Rethinking the Role of Educational Assistants to Better Support Inclusive Education in Ontario Secondary Schools

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to review how educational assistants support students with significant support needs (SSN), such as, developmental disabilities, autism, and multiple disabilities in inclusive secondary school classrooms, and to create learning guides for administrators to use when providing professional development to educational assistants. The learning guides focus on collaboration and research-based practices that close student learning gaps, improve student achievement, and foster inclusive classrooms. Research has shown the role of the school principal to be pivotal for fostering new meaning, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programs as well as building relationships between schools and communities (Riehl, 2000). Educational assistants support the emotional, social, and academic success of all students, but particularly for those with special education needs. Administration and educational assistants both play important roles in student success and in creating inclusive classrooms; therefore, it is essential that they both learn alongside each other with a shared goal of student success. This project is in response to my work within the Upper Canada District School Board as a classroom teacher, special education teacher, secondary learning resource coach, student engagement teacher, vice principal, and principal. Throughout my career I have been dedicated to creating a positive, caring, and inclusive learning environment where all students are encouraged, supported, and given the opportunity to reach their full potential. I have had the privilege of working with many highly effective educational assistants who shared my vision, and working together, along with the help of other dedicated staff, parents, and families, many of my students with significant support needs went on to earn their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. When I moved to administration nine years ago, I made listening to and honouring educational assistants' voices and their professional development a priority. I have

made it a practice to have weekly team meetings with educational assistants with professional development as the focus. I discovered that this practice is not widely adopted throughout our school district, nor are there resources to support this practice. This resource guide was designed, edited, and revised based on informal feedback from many stakeholders, including administrators, classroom teachers, special education teachers, student success teachers, guidance teachers, and educational assistants. This project may be valuable to administrators who are interested in providing professional development to their school's educational assistants and are looking for resources to support them. These learning guides are based on five topics, that include current research and how to put learning into action compiled into easily accessible documents with links to resources.

Acknowledgements

I began my Master of Education in 2015, three years into my journey as a secondary school vice principal. My passion for teaching, learning, and leading through an equity lens propelled me to pursue higher education and professional learning that would help me be more effective in my role while opening doors to teach additional qualifications to teachers. Taking on this challenge has proven to be one of my greatest accomplishments, and the completion of this project would not have been possible without the support of Dr. Lynda Colgan. Dr. Colgan's encouragement, guidance, and wisdom helped me stay focused, and her unwavering patience to see me through to the end is a testament to her commitment to her graduate students. I will be forever grateful. I would also like to thank Dr. Jordan Schurr for being my second reader and taking time out of their schedule to assist me. While I have thoroughly enjoyed the learning, discussions, conservation, and collaboration it took to reach this culmination, at times it was challenging to juggle my personal, professional, and educational commitments. I managed because I had a stellar support network of family and friends surrounding me. I am eternally grateful for the support of my three young-adult children: Summer, Gunner, and Sunshine. They were always available to lend an ear, discuss my ideas and research, and assist with citing and editing. My greatest hope is that I have modelled and passed on my love of learning to them.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

My interest and passion in inclusive education has been shaped by my personal experiences, my education, and my professional experiences in and outside of education. I am fortunate to have been raised in a family where everyone is accepted, valued, and loved for who they are. In the early 1950s, my grandparents were informed that their son was "mentally retarded" and that he would never learn to read or write and would be lucky if he could speak. It was recommended that he be placed in the newly opened Ontario Hospital School in Smiths Falls, Ontario (later named Rideau Regional Centre), a place where people with a range of intellectual disabilities, including people with a developmental disability, were sent to live. These institutions were known as asylums for "idiots", "lunatics", "imbeciles", the "feeble-minded" and "epileptics." My Nana, a schoolteacher in the small community of Beachburg, Ontario, firmly rejected the government and society's views of people with developmental disabilities and chose to raise her son at home and have him educated in his community public school with his siblings and neighbours.

Prior to beginning my career in education, I was hired as a transitional support worker through Brockville & District Association for Community Involvement, an agency committed to promoting equal opportunity, full participation, respect, and values for individuals with intellectual disabilities. My first assignment was to support Neal, a young man who just turned twenty-one years old and was a new graduate from high school who transitioned from school-to-community. I was just a few years older than Neal when I was hired to teach him "life skills" and get him involved in activities outside of the family home, since he was sitting at home eating chips and drinking pop while his parents were at work. Once we started to get to know each other, I quickly learned that like many twenty-one-year-olds he loved sports and hated cooking.

Once we moved beyond Neal complying with everything I said as an attempt to make me happy, I suspect that resulted from years of "playing" school and being "good," then we identified the real issues: (a) he wanted to have friends, (b) he wanted to have a job, and (c) he wanted to be physically active. Neal was educated in a specialized classroom for students with developmental disabilities for seven years, learning "life skills" and his transition plan essentially prepared him for school-to-couch.

I am grateful to share that 20 years later, Neal is an accomplished athlete. He has run several half-marathons, accomplishing a personal best at Toronto Scotiabank Half Marathon with a time of 1:59:41. He has also represented Ontario in swimming and Nordic skiing. In 2016, he completed in the Special Olympics Canada Winter Games in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Nova Scotia. Neal works as a part-time grocery clerk at Giant Tiger, volunteers at the YMCA, swims and Nordic skis with both a community club and a Special Olympics Team, and every Saturday morning, meets the Brockville Roadrunners to do a long run. Most importantly to him, he has true friends.

As an educator, with almost two decades of experience, I know that creating classrooms with inclusive learning environments, although challenging, can be done successfully. I have done this work as both an elementary and secondary teacher. I have supported countless classroom teachers to do this work in my roles as an elementary learning resource coach, secondary learning resource coach, student engagement teacher and vice principal. In my current role as a secondary school principal, I feel I can have the greatest influence on creating inclusive classrooms. I have had the privilege to learn and work alongside educators who believe that all children learn the best in the regular classroom with their peers.

My personal experiences, my education, and my professional experiences inside and outside of education are why I am committed to the work I do. It is my mission to ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential and build independence in an inclusive school community where they are valued and belong, while participating in meaningful learning connected to the curriculum. This has led me to pursue my master's degree in Education, with a focus on helping principals engage in this challenging work of creating inclusive classroom communities by providing them with important information and research-based strategies and resources to leverage the role of the educational assistants as collaborative team members to make this a reality for all children.

Purpose

The overall purpose of this project was to create a series of accessible learning guides for administrators to use when providing professional development to educational assistants. The learning guides focus on collaboration and research-based practices that close learning gaps, improve student achievement, and foster inclusive classrooms. This project is in response to the challenges I faced when looking for resources to support educational assistants in my roles as a secondary school vice principal and principal.

Research indicates that the role of the school principal has been shown to be pivotal for fostering new meaning, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programs as well as building relationships between schools and communities (Riehl, 2000). This project is intended to support principals with this responsibility, while also considering the important roles secondary schoolteachers, special education teachers, education assistants and students have as co-creators of classroom communities that include students with intellectual disabilities, autism,

and multiple disabilities. For the purposes of this project, a classroom is experienced as a community when its members: (a) know, care about, and support one another, and (b) can participate actively in classroom decision-making, planning, and goal setting (Solomon et al., 1996).

By bringing together research on inclusive education, belonging, and classroom communities, and the understanding that students have basic psychological needs for belonging, autonomy, and competence (Deci & Ryan,1985), while simultaneously focusing on educator collaboration and research-based strategies, this project will be a valuable resource for administers and educational assistants as they work towards meeting the expectations of the Accepting Schools Act, Bill 13. The Bill aims to provide safe, inclusive, and accepting learning environments in which every student can succeed, including recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Indigenous students, and students with special education needs, among others, may be at risk of lower achievement.

Key Terms

Students with Significant Support Needs (SSN)

Students with significant support needs are highly diverse learners with extensive needs in the areas of cognition and/or learning, communication, movement, and social/emotional abilities, such as, developmental disability, autism, and multiple disabilities. The individual may also have concurrent health, sensory, physical and/or behavioral disabilities.

Inclusion

For this research, it is important that we have a common understanding of what is meant by the phrase "inclusive education." To accomplish this, I will use key international literature, including UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, Article 24 (2006) definition, as summarized by Loreman (2013):

- All children attend their neighbouring school.
- School districts have a "zero-rejection" policy when it comes to registering and teaching children in their region.
- All children are welcomed and valued.
- All children learn in regular, heterogeneous classrooms with same age peers.
- All children follow substantively similar programs of study, with a curriculum that can be adapted and modified if needed. Modes of instruction are varied and responsive to the needs of all.
- All children contribute to regular school and classroom learning activities and events.
- All children are supported to make friends and be socially successful with their peers.
- Adequate resources and staff training are provided within the school and district to support inclusion.

Inclusive Education

When discussing "inclusive education," it is important that all parties share an understanding of what is meant by the term. Ensuring equity is a key goal of Ontario's publicly funded education system, as set out in *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in*

Ontario (2014). It stems from the fundamental principle that every student should have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of background, identity, or personal circumstances. Giangreco (2011) provides a more in-depth definition by suggesting that inclusive education is more than merely having a physical presence in general education classes, but rather an interrelated set of values from which we make decisions. The following set of practices constitute inclusive education when each of the elements occurs on an ongoing daily basis:

1. All students are welcomed in general education. The first placement options considered are the general education classes in the school a student would attend if not disabled. Since disability is recognized as a form of human diversity, students with disabilities are accepted as individuals and not denied access.
2. Appropriate supports are available regardless of disability label or severity. Given their portability, supports are provided in typical environments, rather than sending students to specialized settings to receive needed supports.
3. Students are educated in classes reflecting the naturally occurring proportion of students with and without disabilities (e.g., substantially more students without than with disabilities).
4. Students—irrespective of their development or performance levels—are educated with peers in the same age groupings available to those without disabilities rather than with younger students. Students with disabilities need not function at or near the same academic level as their classmates (though some do) to benefit from age-appropriate placement.
5. Students with and without disabilities participate in shared educational experiences while pursuing individually appropriate learning outcomes with necessary supports.

> Educational experiences are designed to enhance valued life outcomes that seek an individualized balance between both the academic-functional and the social-personal aspects of schooling.

Evidence-Based Practice

According to the *Council for Exceptional Children* (2014), to be considered an evidence-based practice: (a) it must be supported by at least two methodologically sound group comparison studies with random assignment to groups, positive effects, and at least 60 total participants across studies; four ethnologically sound group comparison studies with non-random assignment to groups, positive effects, and at least 120 total participants across studies; or five methodologically sound single-subject studies with positive effects and at least 20 total participants across studies; or (b) Meet at least 50% of criteria for two or more of the study designs described in (a); and (c) No methodologically sound studies conducted with negative effects and at least a 3:1 ratio of methodologically sound studies with positive effects to methodologically sound studies with neutral or mixed effects. For this item, CEC considers experimental, non-randomly assigned group comparison, and single-subject design studies collectively.

Classroom Communities

As stated in the purpose, a classroom is experienced as a community when its members (a) know, care about, and support one another, and (b) have the opportunity to participate actively in classroom decision-making, planning, and goal setting (Solomon et al., 1996).

Belonging

Goodenow (1993) defines belonging as students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. This component of autonomy and being respected as an individual aligns with the construct of relatedness by Deci & Ryan (1991). Including belonging as a measurable outcome is important because research suggests that students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school. These concepts of commitment and engagement are closely linked to student performance, and more importantly, to the quality of student learning (Osterman, 2000).

Rationale

The Ontario Ministry of Education is committed to equity and inclusion and encourages it through policies and resources, including *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario* (2014). The ministry recognizes that every student is unique and that each must have opportunities to achieve success according to his or her own interests, abilities, and goals. It also recognizes that among children and youth who are at risk of not succeeding are those with special education needs. To ensure that these students have every opportunity to succeed, the vision for special education in Ontario continues to be refined and, in the process, achievement gaps are being narrowed. The education priorities defined in *Achieving Excellence* are:

- Achieving excellence
- Ensuring equity

• Promoting well-being

• Enhancing public confidence

These four goals are fundamental to special education programs. The goal of ensuring equity is of significant importance because Ontario's diversity is one of the province's greatest assets. The fundamental principle driving this work is that every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physicality, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and intellectual ability. Ontario has come far in closing gaps for many learners, yet more work needs to be done for those students who struggle most.

The ministry document, *Special Education in Ontario, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Resource Guide* (2017) is designed to aid those committed to helping children in kindergarten to Grade 12 achieve their full potential in life. *Learning for All: A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (2013) reminds all educators of the need to consider the following guiding principles in their program planning:

•All students can succeed.

• Each student has their own unique patterns of learning.

• Successful instructional practices are founded on evidence-based research, tempered by experience.

• Universal design and differentiated instruction are effective, and interconnected means of meeting the learning or productivity needs of any group of students.

• Classroom teachers are the key educators for a student's literacy and numeracy development.

• Classroom teachers need the support of the larger community to create a learning environment that supports all students.

• Fairness is not sameness. (*Learning for All*, 2013, p. 7)

Learning for All (2013) describes educational approaches that are based on one of the most important findings of educational research since 2000, specifically, that all students learn best when instruction, resources, and the learning environment are well-suited to their strengths, interests, needs, and stage of readiness. This guide focuses on ways in which teachers and/or teams of educators can plan and provide the kind of assessment and instruction that enables all students to learn best. Three elements—personalization, precision, and professional learning—are critical to the process (Fullen et al., 2006).

In 2006, the Ontario Ministry of Education released *Special Education Transformation: The Report of the Co-Chairs with Recommendations of the Working Table on Special Education*. The report strongly reiterated the notion that the regular classroom should continue to be the placement of first choice for students with exceptionalities. However, placement in the regular classroom is not always the case for students with significant support needs. Several factors contribute to this, including stakeholders' beliefs that having students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom hinders the academic achievement of students without disabilities. Yet, this belief has been disproven with clear research indicating that students without disabilities educated in inclusive settings made significantly greater academic progress in both reading and mathematics than did students without disabilities in traditional classrooms (Cole et al., 2004) and that inclusive education benefits all learners (Staub & Peck, 1994) not just those with significant disabilities. Another contributing factor could be the educational assistants' role in the classroom and the fact that their impact on inclusion can be both positive and negative.

Ministry policies and research corroborates my own first-hand experience that when educators believe all students can succeed in the regular classroom and students with significant support needs receive the right amount of support from a collaboration of classroom teachers, special education teachers, educational assistants, and peers, it enhances the learning and sense of belonging for all learners in the classroom, while simultaneously improving overall student achievement. Educational assistants play a pivotal role in providing effective programs and services to students with special needs when they have the knowledge and are supported as valued members of the team. Unfortunately, educational assistants are often overlooked.

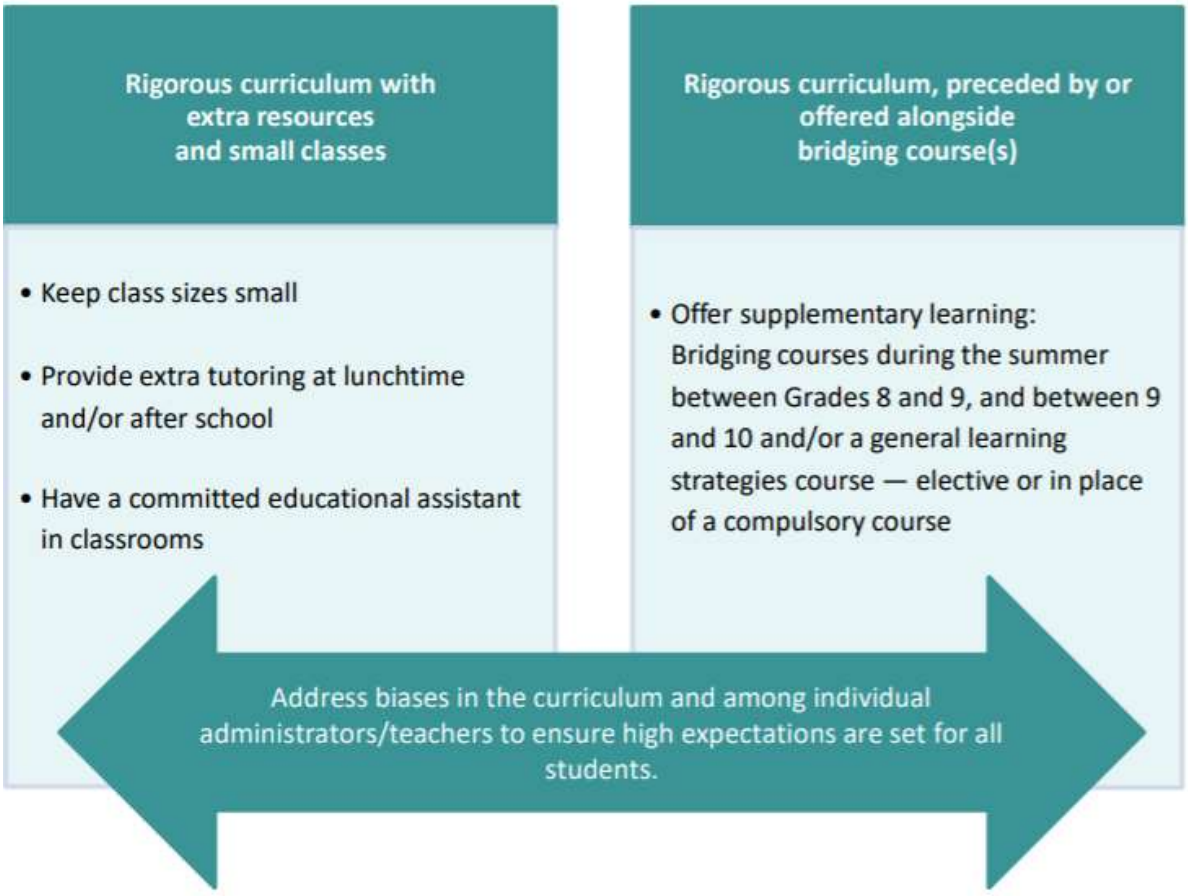
Special Education in Ontario (2017) outlines the roles and responsibilities in the delivery of special education, as defined roles and responsibilities are an essential part of delivering effective programs and services. The roles and responsibilities within special education are outlined in the Education Act, regulations, and policy documents, including policy and program memoranda. Roles are defined for the Ministry of Education, the school board, the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), the school principal, the teacher, the special education teacher, the early-childhood educator, the parent, and the student. Missing from this list of clearly defined roles is the educational assistant, which could be contributing to the confusion of what their role is and is not, what professional learning opportunities they require to be successful in their role and how to best to utilize their support in the classroom.

This M.Ed. project aims to fill the gap in limited resources for secondary school administrators who are committed to the goal of creating inclusive school communities by providing professional learning opportunities and support to educational assistants. This five-part video series and accompanying learning guides will provide the key understandings that

educational assistants need to enhance teaching, learning, and the inclusion of students with significant disabilities within secondary schools.

This resource comes at a pivotal time in education in Ontario as the province moves to de-stream Grade 9 Mathematics in September 2021. Up until June 2021, Ontario was the only Canadian province that separated youths into academic and applied streams as early as Grade 9—a practice that prevented some students from accessing post-secondary education. Researchers have pointed to the individual and systemic biases that have an effect on how students are separated into instructional groups, noting that racialized and lower-income students are disproportionately encouraged to pursue non-academic paths (Pichette, Deller & Colyar, 2020). This will also impact students with significant support needs who are integrated into regular math classrooms. Successful de-streaming will require changes to both the configuration and culture of learning in Ontario secondary schools.

De-streaming policies and plans should ensure all students have access to rigorous instruction along with extra resources and/or bridging courses. Stakeholder engagement and professional development, including anti-racism training for teachers, support staff and administrators, should be embraced to address individual and systemic biases that are known to affect expectations and lower achievement. For successful implementation, it will be important that students have adequate resources to support learning, a curriculum that is inclusive, and educators with unbiased beliefs. Pichette, Deller & Colyar (2020) proposed the following model for de-streaming in Ontario, which has identified having a committed educational assistant in classrooms as a key to successful de-streaming. This further supports the urgency and timeliness of this resource for secondary school administrators.



Pichette, J., Deller, F., & Colyar, J. (2020) Destreaming in Ontario: History, Evidence and Educator Reflections. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Method

Data for this resource was collected through a selection of scholarly articles and literature. A Summit search, a search engine that provides credible, relevance ranked results found in the Queen's University Library, plus millions of full-text articles, was conducted using keywords, such as, educational assistants, students' attitudes towards peers with disabilities, belonging, caring classroom communities and inclusion practices in the secondary classroom. A Google Scholar search was used to determine how many times each the article was cited in other works as one measure of the quality of the research. Inclusion criteria included research at the secondary level and within the Canadian context; however, due to limited research in this area similar research was considered. The Backwards Design model, developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005) was used to inform the structure and design of the resource, *Learning Guides for Secondary School Administrators Leading Inclusive Schools*. Learning goals were identified and developed first, along with identifying the knowledge and skills that educational assistants should have at the end of each session. The learning guide format was modelled after *Adolescent Literacy Guide: A Professional Learning Resource for Literacy Grades 7–12* (2016).

Overview of the Project

In this chapter, I introduced the topic and outline the rationale, purpose, and summary of the method for this M.Ed. project. In Chapter 2, I present the literature review that examines the importance of the role of the educational assistant and how they impact inclusion, how support is delivered, and how to support educational assistants in their role to support inclusion. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology and the process of how to improve the project. Chapter 4 presents the possible implications of the project and how it will contribute to building capacity of

administration and educational assistants in supporting inclusion in the secondary classroom; this section concludes with my final thoughts and reflections. Chapter 5 introduces the administrator resource, *Learning Guides for Secondary School Administrators Leading Inclusive Schools*.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The objective of this chapter is to provide the reader with an awareness of the current literature on how educational assistants support students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and multiple disabilities in inclusive classrooms, and why a training resource aimed at supporting educational assistants to implement research-based practices can be beneficial and effective. The first section will discuss the role of the educational assistant and how they impact inclusion. The second section examines the practice of assigning one-to-one educational assistant support to individual students, and alternatives. The third section provides a summary of the findings as they relate to what can be done to support educational assistants in their role to implement research-based strategies to support inclusion.

The Role of the Educational Assistant and Their Impact on Inclusion

An educational assistant, a valuable member of the special-education team, fulfills numerous functions throughout the school day and is an asset in the running of a smooth and effective inclusive classroom. The role of the educational assistant is outlined in the *Special Education in Ontario, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Resource Guide* (2017). The educational assistants' responsibilities include:

- helping students with learning activities under the direction and supervision of the teacher;
- assisting with providing appropriate accommodations as described in the IEP;
- monitoring and recording student achievements and progress relative to the expectations described in the IEP, under the direction and supervision of the teacher;

• maintaining ongoing communication with the appropriate teacher(s). (*Special Education in Ontario, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Resource Guide*, 2017, p. E76)

Educational assistants work with students individually and in groups. Their responsibilities include helping students with lessons to assisting with personal hygiene or behavioural modification. The responsibilities of educational assistants are multifaceted, and it is not surprising that research suggests that there is confusion among the various stakeholders regarding the role of educational assistants in schools. In a qualitative study, Angelides, Constantinou, and Leigh (2009) observed that some teachers passed their pedagogical role to educational assistants, and some considered that all responsibilities for the children accompanied by educational an assistant was exclusively the responsibility of that educational assistant.

Educational Assistants' Impact on Inclusion

The role of the educational assistant has an impact on inclusive education. Angelides et al. (2009) observed educational assistants in some incidences significantly helping in the provision of more inclusive education. In some others, however, they discovered that the educational assistant's role reduced inclusion and reinforced the exclusion of students who were accompanied by educational assistants. Their findings showed that educational assistants had a contradictory contribution to inclusive education: inclusion and exclusion were two parallel processes in classroom practice (Angelides et al., 2009).

When Educational-Assistant Support Enhances Inclusion

Effective educational support plays a valued and supportive role in schools for students with and without disabilities (Angelides et al., 2009). An educational assistant's presence is important in the classroom and may contribute to the increase of participation of students in the learning process, which may, in turn, enhance inclusion. Educational assistants help students to focus on tasks through continual encouragement and facilitate student involvement in more activities (Angelides et al., 2009) their presence in the classroom had a positive impact on the improvement of student behaviour, which led to the development of better relationships with their classmates (Angelides et al., 2009). Educational assistants provide valuable social support to students. Jamieson et al., (2009) looked at the importance of friendship for adolescents with physical disabilities and determined that schools can help adolescents with physical disabilities and their peers learn to create social accessibility. This is an area where support from an educational assistant can help create educational opportunities that increase the understanding of disabilities among those without disabilities. Angelides et al. (2009) observed that educational assistants encouraged other children to befriend children with special needs. Teachers and parents of students with a disability reported that the contributions of educational assistants encouraged and aided the development and improvement of the motor abilities of students. This improvement aided students in socialization since they could follow their schoolmates during breaks and could better carry out the classroom activities (Angelides et al., 2009). Another point that seemed to be encouraged by educational assistants (which is related to the promotion of inclusive education), was that the support of educational assistants seemed to raise the standards for all students. Very often the educational assistants seemed to function as social workers or behaviour managers, and this gave the chance for teachers to teach the whole class more

smoothly and without interruptions (Angelides, et al. 2009). Angelides et al. (2009) observed that educational assistants were not limited to only the students they accompanied but that whenever they considered it appropriate, they intervened with other students as well. Giangreco et al. (2001) found that classroom teachers tended to be more engaged with their students with disabilities—a critical feature necessary for inclusion—when educational assistants were assigned to their classrooms rather than to an individual student. In addition, these same teachers were more likely to work more collaboratively with classroom-based educational assistants than those assigned to an individual student.

When Educational-Assistant Support is a Barrier to Inclusion

Angelides et al.'s (2009) data indicated that at times, even the well-intentioned, thoughtfully considered and purposeful behaviour of educational assistants acted as a barrier to the promotion of inclusion. Giangreco (2010) identified a host of inadvertent detrimental effects that the over-reliance on educational assistants can have, such as unhealthy dependency, stigmatization, interference with teacher engagement, and interference with peer interactions. Giangreco (2010) encouraged the field of special education to ensure that well-intended supports do not inadvertently restrict opportunities for students with disabilities or otherwise interfere with them receiving their education in the least restrictive environment. Providing "too much support" is a concern reported by teachers, educational assistants, and students, as it creates dependence on the educational assistant. Angelides et al. (2009) observed educational assistants intervening in students' work by refining or completing it, thus creating a wrong impression of the students' level of learning and ability. In many incidences, the over-involvement of the educational assistants seemed to reduce the interactions of the students with their teacher and

classmates. Tews and Lupart's (2008) study highlights a students' perspective: "my EA always did things for me, things I had done myself before. At first it was fun so I did not have to work, but then I realized she didn't think I could do these things and then I would get mad at her" (p. 42). Another concern that emerged from the research is that in many instances students accompanied by an educational assistant are in continuous contact with them, not only during lessons but also during breaks, and as a result, students rarely interacted with their schoolmates or their teachers (Angelides et al., 2009). Angelides et al. (2009) observed that when an educational assistant was present, communication between student and teacher was often mediated through the educational assistant. In some instances, they observed the students during breaks "hanging around" with educational assistants in locations that suited the educational assistant, for example close to the staff room away from their schoolmates (Angelides et al., 2009). Class time is a factor that influences inclusion as well. The findings of Feldman et al. (2016) suggest that students were not present for a substantial portion of the classes in which they were enrolled, and they were in limited proximity to classmates without disabilities when they were present (Feldman et al., 2016). The data indicated a pattern in which fewer students were present toward the beginning and end of these class periods. Almost half of the observed classes involved students who left class before the final bell. This resulted in students missing valuable instructional time as well as opportunities to interact with classmates (Feldman et al., 2016). This could have been a missed opportunity since conversations among peers, particularly social-related interactions, often happen shortly after class begins and just before the final bell rings: times when a large number of students with severe disabilities are not present. Students must be both present and in proximity to peers as prerequisites to fostering peer interactions and shared learning.

One-to-One Educational Assistant Support and Alternatives

Giangreco (2010) suggests that many educational team members view the assignment of one-to-one educational assistants as a desirable and supportive action, and he suggests that this could be wrong. Insufficient data is available regarding one-to-one supports to guide policy and practice (Giangreco, 2010). Suter and Giangreco (2009) determined that the advocacy rationale for assigning one-to-one educational assistants spanned a variety of reasons. The most commonly cited reason was instructional support, which was reported in more than 87% of the cases. This was followed by: (a) behaviour supports, (b) student safety, (c) communication support, (d) personal care support, (e) safety of others, and (f) other unspecified supports. The overreliance on educational assistants is conceptually flawed because there is no strong conceptual or theoretical basis for assigning the least qualified, lowest paid, often inadequately supervised staff, namely educational assistants, to provide the bulk of instruction for students with the most complex learning characteristics. This practice is a cause for concern because according to the *Ontario Education Act*, Regulation 298, teachers are responsible for effective instruction, training, and evaluation of the progress of pupils. The restrictive nature of this and potential detrimental effects suggest that schools should explore alternates to the over-reliance on one-to-one educational assistant supports.

Alternatives

When considering alternatives to the traditional one-to-one educational-assistant support model, it is important to remember that the goal is not to reduce the number of educational assistants, but rather to ensure appropriate educational supports for all students (Giangreco, 2013). One-to-one educational assistant support should be among the last resorts considered

rather than a first or only option. Giangreco (2010) suggests that prior to considering the use of a one-to-one educational assistant, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams should consider what other actions might allow a student with a disability to make meaningful progress in the general education classroom. A combination of possibilities can be considered, such as, assistive technology, the use of existing school-wide supports, having an educational assistant assigned to a class rather than an individual student, as well as positive behaviour and peer supports. If the assignment of a one-to-one educational assistant is determined by the IEP team to be the best option, it should be closely monitored, and efforts should be made to minimize potential consequences (Giangreco, 2010). For example, creating detailed plans to fade educational assistant support during parts of the day where it is possible to do so, can be accomplished through a combination of student skill development and alternative supports.

Shared Support

Educational assistants can have a direct influence on the extent to which the students they support with severe disabilities ultimately learn alongside their peers without disabilities in inclusive settings. We know that when educational assistants are present in classrooms, they raise the standards of all students (Angelides et al., 2009) and when they are assigned to classrooms rather than to an individual student, classroom teachers tended to be more engaged with their students with disabilities. In addition, these same teachers were more likely to work more collaboratively with classroom-based educational assistants than those assigned to an individual student (Giangreco et al., 2001). These are valid arguments to support the practice of assigning educational assistants to classrooms as a means to share support and enhance inclusion.

Natural Support and Peer Support

Peer interactions and relationships are so critical to school success and individual well-being and can be elusive for many students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and multiple disabilities (Carter, 2018). Schools are important contexts for the development of friendships, especially the premise that inclusion polices regarding the relationships that adolescents with disabilities form with typical peers will be similar to those formed between typical youth (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000). Friendship boosts happiness and reduces stress. It improves self-confidence and self-worth. Jamieson et al. (2009) identify three themes of friendship for students with physical disabilities: (a) willingness to embrace opportunities by making the effort with peers or creating social accessibility; (b) shared interests and reciprocal relationships; and (c) physical accessibility. These issues can be addressed at school when, in cooperation with teachers and occupational therapists, educational assistants can create educational opportunities that increase the understanding of disability among those without disability, and they can create structured extracurricular activities and other opportunities in school for adolescents with and without disabilities to learn about each other's interests, hobbies, skills, and accomplishments, and share common interests to promote friendships. Educational assistants can assist students with creating social accessibility. This could be described as facilitating naturally occurring support within the classroom by the educational assistant.

Peer supports can be seen as an alternative to individually assigned educational assistants in inclusive secondary school classrooms. Peer support arrangements involve one or more peers without disabilities providing ongoing social and academic support to classmates with disabilities in regular classrooms. An educational assistant facilitates the peer support arrangement by inviting one or more peers to provide support to a student with a severe

disability, orienting peers to their new roles, and identifying specific ways they might provide needed supports. Peers might provide support in a variety of ways depending on the characteristic of the student with a disability and the activities taking place within the classroom. Examples of common peer roles include encouraging a student to ask questions or contribute to class discussions, scribing verbal answers or responses provided through augmentative and alternative communication, supporting involvement in small-group activities, and summarizing key ideas from lectures. As students gain confidence working together, educational assistants shift to a facilitative role by coaching, supervising, and providing feedback to peers who provide support (Carter et al., 2011). As emphasized elsewhere in the literature (Giangreco, 2010), any educational-assistant-implemented support strategy, including peer support arrangements, should be supplemental to primary instruction as all of which must be closely supervised by highly qualified teachers. In a study by Carter et al. (2007), social interaction outcomes for students with complex needs were substantially higher when working with a peer support relative to working with an educational assistant. Researchers found that the peer interactions of participants with severe disabilities increased when students received additional and ongoing support from a classmate rather than exclusively from an educational assistant or special educator (Carter et al., 2007). This study replicates and extends previous research indicating that peer support arrangements do not diminish the academic engagement of students with moderate to severe disabilities within the general curriculum. Such intervention arrangements appear to support engagement in ongoing instruction at least as well as individually assigned educational assistant support models. This research suggests that educational assistants should assume a broader role within inclusive classrooms, they should not be misinterpreted to suggest that educational assistants are no longer needed or that they necessarily hinder peer interaction and

learning (Carter et al., 2007). This line of research has produced strong evidence that peer support arrangements promote better social outcomes in inclusive classrooms relative to one-to-one educational assistant support and suggests that academic engagement may maintain or increase.

Summary and Supporting Educational Assistants in Their Role

Calling for a rethink of how educational assistant support is utilized in inclusive secondary schools in Ontario is long overdue. Educational assistants can be found in almost every school and have the potential to create the conditions, as cited in *Achieving Excellence* (2014), "Where students will feel free to dream about their futures, where they are able to connect their passions with possible career options, and where the opportunities and resources needed to support these decisions are provided" (p. 1).

To support educational assistants in their role, it is imperative that all stakeholders clearly understand the boundaries of the role. Giangreco et al. (2012) explained that this happens when school leaders ensure that educational assistants: (a) engage in appropriate roles; (b) are sufficiently trained and continually trained for the appropriate roles they are asked to undertake; (c) are explicitly asked not to undertake inappropriate roles; and (d) are adequately supervised on an ongoing basis to ensure fidelity of instruction and other supports. An issue that must be addressed and for the field to pursue, is the fact that students with disabilities who are placed in inclusive classrooms deserve and should receive the bulk of their primary instruction from an individually determined combination of highly qualified teachers, special educators, and if needed, related service providers (Suter and Giangreco, 2009). Simultaneously, non-instructional roles for educational assistants should be acknowledged and valued as important contributions to

inclusive education. When educational assistants engage in non-instructional duties, they often create time and opportunities for teachers and special educators to work directly with their students who have disabilities or to collaborate with each other. By valuing duties such as assisting students with personal care and delivering them in caring and respectful ways, we affirm the dignity of students with severe disabilities and challenge the unhelpful culture of hierarchies among educational assistants where instructional roles are valued and non-instructional roles are devalued (Giangreco, 2010).

Of all the team members, those least likely to have a voice in decisions about the need for educational support are those who are most affected by these decisions, namely, students with disabilities. The perspective of students with disabilities concerning the role of educational assistants are markedly absent from the literature on educational assistant support. From what we do know, some students see educational assistants as a parent figure, friend, protector from bullying, and their primary teacher (Suter et al., 2009). These findings are concerning and suggest that further exploration in how to increase teacher engagement and determine the social appropriateness of educational assistant supports. They also underscore the need to listen to students with complex needs and encourage them to make and communicate decisions about the support they require. Parental voice is another area that is limited in the research. In the People for Education Report, *If Inclusion Means Everyone, Why Not Me?* (2018)—which is aimed at targeting parents or guardians of school-aged children labeled with an intellectual disability in Ontario to identify barriers to inclusion—concluded that "32% of parents reported that their child did not have access to additional support staff when it was needed" (e.g., educational assistants). This warrants further exploration, since it is unclear if parents understand the role of the educational assistant and its implications to the inclusion of their child. Tews and Lupart (2008)

found that educational assistant supports influence peer relationships, student autonomy, school inclusion, and the responsibilities of teachers, and most importantly, that those influences can be both positive and negative.

In the review of literature, *Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools: A Review of Recent Research*, Giangreco et al. (2010) identified the need to explore alternatives to reliance on educational assistants as an area of study. The authors encouraged the field to avoid the temptation of assuming that the best way to support students with disabilities in a general education classroom is to assign an educational assistant. Giangreco and Broer (2007) field-tested a screening tool to help schools plan alternatives to overreliance on educational assistants, since over 80% of the schools reported that educational assistants were viewed as "*the way,*" rather than "*a way,"* to support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Evidence-based strategies, such as peer support arrangements, offer a particularly promising approach for supporting students with complex needs within inclusive secondary school classrooms. Such interventions shift educational assistants away from one-on-one support roles and involve peers in actively providing some of the supports students need to remain academically and socially engaged through the class period. Giangreco (2013) suggest alternatives to overreliance on teacher assistants by examining the following: resource allocation, co-teaching, building capacity of teachers, paperwork assistants, peer supports, self-determination, fading plans, and improving working conditions for special educators and classroom teachers, teacher assistant pools, and dual-certified teachers.

Looking towards the future and how educational-assistant support can enhance the inclusion and outcomes for students with complex needs points to training educational assistants to use evidence-based strategies. Descriptive studies suggest that without strong training,

educational assistant support does not appear to improve the learning outcomes of students with disabilities and may hinder them (Giangreco et al., 2010). For example, untrained educational assistant support in inclusive settings may limit opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with peers and classroom teachers (Giangreco et al., 2001; Malmgren and Causton-Theoharis, 2006). Tews, and Lupart (2008) suggest that several considerations should be weighed in the creation of a plan to increase the use of educational assistants working with students with special needs. First, it is important to enlist the assistance of peers not only to promote social interaction, but because peer-mediated interventions have been empirically supported in the literature as positive influences. Secondly, given the potential adverse effects of one-on-one educational assistant support without adequate supervision and direction, Tews and Lupart, (2008) consider using a system of educational-assistant assignments in which program-based educational assistants provide assistance to a variety of students with special needs on a rotating basis to avoid the autonomy of the educational assistant–student dyad (shared support), to deter dependency and promote student autonomy.

Research shows that educational assistants can effectively implement evidence-based practices with reliability. Brock and Carter (2015) conducted the first randomized controlled trial study showing that when providing effective training, educational assistants can implement an evidence-based practice, such as peer support arrangements with high fidelity. However, most educational assistants are not provided training in evidence-based instructional strategies. Brock and Carter (2015) researched the effects of a professional development package, to teach students with disabilities new skills and to promote their independence and to prepare educational assistants to implement evidence-based practices. Researchers used video modelling and coaching components in the training package and determined both were effective. This is the

first randomized controlled trial study showing that when provided effective training, educational assistants can implement an evidence-based practice with high fidelity. A video modelling with abbreviated coaching training package is different from a stand-alone training workshop, in that it directly targets generalization of instructional strategies to the classroom. The most powerful component of the training package was the one-to-one coaching with performance feedback which involved observing the performance of educational assistants for specific instructional behaviours, and then providing focused support on areas of implementation needing improvement. Findings from this study and previous studies show that educational assistants partially or inconsistently implemented evidence-based strategies before receiving focused professional development. By collecting data on implementation fidelity, the coach was able to directly target these specific errors. The researchers found that given effective training, educational assistants can implement an evidence-based practice with high fidelity.

Peer support arrangements are a promising strategy to promote inclusion in general-education classrooms. In this single-case design study, four special-education teachers trained and supported four educational assistants to implement peer support arrangements through delivery of a professional development package consisting of an initial orientation, video modelling, and brief coaching with performance feedback. Teachers implemented the professional development accurately, educational assistants implemented peer support arrangements with fidelity, and three of the four middle-school students with severe disabilities increased their social interactions with peers while maintaining previous levels of academic engagement. Findings from this study show peer support arrangements implemented by educational assistants can improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Implications for practice suggest that simply seating students with severe disabilities next to students without

disabilities, without intentionally planning and facilitating, was not enough to ensure that students interacted on a regular basis.

Through this literature review it is evident that educational assistants play an important role in serving students with disabilities. However, there is a need to provide them with professional learning opportunities, because most lack training in implementing evidence-based practices. Given the paucity of research to support the use of stand-alone training workshops, a video series accompanied by a learning guide aimed to support educational assistants in implementing evidence-based strategies to support student success and provide an opportunity for them to reflect on their learning has been developed. This resource package will expand the body of resources which are currently available to support educational assistants in their role in inclusive secondary classrooms in Ontario.

Conclusion

When educational communities embrace the challenge to rethink how educational-assistant support is being used to create inclusive learning environments and opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and multiple disabilities, efforts will undoubtedly create better schools for all students. Educational-assistant support can be "*a way*" of removing barriers for teachers and students alike. The research is clear: evidence-based strategies enhance students' academic and social outcomes and educational assistants can effectively implement these strategies. If we believe that educational assistants play an important role, we need to make the necessary changes and support them in the tasks with which they are charged, such as supporting teachers to ensure that secondary school students with severe disabilities fully access the academic curriculum and benefits available within the regular classroom.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology used to collect and analyze data that provided the foundation for this M.Ed. project. In order to create learning guides for secondary school administrators who are committed to creating inclusive classrooms by providing professional learning rooted in research to educational assistants, data was collected through scholarly documents, policies, and resources developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education. This chapter explains how and why research articles were selected for this project and encompasses the findings that influenced the project. The findings were used to inform the topics, key understandings, questions for discussions, and suggested resources for the learning guides. Theorists such as Maslow (1962) and Deci & Ryan (1991) suggest there is a link between an individuals' psychological needs for social connection and their motivation and achievement. Deci & Ryan (1991) refer to "relatedness" or connections with others as one of the core foundations of motivation; it is this theoretical framework that was used to interpret the findings and support the deductive analysis of the compiled data.

Document Selection

To gain a more in-depth understanding of how educational assistants currently support students with intellectual disabilities, autism, and multiple disabilities in an inclusive classroom and how to best provide them with support and resources, a list of questions was generated and the type of secondary data that could be collected to achieve the aim was identified. Sample questions that were generated included: What is an inclusive classroom? who has the most influence on the culture of a school? what are the skills, attributes, and knowledge required by educators, including educational assistants, to effectively work in inclusive classrooms? what are

the responsibilities of the educational assistant? In his research, Loreman (2013) determined that the effectiveness of an inclusive system needs to be measured at three levels: *inputs*—everything provided to the system to achieve inclusion, *process*—practices in schools and classrooms that provide outcomes, and *outcomes*—results of the inputs and processes. This is consistent with the European Approach[1] (Kyriazopoulou & Weber, 2009) and the framework that was used to organize the data. Fifty-five scholarly articles, books, and Ontario Ministry of Education documents were collected, reviewed, analysed, and categorized using each level of Loreman's (2013) model: inputs, process, and outcomes. By examining each level, the intention was that it would help determine the effectiveness and areas of concern (Kyriazopoulou & Weber, 2009) and what needed to be explored in the project. Using his research, Loreman (2013) identified and described the following potential outcomes for each component and theme (Table 1): Table 1: Potential outcomes for each component and theme (Loreman, 2013).

Potential outcomes from component one (*inputs*)	
Theme one	Policy
Theme two	Staff professional development and teacher education
Theme three	Resources and finances
Theme four	Leadership
Theme five	Curriculum
Potential outcomes from component two (*processes*)	

[1] European Approach: The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education is an independent organisation that acts as a platform for collaboration for the ministries of education in 31 member countries. Their work focuses on supporting the development of inclusive education systems to ensure every learner's right to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities. This enhances learners' life chances and possibilities for actively participating in society. The Agency member countries shared ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers.

Theme one	Climate
Theme two	School processes
Theme three	Classroom processes
Theme four	Collaboration and shared responsibility
Theme five	Supports to individuals
Potential outcomes from component three (*outcomes*)	
Theme one	Participation
Theme two	Student Achievement
Theme three	Post-school outcomes

A Summit search (a search engine that provides credible, relevance-ranked results found in the Queen's University Library, plus millions of full-text articles) was conducted using keywords such as, inclusion, inclusive secondary school classrooms, educational assistants, paraprofessionals, evidence-based practices in inclusive classrooms, inclusive school leadership, and special education secondary school and student achievement. A Google Scholar search was used to determine how many times an article was cited in other works as one measure of the quality of the research. Inclusion criteria included research at the secondary level and within the Canadian context, however, due to limited research in this area, similar research was considered.

Each article was analyzed and categorized using Loreman's (2013) three levels to measure inclusion: *inputs*—everything provided to the system to achieve inclusion, *process*—practices in schools and classrooms that provide outcomes, and *outcomes*—results of the inputs

and processes. Themes and patterns were then identified for each article. The themes and patterns were used to: determine the topics of the project's learning guides, identify the key understandings, generate discussion questions, and suggest resources.

Summary of Findings

The findings from the research articles, books, and Ontario Ministry of Education policies and documents showed there is limited research on the role of the educational assistant and the impact they have on student engagement, achievement, and inclusion of students with special needs. At the time of this research, resources for school administrators or school leaders on how to utilize educational assistant support in the inclusive classroom was limited, highlighting the relevancy of this project. Using a framework that measures inclusion (Loreman, 2013) to categorize data, it contributed to better understanding the role of the principal and educational assistants in fostering inclusive classrooms and providing knowledge on how to effectively facilitate the process to achieve the desired outcome for students with special education needs: participation, academic achievement and positive post-secondary school outcomes. The levels used to categorize the data were designed to evaluate inclusive practices, however, they were a good fit to determine what was critical to include in this project. Table 2 provides an overview of the literature findings.

Table 2: Summary of Research Analyzed using Measures of Inclusion to Inform the M.Ed. Project

Measures of Inclusion	Number of Literature Articles/ Books/Documents	Summarized Key Points	Section found within the Learning Guides
Inputs: everything provided to the system to achieve inclusion	26	• The Ontario Ministry of Education has a number of policies to achieve inclusion • Staff professional development and teacher education is limited • Resources to support professional learning must be in place; resources to provide the appropriate educational assistant support must be in place • Leadership has the greatest impact on inclusive practices and school culture • Ontario curriculum refers to Universal Design for Learning and differentiated instruction to achieve learning for all in inclusive classrooms	Learning Guide 1: Educational Assistants as Game Changers
Process: practices in schools and classrooms that provide outcomes	16	• School climate impacts the effectiveness of inclusive practices • School process is best if made explicit • Classroom process is best if made explicit • Collaboration and shared responsibility of all students has a positive impact on inclusion and student achievement • Supports to individuals must be "just right"	Learning Guide 2: Connecting with all Learners Learning Guide 3: Shared Support as a Pathway to the Future Learning Guide 4: You've Got a Friend in Me: Peer Support Learning Guide 5: Building Your Tool Kit with Evidence-Based Strategies
Outcomes: results of the inputs and processes	13	• Participation in professional development related to inclusion has a positive impact on participants • Limited research on the effectiveness of	Reflection

		collaborative school teams, including classroom teacher and educational assistant professional leaning • Student achievement improves in inclusive classrooms for all students • Limited data on post-school outcomes	

Using Loreman's (2013) framework to measure inclusion to categorize research has limitations. Loreman (2013) suggested that potential key outcomes must be subjected to scrutiny by a team of professionals to ensure the gap between academic research and practice can be addressed. This project's goal is to address this gap by bringing research-based practices to the centre of discussions and learning. The research exposes that there exists policy regarding inclusion but there is work to be done on how to implement policy in classrooms and schools, and further research needs to be done on the outcomes of student achievement, belonging, and quality of life beyond secondary school.

Five clear themes emerged from the reviewed research, which informed the topics for the video series and learning guides:

1. Learning Guide 1: Educational Assistants as Game Changers.

2. Learning Guide 2: Connecting with all Learners.

3. Learning Guide 3: Shared Support as a Pathway to the Future.

4. Learning Guide 4: You've Got a Friend in Me: Peer Support.

5. Learning Guide 5: Building Your Tool Kit with Research-Based Strategies.

Using the Backwards Design model (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005), the research that was used to theme and categorize the topics of the learning guides was further analyzed to identify the key understandings for each topic. Research from each category was then selected to inform,

highlight, challenge, and cause reflection for participants and was included in the corresponding learning guide. Using the key understandings and relevant research, discussion questions were formulated with the goal to generate open and collaborative conversations between the school principal and educational assistants. As a consolidation of learning, each learning guide concludes with a "pulling it all together" section; thinking prompts and reflection questions designed to be completed individually by participating educational assistants. Each learning guide includes hyperlinks to research and resources to further support learning and implementation.

Chapter 4 Discussion and Reflection

In this chapter, I begin by reflecting on my learning that resulted from developing this project. I will highlight my intentions for this project and conclude with my final thoughts regarding the completing of this project.

Discussion

The research is clear: inclusive education benefits all learners. Why then are children in publicly funded schools in Ontario still being educated in specialized classrooms? My personal knowledge, education, and professional experience tells me that the answer lies in the "say-do gap". We see this in the definition of inclusive education, which says:

- All children attend their neighbouring school.
- School districts have a "zero-rejection" policy when it comes to registering and teaching children in their region.
- All children are welcomed and valued.

- All children learn in regular, heterogeneous classrooms with same age peers
- All children follow substantively similar programs of study, with a curriculum that can be adapted and modified if needed. Modes of instruction are varied and responsive to the needs of all.
- All children contribute to regular school and classroom learning activities and events.
- All children are supported to make friends and be socially successful with their peers.
- Adequate resources and staff training are provided within the school and district to support inclusion (Salamanca Statement, 1994, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, Article 24, 2006, definition, as summarized by Loreman, 2013).

However, compliance with this definition of inclusive education is not a widespread practice in Ontario. This illustrates a say-do gap[2] and is what led me to pursue a project to address this issue to support school administrators like me who are committed to leading truly inclusive schools.

Research has shown that the role of the school principal is pivotal for promoting inclusive school cultures (Riehl, 2000). With over a decade of school leadership experience, I have seen first-hand that when a leader models their commitment to creating an inclusive school environment, through their words and actions, it becomes important to the entire school community. This extends beyond teachers and students to support staff, community partners, and families.

In the beginning of my school leadership journey, I made promoting inclusive education practices a priority. Earlier, as a classroom teacher I often reflected on how underutilized the role

[2] Say-do gap: Refers to the discrepancy between what we say we will do and what we actually do in practice.

of the educational assistant and peers were and dreamed about the possibilities that a shift in thinking could have on the belonging and achievement of students with special needs in the regular classroom. As a new vice principal, I made a commitment to focus on the role of the educational assistant as a way to foster inclusion and improve student outcomes. I set out to ensure that they felt valued, had access to quality professional learning, were consulted in the planning for the students they supported, and had the conditions in place to work collaboratively with the classroom teacher. This commitment has been a "game changer" for me as a leader, for the school staff I lead, and the overall sense of belonging and student achievement of all students.

Classroom Teacher

The classroom teacher's role is crucial to creating a sense of belonging, a classroom community, and inclusion. Inclusive education calls for the regular classroom teacher to take responsibility of all students (Bunch & Valeo, 2004) and this can be a challenge for secondary schools when students are transitioning from class-to-class. Student and teacher attitudes and perceptions were significantly related to teachers' attitudes and perceptions of the overall school climate (Solomon et al., 1990). Basically, if a teacher accepts a student with a disability, typical students would also be accepting. Typical students learn their behaviour through observation and imitation of peers, and through referencing authority figures (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). This is also known as social referencing theory, which suggests that one gains information about social settings from a familiar, trusted person. What I learned through researching and preparing for this project is that educational assistants are also critical to creating inclusive classroom communities, however, this is less studied. Educational assistants, when utilized effectively, act

as an extension of the teacher to model respect, care, how to ask for help, and how to offer help by providing shared support to all students.

Peer Attitudes

Adolescence can be a very challenging time for most youth, which is a developmental stage when peers become an important influence, and how one is perceived and accepted matters. Like students without disabilities, those with disabilities benefit from inclusive programs which increase their acceptance and understanding of others (Duhaney et al, 1999). As deBoer et al., (2012) suggests, positive attitudes of peers are important for successful social outcomes of inclusive education. Students in inclusive settings realized and accepted that they have some responsibility for supporting their peers with disabilities to do well socially and academically (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). All students in the inclusive secondary school indicated that they would advocate directly or would report to school officials were they to witness abusive behaviour, in comparison to the high number of students from the specialized special education system who reported that they would choose to ignore and walk away in the face of abuse by typical peers. (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). An educational assistant, when trained on how to implement evidence-based practices, can support classrooms on how to best provide peer support to one another, which has a positive impact on peer attitudes in the classroom and outside the classroom (Carter, 2018).

Importance of Belonging

Goodenow (1993) defines belonging as a student's sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting, and

seeing oneself as an important part of the life and activity of the class. This component of autonomy and being respected as an individual aligns with the construct of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1991). The increased significance of friends during adolescence is well documented and suggests that early adolescents may derive much of their academic motivation from the perceived sportiveness of others in the school environment. It is important to identify students who have a low sense of acceptance and belonging in academic classes and make special efforts to ensure that they are included and help them develop social skills. I have learned that educational assistants can help address this gap by inspiring the adolescent student's voice and encouraging peer relationships among students themselves within the classroom. Educational assistants can support the development of all students in the classroom by sharing and implementing research about inclusive education, belonging, and classroom communities, along with providing programming support to the classroom teacher and academic support to students who require it regardless of their diagnosis.

Intentions

I have three intentions on how I will use the resource, *Learning Guides for Secondary School Administrators Leading Inclusive Schools*: (1) to use this project as a guide and as a transition tool to a new school; (2) to share with the vice principals I have mentored and the administrators in my learning community; and (3) to share with our district's special education principal and superintendent.

Effective September 2021, I will be the new principal of a secondary school in rural Eastern Ontario, with an enrollment of 422 students in Grades 9–12. The school has a team of seven educational assistants who support students with significant disabilities in regular classes,

in locally developed classes, and in a resource room. My intention is to use the learning guides during weekly educational team meetings to provide professional learning that will foster inclusion and improve student well-being and achievement. The impact of the learning guides will be assessed through the triangulation of data: observation, conversations, and student work.

Learning Guides for Secondary School Administrators Leading Inclusive Schools will be shared with the vice principals I have mentored and the principals in my professional learning community. They will be encouraged to use the resource when providing professional learning to their educational assistants. Opportunities for reflection on the outcome of the sessions will be provided during informal conversations and during professional learning community meetings.

This project will be shared with our district's special education principal and superintendent. It is my hope that it will be shared throughout our district as a resource for all administrators leading inclusive school communities. There is a lack of resources for administrators who are interested in learning alongside their educational assistants, and often systemwide training focusses solely on Special Education Teachers and Administrators. It would be encouraging to see educational assistants being recognized and valued members of the student support team, included in system-wide professional learning and involved in each student's Individual Educational Plan development and consultation.

Final Thoughts

This project has allowed me to create a resource that directly aligns with my fundamental belief that public education must be inclusive, equitable, and accessible to all students. It speaks to how critical it is for educators to collaborate, be provided with relevant, engaging, and research-based professional learning opportunities, and be afforded the resources to support

students with significant support needs in the regular classroom. My personal experiences, education, and professional practice confirms the research that inclusive education improves the outcome for all students, which in turn benefits us all.

The time to make equity and inclusion a reality in publicly funded schools in Ontario is now. In September 2021, the province is de-streaming Grade 9 Mathematics as a concrete way to provide equitable outcomes for all students, specifically for students who are marginalized due to their race and special needs. I am hopeful that we will see de-streaming happen across all subject areas, for all Grade 9 and 10 students, and that we will see a renewed commitment to end the practice of segregating students based on their disabilities and that school boards will be required to have fully inclusive schools. This will require a change to funding priorities, how resources are allocated, and education for all stakeholders, and above all, policy changes.

To add to the importance and timeliness of this research, currently in Canada our priority of the reconciliation of the treatment of Indigenous peoples is at the forefront of our minds. *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report Calls to Action* (2015) speaks to education and the need to build student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. Gay (2000) and Villegas and Lucas (2002) use the terms "Culturally Responsive Teaching" or "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy" to describe teaching that recognizes the fact that all students learn differently and that these differences may be connected to background, language, family structure, and social or cultural identity. Theorists and practitioners of culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledge the "cultural uniqueness" of each student; they intentionally nurture it in order to create and facilitate effective conditions for learning (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). One could argue that this can only be achieved in an inclusive classroom and inclusive school community.

In conclusion, the educational assistant plays an important role in the inclusion of students with significant special needs in the secondary school classroom as part of a collaborative school team. Students with exceptionalities often present with complex learning, behavioural, and or physical needs. Planning and implementing programming work best when done collaboratively and includes the student. Through the use of *Learning Guides for Secondary School Administrators Leading Inclusive Schools* school principals will be able to provide professional learning to educational assistants providing support in inclusive classrooms. The research is clear: inclusive education benefits all learners, and my personal knowledge, education, and professional experience tells me that the answer lies in the say-do gap. Doing is an action which, in this case, begins with the school leader who can make inclusion a reality for all students.

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Chapter 5 The Project

LEARNING GUIDES FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS LEADING INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

FOCUS: EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS

Introduction

"Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone."

George Dei, Ontario Ministry of Education,
Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy, 2009

Learning Guides for Secondary School Administrators Leading Inclusive Schools is a five-part video series with accompanying learning guides designed for use by administrators who lead professional development with educational assistants to enhance teaching, support learning, and foster the inclusion of students with significant support needs, such as, developmental disability, autism, and multiple disabilities, within Ontario Secondary School classrooms.

Each professional learning session is approximately 30–45 minutes in length. Each session begins with a short video clip to engage participants by activating their prior knowledge. During the session, information and research is introduced, and participants are asked to reflect on their current practice and new learning through discussion questions. Linked resources are provided to enhance the discussion and present alternate perspectives. Each session concludes with "Pulling it all Together" as a way to consolidate ideas and is designed to be completed by participants autonomously. Sessions can be done in succession or independently. It is suggested that the administrator facilitating the professional learning session review the linked resources prior to getting started to prepare for the discussion. It is recommended that the facilitator documents relevant conversation topics, quotes, wonderings, and moments of insights to collect evidence of learning throughout the five-part series.

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Key Terms

Differentiated Instruction

Adapting instruction and assessment in response to differing student interests, learning preferences, and readiness in order to promote growth in learning. It is not individualized instruction; it is responding to varying student strengths and needs by providing a balance of modelled, shared, guided, and independent instructional strategies.[3]

Diversity

The presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.[4]

Equity

A condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences.[5]

Evidence-Based Practice

Skills, techniques, and strategies that have been proven to work through experimental research studies or large-scale research field studies. These practices are shown to have a positive effect on student outcomes. Multiple high-quality studies have been conducted and reviewed by a reputable source.[6]

Fading Support

Systematically reducing the type and level of support given to a student. Fading support can reduce the negative impact of adult support and allow for more natural supports to occur. The research in fading support is clear. Invasive adult support has had inadvertent detrimental effects on students with disabilities.[7]

Inclusive Education

Education is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected.[8]

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[3] Differentiated Instruction Educator's Guide. (2016). EduGains

[2] Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy*.

[5] Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy*.

[6] Council of Ontario Directors of Education. (2012). *Effective Use of Educational Research What do I need to know about research/evaluation in public education in Ontario?*

[7] Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S., Luiselli, T. E., & MacFarland, S. Z. (1997). Helping or hovering? Effects of instructional assistant proximity on students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 64, 7–18.

[8] Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy*.

Natural Supports

Refers to the support and assistance that naturally flows from the associations and relationships typically developed in natural environments such as the family, school, work, and community. In the classroom this could be the teacher or peers.[9]

Peer Support

This intervention strategy involves inviting one or more peers without disabilities to provide ongoing social and academic support to their classmates with severe disabilities while receiving guidance and support from an educational assistant or teacher.[10]

Shared Support

Educational assistants provide supportive and complementary services in the classroom to enhance the learning experiences of children, especially those with special needs. Generally, educational assistance is assigned to a program or classroom rather than to an individual child. Assignments may change depending on children's needs, the resources available, and other needs in the school or classroom. Educational assistants receive all directions and are assigned responsibilities from the teacher or principal. Teachers are ultimately responsible for planning, implementing, and assessing your child's programs.[11]

Students with Significant Support Needs (SSN)

Students with significant support needs are highly diverse learners with extensive needs in the areas of cognition and/or learning, communication, movement, and social/emotional abilities, such as, developmental disability, autism, and multiple disabilities. The individual may also have concurrent health, sensory, physical and/or behavioral disabilities.

[9] Carter, E. W., Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (2008). Promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships through peer support interventions. *Tash Connections*, 20-23.

[10] Carter, E. W., Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (2008). Promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships through peer support interventions. *Tash Connections*, 20-23.

[11] Alberta Ministry of Education. (2003). The learning team: a handbook for parents of children with special needs. *AB: Learning and Teaching Resources Branch*.

Learning Guide 1: Educational Assistants as Game Changers

Overview

In this short video, a secondary school principal discusses the importance of the role of the educational assistant in the classroom as a collaborative partner and how they play a vital role supporting all students, including those with significant disabilities. Link: https://youtu.be/c-r8bBFrTs8

Research Tells Us

- The principal is pivotal in promoting inclusive school cultures.[12]
- Inclusion is not only accessibility, but active and productive involvement for students with exceptionalities, and it means the regular classroom teacher is "taking ownership" of all students in their class.[13]
- Including students with significant support needs in the regular classroom does not have a negative impact on the academic achievement of other students.[14]
- The presence of educational assistants is important in the classroom and contributes to the increase in participation of students in the learning process, which enhances inclusion. They help students to focus on tasks through continual encouragement and facilitate student involvement in more activities. Their presence has a positive impact on the improvement of student behaviour, which leads to the development of better relationships with their classmates.[15]

Key Questions for Discussion

1. What is the role and responsibility of an educational assistant? What is the role and responsibility of the classroom teacher? What roles and responsibilities do they share?
2. What are three strategies for effective collaboration between an educational assistant and classroom teacher?
3. How might an educational assistant foster the inclusion of a student with significant support needs in a regular classroom?

Pulling it all Together

- It is important to examine your own belief systems regarding the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in regular classrooms. This may afford you the opportunity to identify ways in which personal beliefs and experiences inform your daily practice in both positive and negative ways.

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[12] Riehl, C. J. (2000). The principal's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: A critical review of normative, empirical, and critical literature on the practice of educational administration. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 55–81.

[13] Bunch, G., & Valeo, A. (2004). Student attitudes towards peers with disabilities in inclusive and special education schools. Disability and Society, 1(1), 61–78.

[14] Kalambouka, A. Farrell, P. Dyson, A. & Kaplan, I. (2007). The impact of placing students with special education needs in mainstream schools on the achievement of their peers. *Educational Researcher*, 49(4), 365–382.

[15] Angelides, P., Constantinou, C., & Leigh, J. (2009). The role of paraprofessionals in developing inclusive education in Cyprus. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 24(1), 75-89.

- Success happens when we work as a team, including the student. Students with exceptionalities often present with complex learning, behavioural, and/or physical needs. Planning and implementing programming works best collaboratively. Remember to include students with exceptionalities in decision-making so that they have their own voice. Reflect on a time when you discussed with a student what worked best for their learning and identified what supports they needed.
- The support and services required by students with significant support needs must be carefully planned so that the goal of increased independence is always primary in people's minds. In some settings, the role of the educational assistant has shifted from one of helping as needed to one of dependence. This can become a barrier to inclusion and to independence. Reflect on a time you moved a student towards independence.
- Suggestions for building healthy and collaborative working relationships with classroom teachers: (1) know your roles and responsibilities, (2) communicate, and (3) be a team.

For More Information

- For a resource to understand the role of the educational assistant: Mounsteven, J. (2012) *Understanding the Role of the Educational Assistant*. Autism Ontario. https://www.autismontario.com/sites/default/files/2020-05/Understanding%20the%20Role%20of%20the%20EA.pdf
- For an overview of research: Bennett, S. (2009). Including students with exceptionalities. Ontario Ministry of Education. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/bennett.pdf
- For strategies to build a collaborative team: MacCormack, J. (2015) *Building Strong Classroom Partnerships.* ETFO Voice. https://etfovoice.ca/feature/building-strong-classroom-partnerships

Learning Guide 2: Connecting with all Learners

Overview

In this short video, a secondary school principal discusses the importance of the educational assistant knowing and connecting with all students in the classroom, including those with significant disabilities. Link: https://youtu.be/s0bhQAQ3bGE

Research Tells Us

- Caring adults who make themselves available to students, listen attentively, reflect meaningfully on the concerns students raise, and sometimes offer advice for students to consider, can make an important difference in a child's life.[16] Further, educators who make an effort to know their students are well positioned to notice changes in behaviour that may signal escalating social-emotional difficulties.
- Regardless of which social environment children find themselves in—family, school, or community—research shows that three protective factors are essential: caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for meaningful contribution.[17][18] Each of these protective factors plays a crucial role in the construction of environments that foster the development of resilience.
- When teachers recognize diversity in their students in terms of how and what they identify with and how they learn, and when this recognition is reflected in how teachers teach, students are free to discover new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners.[19]
- There is an increasing body of research showing that students who feel connected to school—to teachers, to other students, and to the school itself—do better academically.[20]

Key Questions for Discussion

1. Why is important for the educational assistant to know all learners in the classroom?
2. What are some strategies that an educational assistant can use to get to know and connect with all learners in the classroom?
3. How might getting to know all learners in the classroom foster inclusion?

Pulling it all Together

- Greater student involvement in their own learning and choices lead to greater student engagement and improved achievement. Involving students as partners in the learning

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[16] Lutha, S. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: implications for interventions and social policies. *Development and psychopathology*, *12*(4), 857–885.

[17] Benard, B. (2006). Resiliency: What we have learned. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

[18] Brown, J.H., D'Emidio-Caston, M., & Benard, B. (2001). Resilience education. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

[19] Ferguson, B., Tilleczek, K., Boydell, K., Rummens, J.A., Cote, D., & Roth-Edney, D. (2005). Early school leavers: Understanding the lived reality of student disengagement from secondary school. Final Report submitted to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005).

[20] Schargel, F. P., Thacker, T., & Bell, J. S. (2007). *From at risk to academic excellence: What successful leaders do*. Eye on Education.

and teaching process calls for educators to see the student as a whole person, know about various dimensions of every student's learning process (not just about the student's academic performance), and support every student in playing a more active role in his or her learning, take students' strengths, needs, interests, and views into account in planning learning opportunities. Where do you see the educational assistant's role in this process?

- When we find out who our students are, we can support them in their learning through differentiating instruction. This requires us to understand our students as learners so that we can purposefully plan instruction, assessment, and evaluation to best meet their diverse strengths and needs based on students' readiness, interests, and learning preferences. When students, teachers, and educational assistants work together to find out about readiness, learning preferences and interests, students come to know themselves better. Why is this important?
- Educators can help to enhance resilience in their students with the following strategies: (1) affirm relationships by getting to know your students and their non-school environments; (2) affirm relationships by seeking to understand individual strengths; (3) affirm relationships by encouraging students to know each other; (4) set high expectations; (5) ensure opportunities for meaningful participation; and (6) live resilience development as a process. Where do you see the educational assistant's role in helping students with exceptionalities develop resiliency?
- Resilience research suggests that educators have a vital role to play in generating an environment where every student who enters their classroom can develop the ability to triumph over challenges. Was there an educator who had a positive impact on your life? Has a former student thanked you for the positive impact you made in their life?

For More Information

- For information and resources on knowing your learner see: *Learning for All* (2013). http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/learningforall2013.pdf
- For an overview of resiliency research see: Hurlington, K. (2010). *Bolstering Resilience in Students: Teachers as Protective Factors*. Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. Queen's Printer for Ontario. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/ww_bolstering_students.pdf
- For resources on how to promote students' mental health see: Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Supporting minds: An educator's guide to promoting students' mental health and well-being* http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/supportingminds.pdf

Learning Guide 3: Shared Support as a Pathway to the Future

Overview

In this short video, a secondary school principal discusses what shared support is and what it looks like in the classroom, and how it can meet the support needs of all students while building students with significant support needs independence. Link: https://youtu.be/2bxUg6lAqR4

Research Tells Us

- Research shows that there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of one-to-one educational assistants as the primary support for students with disabilities. Unintentional effects of one-to-one support can include unnecessary adult dependency, isolation from classmates, inhibition of opportunities for choice and creativity and decreased engagement of the teacher and student.[21]
- Finding more natural ways for educational assistants to support students can reduce unnecessary dependence on adults. This could include working with the whole class or checking in periodically with individual students rather than sitting beside them. Working as a team, teachers and educational assistants can look for opportunities to step back and deliberately fade one-to-one adult support to promote independence, facilitate peer relationships, and maximize student opportunities to learn and grow.[22]
- Overreliance on educational assistants can result in the education of students with significant disabilities being delegated to the educational assistant, who does the assessment and planning, and provides instruction for the student with minimal or no input or supervision by the classroom teacher.[23]

Key Questions for Discussion

1. Shared support is when an educational assistant is assigned to a program or classroom rather than to an individual student. Assignments may change depending on student needs, the resources available and other needs in the school or classroom. Educational assistants receive directions and are assigned responsibilities from the teacher or principal. Teachers are ultimately responsible for planning, implementing, and assessing your child's programs. Is this an accurate definition of what shared support is? Explain.
2. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
    - Students' academic engagement, class participation, and social connections in the class may be hindered when they receive all their support from adults.

[21] Giangreco, M. F. (2010). One-to-one paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Is conventional wisdom wrong? Intellectual Disabilities, 48(1), 1-13.
[22] Giangreco, M. F. (2010). One-to-one paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Is conventional wisdom wrong? Intellectual Disabilities, 48(1), 1-13.
[23] Giangreco, M. F. (2010). One-to-one paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Is conventional wisdom wrong? Intellectual Disabilities, 48(1), 1-13.

- Students receiving adult-delivered support tend to have few interactions with their peers.
- Natural supports already exist in the classroom for any student, such as the teacher or peers.

3. What kind of training and support will educational assistants and teachers need to shift from supporting individual students to supporting all students in the classroom?

Pulling it all Together

- The golden rule for adult support in inclusive classrooms is supporting others as you would wish to be supported. To effectively apply the golden rule requires knowledge and imagination. Educators need to know the effect of their actions on students. Imagine that someone regularly stopped into your place of employment to provide you with one-on-one support. This person was present for all your interactions, escorted you to the restroom, and at times supported you by touching your back or shoulder or by manipulating your hands, head, or other parts of your body. This support person might also give you oral directions for upcoming tasks. By reflecting on the student experience, how does this affect your perspective on providing one-on-one support?
- Fading support means systematically reducing the type and level of assistance given to a student. Fading support can reduce the negative impact of adult support and allow for more natural supports to occur. The research in fading support is clear; invasive adult support has had inadvertent detrimental effects on students with disabilities. In your experience as an educational assistant, how have you provided support to a student that encouraged independence or interdependence?
- How would you respond to an educator, staff member, or parent who believes that a particular student's unique learning needs can only be met with the assignment of a one-to-one educational assistant? How can we support educators and educational assistants in building their understanding and confidence around more natural supports for students with disabilities?

For More Information

- For an overview of research on providing support in inclusive classrooms see: Causton-Theoharis, J. N. (2009). The golden rule of providing support in inclusive classrooms: Support others as you would wish to be supported. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *42*(2), 36-43. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237683855_The_Golden_Rule_of_Providing_Support_in_Inclusive_Classrooms_Support_Others_as_You_Would_Wish_to_Be_Supported

  Giangreco, M. F. (2010). One-to-one paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Is conventional wisdom wrong? *Intellectual and developmental disabilities*, *48*(1), 1-13. https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Center-on-Disability-and-Community-Inclusion/GiangrecoIDD20104811-13.pdf

Learning Guide 4: You've Got a Friend in Me

Overview

In this short video, a secondary school principal explains natural and peer supports, and discusses the importance of these approaches for all students, especially for those students with significant disabilities in the classroom. Link: https://youtu.be/RXbfE1IgkUk

Research Tells Us

- Natural supports are those which already exist in the classroom for any student, such as the teacher or peers. Providing support to students in natural ways helps reduce dependence on adult support and enables them to become more independent. The objective is always to move away from the most intrusive supports toward the least intrusive supports.[24]
- Peer support arrangements involve inviting one or more peers without disabilities to provide ongoing social and academic support to their classmates with severe disabilities while receiving guidance and support from an educational assistant or teacher.[25]
- Research documenting the effectiveness of peer support interventions has shown that peers can be quite adept at supporting their classmates and that a number of academic and social benefits are available to participating students with and without disabilities.[26]
- Academically, peer support arrangements offer some distinct advantages over individually assigned educational-assistant support. When working with their classmates, students with severe disabilities are more engaged in ongoing class activities and have greater access to instructional content that is aligned with the general curriculum. Peer supports make sure their partners are staying on-task, working on similar instructional activities, and receiving needed feedback.[27]
- Sometimes concerns are raised that peers may fall behind academically by serving in this support role, but research suggests just the opposite. Students who themselves are struggling academically often show improvements of one to two letter grades.[28]

[24] Doyle, M. B. (2008). *The paraprofessional's guide to the inclusive classroom: Working as a team* (3rd ed.). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

[25] Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (1997). Academic effects on students without disabilities who serve as peer supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 139-152.

[26] Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (1997). Academic effects on students without disabilities who serve as peer supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 139-152.

[27] Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (1997). Academic effects on students without disabilities who serve as peer supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 139-152.

[28] Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (1997). Academic effects on students without disabilities who serve as peer supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 139-152.

Key Questions for Discussion

1. Support that encourages independence or interdependence during school best prepares students for life outside school. What are your thoughts?
2. What natural supports for students currently exist in your school?
3. Peers are generally willing to provide some of the social and academic support needed by their classmates with significant disabilities. How might this look in the classroom?
4. How might an educational assistant facilitate peer support in the classroom?

Pulling it all Together

- One of the simplest yet most effective ways to increase interaction between students with significant disabilities and their peers is to fade the assistance of the educational assistant. Fading assistance means deliberately reducing the type and level of support systematically given to a student. Reducing support promotes independence, interdependence, and interaction with peers. Reflect on a time you faded support, which led to a student's increased independence.
- Educational assistants take responsibility for ensuring that the educational needs of students with exceptionalities are being met, but they begin fading their direct support as the students become more comfortable working together. In other words, their role within inclusive classrooms broadens, enabling them to provide support to a wider range of students in the class. How might educational assistants seek out ways to foster learning and interaction opportunities for the student with disabilities and peers, while responding to behavioural challenges, addressing medical needs, documenting IEP progress, and adapting assignments?
- It is not often that new educational techniques come along in which everybody benefits, but peer support interventions seem to fit this bill. How do students with significant disabilities, students without significant disabilities, the classroom teacher, the special education teach, and the educational assistant benefit?

For More Information

- For resources on prompting for independence see: Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007). Effective Educational Practices for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Queen's Printer for Ontario. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/autismspecdis.pdf
- For an overview of research see: Carter, E. W., Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (2008). Promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships through peer support interventions. *Tash Connections*, 20-23. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.504.6031&rep=rep1&type=pdf
- For more information on how to support peer mentoring for students with disabilities see: Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia (2021). Engaging All Learners: Peer Mentoring to Support Students with Disabilities. http://www.engagingalllearners.ca/sal/peer-mentoring/index.php

Learning Guide 5: Building Your Tool Kit with Research-Based Strategies

Overview

In this short video, a secondary school principal discusses the importance of using research-based practices to effectively teach, support, and include students with significant disabilities in the classroom. Link: https://youtu.be/FT-8GWRKnLI

Research Tells Us

- Research-based practices are skills, techniques, and strategies that have been proven to work through experimental research studies or large-scale research field studies. Research-based practices are shown to have a positive effect on student outcomes.
- *Learning for All* (2013) describes educational approaches that are based on one of the most important findings of educational research since 2000—namely, that all students learn best when instruction, resources, and the learning environment are well suited to their strengths, interests, needs, and stage of readiness. Three elements—personalization, precision, and professional learning—are critical to the process.[29]
- Interventions based on behavioural principles, such as applied behaviour analysis, are designed to develop appropriate behaviours. Progress is assessed and the program is altered if necessary.[30] ABA can be used with students of every age. It can be applied in a variety of situations, and it can be used for very limited and specific purposes, such as the development or reduction of single behaviours. ABA can also be used for broader purposes, such as the development or reduction of sets of behaviour (for example, to improve relaxation skills, to teach more effective social skills, or to enhance community living skills). ABA can be used for students with ASD, and it can be used for students who have varying degrees of intensity of ASD along a learning continuum.
- Research shows that educational assistants can effectively implement research-based practices with reliability when provided effective training, such as facilitating peer support arrangements.[31]

Key Questions for Discussion

1. What research-based strategies are currently being using at your school?
2. Can you recall a time when you collaborated with a peer or a team, such as a fellow educational assistant, a teacher, or a special education teacher to identify and select a research-based strategy to use to support the emotional, behavioural, social, or academic development of a student with special needs?
3. What professional learning and understandings do you think educational assistants and the teachers they work with would benefit from most?

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[29] Fullan, M., Hill, P., & Crévola, C. (2006). *Breakthrough components. The challenge of change*. Corwin Press, 71-85.

[30] Perry, A. & Condillac, R.A. (2003). *Evidence-based practices for children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Review of the literature and practice guide*. Toronto: Children's Mental Health Ontario.

[31] Brock, M. E., & Carter, E. W. (2015). Effects of a professional development package to prepare special education paraprofessionals to implement evidence-based practice. *The Journal of Special Education*, 49(1), 39-51.

Pulling it all Together

Benefits of implementing research-based strategies for educators and students are:

- An increased likelihood of positive child or student outcomes.
- Increased accountability because there is data to back up the selection of a practice or program, which in turn facilitates support from administrators, parents, and others.
- Less wasted time and fewer wasted resources because educators start off with an effective practice or program and are not forced to find one that works through trial and error.
- An increased likelihood of being responsive to the learner's needs. A greater likelihood of convincing students to try it because there is evidence that it works.
- Where do you see your role as an educational assistant in implementing research-based strategies? What do you need to be successful to perform this task?

For More Information

http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/autismspecdis.pdf

- For effective strategies and resources for supporting students with special needs see:
  The Ontario Teachers' Federation Gateway to Special Education Website
  https://www.teachspeced.ca/
  The National Professional Development Centre on Autism Spectrum Disorder
  https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices
- For strategies for strengthening educational assistants' practice see: Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia Learning for All website
  http://www.learningforallab.ca/educational-assistants/10-strategies/
  Ontario Ministry of Education Policy and Program Memoranda 140:
  Incorporating methods of applied behaviour analysis (ABA) into programs for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) (2007)
  https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-140
  Principals' Associations of Ontario (2020). Implementing Inclusive Leadership: Exploring PPM 140 and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). Webinar 2
  https://www.principals.ca/en/professional-learning/resources/ASD_Webinar_2-Implementing_Inclusive_Leadership.pdf

Reflection

Providing professional learning in a collaborative and safe environment is vital for educational assistants to feel valued, supported, and have the skills and competencies to support teachers to ensure that secondary school students with significant disabilities fully access the academic curriculum and the benefits available within the regular classroom. As an administrator, you directly influence the inclusive school culture. *Learning Guides for Secondary School Administrators Leading Inclusive Schools* is intended to be used to begin and/or continue collaborative discussions with educational assistants who support classroom teachers and students in inclusive classrooms.

Supporting Resources

Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia (2021). *Engaging All Learners: Peer Mentoring to Support Students with Disabilities*. http://www.engagingalllearners.ca/sal/peer-mentoring/index.php

Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia (2021). *Learning for All* website http://www.learningforallab.ca/educational-assistants/10-strategies/

Bennett, S. (2009). Including students with exceptionalities. *Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat*. *Queen's Printer for Ontario*. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/bennett.pdf

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Causton-Theoharis, J. N. (2009). The golden rule of providing support in inclusive classrooms: Support others as you would wish to be supported. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *42*(2), 36-43. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237683855_The_Golden_Rule_of_Providing_Support_in_Inclusive_Classrooms_Support_Others_as_You_Would_Wish_to_Be_Supported

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Hurlington, K. (2010). *Bolstering Resilience in Students: Teachers as Protective Factors*. *Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat*. *Queen's Printer for Ontario*. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/ww_bolstering_students.pdf

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MacCormack, J. (2015) *Building Strong Classroom Partnerships.* ETFO Voice. https://etfovoice.ca/feature/building-strong-classroom-partnerships

Mounsteven, J. (2012) *Understanding the Role of the Educational Assistant*. Autism Ontario. https://www.autismontario.com/sites/default/files/2020-05/Understanding%20the%20Role%20of%20the%20EA.pdf

The National Professional Development Centre on Autism Spectrum Disorder https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices

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Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Learning for all: A guide to effective assessment and instruction for all students, kindergarten to grade 12*. *Queen's Printer for Ontario*. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/learningforall2013.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). Ontario's equity and inclusive education strategy. *Queen's Printer for Ontario*. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education Policy and Program Memoranda 140: Incorporating methods of applied behaviour analysis (ABA) into programs for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) (2007) https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-140

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). Supporting minds: An educator's guide to promoting students' mental health and well-being. *Queen's Printer for Ontario*. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/supportingminds.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2001). Student Identity and Engagement in Elementary Schools. *Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat*. *Queen's Printer for Ontario.* http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/cbs_studentidentity.pdf

Ontario Teachers' Federation Gateway to Special Education Website https://www.teachspeced.ca/

Principals' Associations of Ontario (2020). Implementing Inclusive Leadership: Exploring PPM 140 and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). Webinar 2 https://www.principals.ca/en/professional-learning/resources/ASD_Webinar_2-Implementing_Inclusive_Leadership.pdf

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Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Supporting minds: An educator's guide to promoting students' mental health and well-being*. Queen's Printer for Ontario.

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Appendix

Learning Guide 1 | Educational Assistants as Game Changers

This learning guide is designed for use by administrators who lead professional development with educational assistants to enhance teaching, learning and the inclusion of students with significant disabilities within secondary schools.

Overview In this short video, a secondary school principal discusses the importance of the role of the educational assistant in the classroom as a collaborative partner and how they play a vital role supporting all students, including those with significant disabilities.

Research tells us…

- **The principal is pivotal in promoting inclusive school cultures.[32]**
- **Inclusion is not only accessibility, but active and productive involvement for students with exceptionalities, and it means the regular classroom teacher is "taking ownership" of all students in their class.[33]**
- **Including students with significant support needs in the regular classroom does not have a negative impact on the academic achievement of other students.[34]**
- **The presence of educational assistants is important in the classroom and contributes to the increase in participation of students in the learning process, which enhances inclusion. They help students to focus on tasks through continual encouragement and facilitate student involvement in more activities. Their presence has a positive impact on the improvement of student behaviour, which leads to the development of better relationships with their classmates.[35]**

Key questions for discussion

1. What is the role and responsibility of an educational assistant? What is the role and responsibility of the classroom teacher? What roles and responsibilities do they share?

2. What are three strategies for effective collaboration between an educational assistant and classroom teacher?

3. How might an educational assistant foster the inclusion of a student with significant support needs in a regular classroom?

[32] Riehl, C. J. (2000). The principal's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: A critical review of normative, empirical, and critical literature on the practice of educational administration. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 55–81.
[33] Bunch, G., & Valeo, A. (2004). Student attitudes towards peers with disabilities in inclusive and special education schools. Disability and Society, 1(1), 61–78.
[34] Kalambouka, A. Farrell, P. Dyson, A. & Kaplan, I. (2007). The impact of placing students with special education needs in mainstream schools on the achievement of their peers. *Educational Researcher*, 49(4), 365–382.
[35] Angelides, P., Constantinou, C., & Leigh, J. (2009). The role of paraprofessionals in developing inclusive education in Cyprus. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 24(1), 75-89.

Pulling it all together

- It is important to examine your own belief systems regarding the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in regular classrooms. This may afford you the opportunity to identify ways in which personal beliefs and experiences inform your daily practice in both positive and negative ways.

- Success happens when we work as a team, including the student. Students with exceptionalities often present with complex learning, behavioural, and/or physical needs. Planning and implementing programming works best collaboratively. Remember to include students with exceptionalities in decision-making so that they have their own voice. Reflect on a time when you discussed with a student what worked best for their learning and identified what supports they needed.

- The support and services required by students with significant support needs must be carefully planned so that the goal of increased independence is always primary in people's minds. In some settings, the role of the educational assistant has shifted from one of helping as needed to one of dependence. This can become a barrier to inclusion and to independence. Reflect on a time you moved a student towards independence.

- Suggestions for building healthy and collaborative working relationships with classroom teachers: (1) know your roles and responsibilities, (2) communicate, and (3) be a team.

For more information

- For a resource to understand the role of the educational assistant: Mounsteven, J. (2012) *Understanding the Role of the Educational Assistant*. Autism Ontario. https://www.autismontario.com/sites/default/files/2020-05/Understanding%20the%20Role%20of%20the%20EA.pdf
- For an overview of research: Bennett, S. (2009). Including students with exceptionalities. Ontario Ministry of Education. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/bennett.pdf
- For strategies to build a collaborative team: MacCormack, J. (2015) *Building Strong Classroom Partnerships.* ETFO Voice. https://etfovoice.ca/feature/building-strong-classroom-partnerships

Learning Guide 2 | Connecting with All Learners

This learning guide is designed for use by administrators who lead professional development with educational assistants to enhance teaching, learning and the inclusion of students with significant disabilities within secondary schools.

Overview In this short video, a secondary school principal discusses the importance of the educational assistant knowing and connecting with all students in the classroom, including those with significant disabilities.

Research tells us…

- **Caring adults who make themselves available to students, listen attentively, reflect meaningfully on the concerns students raise, and sometimes offer advice for students to consider, can make an important difference in a child's life.[36] Further, educators who make an effort to know their students are well positioned to notice changes in behaviour that may signal escalating social-emotional difficulties.**
- **Regardless of which social environment children find themselves in—family, school, or community—research shows that three protective factors are essential: caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for meaningful contribution.[37][38] Each of these protective factors plays a crucial role in the construction of environments that foster the development of resilience.**
- **When teachers recognize diversity in their students in terms of how and what they identify with and how they learn, and when this recognition is reflected in how teachers teach, students are free to discover new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners.[39]**
- **There is an increasing body of research showing that students who feel connected to school—to teachers, to other students, and to the school itself—do better academically.[40]**

Key questions for discussion

1. Why is important for the educational assistant to know all learners in the classroom?

2. What are some strategies that an educational assistant can use to get to know and connect with all learners in the classroom?

3. How might getting to know all learners in the classroom foster inclusion?

[36] Lutha, S. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: implications for interventions and social policies. *Development and psychopathology*, *12*(4), 857–885.
[37] Benard, B. (2006). Resiliency: What we have learned. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.
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[39] Ferguson, B., Tilleczek, K., Boydell, K., Rummens, J.A., Cote, D., & Roth-Edney, D. (2005). Early school leavers: Understanding the lived reality of student disengagement from secondary school. Final Report submitted to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005).
[40] Schargel, F. P., Thacker, T., & Bell, J. S. (2007). *From at risk to academic excellence: What successful leaders do*. Eye on Education.

Pulling it all together

- Greater student involvement in their own learning and choices lead to greater student engagement and improved achievement. Involving students as partners in the learning and teaching process calls for educators to see the student as a whole person, know about various dimensions of every student's learning process (not just about the student's academic performance), and support every student in playing a more active role in his or her learning, take students' strengths, needs, interests, and views into account in planning learning opportunities. Where do you see the educational assistant's role in this process?

- When we find out who our students are, we can support them in their learning through differentiating instruction. This requires us to understand our students as learners so that we can purposefully plan instruction, assessment, and evaluation to best meet their diverse strengths and needs based on students' readiness, interests, and learning preferences. When students, teachers, and educational assistants work together to find out about readiness, learning preferences and interests, students come to know themselves better. Why is this important?

- Educators can help to enhance resilience in their students with the following strategies: (1) affirm relationships by getting to know your students and their non-school environments; (2) affirm relationships by seeking to understand individual strengths; (3) affirm relationships by encouraging students to know each other; (4) set high expectations; (5) ensure opportunities for meaningful participation; and (6) live resilience development as a process. Where do you see the educational assistant's role in helping students with exceptionalities develop resiliency?

- Resilience research suggests that educators have a vital role to play in generating an environment where every student who enters their classroom can develop the ability to triumph over challenges. Was there an educator who had a positive impact on your life? Has a former student thanked you for the positive impact you made in their life?

For more information

- For information and resources on knowing your learner see:

Learning for All (2013). http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/learningforall2013.pdf

- For an overview of resiliency research see:

Hurlington, K. (2010). *Bolstering Resilience in Students: Teachers as Protective Factors*. Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. Queen's Printer for Ontario. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/ww_bolstering_students.pdf

- For resources on how to promote students' mental health see:

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *Supporting minds: An educator's guide to promoting students' mental health and well-being* http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/supportingminds.pdf

Learning Guide 3 | Shared Support as a Pathway to the Future

This learning guide is designed for use by administrators who lead professional development with educational assistants to enhance teaching, learning and the inclusion of students with significant disabilities within secondary schools.

Overview In this short video, a secondary school principal discusses what shared support is and what it looks like in the classroom, and how it can meet the support needs of all students while building students with significant support needs independence.

Research tells us...

- **Research shows that there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of one-to-one educational assistants as the primary support for students with disabilities. Unintentional effects of one-to-one support can include unnecessary adult dependency, isolation from classmates, inhibition of opportunities for choice and creativity and decreased engagement of the teacher and student.[41]**

- **Finding more natural ways for educational assistants to support students can reduce unnecessary dependence on adults. This could include working with the whole class or checking in periodically with individual students rather than sitting beside them. Working as a team, teachers and educational assistants can look for opportunities to step back and deliberately fade one-to-one adult support to promote independence, facilitate peer relationships, and maximize student opportunities to learn and grow.[42]**

- **Overreliance on educational assistants can result in the education of students with significant disabilities being delegated to the educational assistant, who does the assessment and planning, and provides instruction for the student with minimal or no input or supervision by the classroom teacher.[43]**

Key questions for discussion

1. Shared support is when an educational assistant is assigned to a program or classroom rather than to an individual student. Assignments may change depending on student needs, the resources available and other needs in the school or classroom. Educational assistants receive directions and are assigned responsibilities from the teacher or principal. Teachers are responsible for planning, implementing, and assessing a student's program. Is this an accurate definition of what shared support is? Explain.

2. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
   - Students' academic engagement, class participation, and social connections in the class may be hindered when they receive all their support from adults.
   - Students receiving adult-delivered support tend to have few interactions with their peers.
   - Natural supports already exist in the classroom for any student, such as the teacher or peers.

3. What kind of training and support will educational assistants and teachers need to shift from supporting individual students to supporting all students in the classroom?

[41] Giangreco, M. F. (2010). One-to-one paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Is conventional wisdom wrong? Intellectual Disabilities, 48(1), 1-13.
[42] Giangreco, M. F. (2010). One-to-one paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Is conventional wisdom wrong? Intellectual Disabilities, 48(1), 1-13.
[43] Giangreco, M. F. (2010). One-to-one paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Is conventional wisdom wrong? Intellectual Disabilities, 48(1), 1-13.

Pulling it all together

- The golden rule for adult support in inclusive classrooms is supporting others as you would wish to be supported. To effectively apply the golden rule requires knowledge and imagination. Educators need to know the effect of their actions on students. Imagine that someone regularly stopped into your place of employment to provide you with one-on-one support. This person was present for all your interactions, escorted you to the restroom, and at times supported you by touching your back or shoulder or by manipulating your hands, head, or other parts of your body. This support person might also give you oral directions for upcoming tasks. By reflecting on the student experience, how does this affect your perspective on providing one-on-one support?

- Fading support means systematically reducing the type and level of assistance given to a student. Fading support can reduce the negative impact of adult support and allow for more natural supports to occur. The research in fading support is clear; invasive adult support has had inadvertent detrimental effects on students with disabilities. In your experience as an educational assistant, how have you provided support to a student that encouraged independence or interdependence?

- How would you respond to an educator, staff member, or parent who believes that a particular student's unique learning needs can only be met with the assignment of a one-to-one educational assistant? How can we support educators and educational assistants in building their understanding and confidence around more natural supports for students with disabilities?

Learning Guide 4 | You've Got a Friend in Me

This learning guide is designed for use by administrators who lead professional development with educational assistants to enhance teaching, learning and the inclusion of students with significant disabilities within secondary schools.

Overview In this short video, a secondary school principal explains natural and peer supports, and discusses the importance of these approaches for all students, especially for those students with significant disabilities in the classroom.

Research tells us...

- **Natural supports are those which already exist in the classroom for any student, such as the teacher or peers. Providing support to students in natural ways helps reduce dependence on adult support and enables them to become more independent. The objective is always to move away from the most intrusive supports toward the least intrusive supports.[44]**
- **Peer support arrangements involve inviting one or more peers without disabilities to provide ongoing social and academic support to their classmates with severe disabilities while receiving guidance and support from an educational assistant or teacher.[45]**
- **Research documenting the effectiveness of peer support interventions has shown that peers can be quite adept at supporting their classmates and that a number of academic and social benefits are available to participating students with and without disabilities.[46]**
- **Academically, peer support arrangements offer some distinct advantages over individually assigned educational-assistant support. When working with their classmates, students with severe disabilities are more engaged in ongoing class activities and have greater access to instructional content that is aligned with the general curriculum. Peer supports make sure their partners are staying on-task, working on similar instructional activities, and receiving needed feedback.[47]**
- **Sometimes concerns are raised that peers may fall behind academically by serving in this support role, but research suggests just the opposite. Students who themselves are struggling academically often show improvements of one to two letter grades.[48]**

[44] Doyle, M. B. (2008). *The paraprofessional's guide to the inclusive classroom: Working as a team* (3rd ed.). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
[45] Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (1997). Academic effects on students without disabilities who serve as peer supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 139-152.
[46] Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (1997). Academic effects on students without disabilities who serve as peer supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 139-152.
[47] Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (1997). Academic effects on students without disabilities who serve as peer supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 139-152.
[48] Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (1997). Academic effects on students without disabilities who serve as peer supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30, 139-152.

Key questions for discussion

1. Support that encourages independence or interdependence during school best prepares students for life outside school. What are your thoughts?

2. What natural supports for students currently exist in your school?

3. Peers are generally willing to provide some of the social and academic support needed by their classmates with significant disabilities. How might this look in the classroom?

Pulling it all together

- One of the simplest yet most effective ways to increase interaction between students with significant disabilities and their peers is to fade the assistance of the educational assistant. Fading assistance means deliberately reducing the type and level of support systematically given to a student. Reducing support promotes independence, interdependence, and interaction with peers. Reflect on a time you faded support, which led to a student's increased independence.

- Educational assistants take responsibility for ensuring that the educational needs of students with exceptionalities are being met, but they begin fading their direct support as the students become more comfortable working together. In other words, their role within inclusive classrooms broadens, enabling them to provide support to a wider range of students in the class. How might educational assistants seek out ways to foster learning and interaction opportunities for the student with disabilities and peers, while responding to behavioural challenges, addressing medical needs, documenting IEP progress, and adapting assignments?

- It is not often that new educational techniques come along in which everybody benefits, but peer support interventions seem to fit this bill. How do students with significant disabilities, students without significant disabilities, the classroom teacher, the special education teach, and the educational assistant benefit?

For more information

For resources on prompting for building student's independence see:

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007). Effective Educational Practices for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Queen's Printer for Ontario. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/autismspecdis.pdf

For an overview of research see:

- Carter, E. W., Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (2008). Promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships through peer support interventions. Tash Connections, 20-23. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.504.6031&rep=rep1&type=pdf

For more information on how to support peer mentoring for students with disabilities see:

- Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia (2021). Engaging All Learners: Peer Mentoring to Support Students with Disabilities. http://www.engagingalllearners.ca/sal/peer-mentoring/index.php

Learning Guide 5	Building Your Tool Kit with Research-based Strategies

This learning guide is designed for use by administrators who lead professional development with educational assistants to enhance teaching, learning and the inclusion of students with significant disabilities within secondary schools.

Overview In this short video, a secondary school principal discusses the importance of using research-based practices to effectively teach, support, and include students with significant disabilities in the classroom.

Research tells us…

- **Research-based practices are skills, techniques, and strategies that have been proven to work through experimental research studies or large-scale research field studies. Research-based practices are shown to have a positive effect on student outcomes.**
- **Educational approaches that are based on one of the most important findings of educational research since 2000—namely, that all students learn best when instruction, resources, and the learning environment are well suited to their strengths, interests, needs, and stage of readiness. Three elements—personalization, precision, and professional learning—are critical to the process.[49]**
- **Interventions based on behavioural principles, such as applied behaviour analysis, are designed to develop appropriate behaviours. Progress is assessed and the program is altered if necessary.[50] ABA can be used with students of every age. It can be applied in a variety of situations, and it can be used for very limited and specific purposes.**
- **Research shows that educational assistants can effectively implement research-based practices with reliability when provided effective training, such as facilitating peer support arrangements.[51]**

Key questions for discussion

1. What research-based strategies are currently being using at your school?

2. Can you recall a time when you collaborated with a peer or a team, such as a fellow educational assistant, a teacher, or a special education teacher to identify and select an research-based strategy to use to support the emotional, behavioural, social, or academic development of a student with special needs?

3. What professional learning and understandings do you think educational assistants and the teachers they work with would benefit from most?

4. What strategies do you recommend to administrators who want to build capacity of the teachers working with educational assistants?

[49] Fullan, M., Hill, P., & Crévola, C. (2006). *Breakthrough components. The challenge of change*. Corwin Press, 71-85.

[50] Perry, A. & Condillac, R.A. (2003). *Evidence-based practices for children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Review of the literature and practice guide*. Toronto: Children's Mental Health Ontario.

[51] Brock, M. E., & Carter, E. W. (2015). Effects of a professional development package to prepare special education paraprofessionals to implement evidence-based practice. *The Journal of Special Education*, 49(1), 39-51.

Pulling it all together

- Benefits of implementing research-based strategies for educators and students are:
    - An increased likelihood of positive child or student outcomes.
    - Increased accountability because there is data to back up the selection of a practice or program, which in turn facilitates support from administrators, parents, and others.
    - Less wasted time and fewer wasted resources because educators start off with an effective practice or program and are not forced to find one that works through trial and error.
    - An increased likelihood of being responsive to the learner's needs. A greater likelihood of convincing students to try it because there is evidence that it works.

- Where do you see your role as an educational assistant in implementing research-based strategies? What do you need to be successful to perform this task?

For more information

For resources see:

- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007*). Effective Educational Practices for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.* Queen's Printer for Ontario. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/autismspecdis.pdf

For effective strategies and resources for supporting students with special needs see:

- *The Ontario Teachers' Federation Gateway to Special Education* Website https://www.teachspeced.ca/

For strategies for strengthening educational assistants' practice see:

- Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia Learning for All website http://www.learningforallab.ca/educational-assistants/10-strategies/
- Ontario Ministry of Education Policy and Program Memoranda 140: Incorporating methods of applied behaviour analysis (ABA) into programs for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) (2007) https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-140
- Principals' Associations of Ontario (2020). Implementing Inclusive Leadership: Exploring PPM 140 and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). Webinar 2 https://www.principals.ca/en/professional-learning/resources/ASD_Webinar_2-Implementing_Inclusive_Leadership.pdf
- The National Professional Development Centre on Autism Spectrum Disorder https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices