

**TEACHERS AND TEACHER ASSISTANTS: BUILDING EFFECTIVE
RELATIONSHIPS**

DAWN M. THOMPSON

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D.P.E., University of Lethbridge, 1993

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Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Camerona Maude Abbott (1909 – 1996) who instilled in me a love for travel, for knowledge and for expanding my horizons through education.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the conditions necessary for the development of effective relationships between teachers and teacher assistants. A sample of five teachers and five teacher assistants from a rural school jurisdiction in Alberta participated in the study. The primary method of data collection was interviewing. Data were analyzed thematically and findings presented systematically in order of importance. Key finds from teachers included the importance of communication, the necessity of establishing clear expectations for teacher assistants, the need for collaborative planning time for teacher/teacher assistant teams and the importance of training for both themselves and teacher assistants. Key findings from teacher assistants were not dissimilar and included the important of communication, the necessity of clear expectations and the importance of being seen as valuable members of the educational team. The results of this study have implications for all school authorities in which teacher and teacher assistants are increasingly expected to share responsibility for providing educational services for students.

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Introduction

Every teacher, no matter what the grade level, should have an aide, a helper, a co-worker with her in the classroom. It makes no difference whether the helper is a paid aide or an unpaid volunteer. The aide can be a parent of a child in the class or a nonparent; the aide can come from the area served by the school or from outside the neighborhood, the aide can be a young person or someone older, a trained aide or someone learning on the job. Only one thing is important: *Every teacher, no matter what the grade level, should have an aide, a helper, a co-worker with her in the classroom.* (Hymes, 1968, p. 3)

When he wrote this, Hymes could not have predicted how the introduction of teacher assistants into schools would affect the role of teachers. He simply believed that teachers could benefit from an extra pair of hands in their classrooms, and in the process become better teachers and provide better programs for children (Hymes, 1968).

Teacher assistants (or teacher aides) were first introduced into Bay City Michigan schools in 1953 (Thorlacios, 1969) and have since been employed by school districts across North America to fulfill various roles in the education process. When they were first introduced, teacher aides performed mostly clerical and housekeeping duties, but their role has since evolved into one in which they "... provide instructional and related services to students under the direction of school professionals" (French & Pickett, 1997, p. 62). The support they provide to teachers is invaluable and can greatly enrich the educational experiences of children (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000). However, the mere presence of teacher assistants in classrooms means teachers assume in addition to

their roles as educators, the "...roles of *delegator, planner, director, monitor, coach* and *program manager* to ensure the quality of students' programs, as well as their own professional integrity" (French, 1999, p. 70).

Preparation, either preservice or inservice, for these roles is rare and teachers find themselves relying upon real-life experiences and their own intuition (French, 2001) to develop effective working relationships with teacher assistants. Additionally, teachers often work with teacher assistants who themselves have limited training. Moody (1999) reports that "[q]ualifications for positions vary widely" (p. 53) and in some jurisdictions high school graduation may not even be a requirement for obtaining a position as a teacher assistant. "Other positions may require 'related training' or specific courses, or post-secondary certification" (Moody, 1999, p. 53).

Teachers report that when they decided to pursue a career in education, they did not do so to become managers of other adults (French, 2001). They became teachers because they wanted to work with children.

Teacher assistants report that they often work in isolation with limited direction from teachers. They feel undervalued and unappreciated for the jobs that they do (Wallace, Shin, Bartholomy & Stahl, 2001).

With the integration of increasing numbers of students with special needs into neighborhood schools has come the reality of increased numbers of teacher assistants. It has therefore, in the current education system become essential for teachers and teacher assistants to develop effective working relationships.

Background to the Research

In 1986 when I began teaching, I was an itinerant resource teacher in three rural communities in southern Saskatchewan. Each of the schools had a secretary/library technician/teacher assistant whose job it was to answer the phone, catalog books, type, photocopy and, occasionally, assist in the creation of teaching materials. Rarely did these individuals have direct contact with students and, except to deliver a message to the staff, they were not seen in classrooms.

When I moved to Alberta in 1990, I was hired as a special education teacher in a rural school division. I was assigned to a K – 12 school with approximately 350 students and given two periods a week of “school assistant time”. During this time, one of the two teacher assistants on our staff would help me by photocopying, laminating, typing, preparing bulletin boards or, occasionally, marking an assignment. I certainly appreciated this assistance and was grateful the school administration had been able to hire such talented individuals. Still, however, it was rare for a teacher assistant in our school to work directly with students.

Four years later, as our school population grew and the number of special needs children we were serving increased, we began to hire teacher assistants to work directly with students. These assistants were assigned to work with individual students in regular classroom settings and, depending on the individual child’s needs, to pull him/her out for some one-on-one instruction as directed by the classroom teacher or me.

As the special education teacher in the School, my job evolved from teaching in a ‘pull-out’ resource room to coordinating and administrating a school-wide program which incorporated up to six teacher assistants. It was quite challenging and tested my

leadership ability, my communication skills and my professionalism. Although I had received some training to work with teacher assistants in my undergraduate degree, I did not feel adequately prepared for the new duties I had been assigned. I spent numerous hours chatting with more experienced teachers and reading about more effective ways of working with teacher assistants. I also attended workshops and inservices which addressed, among other things, legal issues relating to working with teacher assistants, and the rights and responsibilities of teachers working with assistants. Over the next few years I learned what was needed to develop effective working relationships with the teacher assistants assigned to my program and I saw the benefits to the children with whom we worked. I still had some concerns about the process and, in conversations with other teachers, I became aware that I was not alone.

After nearly ten years with the School District, I had the opportunity to share my reservations with the Deputy Superintendent who was responsible for Special Education. He expressed similar concerns and asked me to address the issue of working with teacher assistants in a presentation for special education teachers across the Division.

The presentation was conducted as part of one of the regular meetings held for special education teachers in the School Division. There were 25 people present at the meeting including the Deputy Superintendent responsible for Special Education, the Superintendent of Schools and teachers who, like myself, were responsible for planning and implementing programs for students with a variety of special needs in their small rural schools. At least three of these individuals were also school administrators. In the presentation, I provided information regarding the legal issues surrounding working with teacher assistants, the School Board policies related to this area, and suggestions for

effectively working with assistants on a daily basis. The presentation was very well received and I was asked to share it again in the Fall at a district-wide Professional Development day. At this second presentation, a number of teacher assistants were in attendance and I found that they shared some of the same concerns as teachers. It was then I realized that developing effective working relationships with teacher assistants needs to involve the assistants themselves.

In the spring of 2000, I received a copy of a document entitled Teachers and Teachers' Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities which affirmed my concerns about the nature of working with teacher assistants. It was published by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) because the Association was finding that "... the relatively rapid growth in the number of teachers' assistants in the province [had] raised a number of questions about their role and its relation to that of teachers" (ATA, 2000, p. 1). Teachers from across the province had begun turning to the Association for guidance in resolving issues related to working with assistants. This publication was produced to address some of the concerns of both teachers and the Association. It was not "... intended as a how-to manual" (ATA, 2000, p. 1), but to "... answer some of the fundamental questions that arise from time to time in all schools about the nature of teaching, the value of teacher qualifications and the scope of decision making by professional and paraprofessional staff" (ATA, 2000, p. 1).

In September 2000, when I accepted a position as a Resource Teacher in another rural School Division in Alberta, I learned that teachers in this District have similar concerns about working with teacher assistants. Some issues shared by teachers in this School Division are (1) their legal rights and responsibilities related to teacher assistants,

(2) roles and responsibilities of teacher assistants, (3) developing effective relationships, (4) communication and, (5) supervision and evaluation of teacher assistants. Each of these issues is also identified in the current literature related to teacher assistants.

Literature Review

In recent years, across North America, there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of teacher assistants employed in public schools. In the United States, there were fewer than 10 000 assistants in 1965 and about 150 000 in 1985 (Pickett, 1986, as cited in French, 1997). By 1995, these numbers had grown to 500 000 (Pickett, 1996, as cited in French, 1997). The Canadian Education Association (1975) reported that in Canada in 1967 there were approximately 1000 teacher aides and this number had increased to nearly 6000 by 1974. In 1998, according to Human Resources Development Canada, there were approximately 58 000 teacher assistants working in Canadian schools.

This relatively rapid growth in the number of teacher assistants has raised a number of concerns about the role of assistants and its relation to the role of teachers (ATA, 2000). In the Association's 2000 document entitled Teachers and Teachers' Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities some of these issues are addressed. Specifically, the ATA identified concerns with (1) legal rights and responsibilities of teachers related to teacher assistants, (2) duties of both teachers and assistants, (3) supervision and evaluation of teacher assistants, and (4) developing effective relationships between teachers and teacher assistants through team building and communication.

Since the introduction of teacher assistants into schools, teachers have been faced with the dilemma of being grateful for the additional support while dealing with an increased workload. Having an assistant means that teachers must do additional planning to develop programs which can be implemented by the teacher assistant. They have the responsibility of ensuring they are not assigning to the assistant any duties which are

legally considered theirs, and they must monitor teacher assistants in their work with children. Because students have another adult to refer to, teachers must ensure that teacher assistants adhere to the same behavior management strategies and instructional procedures as the teacher (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001). Additionally, they must carefully plan their goals and use effective communication strategies with both adults and students. Hymes (1968) stressed that once assistants (or aides) were hired, they should be oriented to their new position and given time to conference with teachers. He also emphasized that assistants (or aides) and teachers must be well matched and that "... someone, usually the teacher, has to give much consideration to the fact that some work an aide [or assistant] can do well and that some work is not suited to her" (Hymes, 1968, p. 6). Current authors, including the ATA (2000), emphasize the same issues, especially the importance of understanding one's legal rights and responsibilities related to working with teacher assistants.

Legal Rights and Responsibilities of Teachers Related to Teacher Assistants

The ATA (2000) states that teacher assistants are part of the group of school personnel known as 'support staff'. Persons who are considered support staff are any "... personnel who help teachers carry out the educational mission of the school and who make the educational experiences of children more rewarding" (ATA, 2000, p. 2). Included in this group may be professionals such as psychologists, physiotherapists, speech/language pathologists and nurses, in addition to paraprofessionals such as teacher assistants. Teachers, however, are ultimately responsible and accountable for the educational program of the students in their care. Accordingly, the ATA (2000) states

that teachers should be responsible for assigning duties to teacher assistants and cannot assign to them any duty that is legally the responsibility of the teacher.

Duties of Teachers and Teacher Assistants

“The Association’s Code of Professional Conduct defines the duties for which teachers are responsible” (ATA, 2000, p. 4). Among these are (1) the diagnosis of learning needs, (2) the prescription of solutions related to those learning needs, (3) the planning of lessons and the selection of appropriate resources, (4) the implementation of the lessons, (5) the evaluation of students, (6) reporting to parents, (7) the evaluation of professional and non-professional staff, and (8) the evaluation of programs (ATA, 2000). Teachers may choose to delegate “... specific and limited aspects of instructional activity to teachers’ assistants provided that teachers supervise and direct those activities” (ATA, 2000, p. 4).

Duties which teachers may delegate to teacher assistants fall into four general areas of support – instructional/learning support; behavioral support; health care/hygiene/transportation; and clerical/classroom support (Moody, 1999).

Instructional/learning support. Instructional/learning support can include many supports, from a set of skills requiring specialized training, such as sign language interpretation or Braille assistance, to simple reinforcement of skills previously taught by the teacher. An assistant may be asked to implement a specific program or to adapt learning materials to accommodate individual student needs. Helping children learn how to organize for learning, assisting teachers in displays and activities, and supporting students at work experience placements also fall under the category of instructional/learning support and are duties which may be assigned to teacher assistants.

Behavioral support. Under the category of behavioral support are such things as supervising students for reasons of personal safety and the safety of others, assisting children to learn pro-social skills, and carrying out behavior management plans. In some cases, and with the appropriate training, teacher assistants may also be asked to use non-violent physical restraint procedures to prevent children from harming themselves or others.

Health care/hygiene/transportation. Many of the health care supports that teacher assistants may be asked to carry out require specialized training from a health care professional. These supports can include personal care such as toileting, feeding and dressing of physically handicapped children. Specific physical therapy or occupational therapy goals may also be carried out by teacher assistants, but only under the supervision of a professional.

Clerical/classroom support. The first teacher assistants (or teacher aides) were hired to perform clerical tasks which would enable teachers to concentrate their efforts on teaching tasks (Thorlacius, 1969). Photocopying, filing, typing and other clerical tasks are still assigned to teacher assistants, though less frequently as their role has evolved into one in which they have become more involved in instructional support.

Of course none of these lists is exhaustive and there are many other duties which teacher assistants can and do perform in schools across North America. Teachers must remember when assigning duties to teacher assistants that “[t]he primary responsibility for the educational program falls upon teachers, who are expected to maintain a high standard of conduct, care and instruction” (ATA, 2000, p. 2). To ensure this standard,

teachers who are assigning duties to teacher assistants must be prepared to assume responsibility for the supervision and evaluation of those assistants.

Supervision and Evaluation of Teacher Assistants

Supervision. “The introduction of another adult into the classroom adds a management level and complicates the functioning in the classroom – although it also brings major benefits for [teachers] and [their] students when handled properly” (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001, p. 2). Proper handling of this supervisory role is something for which teachers traditionally have not been prepared. Salzberg and Morgan (1995) reviewed the available literature on the subject of teacher preparation and discovered that, in spite of the increasing number of teacher assistants in schools, many teachers find the presence of another adult in the classroom an intrusion. These teachers had not expected to assume a managerial role when they began their careers and had no training to prepare them for such a role.

Morgan (1997) found that 68% of special education teachers who supervise assistants had no formal preservice or inservice training for that role. In a more recent study about the practice of supervising teacher assistants, French (2001) found that “[i]n spite of the professional maturity and high education level of the respondents in [her] study, real-life experience was the primary source of their knowledge about supervising paraprofessionals, rather than any type of formal preparation” (p. 47). Despite this apparent lack of preparation for the supervision of teacher assistants, teachers are supervising assistants and are being expected to evaluate their performance.

Evaluation. The ATA (2000) states that “... teachers are responsible for evaluating the performance of non-teachers assigned to them and for reporting the results of those

evaluations to the employer” (p. 9). School Boards in Alberta generally have policies in place regarding the supervision and evaluation of teacher assistants. In most Alberta School Jurisdictions, the principal is ultimately responsible for evaluation but may delegate this responsibility to the teacher who regularly works with the assistant. Teachers who do not feel prepared to supervise other adults are certain to be uncomfortable in evaluating them. However, there is evidence in the literature that suggests evaluation is an important component of the teacher/teacher assistant relationship.

Pickett, Vasa and Steckelberg (1993) believe that evaluation of teacher assistants should include not only evaluation of how effective the assistant is, but how effective the teacher has been in using the assistant as an instructional support. They also suggest that the evaluation should examine the effectiveness of the teacher/teacher assistant team.

Relationships Between Teachers and Assistants

“For teachers and paraeducators to work as a team, they need to communicate clearly and regularly” (Pickett, Vasa & Steckelberg, 1993, p. 16). The ATA (2000) concurs with this statement and suggests that to facilitate a more productive relationship with teacher assistants, teachers need to (1) discuss the teacher assistant’s role with him/her, (2) establish clear parameters, (3) stress the importance of confidentiality, (4) ensure that the assistant is aware of the teacher’s philosophy of education and approaches to teaching and classroom management, as well as to (5) help the assistant feel like part of the school community. This relationship can be further enhanced through “...regular meetings with the assistant to discuss his or her observations about students, obtain feedback and reports, hear concerns and discuss implementation strategies” (ATA,

2000, p. 10). Teacher assistants have expressed concerns about feeling unappreciated. It is important, therefore, for teachers to make assistants feel they are valuable members of the educational team. Ginagreco, Edelman and Broer (2001) stress the importance of the role played by assistants in the current educational system and suggest that teacher assistants "...deserve respect, appreciation and acknowledgement in tangible ways, such as appropriate role clarification, support, compensation, and opportunities for input in schools" (p. 497).

Conclusion

None of the issues raised by the ATA in their 2000 document is new. In a study conducted in 1969, Thorlaciuss reported that teachers "...doubted that adequate time would be set aside during school hours for planning and evaluating with the aides..." (p. 4) and that they were "...unaccustomed to the new leadership function which was now thrust upon them" (p. 4). In 1968, Hornburger wrote "[s]ince a most important factor in the success or failure of a teacher-aide program is the way professionals feel about paraprofessionals, it is important for those who will be working with paraprofessionals to receive some orientation and additional training" (p. 44). Wallace, Shin, Bartholomy and Stahl (2001) stated that "[t]eachers must be prepared before they enter the educational setting to work with paraprofessionals as well as students, parents, and others. Sometimes, teachers reflect on why they wanted to become teachers in the first place, and they report that it was not to supervise adults, but that is the reality in education today" (p. 531).

It appears that teachers can no longer be responsible solely for the education of children in their care, but must assume the roles of supervisor and director of teacher

assistants as well. Many teachers are uncomfortable with this shift in their role but, at the same time, they are unlikely to reject the opportunity for additional support in their classrooms. To make the most effective use of this support "... a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities and knowledge of the legal, ethical, and liability issues associated with each of the roles..." (French, 1999, p. 66) is required.

Far too often we move forward in new initiatives seeking educational improvements for children without reflecting on the impact that such changes will have on the people and the systems that must implement and support the changes. We must identify the skills needed by the individuals who will implement the new initiatives, how and where they might get the knowledge, skills, and strategies they need, and how the system will support them. (French, 2001, p. 531)

When first introduced into schools, teacher assistants were seen as a way for teachers to be freed from clerical tasks to focus on instruction. Despite changes that have occurred in teacher assistant roles to focus more on instructional support, there is still limited training for teachers on how to engage in working with teacher assistants. The acquisition of the knowledge, skills and strategies seems to have been left up to each individual teacher. How, then, have they been able to develop effective relationships with teacher assistants and what conditions need to be met to develop these relationships?

Methodology

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to gain information about the development of effective working relationships between teachers and teacher assistants and to compare the findings to current literature. The development of the research instrument, the data collection, and the data analysis were driven by the research question: What conditions need to be met to develop effective working relationships between teachers and teacher assistants?

Procedure

Through the personal experience of the author and a review of the current literature, a number of factors affecting relationships between teachers and teacher assistants were identified. These factors were divided into categories and interview questions were developed to ascertain the impact of each factor on the effectiveness of teacher/teacher assistant relationships. Interviews were selected as the best method of data collection for this study because of the depth of information that could be gathered. While questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, responses to interview questions can be developed and clarified by following up on ideas and asking probing questions (Bell, 1993). It is considered easier to engage people in an interview than in completing a questionnaire (Anderson, 1998) and it was anticipated that once approached, few people would decline to be interviewed for this study.

Interview development. Through a review of relevant literature on the topic, it was discovered that the issues around working with teacher assistants are not new. In his doctoral dissertation of 1969, Thorlaciuss identified similar concerns as the ATA in the

document Teachers and Teachers' Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities, written in 2000.

These concerns focus on the delineation of the roles and responsibilities of teachers and teacher assistants as well as the development of effective working relationships. It is suggested that teacher assistants can be an integral part of the education system but not without examining the roles and responsibilities of both teachers and assistants (French, 1999). The interview questions for this study were designed to examine those roles and responsibilities.

Questions were developed to address the perceptions of both teachers and teacher assistants regarding their roles, responsibilities and relationships. The interview guides for both teachers and teacher assistants were field tested with educators who would not later become part of the study. Once the field tests had been completed, some of the questions were modified or reworded for clarity and the final interview guides were drawn up (See Appendices A and B).

Sample. All of the participants interviewed for this study are employed by a large rural School Jurisdiction in central Alberta. The Jurisdiction serves approximately 14 000 students in 28 schools. There are close to 700 teaching staff and more than 400 support staff including building operators, custodians, secretaries and teacher assistants. The respondents were randomly selected from among the schools in the Jurisdiction and once approached, were more than willing to participate. Five teachers and five teacher assistants were interviewed.

Conducting the interviews. Interviews were structured such that each participant would be exposed to "...a 'nearly identical' experience" (Borg & Gall, 1993, p. 445). Prior to their interviews, each participant was asked to read and sign a letter of invitation

and consent to participate in the study (See Appendix C). The opening statement was read verbatim and each participant was asked the same questions in the same order. Interviews were conducted in an environment comfortable to the participants and at a time convenient to them. The time involved varied for each interview but generally took no more than thirty minutes.

All interviews were recorded on audiotape with the interviewer making only occasional jot notes on points to be clarified later. Detailed note taking was not elected so as not to "... disrupt the effectiveness of the communication between interviewer and respondent" (Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 455).

Immediately following each interview, the audiotapes were transcribed and participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview. The transcripts were then analyzed and coded using common themes.

Data analysis. The author analyzed the interview data using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The transcripts were examined statement-by-statement and as themes emerged from the data, each one was assigned a different color. Highlighters were then used to color-code the transcribed words.

Respondents

All individuals interviewed work with special needs children in some capacity. Currently, each of them is working in either an elementary school or a middle school, and their experience in educational institutions is varied. They were all more than willing to share their insights on teacher/teacher assistant relationships. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Teachers. Five teachers of varying backgrounds were interviewed for this study. They willingly shared their unique perspective about working with teacher assistants. Their contributions to this study were invaluable.

Diane is the most experienced teacher interviewed. She has a Bachelor of Education degree with a major in Special Education and a minor in Physical Education. She also holds a Masters of Education in which her specialization was the 'Integration of Special Education Students'. Diane has been teaching for sixteen years and is currently employed as a Resource Teacher in a middle school with a population of 500 students. Along with her partner, she is responsible for programming for 25 students who have severe medical, physical, emotional or cognitive disabilities. There are eleven teacher assistants in her program, each one of whom is assigned to work with students either in the Resource Room or in regular classrooms.

Employed in a similar position except at an elementary school is Pat. With eight years of teaching experience, Pat is responsible for programming for eleven children with high needs. She has a Bachelor of Education degree with a major in Special Education. There are five teacher assistants assigned to her program. The assistants are assigned to work with individual children, either in the Resource Room setting or in regular classrooms.

Sheri also has eight years of teaching experience and a Bachelor of Education degree with a major in Special Education. Her other areas of specialization include Reading and Early Childhood. Currently, she is working in an elementary school with a population of 300 students. Her full time position is divided among three programs – she is the Resource Teacher responsible for programming for children with learning

disabilities, the Early Literacy Teacher responsible for programming for children in grades one and two who are struggling in reading, and the Lead Teacher for the School's Literacy Project with grade three and four students. She has one assistant assigned to her programs. In addition to working with Sheri in her Resource Room program, this assistant works with children in regular classrooms settings.

Jackie was the youngest of the teachers interviewed with only two years of teaching experience. She holds two degrees – a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Education. Her area of specialization is Literacy and Learning Disabilities. Her part-time teaching position is divided between two programs in an elementary school with 500 students. She is the Lead Teacher for the Literacy Project in her school as well as the Early Literacy Teacher responsible for programming for children experiencing reading difficulties in grades one and two. She has one teacher assistant assigned to her programs. This assistant works both in regular classrooms and with Jackie as she implements individual programs for students.

Sheila has a unique perspective on the teacher/teacher assistant relationship as, prior to finding a full-time teaching position, she was employed as a teacher assistant. Currently, she is teaching grade one in an elementary school with 300 students. She holds two university degrees – a Bachelor of Psychology and a Bachelor of Education with a major in Primary Education. She works with one teacher assistant who is assigned to support a funded student who is integrated into her classroom.

Teacher assistants. The five teacher assistants interviewed for this study have had a variety of experiences in educational settings. They have worked as parent volunteers in their own children's schools and have been or still are students themselves. The insights

that they shared about the development of effective relationships between teachers and teacher assistants are extensive.

Currently in her fifteenth year, Brenda has the most experience of the teacher assistants interviewed. She is presently working in a middle school with about 400 students where her job consists of working 1:1 or in small groups with children who are struggling in the regular classroom setting. She took two years of University training toward her Bachelor of Education before leaving the faculty to have a family.

Isabel has worked as a teacher assistant for ten years, but this is her first year as an employee of this School District. She is employed at a middle school with 500 students. In her position, she works with two children with special needs, shadowing them throughout the day as they move from a regular classroom setting to a Resource Room setting. Isabel has completed a Medical Assistant course and a Pharmacy Assistant course and is currently working on her Teacher Assistant Certification through a local institution.

Nancy started in the school setting as a parent volunteer and has now worked as a teacher assistant for four years. She has no post-secondary training. In her current position in an elementary school with 300 students, she works with a variety of children with learning difficulties both in the regular classroom and in a Resource Room setting.

Sally also has four years of experience as a teacher assistant. She is currently taking a Teacher Aide course by correspondence, and has previously taken a number of courses in crisis intervention and working with children who have emotional difficulties. Employed in an elementary school with 350 students, she provides support to a student with a severe behavior disorder in a regular classroom setting.

Della has the least experience of the teacher assistants in this study. This is her first year working full-time at an elementary school. She has previously been a parent volunteer at the same school and, last year, worked two days a week as an assistant in the School's Resource Program. She has no post-secondary training. In her current position, she works in a grade one classroom where her primary responsibility is to support and monitor a child with a disability.

All of the respondents were very interested in sharing their stories about working as part of a teacher/teacher assistant team. Their input has proven invaluable in confirming what the current literature states about the development of effective relationships between teachers and teacher assistants.

Findings

From the analysis of the transcripts of both groups, the strongest theme to emerge was that of communication. It appears that both teachers and assistants feel that communication is the most critical element in the development of effective working relationships. As it was stated by Isabel, one of the more experienced teacher assistants, “Communication would be the number one thing so that you know what is wanted in the classroom, what is expected in the classroom. Anything you’re thinking, communicate back and forth – that’s probably one of the best things that can happen.”

Other themes that emerged through the data analysis were the importance of clear expectations for teacher assistants, the establishment of collaborative planning time for the teacher/teacher assistant teams, and the supervision/evaluation of the teacher assistants. Both groups also talked about the importance of training, especially the fact that this was one area they perceived as inadequate.

Communication

Whether working with one other adult or with many, all of the respondents emphasized the importance of communication in the teacher/teacher assistant relationship. Some talked about regularly scheduled meetings as a mode of communication while others, like Jackie, indicated that she simply touches base with her assistant every day. Teachers and teacher assistants alike feel that the form of communication is less important than the fact that both members of the team are kept informed and that the lines of communication are kept open.

Teachers. When discussing communication between themselves and the teacher assistants they work with, the teachers referred mostly to formal methods of sharing

information, such as meetings and plan books. Some reference was also made to informal conferencing.

Diane and her teaching partner have developed a fairly elaborate system of communicating with their team of eleven assistants. Each morning, they hold fifteen-minute meetings with the teacher assistants. At these meetings, they touch base making sure that everybody's there and everybody knows what they're doing. "We don't talk about personal issues, we talk about things like So & So can't take Phys. Ed. today so he's going to stay out, or So & So had a bad morning so today he's going to be off kilter." Assistants are made aware of what is going on during the day and then they are sent off to carry on with their assigned duties. If anything comes up during the day that is going to affect a teacher assistant's schedule, a memorandum is sent around and a note is made on the "monitoring board" in the Resource Room. The teacher assistants also have a plan book in which their daily assignments are written and they "...keep a jot note of what happens in the [regular] classroom." They also write anecdotal notes regarding student behavior in their plan books, which are read by Diane and her teammate on a regular basis. (Diane and her partner spend a considerable amount of time training their assistants on what an appropriate anecdotal comment looks like before asking the assistants to assume this responsibility.) A thirty-minute block is scheduled twice a week for the assistants to meet with Diane and her partner. The assistants are invited to discuss individual students with whom they are working and how to meet the needs of those students. They are also encouraged to use this time to discuss any problems they might have encountered in a classroom, with a particular teacher, or with another assistant. Diane fully believes that communication is an essential component of an effective

teacher/teacher assistant relationship and she ensures that communication occurs through regular meetings, written plans and informal conferencing. In her words, “If there’s no communication, you’re going to have a lot of problems.”

Sheri is another teacher who has been able to schedule fifteen minutes each morning to meet with her teacher assistant. During this time, she will “...give her [assistant] a little debrief on this is what I want to achieve, this is where we’re going with this and this is what it’s going to look like.” She also says that she does a lot of conferencing with her assistant – “informally, at the end of the day, at the beginning of the day, that type of thing.” Sheri’s assistant is encouraged to use their meeting time to share any concerns or issues that arise when she is scheduled to be in regular classrooms. Sheri is very open in her communication with her assistant and says that because they have established such an open relationship, she relies on her assistant for feedback about what is going well and what needs to be changed. She feels she has become more reflective about her own teaching through communication with her assistant.

In addition to touching base on a daily basis, Jackie also uses scheduled meetings to communicate with her assistant. These meetings are held once a week and give them time to work as a team to plan what will occur over the next week. The assistant, whom Jackie refers to as “dedicated and professional”, will also ask clarifying questions whenever the opportunity arises throughout the day.

Although they admitted that they chatted informally with their teacher assistants, the other two teachers in the study tend to rely more on written modes of communication. Pat expects each of her assistants to check in her plan book daily where she writes directions for each assistant beside her own lesson plans. The assistants are expected to

complete “a weekly log sheet” on which they share what they have been working on in the regular classroom setting. Specifically, they tell her “... what they’re working on from the IPP [Individual Program Plan] objectives and the progress or the needs, and any behavioral needs as well.” With six assistants to coordinate, Pat has found written communication to be the most efficient method for her.

Sheila also uses her plan book to communicate with the assistant in her grade one classroom. She says, “I’ve got my plans here and then on the opposite page, I’ve got a column [with the assistant’s name] and then a place for comments. If there’s anything special that I need her to do, that’s where I write it.” Sheila finds this to be the most efficient method of communication in her class of twenty-seven grade one students where she may not always be able to make the time to converse with the assistant. Sheila also has a place for the teacher assistant to write comments about the child she is responsible for and how he was able to cope with a particular lesson.

Teacher assistants. When talking about communication, the teacher assistants were less concerned about what is being communicated and more concerned about how it is being communicated. Each of them talked about the importance of feeling that they were being listened to and about clarifying what is expected of them so as to avoid misunderstandings.

Nancy says she has found that if she has a question about something, it is best to just come right out and ask. She would, however, add, “[i]t’s important to communicate and choose your timing on that. The teacher will be more receptive if you’re careful about the timing.”

Also straightforward in her approach to communication with teachers, Brenda says, 'I usually try to talk things through. If I feel that there have been misunderstandings, I feel that it's best just to lay all the cards out on the table and talk about it and hopefully resolve whatever it is. I try not to just assume things or take on anything unless I have direct instruction from the teacher.'

Sally finds it best to ask questions before misunderstandings arise. Her advice is "... find out how [teachers] like things done and make sure you're always asking the teachers if there is something that needs to be done. Just say this is what I think I should be doing. Is this okay with you? Is this how you would do it?"

Della feels it is important to be "... open and honest without being confrontational." When misunderstandings do arise, or she is uncertain of something the teachers have asked her to do, she says, "... you have to let them know because if you don't they just assume you understand." In her experience as a teacher assistant, she has found that teachers tend to use educational jargon and are not aware of how frustrating it can be for somebody who does not have the same background.

[Teachers] have all these little words that they use and I think, 'What does that mean?' Sometimes they forget and I know they don't mean to, they just sometimes forget and you're kind of [left wondering what they are saying and] I always think, 'What does that mean?' And some are worse than others. Some speak very plain and simple English. When you don't have the background, it's difficult because you're kind of going, 'I have no idea what they just said.' You know, they use all these little acronyms or whatever you call them and you're like, 'What does that mean?'

Clear Expectations

All of the teacher assistants alluded to the fact that most misunderstandings between themselves and their supervising teachers could be avoided if teachers clearly communicated their expectations.

Teachers. In the interviews, teachers were asked to give a description of the role of the teacher assistant(s) with whom they work. The answers given varied from supporting special needs students in classrooms to supporting the instruction of the teacher to assisting with personal care/hygiene for students with physical disabilities. Some of the teachers see the teacher assistant's primary role as supporting the teacher, while others see it as supporting students.

Because she is responsible for three different programs in her school, Sheri's description of the role of her teacher assistant was the most varied. She indicated that during the Early Literacy portion of her time, her teacher assistant is responsible for "supporting my instruction... doing vocabulary development, phonemic awareness, guided reading... all under my instruction." When assigned to the Resource program, her assistant is allocated to classrooms to provide support to the students in those classes. Specific direction in these classes comes from the classroom teacher, but her greatest responsibility is to support students having difficulty in math. In the portion of her time allotted to the School's Literacy Project, Sheri's assistant is also assigned to individual classrooms where she supports the classroom teacher in her instruction while specifically targeting two or three children with reading difficulties.

Similarly, the role of the teacher assistant working with Jackie is "[t]o aid the children in the classroom that are struggling." Jackie's assistant provides support to her in

her instruction of small groups of children with reading difficulties. Jackie sees her own role as “validating her assistant’s job” and “... taking time to explain what needs to be done and why it needs to be done, not just expecting her [assistant] to walk into a classroom and be with children.”

Sheila is also very clear about what her role is in relation to that of the teacher assistant. The assistant is responsible “... to provide, not to come up with, but to implement the programming set forth by me.” Having worked as a teacher assistant herself, Sheila had been put into the position of planning and implementing a program for a special needs child. At the time, Sheila had completed her teaching degree, but had been unable to find a teaching position. Her supervising teacher had chosen to take advantage of her training as a teacher and Sheila had found herself in a difficult position. The School’s administration, when this was discovered, informed Sheila that she was performing duties outside her realm of responsibility, and ensured that the teacher involved resumed responsibility for planning the program while Sheila maintained responsibility for implementation of that program. Having had this experience, Sheila is careful to ensure she is planning for her assistant, but wonders if she gives enough guidance.

In Pat’s program, the assistants have various responsibilities. Two of them work with children who are fully integrated into regular classrooms. The others work with children in a segregated setting in the morning and then follow these children as they are integrated in regular classrooms in the afternoon.

Diane explains the roles of her eleven assistants as “... first of all, we work very closely together on IPP planning. The assistants also work with students [who] have

medical needs, behavior students, students [who] are integrated in the classroom, as well as the assistants work in the Resource Room specifically in the area of living skills.”

Some of the assistants in her program also implement exercise programs for physically handicapped children or assist in planning for alternate Physical Education programs for medically fragile children. In regard to explaining to the assistants what their roles and responsibilities are, she feels that “... the best thing to do is to sit down with the assistants right away and let them know that this is what your role is, your responsibilities, these are your expectations, these are your hours (because that always comes up), this is what your job role is and then, give [the assistants] some type of training.”

Teacher assistants. Given the variety of job descriptions, it is no surprise that the teacher assistants expressed confusion about their roles and a desire to have teachers be more clear in their expectations. This is especially true in the case of the assistants who are working with more than one teacher.

As Brenda says, “...I work in the classroom with different teachers. From class to class each teacher has their own style, their own way of doing things, their own expectations on how high the noise level can go, whether the kids are allowed leave the room for bathroom, drinks, etc.” Nancy expanded on this thought with, “[i]t’s frustrating working with different teachers and not knowing. Sometimes it takes a year or more to establish eye cues, [or] body language that doesn’t have to always be fed. The hardest part of working with different teachers is understanding their styles, what they want to see from you, when they want you to cut in, and when they don’t need you.”

When asked if any of the teachers they worked with had taken the time to explain their personal teaching philosophies or discipline policies, or make clear their

expectations, neither of these two teacher assistants could say that this had been formally done. Brenda indicated that she had received "... maybe just a general bit of instruction to start with and then as we go along, [the teacher] will say, 'Well, I usually do it this way, or I prefer this.' Most people just can't take the time, or don't take the time to sit and make it clearer. You know, usually they're just frantic to get an assistant and I guess they just think that somehow that person will figure it out as they go. That's what most of us [teacher assistants] end up doing." Brenda went on to say that she has learned to take a few minutes as she enters a new classroom to study the dynamics and figure out where she is most needed, but she has fifteen years of experience as a teacher assistant and felt that this would be very difficult for somebody who was just starting out as an assistant.

Della, as the least experienced of the teacher assistants in the study, expressed exactly that. "I really didn't know what was expected of me. When I went into the classroom, I really didn't have an outline of my job description to go back and check up on. So I feel I'm kind of learning on the fly."

Isabel also feels that she has been learning on the fly this year. Although she has ten years of experience as a teacher assistant, this is her first year in her current assignment, and she says, "I'm just starting to get to know the kids that I'm working with and I spend every day with them. And, with the teachers, you know, you don't get that chance and you don't know personally what they're like or what kind of expectations they have." She firmly believes that teacher/teacher assistant teams should have more time to converse, clarifying roles and discussing responsibilities. The responsibility for what happens in the classroom ultimately lies with the teacher and Isabel feels that, as an assistant, for her to be able to do a good job she needs clear guidelines to follow. Her

concern, and one which is shared by teachers and teacher assistants alike, is that it is difficult for teachers and assistants to find time in their hectic daily schedules to meet and plan collaboratively.

Collaboration and Planning Time

Collaboration and time for planning together are essential components of teamwork. This is especially true for teacher/teacher assistant teams. Both teachers and assistants stressed the importance of having time to talk about how they work together for the benefit of the children in their care. This time, for many of them, occurs outside the regular school hours, either before or after school or at lunch.

Teachers. In addition to the daily meetings and weekly clerical time already discussed, Diane, her partner and their eleven assistants meet once each month for two hours to plan their program. They discuss "... what works, what doesn't work, what we need to change." Because the assistants are not paid for this time, Diane tries to make it a short meeting and then takes the assistants out for dinner.

In their weekly collaboration time, Pat and her assistants, along with the regular classroom teachers, meet to "... go over anything [the teacher assistants] need help with and to do programming and put together special programs." Pat indicates that she used to have most of these meetings either before or after school, but has now found a way to build the time into her schedule.

Sheri has also found a way to build meeting time with her assistant into her regular schedule. Unfortunately, it has meant that she has had to give up some of her teacher preparation time, something which she considers a small sacrifice.

Jackie says that as a relatively new teacher working with a teacher assistant she is excited about “the opportunity to collaborate with someone who’s very enthusiastic and always wanting to learn more.” She says, “It keeps me on my toes making sure I’m providing her with information.” Time for her to collaborate with her teacher assistant is built into her schedule once each week.

Teacher assistants. The teacher assistants talked less about the time for meetings and how it is scheduled. More important for them is that they feel listened to and valued as a member of a team working toward the same goal.

Isabel, who works both in the regular classroom and in a Resource Room setting, indicated that although she felt there was adequate time to plan with the resource teacher, she would like to have “...more time to be able to spend with the classroom teachers so that [they] could better plan out for the particular child...” with whom she works. She says she ends up trying to catch classroom teachers before school, after school or at lunch and, since they’re time is stretched to the limit, she is often left on her own to do what she feels is best for the children.

Della, on the other hand, feels that with the weekly IPP meetings she is involved in, she has ample time to meet and collaborate with the teacher with whom she works. More important to her is the fact that when she has an idea she is able to share it with the teacher. “I give her my input and she’s very receptive to that. She’s just awesome, you know, kind of going on my intuition, or gut reaction.”

Nancy also feels valued for the skills she brings to her position and finds herself being invited to share her ideas with teachers.

The longer I've been here, they've watched what I do and how I do things and they're more free now so the responsibilities are a lot bigger and greater than when I first began here. Like I was saying with the reteaching of something, they're okay to say, 'This is the skill we're working on, this is what I've tried.' We may dialogue briefly about what I may try and then it's, 'OK, go ahead and let me know how it goes.'

Sally and Brenda also referred to the importance of being made to feel like part of a team. They each felt that the staffs at their schools were very grateful to have the extra pair of hands to help with difficult children and they indicated that they are invited to contribute to program planning for these children. Both respondents also feel very supported by the teachers who supervise them and are comfortable in approaching them with any difficulties that may arise.

Supervision of Teacher Assistants

Supervision of teacher assistants has become a reality for each of the teachers that were interviewed. It is a reality however which has been the cause of anxiety and stress for them. As Jackie puts it, "I was not prepared for it. I was a little shocked and wasn't sure what I was going to do with the assistant or how it was going to work. I wasn't given a lot of guidance on how to do this so it was a real learning process with the assistant."

Pat feels that with the numbers of teacher assistants she is working with, her job "... is more of a facilitator than a teacher now." She finds herself spending a considerable amount of time developing programs for her assistants to implement and then supervising them during that implementation. She is concerned that she is "... not a great supervisor in terms of dealing with conflict or confrontation, but if [the assistants] are doing

something they ought not, I will comment to it.” Pat indicated that she has involved the school administration in the mediation of conflict between herself and teacher assistants, especially when the conflict arose from the evaluation of the assistant.

Although staff evaluation is an administrative responsibility, Pat is not alone in having been asked to evaluate teacher assistants. Each of the teachers interviewed has been involved in the evaluation process. Diane says, “The only thing I worry about is being honest enough, because you know when you’re evaluating it’s really hard because we all have different qualities.” Sheila says, “Evaluating, yeah, I guess that would be a stressor. I haven’t done it yet this year, so it wasn’t on my mind, but it was difficult last year. Especially when you know it’s not going to be the most positive.” Both of these teachers indicated that they have also involved school administration in more difficult situations, but evaluation of teacher assistants was certainly not something either had expected to be doing when they began teaching; nor was it something either had received any formal training to do.

Training

Teachers. One should expect that given the fact that teacher assistants have been working in schools for nearly 45 years, educational institutions would be incorporating some type of training to work with assistants into teacher education programs. This is not the case, however, as even Jackie, who is the most recent University graduate, received no training to work with teacher assistants in her formal education. All of the training the teachers in this study had received came from attending workshops, reading books or simply on-the-job experience (See Table 1).

Table 1.
Training Received by Teachers

Name	Type of Training
Diane	Inservice training; read books about working with teacher assistants; on-the-job experience.
Jackie	No formal training; read books about working with teacher assistants; on-the-job experience.
Pat	Inservice training; read books about working with teacher assistants; on-the-job experience.
Sheila	No formal training; 1:1 mentoring from an experienced teacher; on-the-job experience.
Sheri	No formal training; on-the-job experience

Diane, who has the most experience working with teacher assistants, has this advice for teachers who are working with a teacher assistant for the first time. “I think the very first thing that the teacher should do is make sure that they have some training themselves, in working with assistants. So I would recommend that they take a course or they work through their school district or they go through a community college.” She suggests that even simply reading a book will help the teacher gain some knowledge about how to work with teacher assistants more effectively.

Teacher assistants. The teacher assistants, even those who are currently working on teacher assistant certification courses, indicated that most of their training comes from on-the-job experience (See Table 2). Some, like Della, have attended workshops sponsored by the School District and a couple have attended conferences for teacher assistants. For the most part though, as Isabel says, their training comes from "...being shown what to do through guidance from the teachers."

Table 2.
Training Received by Teacher Assistants

Name	Type of Training
Brenda	Two years of University education; on-the-job training.
Della	Inservice training, on-the-job experience.
Isabel	Formal training through teacher assistant program; workshops; on-the-job training.
Nancy	Workshops; on-the-job training.
Sally	Formal training through teacher assistant program; workshops; on-the-job training.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that issues pertaining to communication, clear expectations and collaborative planning time all affect the development of effective relationships between teachers and teacher assistants. The relationships between teachers and teacher assistants are also influenced by the limited training, either preservice or inservice, available to either group. The role of teachers in this relationship is further complicated by their responsibility to supervise and evaluate teacher assistants.

Communication is a central component of any healthy relationship. The relationship between teachers and teacher assistants is no exception. Teachers and teacher assistants alike believe that keeping the lines of communication open between all members of the team is essential. The teachers in this study emphasized the importance of what is communicated and where the communication occurs, while the teacher assistants were more concerned with how it occurs. Morgan and Ashbaker (2001) state, “Good communication is a vital element of classroom efficiency. Talk to each other whenever you can; send notes if you have to, but make sure that everyone knows what they need to know so that work is not duplicated and so that no one is frustrated by being left in the dark about procedures or expectations” (p. 76).

Closely linked to communication is the idea of clear expectations. Teachers believe that for teacher assistants to perform to the best of their ability, their roles and responsibilities should be clearly outlined. The teacher assistants in this study agreed with this statement, but have found that in practice this does not always happen. They have found themselves working in schools without written job descriptions or clear guidelines for their roles. This continues to occur despite the fact that much of the literature written

about teacher assistants in the past decade has focused on role clarification and the positive impact it has on the effectiveness of the teacher/teacher assistant relationship (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer & Doyle, 2001). “To be most effective, responsibilities need to be clearly defined, with specific instances of both what the responsibility includes and what it does *not* include” (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001, p. 16). Furthermore, it is the duty of the teacher “...to identify and correct serious misunderstandings about the extent of [the] paraprofessional’s responsibility and authority and to know the limitations that the school and the district place on responsibilities that can be assigned” (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001, p. 16).

To facilitate role clarification, teacher/teacher assistant teams must have time for meetings and collaborative planning. The teachers in this study emphasized that at the least, one should set aside time each week to meet with teacher assistants. Blalock (1991) indicated that establishing and maintaining good communication can be facilitated through daily or at least biweekly meetings. These meetings provide a “...consistent arena in which both partners can share their perceptions about students’ progress, feelings about recent activities and ideas for the future...” (Blalock, 1991, p. 207).

The teacher assistants agreed that planning time is essential for effective performance of their roles, but they were more concerned about having their input valued than with the frequency of the meetings. Teacher assistants, especially those who are assigned to support children with special needs, often know the children better than anyone else and their input into planning programs can be invaluable (Marks, Schrader & Levine, 1999). However, this should not preclude that it is the legal responsibility of the

teacher to prepare program plans (ATA, 2000) and supervise the teacher assistant in the implementation of these plans.

Supervision of teacher assistants is a responsibility for which most of the teachers in this study felt inadequately prepared, yet it has become a major part of their role. Teachers have become responsible for the deployment of a valuable human resource and must ensure they are making adequate use of the teacher assistants' talents and skills in meeting the educational needs of children (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001).

As a result of their supervisory position, teachers are also being required to assume increasing responsibility for the evaluation of teacher assistants. Although teachers may not be comfortable with this responsibility, their input into the evaluation of teacher assistants is important as they are the ones who work closest with the assistants and know the strengths and limitations of the assistants best. Teachers' "... interest in evaluation should extend beyond just the district's formal personnel evaluation. The teacher should be concerned with finding ways to help the paraeducator be more effective. Evaluation of the paraeducator's ability to carry out classroom functions is one means of highlighting the need for additional assistance or training" (Pickett, Vasa & Steckelberg, 1993, p. 27).

While few of the teacher assistants in this study had received formal training for their position, most had participated in inservice training related either to working with teachers or to working with children. They also indicated that they had received some on-the-job training through guidance from their supervising teachers, but none of them felt that their training had been adequate to meet all the demands of their roles. Giangreco, Edelman, Broer and Doyle (2001) reported in their review of the literature from the past

decade "... that preservice training for paraprofessionals is virtually nonexistent and inservice training continues to be insufficient" (p. 49).

The teachers reported that much of their training for working with teacher assistants has come from on-the-job experience. Some of the participants in the study had sought the advice of more experienced teachers and used this information to develop an effective method of supervision. Others had participated in workshops or inservices related to working with teacher assistants, but not one of them had received any formal training in their preservice education. This concern about insufficient training is consistent with the findings of Giangreco, Edelman, Broer and Doyle (2001), who discovered that the non-databased literature written over the past decade "... consistently suggests that teachers and special educators have insufficient training related to the supervision of paraprofessionals" (p. 48).

Yet, training has been identified in the literature as one of the most important factors in the development of effective working relationships between teachers and teacher assistants. Hornburg (1968) stated that "[a] good inservice program may spare both aide and teacher many awkward situations and dispel unnecessary doubts and concerns" (p. 45). French (1998) indicated that in addition to inservice training that would enable teachers to refine their supervisory skills, "... we need preservice preparation so that future teachers acknowledge their role as supervisor and are better prepared to supervise than our current workforce" (p. 367).

Because this study was conducted in only one School District in Alberta, one must be cautious in applying its results to all school jurisdictions. However, the results can be used to make some general recommendations regarding the conditions which

should be met to develop effective working relationships between teachers and teacher assistants.

Recommendations

This study has identified communication as the key element in the development of effective working relationships between teachers and teacher assistants. To facilitate communication, several things must be considered. Most importantly, teachers and teacher assistants need to be aware of their roles and responsibilities as they relate to each other. Teachers must be comfortable in their role as supervisors and clear about the responsibilities they may legally and ethically delegate to noncertificated personnel. They must be aware of both provincial regulations and school district policies related to teacher assistants. They also need to be given the opportunity to meet with teacher assistants on a regular basis to share pertinent information related to the assistants' roles. Teacher assistants must have a clear understanding of their job description and the expectations of their supervising teachers. They need to be validated as important members of the educational team and they need to understand what their role on that team is.

The data collected in this study suggest several courses of action. First and foremost, teachers and teacher assistants need to receive training, both preservice and inservice, so they can work together effectively. Second, both school district and school level administration must be willing to support teachers and assistants in their work together. Finally, teachers and teacher assistants themselves must be prepared to accept a role in the development of effective working relationships.

Training

For teachers. Through an informal survey of the teacher training programs in Alberta, it was determined that only students who are preparing for a career in special education receive any type of training related to working with teacher assistants, and even

this is limited. Because “[m]ost elementary classroom teachers [in Alberta] have at least some access to the services of a teachers’ assistant” (ATA, 2000, p.1), it would be prudent for educational institutions to provide preservice training to equip teachers with the necessary skills to work effectively with teacher assistants.

Wallace, Shin, Bartholomy and Stahl (2001) have identified seven competencies necessary for teachers supervising the work of teacher assistants. These competencies, which could become the foundation for preservice training, include:

- 1) communication – sharing information about students and explaining the role of the assistant;
- 2) planning and scheduling – developing schedules which include time for collaborative planning;
- 3) instructional support – providing feedback and supporting assistants as they provide instruction to students;
- 4) modeling for assistants – treating students in a caring, respectful manner;
- 5) public relations – keeping administration, teachers and parents informed as to the role of the assistant; and advocating for teacher assistant training;
- 6) training – providing on-the-job training to the assistant; and, finally
- 7) management of paraprofessionals – maintaining regular and positive interaction with the assistant while contributing to evaluation and supporting skills development for the assistant.

School jurisdictions could use these same competencies to develop inservice training programs for teachers engaged in the supervision of teacher assistants.

For teacher assistants. While preservice training programs for teacher assistants are becoming more accessible, there are still large numbers of assistants who have no training at all. Given this, it would be prudent for school jurisdictions to consider the development of inservice training for teacher assistants as well. Not dissimilar to the competencies needed by teachers, elements of a training program for teacher assistants could include team-building, communication skills, self-advocacy skills and public relations skills. Specific training for working with students could also be included.

On-the-job. Teachers, because they work closest with teacher assistants, have the opportunity to provide on-the-job training for assistants. This training should begin with an orientation to the position, including a clear description of the teacher assistant's role, scheduling details, confidentiality policies, emergency procedures and a tour of the school building (Carroll, 2001). Teachers would also be wise to share their personal teaching philosophy, discipline procedures and classroom management strategies in this orientation session.

Beyond the orientation session, teachers should take the opportunity to continuously clarify their expectations of teacher assistants through regularly scheduled meetings. During these meetings, teachers could share information about specific students or programs, as well as information about the lessons teacher assistants may be involved in implementing. On-the-job training should also include teachers identifying teacher assistants' strengths and areas to develop and then advocating for further inservice training for the assistant.

Administrative Support

In addition to the development of inservice training, school district administration

can provide support to teacher/teacher assistant teams through the development of policy related to teacher assistants. One of the crucial elements of this policy would be a written job description.

While only mentioned specifically as a concern by one of the teacher assistants in this study, a clear written job description would appear to be critical, given the other concerns raised by all respondents. Because of the breadth of the roles assumed by teacher assistants, one job description may be difficult to establish, but it would certainly assist teacher assistants in understanding their roles in schools. It would also assist teachers in their supervision of teacher assistants.

Supervision and evaluation of teacher assistants. Since the introduction of teacher assistants into classrooms in North America, teachers have been responsible for supervising them. Despite their hesitation to take on this role, teachers have done so, but not without sacrifice. The time involved in planning adequately for teacher assistants as well as for meeting with them on a regular basis has often been taken from the teachers' preparation time or from time before or after school for which the assistants are generally not paid. School administrators need to be aware of this and find some way to build collaborative meeting time into both the teachers' and teacher assistants' schedules.

In most Alberta school jurisdictions, the responsibility for the evaluation of teacher assistants belongs with the principal who may delegate it to the supervising teachers. If principals are going to continue to have this expectation of teachers, they need to be prepared to support the teacher throughout this process. Teachers in this study confirmed the need for more administrative support in this area.

Selection of teacher assistants. School administrators need to be aware of the importance of matching teachers and teacher assistants to each other. To facilitate this, it would behoove administrators to involve teachers in the process of selecting the assistants with whom they will be working. “With minimal preparation regarding the legal limitations on interview questions, every teacher who has supervisory responsibility for paraprofessionals could be part of the hiring process” (French, 2001, p. 48). Principals and human resources personnel could provide this preparation for teachers and include them in the process of hiring teacher assistants.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers themselves play a vital role in the development of effective relationships with teacher assistants. They must be able to provide teacher assistants with clear expectations of both what the assistant’s role is and what it is not. Morgan and Ashbaker (2001) state that teachers “... should be *very* explicit in communicating what [they] want – and do not want – [the] paraeducator to do” (p. 16). To do this effectively, teachers must be aware of their legal rights and responsibilities related to teacher assistants as well as their school district policies related to working with teacher assistants (ATA, 2000; Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001). They need to know what responsibilities can legally be assigned to teacher assistants as well as those which cannot. They must be willing to share their personal philosophies of education, of classroom management and of discipline.

Teachers must be advocates for training for both themselves and teacher assistants and, when inservice training is not available, they must be willing to provide on-the-job training for assistants. Morgan and Ashbaker (2001) state that “[p]eople should not be

expected to perform tasks that they have not been taught or that have not been modeled for them” (p. 64). Teachers, therefore, should provide support to teacher assistants by ensuring they have the opportunity to learn skills before they are expected to perform them. This can be accomplished by modeling tasks for assistants and providing them opportunity to ask clarifying questions before asking them to demonstrate their own skill (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001). “Providing training and support that match an appropriate paraprofessional role tangibly demonstrates respect and value for paraprofessionals. It sends the message that the individual’s work is important enough to warrant such attention, training, and support because it is vital to the operation of the educational program” (Giangreco, Edelman & Broer, 2001, 495).

Role of the Teacher Assistant

Teacher assistants obviously make an important contribution to the development of effective relationships between themselves and teachers. They must be willing to take direction from their supervising teacher and to ask clarifying questions when that direction is ambiguous. They must learn to communicate effectively with adults as well as children. They must be willing to advocate for training for themselves and to learn teaching techniques and management strategies that work with all types of students. “When paraprofessionals are part of the process, training is more meaningful, and when paraprofessionals know ‘what to do’, their effectiveness increases and instruction for all students improves” (Riggs, 2001, p.82). Most importantly, though, teacher assistants must become willing participants in all aspects of the school community.

Summary

The development of effective relationships between teachers and teacher assistants is dependent upon a number of conditions, including appropriate training and administrative support. The teachers and teacher assistants themselves play an important role in these relationships and must be prepared to support each other in their work with children.

Supervision of teacher assistants can be challenging for new teachers and veterans alike, and that challenge may be renewed each time teachers are assigned to work with a new assistant. However, the supervision of teacher assistants can also be rewarding as it offers many benefits – “... another adult perspective in the classroom, someone else’s lifetime of experiences and skills, another pair of hands and eyes to help you [as the teacher] to learn more about your own effectiveness as an educator; an opportunity to facilitate another adult’s learning and professional development; and (in the experience of most teacher-paraeducator teams that we have encountered) a tremendous source of support for the important work you do as an educator” (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001, p. 96).

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Appendix A

Interview Guide – Teachers

Introduction:

(This statement will be read verbatim at the beginning of each interview.)

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me today. My name is Dawn Thompson and as a graduate student of the University of Lethbridge, I am conducting research on building effective working relationships between teachers and teacher assistants. I will be recording our interview and will give you the opportunity to review the transcript of the tape before I write my report. Everything you share with me today will be kept in the strictest confidence. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been teaching?
 - a. What degrees do you hold?
 - b. What is your area of specialization?
 - c. What is your current teaching assignment?
 - d. What, if any, training did you receive to work with teacher assistants?
 - e. How many teacher assistants do you currently work with?
2. What is the role of the teacher assistant(s) you work with?
 - a. What, if any, training (either preservice or inservice) has the teacher assistant had?
 - b. How do you engage in working with teacher assistants?
 - c. How do you determine the responsibilities of the teacher assistant?

- d. How has working with teacher assistants affected your role?
3. How would you describe your relationship with the teacher assistants you work with?
 - a. What aspects of working with teacher assistants cause you anxiety?
 - b. How do you approach difficulties in your relationship with teacher assistants?
 - c. What aspects of working with teacher assistants do you find most satisfying?
 4. What advice would you offer to a teacher who is working with a teacher assistant for the first time?
 5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B:

Interview Guide – Teacher Assistants

Introduction:

(This statement will be read verbatim at the beginning of each interview.)

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me today. My name is Dawn Thompson and as a graduate student of the University of Lethbridge, I am conducting research on building effective working relationships between teachers and teacher assistants. I will be recording our interview and will give you the opportunity to review the transcript of this tape before I write my report. Everything you share with me today will be kept in the strictest confidence. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. How many years have you been working as a teacher assistant?
 - a. What, if any, post-secondary training do you have?
 - b. What, if any, training did you receive to work with teachers?
 - c. What training have you received since you began working as a teacher assistant?
2. What is your current assignment?
 - a. What kinds of things are you responsible for in this assignment?
 - b. Who determines what your responsibilities are?
 - c. What part of your work do you find the most satisfying?
 - d. What part of your work do you find the most frustrating?

- e. How has your role changed in the time that you've been a teacher assistant?
3. How would you describe your relationship with the teachers you work with?
 - a. What aspects of working with teachers do you find the most frustrating?
 - b. How do you approach difficulties in your relationships with teachers?
 - c. What aspects of working with teachers do you find the most rewarding?
4. How would you describe your relationship with the school administration?
5. What advice would you give to somebody who has just accepted a job as a teacher assistant?
6. What advice would you offer to a teacher who is working with a teacher assistant for the first time?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix C

Letter of Invitation and Consent to Participate

Dear Colleague:

As a graduate student at The University of Lethbridge, I am conducting research on building effective working relationships between teachers and teacher assistants. I anticipate that the results of this project will assist teachers and teacher assistants build effective working relationships for the benefit of all students in their care.

As part of the research, you are being asked to participate in an interview. Please note that this interview will be recorded on audiotape. The tape will be kept in a secure location until it is destroyed on or before June 30, 2002. All information will be handled in a confidential and professional manner. Names, locations and any other identifying information will not be included in any discussion of the results. Since your participation is entirely voluntary, at any time you may decide to withdraw without prejudice.

I very much appreciate your participation in these interviews. If you choose to do so, please indicate your willingness by signing this letter in the space provided below.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 730-0876 or by email at dmthomp@shaw.ca. Also, feel free to contact my project supervisor, Dr. David Townsend at The University of Lethbridge (329-2731, email: david.townsend@uleth.ca),

or Dr. Keith Roscoe, Chair of Human Subjects Research Committee, The University of Lethbridge (329-2446, email: keith.roscoe@uleth.ca), if you wish additional information.

Sincerely,

Dawn M. Thompson

I have read the above information and agree to be interviewed.

Name

Signature

Date