of professionals and para-professionals within an inclusive education system;
- Inform parents of the potential negative consequences of teacher assistant proximity to individual students;
- Inform parents of other types of support within the school and classroom, including peer support and other types to “natural” supports;
- Inform parents of strategies to develop peer relationships between students, including Circles of Friends. (A Circle of Friends is a group of people who meet regularly to plan and participate in activities centred on an individual who may be socially isolated.)

The development and implementation of a parent focused education and awareness strategy should involve community organisations such as NBACL.

6. ***Promote and implement peer support strategies.*** Lessening dependence on teacher assistants can happen, in part, through efforts to promote peer support between students. This can best happen when all students are included in regular classrooms. Peer support can happen in the context of academic activities through the use of strategies such as co-operative learning groups and peer tutoring. It can also happen in the context of other school activities through efforts such as peer mentoring and Circles of Friends. A number of schools in New Brunswick are already effectively using peer support strategies. Schools and school districts, with the support of the Department of Education and community organizations, should undertake a systematic approach to developing peer support opportunities within all grade levels. As part of this effort, school personnel such as teachers and teacher assistants should receive training on peer support strategies.

7. ***Develop greater flexibility in the assignment of teacher assistant support.*** In exceptional circumstances, individual students need greater consistency in the assignment of teacher assistant supports. Alternatively, students may require the support of a teacher assistant who has specific skills. The Department of Education should enter into negotiations with the union representing teacher assistants in order to provide school districts with the capacity to make specific assignments of teacher assistants where there is a clearly demonstrated need for:

- consistency of teacher assistant support; or
- specific identified skills in the provision of support.

This flexibility will need to address issues of seniority in the assignment and selection of teacher assistant positions.

Conclusion

NBACL understands the necessity of the Department of Education aggressively continuing its leadership role as outlined in the Quality Learning Agenda to provide improved support for students with exceptionalities. This may include a review of the collective agreement, resources available to districts, clarification of the roles of teacher assistants and continued training for all staff.

NBACL offers its services to the Department of Education in ways that may be identified through our continuing communication.

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Appendix A

A DESCRIPTION OF THE ROLE OF TEACHER ASSISTANTS

Achieving Inclusion: A Parent Guide to Inclusive Education in New Brunswick (2000)
pages 76-82

Teacher Assistants

Teacher assistants are people who provide assistance to teachers in the classroom, library, shop or laboratory in a number of areas including:

- assisting with the physical needs of a child with a disability;
- safety and supervision;
- classroom observation;
- preparation of teaching aids and the assembly of materials as directed by the teacher;
- assisting individual students or small groups in performing activities in the classroom or school;
- following therapy programs set out by therapists (for example, physiotherapists or speech therapists);
- assisting with maintaining records and keeping notes that can be used by the regular classroom teacher to inform you of your child's activities and progress.

The Teacher Assistant Dilemma

Teacher assistants can play a very important role in the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classrooms and schools. This is particularly true if your child has a lot of physical needs that require regular attention during the day. Teacher assistants provide a lot of valuable support to individual children as well as to regular classroom teachers.

Many people, however, including parents, assume that every child with a disability in a regular classroom needs a teacher assistant. There is often a belief that because a child has some additional needs, these needs can only be met by another adult person in the classroom. These beliefs have led to parents, teachers and others in the school system depending too much on the presence of a teacher assistant to include children with disabilities. This can cause a few problems of which you should be aware.

Too much dependence on teacher assistants can result in the "illusion of inclusion". We expect that the teacher assistant will help to bring about inclusion, but often the teacher assistant can become a barrier to inclusion. This will happen, for example, when a regular classroom teacher feels he or she has little or no responsibility to educate the child with a disability. The teacher assistant is seen to be the primary teacher of the child, often finding herself working at the child's side and often at the back of the class as to not disturb the other children. Outside of the classroom, the teacher assistant is often the only person who helps the child with a disability eat, play, or go to the washroom. Other children may not approach a fellow student when an adult is present. Children may be segregated by the presence of the person who is supposed to

help with inclusion. This often means that the child with a disability is not participating in the activities of the classroom or other activities of the school.

If your child has an adult assistant always attached to his or her side, other children will be less inclined to spend time with your child or offer support. “Shadowing” reinforces the impression that your child is unusual and significantly different from the other children in the classroom. Providing support in this fashion can turn other students off and away. Ironically, your child then becomes isolated by the very person who was hired to help with his or her inclusion. The teacher assistant becomes the wall that stands between your child and his or her classmates, and often between your child and the regular classroom teacher.

You need to be aware of the “danger signals” that will tell you if your child depends too much on a teacher assistant. If this is happening, it is time to start to think about other ways your child can be supported. You also need to think about the proper role for the teacher assistant in your child’s classroom. These discussions must happen with your child’s school principal, regular classroom teacher and others who are involved in ensuring that real inclusion happens.

DANGER SIGNALS!

You Know Your Child’s School is Depending Too Much on a Teacher Assistant

When:

- At a meeting, it is the teacher assistant who knows the most about what and how your child is doing rather than the regular classroom teacher.
- The teacher assistant is the only person who sends messages to you in your child’s communication book.
- The teacher assistant is always seen by your child’s side, both inside and out of the classroom.
- Your child will mainly seek out the teacher assistant when in need of help.
- Other children in the class call upon the teacher assistant when they notice that your child needs help, rather than notifying the teacher or offering to help themselves.
- Other students and school staff will talk to your through the teacher assistant rather than directly to your child.
- The teacher assistant is often working alone with your child at the back or the side of the class, frequently doing something quite different from the rest of the class.
- Whenever a problem arises or a question is asked concerning your child, the teacher assistant is called upon as the “expert” in the school.
- Students without disabilities do not seek out the teacher assistant when they need help.
- When the teacher assistant is ill, it is suggested that your child stay home from school.

The Role of the Teacher Assistant in Support of Inclusion

(i) A RESOURCE TO ALL

The teacher assistant should be seen as a resource to the entire classroom and a support to the regular classroom teacher rather than as a “shadow” to your child. This requires that teacher assistants work with all students and help regular classroom teachers teach, manage and coordinate the total class.

Having a teacher assistant in the regular classroom provides an opportunity to increase the level of teaching support to all students:

- It provides an extra set of eyes and ears to be alert to individual needs and problems;
- It expands the opportunity for all students to receive more one-on-one support from either the assistant or the teacher;
- It provides an additional resource to the teacher for helping with the supervision of pupils in the class and giving information to the teacher in order for the teacher to better evaluate progress and to talk with parents;
- For a child with a disability, the teacher assistant can be involved in helping the teacher prepare an adapted lesson and its materials to maximize the child’s participation.

When used appropriately, a teacher assistant can enhance the learning environment and improve the quality of education being provided to all students.

(ii) THE ART OF BEING INVISIBLE

As noted, continuous one-on-one support can stigmatize a child and create too much dependence on the assistant. When possible, invisible support is best. Invisible support results from what the teacher and teacher assistant do in advance of the lesson. This includes:

- Considering how to structure an activity so that the child with a disability can participate;
- Preparing materials for that child to use;
- Arranging the physical organization of the classroom to make moving about easier; and
- Figuring out whom else can offer help to the child during various times.

As much as possible, the support that a teacher assistant provides to a child should be subtle. Often, a prompt or gesture will be enough. The teacher assistant should not shadow a child or be seen as the person or expert who deals with the child with a disability. Both teacher and teacher assistant need to develop these capabilities.

(iii) MODIFYING ACTIVITIES, NOT CHILDREN

Teacher assistants often try to help by separating the child with a disability from the rest of the class. They may help a child acquire skills that other children may already have or may coach them so that they will be more “ready” to participate with the group at a later date. This approach requires a one-on-one situation and results in the child being isolated from the rest of the class. Instead, the teacher assistant, under the direction and supervision of the regular classroom teacher, should be trying to provide experiences for the child within the normal activities of the classroom. This involves changing activities so that the child can participate at his or her own level and be working on his or her individual goals.

(iv) LESS IS BEST

The teacher assistant should help bring about the inclusion of the pupils in the activities of the class and classroom, rather than isolate a child with a disability. This means that the teacher assistant should try to minimize the direct one-on-one support that he or she provides to a child with a disability. As a rule, direct support should be provided only when necessary. More is not necessarily better.

Appendix B

OUTLINE OF ISSUES RELATING TO THE USE OF TEACHER ASSISTANTS IN NEW BRUNSWICK'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

New Brunswick Association for Community Living/Association du Nouveau- Brunswick pour l'intégration communautaire

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A number of important issues have been identified relating to the roles and use of teacher assistants in our education system. An outline of these issues is provided below. Some of the issues may be more significant than others, but all are relevant in that they affect the implementation of inclusive education in New Brunswick.

- At times, teacher assistants are the de facto teachers or instructors for students with disabilities. Teacher assistants often spend “one-on-one” time with individual students either within or outside regular classrooms. In addition, during meetings between parents and the education system (sometimes referred to as “case conferences”) the classroom or subject teacher often cannot answer academic related questions since they are not directly involved in teaching the student with the disability. This issue is significant from a number of respects:
 - Teacher assistants are not trained educators and it is contrary to Department of Education policy that teacher assistants are engaged in teaching activities;
 - The issue of teacher vs. teaching assistant responsibility needs to be addressed. In light of roles being undertaken by teacher assistants, it appears that the teacher's view of his or her responsibilities toward exceptional pupils is affected by the presence of teacher assistants.
 - On a broader level, are teachers and teacher assistants given proper instruction on the roles of teacher assistants within the education system? Is there any measure of accountability on the ways in which teacher assistants are being used?
- In addition to providing de facto instruction to certain students with disabilities, teacher assistants also provide “babysitting” services for some students who spend little (if any) time in regular classrooms. A main role for some teacher assistants is the supervision of certain students (either individually or in-groups) who do not attend regular classrooms.
- Some parents believe (or have been told by others) that their child requires a teacher assistant in order to attend school. In some instances, doctors have prescribed a teacher assistant for a child. These expectations present unrealistic and likely unsupportable demands for teacher assistants both from parents and from people

within the education system. This may be reflected in decisions made around use of budgets when school administrators decide to hire additional teacher assistants over additional resource teachers or other supports.

- Student and the school system's dependence on teacher assistants are revealed when parents are told that they need to keep their son or daughter at home because the teacher assistant is ill. In some districts, teacher assistants who are ill are not replaced until their third day of illness.
- While teacher assistants are supposed to be assigned to classrooms they often are "attached at the hip" to a student with a disability. The permanent presence of an adult with certain students often seriously hinders opportunities for social interaction with other students. The identification of teacher assistants with specific students is also revealed by reference to teacher assistants as being a particular student's "TA".
- In some schools, a student with a disability is required to eat his or her lunch with the teacher assistant or in the teacher assistant's lunchroom so that he or she may be supervised. This also isolates the student from opportunities to spend time with his or her peers.
- Teacher assistants are often paid for only 5 hours a day or less. This results in some students with disabilities being encouraged to take the "disability bus" which often arrives late and leaves early. Students are being forced to miss school time, particularly at the end of the day to accommodate teacher assistant and transportation scheduling.
- Since teacher assistants are not paid to work during exam time, many students with a disability do not write exams or attend school during exam time. At the high school level, school for students with disabilities ends two weeks earlier than for other students because teacher assistants are not hired to work during these times.
- Despite the current roles played by teacher assistants, parents are often not allowed to discuss their child with the teacher assistant, nor are they encouraged to build a rapport with the assistant.
- In the past, teacher assistants have been hired under government programs to provide individuals on social assistance with employment opportunities in order to qualify them for Employment Insurance benefits. These individuals, and others, likely do not have the qualifications or training to adequately perform their roles in an inclusive education system.
- Sometimes, teacher assistants portray students with disabilities in a negative fashion. For example, a teacher assistant in one school who wore rubber gloves because the student she was working with drooled, provided gloves to other students should they want to get close to this student.

- As a result of seniority rules under the teacher assistant Collective Bargaining Agreement, teacher assistants may change their classroom assignments during the school year. In some circumstances, individuals who rely on a teacher assistant for support may have to receive the support from 2 or 3 different individuals during a school year. This can be very unsettling to individuals who have a difficult time with change. In addition, parents may not be kept informed regarding this change and have no way to prepare the child for these transitions.