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# Educational Assistants Supporting Inclusive Education in Secondary Schools

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EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN
SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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by

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**Abstract**

As school boards in Ontario move towards more inclusive models of learning, more students

with disabilities are taught in regular classes instead of self-contained placements. This move

results in a role change for the educational assistant (EA). Research is needed to determine the

overall framework that will make the use of EAs a more effective practice for student and

school. Fifteen EAs working in secondary schools within a school board in southwestern

Ontario which was moving to a more inclusive model of education were individually

interviewed. EAs chosen for the study had a background of supporting students with

developmental disabilities in self-contained placements and had recently moved to support

students in a regular class setting. The purpose of the study was to answer the following

question: What do EAs need in their profession to make the support of students with

developmental disabilities transition from self-contained settings to inclusive classes in

secondary schooling successful? Through thematic analysis of the interviews three themes

became apparent as concerns for the EA role: collaboration, programming and relationships.

The details of these findings can be used to assist school boards to create inclusive practice. It

also outlines what EA's need to support the transition of students with developmental disabilities

from a self-contained setting to a regular class setting in secondary schools.

*Keywords*: educational assistant, developmental disability, inclusion, secondary

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**Table of Contents**

**Introduction**

As school boards in Ontario move towards more inclusive models of learning, more students with disabilities are taught in regular classes instead of self-contained placements. An investigation into how the role of the educational assistant (EA) supports the student's learning in this new environment is needed. Giangreco, Doyle and Sutter (2012) suggest that research such as the present study that interviews current stakeholders in the work of EAs may move systems towards an overall framework which will make the use of EAs a more effective practice for student and school. By interviewing EAs in a secondary setting, I sought to answer the following question: What do EAs need in their professional development to ensure the successful transition of students with developmental disabilities from self-contained settings to inclusive classes in secondary school?

**Special Education in Ontario**

When students present with learning difficulties in school they are often referred for a psychoeducational assessment by the special education services a school board offers. Depending on the outcome of this assessment and how the child's learning presents in the classroom setting, students may meet ministry criteria to be formally identified. This formal identification ensures that an individual education plan (IEP) is created to meet the child's learning needs as well as a consideration of placement for his/her learning. This process is conducted by the Identification, Placement and Review Committee process (IPRC).

Students who present with an overlying medical condition may move more quickly through this process of assessment as school staff and parents seek to measure the cognitive delays the child may have. If the students' test outcomes indicate they are to the lower end of cognitive functioning they will be identified as having a developmental disability. The

identification of a developmental disability is defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education as a student who has a "severe learning disorder characterized by a limited potential for academic learning, independent and social adjustment, and economic self-support" (Ministry, 2001 p. 20). In school boards where there are a range of placement options offered to students that present with different learning challenges, the school team will present alternative placements other than the regular classroom to families for their son/daughter's learning. Students are typically attending a regular class placement before this time and then may be asked to consider placement in a self-contained class once the identification is given. A self-contained placement in elementary or secondary school is characterized by a smaller teacher to pupil ratio with all students identified with the same disability often with additional educational assistants available to support unique learning or safety needs students may have. In Ontario, the maximum number of students with developmental disabilities in a self-contained class is 10, regular classes with a diverse range of students can total 20 to 30 pupils (Bowlby, Peters & Mackinnon, 2001). The self-contained placement would also offer programming referred to as 'life skills' that are thought to be essential for this learner profile. Many families do choose this self-contained setting as it is promoted by the school board through the IPRC process. The family has the final decision on this matter and some families do choose the regular class setting, as they understand the benefits that an inclusive opportunity can provide for their son or daughter. If the student continues to be placed in the regular class setting, many elementary schools successfully support these students in their learning with the support of an EA.

As students enter secondary school, different challenges occur for a student with a developmental disability that are not present in elementary school. For example, the number of teachers a student encounters per day increases due to specialized subject areas, the social skills

used to connect with peers become more complex and student driven in the absence of supervised recesses where socialization is encouraged and remediated by adults, and students are streamed into different levels of classes depending on their post-secondary aspirations (Rossetti & Goessling, 2010).   These complexities have led to many families selecting the self-contained setting once their son/daughter reaches secondary schooling.

**Context for Present Research**

The school board I work for is moving toward a fully inclusive model where all students attend regular classroom settings.  This means the closing of all self-contained classes that were previously in place with the vision of programming for students with developmental disabilities within a regular classroom setting.  In the secondary schools both the EA and the students are starting to experience new learning opportunities in formats that may not have been present in the self-contained setting.  Many of the students have been educated in a self-contained setting for the majority of their school years.  The EAs have also had most of their experience supporting students in a self-contained setting.

My current role is a coordinator for a team of educators focused on inclusive practice who co-teach with regular classroom teachers, kindergarten to grade twelve, through a Collaborative Inquiry model.  This support enables the classroom teacher to employ effective programming strategies for students who have been identified with one or more of the following: autism, mild intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities or complex multiple needs.  The support of an EA is brought to the forefront of our work as the classroom teacher learns how to collaborate with this resource effectively to make inclusion successful.  EAs that are now supporting students in the regular classroom setting often require a different skill set than would have been previously required in the self-contained setting.   When an EA supports a student in a

self-contained setting it looks and feels different for the following reasons: the self-contained setting works with one teacher and multiple EAs in the room causing more of a shared support model. The learning experiences for a student in the self-contained class are often individualized and set apart from group learning. Programming expectations around student academic outcomes may be lower compared to their same aged peers, or alternative (non-academic programming). In addition, it is common that self-contained classrooms have weekly out-of-school experiences as they engage in community recreation such as bowling, swimming, etc.

Having been in the regular classrooms supporting teachers with the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities, I see the teacher relying on the perceived expertise of an EA, as often the teachers have limited or no experiences with these more complex learning profiles of students. Teachers are unsure of how to enter into the teacher student relationship when an EA is already in place supporting the student. My observations concur with previous research that describes the EA as being instrumental in transitioning the student to the inclusive classroom (Downing, Ryndak & Clark, 2000). It is for this reason that I seek more knowledge around the role definitions, attitudes and beliefs towards inclusive education and past experiences of EAs working in inclusive classrooms to see how we can best support the EA in making learning successful for the student.

## Literature Review

When seeking research on this topic, the inclusion criteria involved reviewing articles that captured scenarios of EAs working in a secondary school setting to support students with developmental disabilities. Studies that examined effective inclusion practices of EA's as well as attitudes and beliefs of EAs towards inclusive education were selected.

I used synonym rings, sets of relevant search keywords for the purpose of information retrieval in online databases (Sandieson, Kirkpatrick, Sandieson & Zimmerman, 2010). I used the synonym ring of 'inclusion' as well as 'intellectual disability and mental retardation' already developed by Sandieson (2015). I then created a synonym ring for the term 'educational assistant'. These synonym rings were then strung together and inputted into the following databases to search for key articles on the topic of EAs in the inclusive classroom setting: PsycInfo, ERIC and Google Scholar. Studies that did not contain examples of students being included with EA support at the secondary level were excluded. Articles that were published before 1995 were not used in the review either. Studies that described EAs supporting students with mental health disorders were also excluded from this review as the review was to focus on the complexities of the EA role supporting students with developmental disabilities only. I read recent books written to assist effective teacher practice in an inclusive setting that addressed the role of the EA (Burello, Sailor & Kleinhammer-Trammill, 2013; Hutchison, 2014; Katz, 2012; Katz, 2013). I also examined Ontario Ministry of Education policy documents to search for recommendations for school boards on how to utilize this support effectively.

The journal articles reviewed were mostly of qualitative design which consisted of interviewing multiple perspectives when considering the support of an EA. The perspectives captured throughout the interviews included: EAs, students, teachers, parents, peers, job coaches, administrators, and outside agencies supporting the students in transition to work (Bennett & Gallagher, 2013; Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco, Edelman & Broer, 2001; Giangreco et al., 2012; Tews & Lupart, 2008). Some of the interviews were conducted on a small scale (e.g. eight participants completing individual interviews) (Tews & Lupart, 2008;), while other research took

a large scale approach through questionnaire methods capturing one hundred or more

participants (Giangreco et al, 2001; Giangreco, Broer & Suter, 2011).

One of the main contributors to this body of research is Dr. Michael Giangreco. His

work focusses on how to support the learning of students with disabilities in the regular

classroom. His research focused on discovering the challenges that existed and then finding

techniques which might remediate the challenges in an effort to build on inclusive practice.

Multiple studies that concentrated on EA respondents captured similar themes including

the need for team collaboration at the school level. Downing (et al. 2000) reported EAs feeling

alone in their work at times rather than supported by a school team or others. It was found that

there was a need for roles and responsibilities to be defined so that the EAs were not left making

decisions about a student's programming on their own. Throughout the interviews, many felt a

need for further training in their roles. Areas of training identified included: instructional

techniques, behavior management techniques, and data collection skills (Bennett & Gallagher,

2013; Downing, et al. 2000; Giangreco, et al., 2012; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996).

A few articles concentrated on examining how administrators orchestrate EA support and

how the school team was involved. These studies indicated that many schools are currently

supporting students with developmental disabilities using the support mainly in a one-to-one

framework (Giangreco & Suter, 2009; Giangreco et al., 2011). According to the articles

reviewed, using one-to-one support is the opposite of what is needed when it comes to inclusive

classroom settings. Singular support can be detrimental to the students involved leading to:

unnecessary dependence, stigmatization, and interference with teacher and peer relationships

(Giangreco, 2010). This realization prompted the researchers to recommend more effective

utilization of the EA role by having administrators focus on making decisions based on the

funding provided, lowering caseloads, and investigating the number of students with special

education needs within their building (Giangreco & Suter, 2009).  Giangreco (2011) than

followed up his initial research with a 5-year, multisite, mixed-methods evaluation study where

26 schools participated.  During this study, they implemented a framework titled; Guidelines for

Selecting Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals: Ten Steps (GSA) (Giangreco et al.,

2011).  This study found that the use of the GSA provided a practical mechanism for action

planning, which contributed to both school and student improvement.  In addition, GSA was able

to stop or reverse some long standing trends in schools such as increasing the number of EAs

used for one-to-one support.  It also increased inclusive instructional opportunities for students

without increasing EA support (Giangreco et al., 2011).

Only a few articles concentrated on student perspectives around the support of their EA.

Tews & Lupart (2008) found that students identified that the EA negatively affected their level

of peer relationships as they appeared less approachable when paired with an adult, school wide

inclusion, and the responsibilities of the teachers.  In this study parents and teachers were also

interviewed.  Both the parent and the teachers were found to have a high degree of satisfaction in

having an EA supporting the student (Tews & Lupart, 2008).

Only one article reviewed (Bennett & Gallagher, 2013) had a Canadian context, the

remaining were from the United States.  Also noted through the review is that it was more

common to find the use of EA support within a self-contained class rather than in a regular class

in secondary schools in Ontario.

Dr. Jennifer Katz studies inclusive education practice and acknowledges the important

role that EAs play in making inclusion successful for the classroom community.  Katz (2012)

noted in her first book *Teaching to Diversity: The Three Block Model of Universal Design for*

*Learning* that "a downside to inclusive educational programs is that, in the transition, we have sent children into inclusive classrooms without having provided enough professional training for the classroom teachers and resource teachers, but with educational assistants for children with special needs. The lack of training meant that many teachers believed that EAs knew their assigned child best so they handed over responsibility for their program—to staff who are not trained teachers" (p.10). The practices outlined in Katz's books focus on effective teaching practices in universal design for learning and differentiated instruction. These practices equip teachers with the knowledge and confidence to program for students with developmental disabilities in the inclusive classroom. Correspondingly, shifting the responsibility of a student with learning needs back to the classroom teacher and away from the EA.

All of the literature noted above has concentrated on the support in the inclusive classroom, but none have considered the background of a student or EA coming from a self-contained setting and how this could impact the work of transitioning the student's learning to an inclusive classroom.

As educators look to the Ministry of Education to lead them in research findings and training around effective practice for teaching all students, I am aware that school boards have received minimal information on how the role is to be utilized. In a review of recent Ontario Ministry of Education documents, no mention was made of the role of the EA. Documents such as: *Shared Solutions: A Guide to Presenting and Resolving Conflicts Regarding Programs and Services for Students with Special Needs* (2007) and *Caring and Safe Schools in Ontario: Supporting Students with Special Education Needs Through Progressive Discipline Kindergarten to Grade 12* (2010), and *Learning for All: A Guide for Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (2013) omit any discussion of the role an

EA may play. These documents promote the use of teaching practices that benefit all learners, including students with developmental disabilities but are directed at the classroom teacher. Going back to 2001, you will find the mention of EAs in the *Special Education: A Guide for Educators*. In this document, a brief outlining of the EA role and responsibilities as well as the purpose of this support funded by individual school boards is found. As many policy and program resources have been developed since this time to support educators in inclusive practice there is a need for updated guidance to school boards around the use of EA support in regular the classroom.

The body of research around the use of EAs for supporting students with developmental disabilities is not broad but it is rich with reoccurring themes of deficits in: role definition, training and supervision (Giangreco, et al., 2012). There were no studies to be found around the transition of students and EA back to a regular class setting after been placed in a self-contained setting. The lack of research may be due to the differing of opinions in education as how best to serve students with developmental disabilities, as 50% of identified students in Ontario still remain in self-contained settings (Bennett & Gallagher, 2013). Within Ontario, there is no commonly used criteria as to how an EA is allocated as the parameters of this role are defined by individual school boards (Hutchison, 2014).

**Present Study**

Due to a lack of research in the Ontario context of the role of the EA in secondary inclusive classrooms as well as the acknowledgement that schools boards are moving forward their models of special education towards inclusive education this study seeks to answer the following question: What do educational assistants need in their professional development to

ensure the successful transition of students with developmental disabilities from self-contained settings to inclusive classes in secondary school?

## Method

A qualitative research design was used to answer the question:  What do educational assistants need in their professional development to ensure the successful transition of students with developmental disabilities from self-contained settings to inclusive classes in secondary school?

### Setting

The research was conducted in a school board located in southwestern Ontario comprised of mainly rural communities.  This school board was in its first years of changing their special education model and was moving students with developmental disabilities to a fully inclusive model where students would be transitioned into regular classes.  There were nine secondary schools in the school board and all EAs were considered for participation in the study.  All of these schools were at varying degrees of the move to a more inclusive model as previously students with developmental disabilities had been congregated at certain sites.  The secondary schools which held the self-contained programs resulted in a greater concentration of students with developmental disabilities at some schools than others.  Participants chosen for this study were EAs that were supporting students who were identified as having a developmental disability.  The student of which the EA supported would be currently integrated out into one or more regular class sections within the school.  The EA would have a history of supporting students with developmental disabilities in a self-contained setting as well as in a regular class setting.

**Participants**

  Through a request of participation through their work e-mail address, fifteen educational assistants in the school board participated in individual interviews, using a semi-structured technique. There were 14 female participants and one male. The EAs came from five out of nine of the secondary schools within the school board. Two schools did not have self-contained classes and therefore EAs placed there did not meet the criteria for participation in the study. I had been working intensively with one secondary school over the previous couple of years around the inclusion of students from self-contained classes and therefore was not approached due to ethical concerns. A fourth site chose not to participate; it was communicated to myself that the EAs had come forward asking to decline this opportunity due to trust issues with being a participant in research. This was interpreted in the context of EAs not being involved in outside research previously, as well as acknowledging the system change towards inclusion was impacting their roles and likely causing some stress on the staff.

  The inclusion criteria for participants was that they needed to have had the experience of supporting students with developmental disabilities in the self-contained class as well as supported them in a regular class setting in the past two school calendars. It was found that out of seventy-seven EAs working in secondary schools within the school board only thirty-nine were considered eligible participants via the inclusion criteria of the study as only thirty-nine had the experience of supporting students with developmental disabilities in both class placements. Fifteen EAs participated which meant that 38% of the eligible participant population was involved in the study.

  The majority of the participants had only been supporting students with developmental disabilities in a regular class setting for one to two years. Their experiences in the self-contained

classroom for students with developmental disabilities ranged from one to twenty years of experience.  As well, all but two of the participants had over ten years of experience in the role of an EA with the most experience being 29 years.

**Data Collection**

Ethics approval was granted by the University of Western Ontario for the study in April of 2015 (See Appendix A).  The necessary steps were taken through the research application protocol set out by the school board of interest.  At the beginning of May 2015 the school board passed the approval for the research to take place.

The questions chosen for the interview were created from personal experience and by the investigation of current research on the role of the EA support in an inclusive school setting. Responses were collected from the following questions:

- How many years have you supported students with developmental disabilities in an inclusive class setting?

- How many years have you supported students with developmental disabilities in a self-contained setting?

- What professional development has occurred to support you in your practice from moving from supporting students with developmental disabilities in a self-contained setting to supporting students in an inclusive class setting?

- Are you aware of the current Individual Educational Plan goals for the student you support in the inclusive class setting?

- Do you believe students with developmental disabilities should be placed in an inclusive class setting?  Why or Why not?

- What procedures need to be in place for you to successfully support students in an inclusive class setting?

- What type of professional development would you like to receive to assist a student that has a developmental disability in an inclusive class setting?

- What suggestions would you have for educators to help prepare students with developmental disabilities for their transition from the self-contained setting to the inclusive class setting?

- Do you believe the student you are supporting in the inclusive class is benefitting from this experience?  How so?

- Do you believe the support you provide a student is wanted by the students you support?  What is your evidence of this?

- What do you think is important for a secondary teacher to know when working with the support of an educational assistant for a student in their class?

Interviews took place in a private setting in the secondary school where the EA worked during their final hour of work when they were not directly supporting students.  Some interviews also took place during scheduled exam days, also at a time when they were not supporting students.  Initially, I met with their union representative to encourage participation amongst the members.  An e-mail was then sent to all EAs that met the eligibility criteria of the study.  The Superintendent of Learning Services also sent an e-mail to Principals to encourage participation in the study and approval for EAs to be released from other assigned duties during the final hour of their work day.  Only five EAs came forward at that time.  I was told that EAs were reluctant to participate as they were unsure of the anonymity of their responses.   I then contacted the union representative and Superintendent of Learning Services to help clarify to the

EAs the research process and to assist with more participation.  As it was nearing the end of the school year the superintendent than asked principals to release EAs from assigned duties during the exam schedule when they were not directly supporting students to participate in the study.

Interviews were conducted and recorded by myself using the Dragon App on the iPAD with the use of a microphone to enhance the efficiency of the transcription from audio to text. The interview lengths ranged in time from approximately fifteen minutes to thirty minutes.

To assist participants in understanding how their identities would be protected, I took the time to explain the ethics protocols and approvals that had taken place before the commencement of the research. This seemed to put participants at ease in promoting authentic responses to the questions posed.

**Data Analysis:**

All of the interviews conducted were included in this analysis.  The interviews themselves represented a realistic method of collecting data where the participant's report their experiences, meanings and realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006).  The responses transcribed from the interview questions were coded through thematic analysis.  The process of thematic analysis provided six phases: familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, review themes, defining and naming the themes that were most evident throughout the data, and then moving to report writing (Braun & Clark, 2006).  Three larger themes quickly emerged as their meanings were found in multiple interviews.  Once the larger themes were established I created another step to break the larger themes back down as I sought to answer my initial research question.  Through this process three to four subthemes were identified within each large theme. These themes were then looked at in the context of the system change in special education taking place within the school board to note the impact on the role of the EA

and the skill set required to transitioning students with developmental disabilities towards inclusive education.

## Results

Throughout the interviews different themes came forward to shed light on how EAs in secondary schools can be supported in the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities into regular classrooms.  I found that three major themes Collaboration, Programming, and Relationships were uncovered, each with subthemes that highlighted EA's needs for a successful transition from a self-contained class setting to supporting students with developmental disabilities in the inclusive classroom.

Before noting the themes that presented themselves, it is important to share the beliefs that were held by the participants towards inclusive education that framed the work they were doing to give context to the findings.  Believing in the work you are doing no doubt will have impact on how the work is carried out.  It is therefore imperative to determine if EAs believe that the regular classroom will provide an optimal learning setting as they move towards an inclusive model.  EAs were asked the question 'Do you believe students with developmental disabilities should be included in regular classrooms?'  All participants acknowledged they did believe in the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities.

Twelve participants said they did believe but had various conditions under which it would need to occur.  Two EAs felt that there needed to be a balance between going out into regular classes and time spent in their self-contained classes.  One EA shared that they felt "an inclusive class setting is okay if they're out maybe in two classes but they need to have a home base".  Two EAs thought that traditional academic classes were not for these students.  Their comments included that being placed in an academic setting was an "unreal expectation" and

"horribly useless". This was paired with four EAs that expressed traditional life skills programming found in the self-contained setting was needed for students with developmental disabilities. Many also shared that their belief in inclusive education was dependant on the individual being placed in the regular classroom. Although all of the students these EAs were working with have been identified as having a developmental disability, the EAs felt that there would be some students that would not benefit from inclusion in a regular class. One EA indicated "there might be like three kids in the big picture that it is not going to work in an inclusive class setting". When speaking of this small percentage another EA expressed "I think part of my skepticism is I don't know how to help them be a part of the classroom." This sentiment indicates the acknowledgement that there are skills to acquire when doing this work.

Three EAs stated no conditions in their belief towards inclusive education and spoke to wanting the work done sooner within the school board. One EA became quite emotional when answering this question and provided a lengthy response accompanied with tears. Here are a few statements the EA shared: "definitely they should be included because they're part of society and they deserve to be treated like that"… "we limit them because of ourselves and not because of them"… "its freedom, it's their right, they deserve it and let them take from it what they can get". Overall, the responses to this question were positive towards a belief that students with developmental disabilities should have the opportunity to learn in regular classes. It is reasonable to consider that EAs would have ideas and suggestions about how inclusion should occur based on their experiences as well as having the best interest of the students they support as they move through the change towards inclusive education.

**Collaboration**

The main theme that surfaced and was present in almost every interview was the request for collaboration between themselves and the classroom teacher. The need for collaboration came through the responses in three different ways: time to meet with the classroom teacher, wanting to share the untapped knowledge of the EA, as well as the information that the EA was seeking to perform their role effectively.

**Time to Meet.** Within the theme of collaboration EAs expressed the need to meet with the classroom teacher. Some felt that there needed to be time to talk with the classroom teacher before the semester even began. They were looking for "time set aside somewhere for the teachers and EA to know ahead of time what is going to take place in the classroom". EAs were asking for time "to sit down with the teacher and get a game plan". Other EAs spoke of the need to have continual dialogue "even daily" in the form of "little powwows, little discussions" to talk over how the student is progressing with the teachers' expectations in the classrooms.

There was some acknowledgement of collaboration amongst EAs when one participant brought forward that the EAs in their building have meetings every other Friday to discuss strategies they use in the classroom with various students. They found this practice helpful and could see the need for this to happen with the classroom teachers as well.

There were three ways EAs felt more collaboration between themselves and classroom teachers could take place. Some thought time before the school starts or in between semesters. Some spoke to wanting the time to be provided either within the daily schedules or a third way suggested was to have this time incorporated into professional development days.

**Untapped Knowledge of the EA**. Through seeking time to meet with classroom teachers, EAs hoped to convey their feelings of their untapped knowledge or skills that they felt the classroom teacher was unaware of. "Educational Assistants have many, many skills, a lot of skills of teachers and we are being very underutilized" as expressed by one participant. They wanted the time to share their ideas and have input into how the student is being included in the classroom whether it pertained to academic achievement, socialization, or behavior management of the student that they supported. Without this time to collaborate they feel their "skills and our knowledge is just dismissed".

**Information Sought by EAs.** The final piece that EAs hoped to improve through collaboration with the classroom teacher was the need to gain more information. EAs spoke of not being invited to meetings concerning the student they supported whether it pertained to the development of the IEP (Individual Education Plan) or the annual IPRC (Identification Placement and Review Committee).

When EAs were asked about their knowledge of the IEP, ten responded that they were not aware of any of the goals, four could say they knew some of the goals and only one out of the fifteen interviewed could say they were aware of all of the goals. They want to be included in these meetings or at least informed of the outcomes so that they "know what the goals and needs of the students are". Some of the other information they felt they require pertains more to the role definition within the regular classroom as for many of them this was a new setting to be supporting a student with developmental disabilities. They spoke of "really not being sure of what the work is because they have not been given any guidelines".

**Programming**

The second theme that surfaced in the responses was the type of programming taking place in the classroom with which the students were expected to engage. Within this theme there were three areas of conversation. These areas included: modified programming, teacher's responsibility to program, and their ideas about life skills programming. Given that the secondary classroom teachers in this school board were new to the ideas and skills of programming for students with developmental disabilities within the regular classroom, EAs felt that this was an area that needed some work. When programming was appropriate for the student they felt they would be able to support the student better within the regular classroom. EAs in this study were hopeful as inclusion of students with developmental disabilities becomes consistent practice throughout the school board that teachers will be able to learn the skills needed to modify their programming.

**Modified Programming.** EAs clearly expressed that "academically the work is not modified enough" and then continued to describe what was happening in the classrooms due to lack of programming through multiple statements that spoke to "downtime for our students". The sense that the goal for the students was to sit for a full period (75 minutes) was not making them feel that including students with developmental disabilities in regular classrooms was beneficial. At times they spoke of students "just left sitting doing nothing". They expressed that "teachers lecturing in an academic setting" would not engage or enable their students to learn through this format of teaching. Many asked about how the teachers could receive more help with programming as they empathized with teachers having their first experiences with including students with developmental disabilities.

**Teacher's Responsibility to Program.**  EAs were not sure if classroom teachers understood that it was their responsibility to program or modify the curriculum.  They wanted their role as the EA defined to the teacher "that we're there to assist them but they're actually responsible for coming up with the learning plan".  Many spoke that out of compassion to the student they supported that they were taking on the role of programming, as one stated "they really need to start planning for these kids, not that I mind doing the job, but it's not for me to do either."

**Life Skills Programming.**  Although some EAs were eager to get teaching practice to a place where modifications were being applied to include students with developmental disabilities in the regular classroom, some were speaking of the students now missing out on the traditional life skills program that was in the self-contained placement.  A few of the EAs compared the two ways of programming and held the life skills as more important for their students.  One spoke of a balance, "if we can give them life skills that they need when they are in the self-contained class and they can go out for some fun".  Similarly, another said "to learn how to fold laundry and cooking, I think that's more beneficial."  There was a sense that these types of life skills are lost when the student moves to a regular classroom.  There were also a few EAs that spoke of life skills that students were gaining in the regular classroom by ways of students becoming "more independent and making more choices" and "advocating for themselves when forgotten from group work".

**Relationships**

The third theme was the request for the growth of relationships that would foster the inclusion of students into the regular class setting.  In this new classroom environment for both the EA and the students with developmental disabilities three relationships were identified when

supporting students in the regular classroom. The three relationships that were identified are: classroom teacher and EA, classroom teacher and the student with a developmental disability, and students with developmental disabilities and their peers in the regular class. All three relationships are described in the following sections as they pertain to the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities.

**Classroom Teacher and EA**. The perception that the EAs felt misunderstood in their role and acknowledged that the relationship between themselves and the teacher is strained. One EA stated, "neither should feel threatened by one another". They wanted teachers to know that they were "there to help, not hinder". EAs expressed their feelings of being "forgot about" and one said that they "didn't think that anybody recognizes that we do have a lot to contribute… we feel very devalued". Some had taken a negative stance as they expressed their relationship "it is almost like it is us and them" and that they themselves "cannot be pushed aside". Many felt that their relationship with the classroom teacher was not where it should be in an effort to support the student with developmental disabilities in the class.

**Classroom Teacher and Student with Developmental Disability.** Not only were EAs asking for a relationship with the classroom teacher for themselves, but they had hopes of the student they supported to connect with the teacher as well. Simple ideas were expressed like wanting to tell the teacher "sit down and talk to them about it" (the regular classroom and what will be expected of them), and asking if the student could be included in meetings about their programming and progress in the classroom. EAs noted that how the classroom teacher treated the student would influence how their peers would see them and that group work should be encouraged.

**Students with Developmental Disability and Peers.**  More positively, the EAs spoke of the peer relations being created in the regular classroom with the student they supported.  Many expressed that the social skills of the student they supported were improving in the regular classroom with peers of their own age.  Some recognized the benefit of "just being with peers their own age and starting to develop that relationship with peers that they couldn't have had time or even the opportunity to do beforehand".  They explained how they observed the increase in social skills within the students they supported which included: requesting partners other than the EA themselves, visiting with other students while in the classroom, and simply noting the enjoyment of speaking with peers.  EAs also recognized the social gains spilling out into the hallways and "different parts of the building" as more students were saying "hi" to the students they support.  One EA mentioned that they had witnessed "people on the street giving high-fives" to the student with developmental disability and expressed "that, to me, is success".  Another EA spoke of the benefit to the peers as "they can learn respect and empathy".  For positive peer relations to foster, some noted that "knowledge for the rest of the class" is an asset by letting them know what is expected of them and how they can help the student to be included.  "It can take weeks or months for kids to even approach one of our kids within the classroom so if we can get that out of the way earlier, I think the experience for everybody involved would be way better."

A few EAs did feel that the students they were supporting in the regular classroom were going to "miss a lot of social pieces going out" of the self-contained setting.  They felt the students in the regular classroom were "not their true friends" or that they were not "going to hang out with the other students on weekends or call them".

EAs identified that the relationships between themselves and the classroom teacher, the student being included and classroom teacher and between the student and their peers all need thoughtful consideration when making the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities in regular classrooms successful in the secondary setting.

## Discussion

It is positive to note the beliefs that the EA's held towards inclusive education for the students they were supporting with developmental disabilities. Hutchison (2014) states that for an effective working relationship between teachers and EAs they must have shared beliefs about what is most important in relation to inclusive education. Therefore, it was important to understand if EAs held positive or negative beliefs around inclusion given that this was the way that the Board was moving. The majority of EAs did believe that this would contribute to the student's learning and experience in secondary school but the limitations they placed on either subject area or specific students called for further investigation. Due to the fact that some of the EAs that participated had limited experiences in the regular classes, this may have narrowed the subject areas and teacher practice that they experienced. This narrowed experience may have impacted their beliefs of the effectiveness of inclusive education for a student with a developmental disability.

The three major themes of collaboration, programming and relationships that emerged from the findings outline the essential areas of focus for school and system level development to support EAs in being an effective and appreciated resource for students with developmental disabilities in a regular classroom during the secondary years of schooling. The findings reflect the literature review conducted on previous studies that included EAs supporting students at a secondary level. A school board going through such system level changes from a traditional

model of special education that has been in place for over two decades to an inclusive model will no doubt have challenges along the way. The challenges that EAs expressed in the findings could lead to problem solving at both the system level and school level to support the EA's role in the regular classroom to move the school forward in inclusive practice.

Some of the simple requests that the EAs expressed around collaboration, programming and relationships could be addressed by revisiting the provincial policy document *Special Education: A Guide for Educators.* The document outlines the role and responsibilities of the EA as the following:

- Collaborates in the IEP process;

- Helps the student with learning activities under the direction of the teacher;

- Assists with appropriate modifications and accommodations as described in the IEP;

- Monitors and records the student's achievements and progress relative to the expectations described in the IEP, under the direction of the teacher;

- Maintains ongoing communication with the student's teachers.

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001)

By reviewing this guide with teachers who are new to the support of an EA in their classroom would bring clarity to the role of the EA. The outline of the role would also allow for structures to be created around how information is shared and how communication can flow to ensure the EA is able to fulfill these responsibilities.

**Collaboration**

Interestingly, at the beginning and at the end of this list is the need to collaborate with the classroom teacher in support of the program delivered. The findings uncovered the lack of knowledge that the EAs had around the IEP and the teachers' intent on how the programming would be carried out for the student. In a larger study conducted by Giangreco et al., (2001) there were similar findings, "several paraprofessionals reported being unaware of a student's disability, how the disability affected learning, or a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals". The lack of information EAs receive highlights the need for collaboration between the teacher and the EA; otherwise, schools run the risk of the EA resource not being able to guide the student in a successful way. The goals that were created by the classroom teacher in consultation with the student's family will have a limited chance of being reached if the EA is not informed of them. If time was found and agreed upon between the classroom teacher and the EA this concern could be addressed. McDonnell and Jameson (2014) speak to the necessity of having regular meetings and strategies for communication that can assist the transfer of knowledge between the two to be organized and efficient. The establishment of regular meeting times and location, developing a standard agenda and gathering materials to support discussion prior to the meeting can make this time more productive and valuable for all (McDonnell & Jameson, 2014). This time will need to be initially orchestrated by the administration of the school to support the collaboration that needs to take place. Once the practice is initiated and if done well, members of the team will come to value this time and will likely seek out the time independent of administration.

**Programming**

The need for teachers to have more professional development on how to modify programming for students with developmental disabilities will continue to be the work for many teachers. Embedding research based strategies of differentiated instruction and universal design for learning in their practice will be their focus. These practices are not new in the world of education but without a secondary teacher having a need to apply these in an academically streamed school there would have been a limited need to acquire these skills previous to a system change towards inclusive education. The fact that the majority of participants agree with inclusive education and it positively benefitting students with developmental disabilities will allow EAs to work collaboratively with teachers as they acquire these new skills. Through research brought forth by Carnahan (et al., 2009) on how teachers can support EAs, they note that a shared philosophy will set a positive tone to promote a productive learning environment for the teacher and EA to work within. The shared philosophy outlines more than their attitudes or beliefs towards inclusive education but also to a shared understanding of the team's values, goals and desires for the school year (Carnahan, et al., 2009). It will need to be conveyed to classroom teachers new to inclusive education that it is essential that programming be designed by the classroom teacher and they must offer support to the EA in delivery and content of the curriculum. EAs should be working from prepared plans developed by teachers using evidence-based approaches; therefore, not putting EAs in the inappropriate position of making pedagogical decisions (Giangreco, 2013). A concern that arises in having a shared philosophy is when the EA or the teacher does not believe that the placement of the student with a developmental disability in a regular class has value. EAs acknowledged limitations and identified certain

students for whom they did not think it was beneficial, this will become a challenge when self-contained classes are no longer available as schools move forward towards inclusive education.

The school board's shift away from a traditional "life skills" approach in a self-contained setting will need to be addressed to answer the questions of why programming should change. EAs have spent many hours supporting a student to complete a short list of tasks such as food preparation, jobs around the school, and weekly community trips to local recreation facilities. When students are placed in regular class settings, the tasks that the student is asked to complete will more typically take place in a classroom amongst peers at various academic levels. Expectations of what students with developmental disabilities may be capable of will rise as a result of being placed in a regular classroom setting. Students will be engaged in more academic learning activities that will foster both social and intellectual development (Shepley, 2007). It will look and feel different for both the EA and the student and there is a need to support the new understandings as the transition occurs.

**Relationship**

Lastly, the relationship theme that emerged spoke to everyone's need as an employee, to be valued which is reflected by the relationships that form in a work environment. If they feel their role is not valued by those who support them they will question their effort, which ultimately impacts their work. EAs did feel appreciated by the student but it was clear that many did not feel appreciated by the classroom teacher. It may be that the lack of collaboration in the role they were to play in the classroom was a large part of this feeling. Knowing that many had worked in a self-contained placement previously, one may also suspect that the long term relationship that they had with a teacher of a self-contained placement that was present three-quarters of the day was being missed. It is quite possible that many EAs will now be present in

four different classrooms supporting four different teachers, compared to two. If the teachers have put no effort into fostering these relationships, it is understandable that the EA will start to feel isolated. It was positive to discover that the EA acknowledged that the classroom teachers and peers would also need to start to work on their relationship with the student being included into the class. The EA may have supported the student for multiple years and may be the best one to model how this relationship can occur, but without the EA having a relationship with the classroom teacher, this is unlikely to occur for both the classroom teacher and the peers. I think this is an effective way in which EAs could share their skills with the classroom teacher and will provide a sense of belonging for the student once these relationships start to develop. A key to successful inclusive education is building relationships that will, in turn, support learning to take place within the classroom.

**Limitations**

The limitation to the research undertaken is that it is representative of only one school board in Ontario. The school board was chosen due to their commitment to moving forward with inclusive education and the closure of self-contained classes. Currently, in Ontario there would be only a few instances in other school boards where EAs may be supporting students with developmental disabilities in regular class settings at a secondary level and rare that they would be transitioning students from a self-contained to a regular class setting. As all school boards in Ontario are encouraged through policy to practice towards inclusive education this study will be of interest to many (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

**Implications**

Studying what EAs require to support the transition of students from a self-contained setting to an inclusive class setting is important as many school boards seek further inclusion of

all students in Ontario. Further investigation of how the EA understands their role in relation to the successful academic and social inclusion of the students of which they are assigned too will allow those providing support and training of these roles insight into what is needed.

As the majority of students with developmental disabilities are placed in self-contained settings once they are in secondary school there is little research looking at the role of an EA in the secondary inclusive classroom. Up until this study there is no known research that captures the transition of the EA support from a self-contained classroom to a regular class setting. From my observations, at the secondary school level, teachers that have never worked with the support of an EA in their classroom are unsure of how to orchestrate this support effectively. Teachers are unsure of what they can ask of people in the EA role. Teachers are also unsure of where they fit into the students learning when another adult provides one-to-one support to a student in their classroom. This creates an uneasy collegial relationship where collaboration does not always take place and the EA is left to adjust the teacher's programming for the student with the developmental disability. Therefore, further clarification of the EA role will assist teachers in seeing that change may be needed in their own practice to successfully include students with developmental disabilities into their classrooms.

The use of this role may serve as a predictor of what supports may be needed once the student transitions into adult life outside of the school community. Personal support workers will be available for many students who have a developmental disability once they have graduated, however the availability of this resource that young adults will be able to access will be much less than the one-to-one support for eight hours a day that a student may have become reliant on in school. Outside agencies will be concerned with practices that the EAs are engaged

in to promote independence during their final school years in hopes of young adults less in need of this personal care.

In an educational context, the investigation into EAs moving their support from a self-contained setting to an inclusive class setting will contribute to the work needed in Ontario as school boards become more inclusive in practice. EAs being placed into a different learning context will require skills to meet the more global needs of students with significant disabilities, although these skills might be determined based on the specific students with whom they interact (Burello, et al., 2013). From the research conducted, recommendations could be made to support EAs that may be supporting a student for the first time in a secondary inclusive class. Collaboration ideas may come forward so that the classroom teacher and the EA understand their roles more fully in an effort to better support the students with a developmental learner profile. The broader school and school board whom supports and develops this role/resource may question what it is EAs feel they need in their role of supporting students in the inclusive classroom. The perspective of the EA will be important as school boards move through system changes towards further inclusion and recognize EAs as a key contributor to the success of students.

Ideas may come forward around supporting both the classroom teacher to ensure that the EA does not feel compelled to take on the responsibility to program for the student. As this becomes realized and the teacher is supported through strategies such as universal design for learning the demand for the role of the EA as a resource may decline (Katz, 2013).

Educators may better convey the role of the EA to the parent of the child with a developmental disability to assist them to understand when this support is appropriate and

needed for their child. A deeper understanding of this may cause less tension between school and family relationships.

Research in this area may inform the Ontario Ministry of Education to provide more updated information in policy documents around the role and use of the EA in an inclusive classroom. If funding was attached to this project, as is the current practice when a new document is released from the Ministry, school boards may be able to provide training needed to support the transition of this role from a self-contained classroom to a regular classroom setting. Without the release of new documents both the Ministry of Education and at a local school board level could focus professional development on the coordination of resources for teachers to move inclusive education forward with a review of the resource of the EA to ensure best practices are being implemented through a collaborative team approach in all schools.

Overall, due to the lack of the investigation around the role of the EA in a secondary inclusive classroom, I feel there are many lessons we can learn as both educators and researchers to promote the work of inclusion in schools locally and throughout North America where challenges persist. In an effort to support these perceived implications results will be shared with the senior administration of the school board involved in the study, neighboring regional school boards as well as with the Ministry of Education of Ontario.

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# Appendix A – Ethics Approval

**Western Research**

Research Ethics

**Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board**
**NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice**

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jacqueline Specht
Department & Institution: Education\Faculty of Education, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 106459
Study Title: Educational Assistants Supporting Inclusive Education in Secondary Schools
Sponsor:

**NMREB Initial Approval Date:** May 06, 2015
**NMREB Expiry Date:** May 06, 2016

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

| Document Name | Comments | Version Date |
|---|---|---|
| Revised Western University Protocol | Revised Exported Word Document of Application. | 2015/04/21 |
| Revised Letter of Information & Consent | Revised Letter of Information and Consent as advised by the REB | 2015/04/13 |

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Ethics Officer, on behalf of Riley Hinson, NMREB Chair or delegated board member

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