A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF TEACHER ASSISTANTS'

EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR WORK

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the work of teacher assistants supporting students with disabilities in the public education system of British Columbia. Guided by the question, "What are the experiences and perceptions of the teacher assistants as they support students with disabilities in public education?", a naturalistic-phenomenological methodology was used to explore the experiences and perceptions of eight teacher assistants through in-depth interviews. Described are six major themes that emerged from the data. These include: 1) a shared sense of purpose in their work, one of supporting students towards independence and an enhanced quality of life; 2) participation in the development of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for the students; 3) a large degree of variability and lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities; 4) a high level of educational decision-making, responsibility, and autonomy in their work, including responsibility for adapting and modifying educational programs; 5) a low level of valuing and recognition for the work done, and 6) a strong sense of satisfaction and joy that arises from working with the students. There were a number of structural, attitudinal, and education issues that participants shared that contributed to the lack of clarity for the role and the tension between the high level of responsibility and low level of valuing and recognition. These findings support issues addressed in the current literature, including the lack of clarity of role and responsibilities, the need to educate teachers on ways to work with teacher assistants, and a lack of valuing and support for teacher assistants. They do not support the idea of increased education for teacher assistants as the sole means towards alleviating tensions arising in the field. A number of areas for further investigation arise from this study, as well as a call for further investigation in all aspects of the work of the teacher assistant.

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Preface

Pat is a teacher assistant supporting students with disabilities in a large secondary school in a public school district in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The following excerpt provides a glimpse into her workday life:

This is my life, yep. Well, at the high school that I work at, we have a block system, which is on a four day rotation. So day one would be ABC, lunch, CD. So you have a double block around lunchtime. The following day would be BCDDA, so it goes on a four day cycle. At the beginning of a semester, the teaching assistants get together with the teacher [and] we go through the students. We discover which students are in which classes and then we allot teacher assistants to each subject so that you are not assigned to a particular student for their school life. You continue rotating with students through the semesters and you'll be taking them into different classes depending on what they've been assigned for that particular semester. So you could be in a grade eight English in block A, and a grade 12 PE the next block B, or Foods and Nutrition in C in grade 10, so it is extremely varied.

And it depends on how the complement of the students, on their disabilities, whether they're severely disabled or just mildly mentally handicapped, to what extent you're supporting them and which way you're supporting them, you know, whether there is personal care involved, or whether there is modifying work involved or whatever.

So my particular day, let's say it was day one at this present time. My A block, I would spend in the resource room, probably supporting students I have out in an academic class. So if they have work or if they have some assignments that they needed help with, I could help with that. Also, there would be students in there ... who may not be doing academic English but

having English basic skills in the resource room. [They] might be doing basic Math and so you would just be part of the team supporting them as they're doing their work assignments. B block, I'm in a grade 8 English class. The young lady that I'm supporting is extremely verbal, desperate to learn, is a joy to work with, and really wants to be just one of the gang.... I find that I'm having to do a lot of scribing for her. She can write but she's very slow and her printing is not good ... but she can understand the notes and she can read my notes especially when I simplify them. So I will scribe for her so that she can listen to the teacher. And then when we are given assignments, I might reduce the number of questions that she does.

Also because it's an English class, we have a reading assignment and fortunately in the resource room, because its been going for such a long time now, we do have fairly good resource materials. We have been supporting students in academic classes for some time, so we have quite a lot of modified material that goes along with the academic curriculum. So, at the moment, the students are reading The Outsiders and so I have a modified version of assignments that she can do so that she's getting the same information, she's listening to the same words from the class, from the teacher. She can be involved in discussions, but the work that she's actually doing is on a modified level.

Whereas in D block, skipping C here, just to give you a comparison, it's a grade 8 class again. But it's a life skills class and the young man I'm supporting in that class, the first part of the life skills program is a sewing and he is a behaviour problem, very mildly mentally handicapped but attention deficit and behavioural, just bouncing off the walls, so very difficult to get on task and stay on task. But there are a number of kids in that class who are not identified as special needs but who obviously are having difficulty already even though they just started grade eight and so because it was a hands-on type of class, I was able to help the teacher work

with all of the students. And then that would include my student as well, just sort of with the interactions and everything. So I felt I was more of a teacher's assistant whereas in the English class, I'm more of a student's assistant.

[It's] a totally different picture. And sometimes in an academic class, it depends on the student. If you're constantly having to give feedback to that student, you might be talking quietly, trying to explain what the teacher's saying; you can't really sit back from her. Other students, you don't want to identify them too much and feel you're sitting at their elbow. They can be independent at a different part of the classroom but you are still there supporting them. Maybe [you] just go up and talk to them occasionally, you're there maybe taking some simple notes so that when they come to the resource room, then you've got the material because you know they won't have been able to follow that.

And also just to keep track of what the teacher's expectations are so that you can follow up on that so you don't have to be sitting at their elbow. But in that particular case, ... you could be working with maybe one or two other students that maybe you and the teacher have identified as needing a little bit of the assistance. Anyway, we jumped there didn't we, so C block I'm in 11/12 Foods class supporting a young man with autism....

Yeah, the young man with autism is extremely nice to work with. He's matured considerably over the three years he's been at our school and the hardest thing because he has autism is facilitating him having interaction with his peers. He's very much, he wants to be part of the group, but he can't force himself into the circle and he has difficulty expressing his wants and his needs to them. So I spend a lot of my time prompting, in that situation he's supposed to be part of a group when they're cooking but I have to say, 'Why don't you go and ask Tim if he wants garlic in whatever it is they're making', or 'Ask Ted whether he wants you to get, what job

he wants you to do', so the prompting kind of stuff.

So during or across the day, I might be say for the foods class, my student can write. He can write beautifully, cursive writing, but he is slow. So, say that she's dictating a recipe to them, I try and get recipes beforehand. I photocopy them and white out so that he just has to fill in the blanks, and that works really well for him. So then I'm doing an office type job. And then I have to coordinate with the teacher too, say, 'You know what recipes are coming up in the next couple of weeks?', ... 'Have you got them?', 'Can you give me them, can I get these prepared?'. I try and always think ahead too, when I'm in a class like that. I think, well, we've got students coming up they're going to be in the Foods class probably in the future so when I'm doing that, I'm trying to compile a binder so that then next time if it's not me that's in there, some other TA, you can say, well there's the binder for Foods 11, so you're not just thinking of the moment.

Acknowledgements

The end product of this thesis does not truly reflect the process and magnitude of the endeavour, and the fact that it is has been a group effort from start to finish. I want to acknowledge the many people who supported me through this 'adventure' and express my gratitude for their time, energy, and tolerance.

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Last, but never least, thank you to my daughter, Megan, for your patience, for believing in me, and for reminding me what is truly important in life. You are an inspiration and a joy. Let's go play!

Dedication

To the eight teacher assistants who so willingly and generously shared their time, experiences, and thoughts with me. May you one day get a name that reflects the value of and commitment to the work that you do!

To Gloria and Tom, the teacher assistants with whom I had the honour of working with as partners and who taught me so much.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore teacher assistants' experiences and their perceptions of their work. Teacher assistants, also referred to as paraprofessionals[1], support students with disabilities in the public education system of British Columbia. Originally a role primarily concerned with the personal care and educational support of students with severe disabilities in segregated schools and institutions, the role of the teacher assistant now involves the learning, behavioural, and personal care support of students with disabilities within the general education setting. Influenced by the implementation of inclusive education imperatives, the role of the teacher assistant has shifted dramatically over the past fifteen years. With this shift, new responsibilities, role definitions, and relational considerations continue to emerge. Paraprofessionals now "participate in all phases of the instructional process and support and enhance the programmatic and administrative functions of teachers" (Pickett, 1986a, p. 4). Identified as an integral part of the special education delivery system, it has become common practice to assign teacher assistants to support students with special needs. Although teacher assistants are considered significant members of the educational team, there is a lack of a clear and informed understanding of the work that they do and their perception of that work.

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, the main term, 'teacher assistant', as used by the Ministry of Education of British Columbia, will be used to describe the job of a paraprofessional supporting students with disabilities in the public school system. The secondary terms, paraprofessional or paraeducator, will be used in the context of discussing literature that has used paraprofessional or paraeducator as a definitive term. Typically, these secondary terms are used in the literature from the United States.

The evolving nature of the role of teacher assistants, the implementation of inclusive educational practices[2], and the concomitant educational, political, and economic issues contribute an on-going challenge in understanding this work. However, the need for further understanding is critical at this time for a number of reasons. The use of teacher assistants has become standard practice, resulting in a dramatic growth of positions and need for funding throughout the educational system. While considerable funding is allocated to these positions, there is limited empirical and qualitative research investigating the use of the teacher assistants to support students with disabilities. In addition, there is an absence of the teacher assistant in the research and in discussion of best practices in special education, and a lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in the educational process (Jensen, 1994; Pickett, 1996). As a result of the increasing numbers of positions, the changes in the work, and the confusion in the roles and responsibilities, there is a call from the field for standardized, in-depth post-secondary training for teacher assistants, as well as standardized qualifications. The accompanying costs to post-secondary institutions, school districts, and individuals undergoing teacher assistant education are significant. Finally, there are a few new and notable studies (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; Mueller, 1997) emerging that suggest that there are deeper and more complex issues related to practice and relational issues for paraprofessionals that go beyond the scope of the current literature available.

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[2] The philosophy of inclusive education advocates the inclusion of all students regardless of ability in the regular school setting. Stainback and Stainback (1990) define the inclusive school as "a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met" (p.3). With support and services, students with special needs have individualized programs aimed at addressing educational goals in the academic, life skills, and social domains.

In 1989, there was more than twice the number of teacher assistants than teachers employed in the area of special education in the province (Lam & McQuarrie, 1989). In British Columbia, there are now over 7,000 teacher assistants providing support to students in schools (C. Payne, personal communication, 1999) as compared to just over 3,600 full-time-equivalent teaching positions employed in special education (Ministry of Education, December 1999). In the United States, it is estimated that there are approximately 450,000 to 500,000 paraprofessionals working in education (Calhoun, 1998; Hofmeister, Ashbaker, & Morgan, 1996), with an estimated ratio of paraprofessionals to teachers of nearly one to five (Calhoun, 1998). Approximately half of these paraprofessionals are employed in special education (Calhoun, 1998). The magnitude of this sector of the education workforce suggests significant implications to service delivery, educational decision-making, instructional roles and responsibilities, inclusive education practices, and classroom practice. Yet, as Doyle (1995) stated, the role of the paraprofessional is "one of the fastest growing, yet least understood, roles in public education" (p. 1).

In relation to other topics in special education, very little has been written or researched about paraprofessionals. In an extensive review of the literature, Jones and Bender (1993) demonstrated the paucity of available research on paraprofessionals in education. "The comprehensive search of research and information articles that spanned more than 30 years revealed that little attention has been given to the utilization of paraprofessionals in special education programs" (Jones & Bender, 1993, p. 13). Limitations of the current literature include the relatively few researchers currently studying paraprofessionals in education, as well as a focus of the empirical research on what Jones and Bender (1995) refer to as "peripheral issues" (p. 7).

In addition, much of the discussion on the hiring and training of paraprofessionals is based on deeply rooted assumptions rather than on empirical data. In addressing the assumptions that guide the hiring of increasing numbers of paraprofessionals, Doyle (1995) explains:

> This has been based, in part, on the assumption that adding a paraeducator to a classroom leads to improved student outcomes. This assumption is deeply rooted in the sociology of schools, [sic] Cruickshank and Haring (1957) explain: *"This assumption is so central that it provides the rationale for the use of paraprofessionals"* (pp.4). However, this assumption has never been verified. In addition, a review of the literature found only limited evidence of any research that focuses on what it is that paraeducators do that lead to improved outcomes for students. (p.3)

Jones and Bender (1993) conclude, "very few data are available to suggest that enhanced student outcomes in achievement or social development can be attributed to the utilization of paraprofessionals" (p. 3). French (1996) supports this conclusion: "… there remains a notable lack of empirical information about the theoretical, legal, organizational and many of the procedural aspects of the employment of paraprofessionals" (p. 1).

Added to the lack of direct study addressing paraprofessionals is the significant absence of their role or work in the special education literature. While much of the work of the paraprofessional is informed by special education practice, little of the writing includes them in the discussion. An informal survey by this researcher of recently published special education/inclusive education textbooks for teacher education, for example, Hallahan and Kauffman's (2000) Exceptional Learners: Introduction to Special Education yielded little information about paraprofessionals within special education practice. At most, one to two paragraphs suggesting that a paraprofessional may be involved in the process are included. These

results are consistent with an informal survey conducted by this author of recent journal articles on best practices in special education and the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Salisbury, Gallucci, Palombaro, & Peck, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Wood, 1998). While teamwork and collaborative practices are discussed and strongly supported, paraprofessionals are not included as a part of the discussion on the 'educational team'. Classroom practices and instructional strategies for students with severe disabilities are studied; however, paraprofessionals' practices are not investigated. The focus of the special education literature is on the student, the teacher, the administrator's role, and the inclusion of the parent in the process. The work of the paraprofessional is, in essence, absent.

There is a glaring absence of the presence of teacher assistants, let alone an informed understanding of their work. This absence is significant in light of the large number of these positions in the schools. It is also significant in light of the responsibility assigned to the role. As Giangreco et al. (1997) point out, the use of the paraprofessional "has become a primary mechanism to implement more inclusive schooling practices" (p. 8). In spite of the lack of empirical evidence to support the efficacy of paraprofessionals or to guide educational practice, substantial funding dollars continue to be allocated to the hiring of these support staff.

In practice, there is strong support for the use of teacher assistants and the belief that they are integral to the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. The growing use of teacher assistants in this role is in response to the changing, and often urgent, needs of the school districts as they endeavour to include students with disabilities in educational experiences. In this case, daily need dictates practice rather than empirical evidence. The individual experiences of students who have achieved success with the support of a teacher assistant have been witnessed countless times by families, school staffs, and decision-makers. However, with the growth of this

position, the large amount of funding dollars allocated to it, and ultimately and most importantly, the need for quality support and educational experience for students with disabilities, it is imperative that further investigation that gives voice and understanding to this work be undertaken. While anecdotal reports can be valuable additions to our understanding, there is a need to add to our knowledge of the work of the paraprofessional through informed and systematic research. As Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Snyder, & Lisowski (1995) note:

> The use of paraprofessionals in the classroom has not been extensively researched.... Further research is needed to determine how decisions are made to provide teaching assistants, how they are used in inclusive classrooms, and the training they need to support the general education teacher. (p. 24)

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to contribute to an informed understanding of the work of the teacher assistant. This exploratory project investigated the experiences of teacher assistants and their perceptions of their work supporting students with disabilities in public education. The objectives of the project were:

- to identify and describe teacher assistants' experiences of their work;

- to analyze themes voiced by teacher assistants;

- to contextualize these themes within the broader perspective of special education/inclusive education practice and general education practice; and

- to identify areas for further inquiry.

Guided by the question: 'What are the experiences and perceptions of teacher assistants as they support students with disabilities in public education?', eight teacher assistants

supporting students with disabilities in the public education system of British Columbia were interviewed using a qualitative research design, grounded in a naturalistic-phenomenological philosophy[3]. These interviews were analyzed with an end goal of providing further understanding of the work of the teacher assistant by representing what they do and how they interpret their work, from their perspective. "Qualitative research techniques afford rich data through which it is possible to discover the meanings of events and situations as the participants … see them" (Wing, 1995, p. 226).

Little in the literature defines, describes, or interprets the experience of teacher assistants; there is little that addresses the work from the view of the teacher assistant. However, teacher assistants' own understandings of their work can bring a new and informed perspective to the discussion. In light of the many decisions made about the support of students with disabilities by teacher assistants, it is necessary to consider in a deliberate way the experience of teacher assistants in the field and how they define and understand the experiences of their work.

In our busy world of education, we are surrounded by layers of voices, some loud, some shrill, that claim to know what teaching is. Awed, perhaps, by the cacophony of voices, certain voices became silent and, hesitating to reveal themselves, conceal themselves. Let us beckon these voices to speak to us, particularly the silent ones, so that we may awaken to the truer sense of teaching that likely stirs within each of us. (Aoki, 1992, p. 17-18)

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[3] Naturalistic-phenomenological inquiry is a qualitative approach which "assumes that multiple realities are socially constructed through individual and collective definitions of the situation" and is "concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the participants' perspectives." (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993, p. 14).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Teacher assistants, also referred to as paraprofessionals, became a viable staffing alternative in response to a shortage of trained teachers in the 1950s. Trained and hired primarily to perform clerical duties, paraprofessionals freed teachers from time spent on routine administrative tasks and enabled them to spend more time with students in direct instruction (Doyle, 1995; Hofmeister, Ashbaker, & Morgan, 1996; Pickett, 1986b). With the inclusion of students with special needs in schools in the 1970s, the role of the paraprofessional changed dramatically. It evolved from a primarily clerical function to one that provides direct support for children with special needs. Paraprofessionals "participate in all phases of the instructional process and support and enhance the programmatic and administrative functions of teachers" (Pickett, 1986a, p. 4). Identified as an integral part of the special education delivery system, it has become common practice to assign paraprofessionals to students with special needs or to classrooms in which students with special needs are enrolled.

This chapter will provide an overview of the available research and information on teacher assistants, or paraprofessionals, in education. Focussed by the question: "What is the nature of the current literature on paraprofessionals in education and how does it inform us?", it will provide a provincial context for the employment of teacher assistants in British Columbia, examine the present understanding of the roles and responsibilities, and discuss current issues and concerns. Within the discussion of current issues and concerns, roles and responsibilities, standards in training and certification, teacher education needs, paraprofessionals' concerns, and paraprofessionals' practices and efficacy will be addressed.

Provincial Context

Teacher assistants in British Columbia perform a range of duties in the schools, with a primary focus on direct support for students with disabilities[4]. However, the title itself reflects the emerging status of this role and the ambiguity related to the job. Within the school districts of British Columbia, there are no less than 11 different job titles used to refer to this position. These include teacher assistant, special education assistant, educational assistant, classroom assistant, paraprofessional, personal care attendant, school support worker, certified teaching assistant, certified education assistant, education assistant, and special education support (Paraprofessional Educational Network of B.C., 1998). The title of matron was used in one school district up until 1996. Titles used in other Canadian provinces include teacher aides, classroom attendants, school aides, teacher associates, auxiliary personnel, and remedial tutors (Lam & McQuarrie, 1989). Additional descriptors found in the literature are teacher aides, paraeducators, independent living skills assistants, and instructional assistants (Doyle, 1995). The terms, paraprofessional or paraeducator, are most typically used in the literature from the United States, while the title, teacher assistant, is used by British Columbia's Ministry of Education.

Of the 7,000 teacher assistants working in British Columbia schools, women fill the majority of the positions. While there is a great need for males in the role, in particular to support adolescent boys in the areas of life skills, personal care, and behaviour, it is not typically a position that males occupy. Within one community college program for teacher assistants, less than 4% (five out of 153) of the students in the 1997 and 1998 graduating classes were male (Robertson, raw data, 1999). Out of the 375 teacher assistants employed by one local school

[4] A position designated as 'staff assistant,' or 'teacher assistant' in contrast to 'special education assistant,' remains in a very few of the province's school districts. These positions continue to be clerical in nature and are funded through avenues other than special education funding (e.g., Inner-City or First Nations funding). This discussion does not address these positions.

district (substitute and regularized positions), 63 are males for a total of 16.8% (J. Schaap, personal communication, February 17th, 1999)[5]. This gender differential is consistent with survey results from the United States that suggest that 95% of paraprofessionals are women (Hofmeister, 1993).

Within British Columbia, teacher assistant positions are unionized, the majority being under the auspices of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE B.C.). Hourly wages are negotiated between union locals and individual school districts, resulting in a provincial range of $15.01 – $20.17 per hour (PEN B.C., 1998; W. Robson, personal communication, January 17th, 1999). Hours of work are also school district specific, with full-time positions ranging from a maximum of 20 to 35 hours per week (PEN B.C., 1998). Part-time positions, ranging anywhere from 10 to 28 hours per week, are commonplace; in one of the largest school districts in the province, School District #36, Surrey, over 90% of all positions are part-time (Graeme Stewart, personal communication, February 22, 1999). In recent years, a number of school districts have reduced the maximum weekly hours of full-time positions in response to system-wide budget constraints. Employment hours and job security are central concerns in the CUPE Locals bargaining positions (J. Lau, personal communication, February 19th, 1999).

Paraprofessional Roles and Responsibilities

The role of paraprofessionals varies greatly depending upon the setting and individual needs of the students they are supporting. The primary purpose of the paraprofessional within an

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[5] The difference between the percentage of males employed as compared to those in community college training may possibly be explained by the absence of standard qualifications required for hiring. Each school district has distinct hiring practices that may include a range of pre-service training qualifications and/or field-based experience. Due to the high need for male paraprofessionals, male employees may have been hired based on their experiences working in group home or community agency situations rather than college preparation.

inclusive school framework is to enhance the quality of education for students with disabilities by engaging in a variety of tasks aimed at supporting the teacher, the child with disabilities, and the other children in that setting. A definition for paraprofessionals, or paraeducators, that is commonly used in the literature was developed by Anna Lou Pickett (1988), of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services:

> A paraeducator is an employee: (1) whose position is either instructional in nature or who delivers other direct or indirect services to students and/or parents; and (2) who works under the supervision of a teacher or other professional staff member who is responsible for the overall conduct of the class, the design and implementation of individualized educational programs, and the assessment of the effect of the programs on student progress (p .2)

In British Columbia, Section 18 of the School Act states: "Boards may employ persons other than teachers to assist teachers in carrying out their responsibilities and duties, and these persons shall work under the general supervision of a teacher or administrative officer" (Province of British Columbia, 1989, p. 13). Paraprofessional, or teacher assistant, positions are funded through the Special Services Branch of the Ministry of Education and are specifically designated for special education support. The Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines (1995) of the Special Education Services branch of the Ministry of Education explains the role of the teacher assistant:

> Teachers are expected to design programs for students with special needs. Teacher assistants play a key role in many programs for students with special needs, performing functions which range from personal care to assisting the teacher with instructional

program. Under the supervision of a teacher, they may play a key role in implementing the program. (Section B, p. 8)

In a general sense, the role of teacher assistants is to support students with special needs in Kindergarten through Grade 12 and work as members of an interdisciplinary team. Their duties may include the provision of basic medical and personal care support, life skills training, vocational training, observation and recording, behavioural support, and instructional support. In an inclusive framework, teacher assistants also assist in supporting the development of social skills and peer relationships, promoting the use of natural supports, and encouraging greater independence and interdependence. "The use of special education instructional assistants has become a primary mechanism to implement more inclusive schooling practices" (Giangreco et al., 1997).

The Ministry of Education's (1995) <u>Resource Guide for Teachers: Students with Intellectual Disabilities</u> provides a listing of "suggestions that could be considered for teacher assistant duties" (p. 37). Suggestions for duties are listed under the subheadings: assisting with preparation; providing follow-up activities; providing feedback to the student, teacher and parents; and providing assistance with life skills/social skills. The designation 'para', meaning 'along side of' the professional, is reflected in the nature of these duties. However, it is generally accepted that while paraprofessionals work along side of the teacher, they do not engage in work that the teacher is directly responsible for. Often, the role of the paraprofessional is described in terms of what they cannot do.

In defining the roles and responsibilities of teachers and teacher assistants, the Special Education Association of British Columbia (1998), a specialist association of the British Columbia Teacher's Federation, differentiates the role as follows:

TAs must not assume at any time the direct instructional responsibility for providing educational programs to students or groups. However, TAs may assist in providing educational programs to students or groups of students. TAs must not perform any of the duties of Teachers, except under the direction of Teachers.

In all instructional matters, Teachers have decision making responsibilities. TAs must respect those decisions and support the resulting instructional program. TAs do not decide which concepts/content are to be taught or which strategies are to be used. Nevertheless, TAs are encouraged to bring suggestions to Teachers for their consideration. (p. 8)

In discussing the nature of the role, this document points out that the responsibility for educational decision making lies with the teacher; the responsibility of the teacher assistant is clearly to assist by implementing those decisions. Within the tasks that are instructional in nature, teacher assistants are to assist by providing "repeated practice of specified skills (not to be confused with presentation of new material)" (p. 7), and "implementing the adaptations and modifications as specified in a student's IEP" (p. 8).

Typically, the list of professional tasks includes: providing direct instruction of new concepts to students (teacher assistants reinforce the concepts that have been taught); making decisions to modify and adapt goals and curriculum (teacher assistants carry out the modifications and adaptations); interpreting assessment information (teacher assistants might collect information through observation and recording); and evaluating and reporting student progress (teacher assistants do not take part in this component of the educational process) (Lindsey, 1983; Richmond School District, 1993). Although defined in relation to the teacher's role in what they cannot do, the role and responsibilities of the paraprofessional have not been

defined clearly in terms of what they <u>can</u> do. The resulting ambiguity leaves the role open for

interpretation within each individual classroom, school, and school district.

Concerns and Issues

<u>Roles and Responsibilities</u>

The indeterminate wording chosen in the Ministry of Education's Resource Guide for

Teachers - 'suggestions', 'could', and 'considered' - embodies the tentative understanding of the

nature of this emerging work and the difficulty of defining the role in clear and definite terms. A

lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities is reflected throughout the literature on

paraprofessionals. In 1980, Pickett and Humm reviewed national employment practices in the

United States and concluded, "Paraprofessional staff can and have been used in so many

different ways in educational settings…. There is no paradigmatic job description for a

paraprofessional any more that there is a single ideal professional" (p. 7). In part, this may be due

to the lack of delineation of types of educational paraprofessionals in the literature as well as the

implementation of inclusive education and a resulting shift in special education practices.

More recent literature begins to specifically address paraprofessionals in special

education and their evolving role. A number of authors documented the shifting duties of

paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals now participate in the instructional process (Handly, 1986;

Reynolds, 1990; Vasa, Steckleberg, & Roning, 1982; Woolf & Bassett, 1988), with estimates of

up to 80% of a paraprofessional's time being spent in direct instruction with individual students

and small groups (Vasa & Steckleberg, 1986). This is a dramatic shift from the clerical role that

paraprofessionals were formerly hired to fulfill. Pickett (1996) reported that paraprofessionals

are working at increased levels of independence and are taking on increasingly complex and

sophisticated responsibilities. As more students with diverse needs are included in the

educational process, new challenges for the paraprofessional present themselves. These include

working as part of multidisciplinary teams; supporting students in all levels of the curriculum;

using augmentative and alternative communication methods, assistive technology; and

supporting students who may have complex physical needs. Yssel & Hadadian (1997) point out:

> The inclusion of medically fragile students, for example, is an issue which presents a
>
> challenge; this may prompt school systems to delegate highly technical roles upon
>
> paraeducators (Bartlet, Parette, & Holder-Brown, 1994). In rural districts, paraeducators
>
> may be given even more responsibilities, such as working closely with the school nurse
>
> to provide care for students with chronic illnesses or disabilities. (Pickett, 1996, p. 190)

Giangreco et al. (1997) suggest that "the proliferation of instructional assistants in public

schools often has outpaced conceptualization of team roles and responsibilities" (p. 7). In spite of

guidelines, "there is a great amount of room for interpretation and variability" (Jensen, 1994, p.

19) and much of what paraprofessionals actually do in their daily work becomes the individual

interpretation of the paraprofessional, the teacher, the administrator, and the parents (Hill, 1988).

Doyle (1995) suggests that "the role of paraeducators has continued to evolve, yet little

attention has been directed toward identifying what their roles and responsibilities are in

supporting the learning and growth of students with disabilities" (p. 90). A number of factors,

including the changing needs of students, educational initiatives, the range of service delivery

structures and settings, lack of standards for training and qualifications, current political stances,

and differential training levels of paraprofessionals and teachers result in this variability in the

interpretation of the role.

Standards in Paraprofessional Education and Qualifications

Within the literature, this documented confusion in roles and responsibilities has provided

a stepping off point for discussions on standards for paraprofessional education and

qualifications.

Although paraprofessionals are common in special education classrooms, there has been

a lack of clarity regarding proper roles and responsibilities and effective use of

paraprofessionals (Escudero & Sears, 1982; Hennike & Taylor, 1973; Lindsey, 1983).

Delineating the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals has implications for teacher

and paraprofessional training (Escudero & Sears, 1982; Frith, 1981; May & Marozas,

1981; Reid & Reid, 1974) and hiring practices (Hennike & Taylor, 1973). (Frith, Keith,

& Steil, 1988, p. 253)

In addition to having one of the least understood roles in education, paraprofessionals have also

been identified as "the fastest growing, yet least prepared group in the system of service delivery

in special education" (Pickett & Humm, 1980, p. 3).

The need for standards for training and qualifications of paraprofessionals has been

discussed at length in the literature (Frith, 1982; Hofmeister, 1993; Jensen, 1994; Morgan &

Ashbaker, 1994; Pickett, 1986; Vasa & Steckleberg, 1993) and this topic occupies much of the

discussion on paraprofessional issues. However, to a large extent, the writing is non-empirical

and consists of position and opinion papers, surveys of existing training programs, and newly

developed content and curriculums for training. Few studies have evaluated the efficacy of

paraprofessionals in a direct support role, and little of the research has been comparative: trained

paraprofessionals as compared to untrained paraprofessionals, outcomes of different types of

training, or outcomes of different levels of training (A.L. Pickett, personal communication,

November 21st, 1995). Despite the limited research, it is a commonly held assumption in the literature and the field that formalized training and standardized qualifications for paraprofessionals will increase the quality of education for children with special needs (Doyle, 1995). Salzberg and Morgan (1995) state that due to the high numbers of paraprofessionals in the workforce, the increased needs of students, and differentiated staffing issues related to the school reform movement, the preparation of paraprofessionals "has recently become an important national priority" (p.49).

The majority of the research on the training of paraprofessionals consists of surveys used to collect data on the perceived need for training, skills required for paraprofessionals, types of training programs available, and recommendations for curriculum content. These surveys have been administered to teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and administrators. The results indicate widespread support for training (Hill, 1988; Jensen, 1994; Morgan, Hofmeister, & Ashbaker, 1995; Pickett, 1986). Pickett (1986b) surveyed educators' and parents' perceptions on the need for training for paraprofessionals, finding an 80% or more agreement on the need for pre-service, in-service, and on-the-job professional development. On-the-job education alone was not supported as being sufficient to provide adequate training. She contends that "by setting standards and mandating specified training and experience, certification would guarantee a level of quality in the educational services provided by paraprofessionals" (Pickett, 1986a, p. 34).

While there is support for training and some consensus on the type of content for training (Morgan, Hofmeister, & Ashbaker, 1995), conclusions of these studies have resulted in recommendations for pre-service or in-service training ranging from twenty clock hours to a two-year associate degree (Frith & Lindsey, 1982; Hofmeister, 1993; Pickett, 1986a, 1986b, 1995). In practice, support for paraprofessional training is limited. Of the 7,000 teacher assistants

currently employed in British Columbia, approximately half have no formal training. Most school districts in the province do not provide specific in-service for their teacher assistants. Of the 14 related college programs offered, only two are specific to teacher assistants in schools. There are few financial incentives for upgrading; a teacher assistant with a two-year college diploma earns the same wage as one with no formal training in all but two districts. The American issues are similar. Pickett (1995) states, "despite this increased reliance on paraprofessionals, comprehensive systems of training and professional development for paraprofessionals are not systematically available at either the state or local level" (p. 1).

The research on qualifications for paraprofessionals also consists of studies, the majority American, using a survey methodology that highlight the inconsistencies and lack of standard qualifications required (Doyle, 1995; Pickett, 1986, 1994, 1995, 1996). "There are more differences than similarities in the standards covering the utilization, education and/or experiential requirements for employment, and criteria for training and career development" (Pickett, 1990, p. 15). In Canada, standard qualifications are non-existent. One province, Prince Edward Island, recognizes two category levels, Category I for no training, and Category II for a range of training experiences consisting of a minimum of one year of formal training (Lam & McQuarrie, 1989). However, the training experiences have not been standardized. In the rest of the provinces, a range of qualifications and/or experiences is accepted.

Although specific qualifications have not been identified as necessary for hiring in British Columbia, it is becoming standard practice within the local school districts to set some type of preference for training. The desired qualification is usually related to the level and type of training available at the local community college; if the available training is in early childhood education then a certificate in this area may be an accepted qualification. For some rural areas in

which training is not easily accessible, experience may be more commonly accepted than training. The Ministry of Education in British Columbia is currently in the process of developing occupational competencies for teacher assistants with a goal towards developing consistency and standards in college program curriculum. Although initially viewed as an opportunity to develop standards for qualifications, current political issues and competing interests have stalemated this part of the process (Robertson, 1997). At this point, standards for qualifications are decided at the individual school district level.

Preparing Classroom Teachers to Work With Paraprofessionals

In addition to the literature on the education of paraprofessionals, there are a number of papers calling for the need to educate classroom teachers on ways to work with paraprofessionals (Jensen, 1994; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; Vasa & Steckleberg, 1988). Salzberg and Morgan (1995) explain: "Although paraeducators typically work under the supervision of certified classroom teachers, teachers are not generally prepared for this role" (p. 49). Classroom teachers face a number of challenges when working with paraprofessionals, the primary challenge being working with another adult in the classroom.

Typically, the model of inclusive education is a collaborative one, where the many members supporting a student with disabilities plan, implement, and evaluate a student's Individualized Education Plan as a team. While this collaborative team approach has been accepted practice in the field of special education for many years, it is typically inconsistent with the cultural norms of the regular education setting – one that is characterized by the "continuing and pervasive presence of isolation, individualism and privatism" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 167). Hargreaves (1992) describes the culture of teaching as one in which teachers struggle with their

problems and anxieties privately, engage little in sharing, and rarely observe and discuss other's work. In this context, to have another adult in the classroom, in itself, can be challenging. Additional challenges for teachers include the designation of duties for the paraprofessional, supervision of another adult, establishment of positive working relationships, and the provision of feedback (McKenzie & Houk, 1986; Pickett, 1997). Utilizing paraprofessionals effectively can be a difficult task for teachers, especially in light of the ambiguity related to paraprofessional roles and responsibilities.

Paraprofessional's Concerns/Paraprofessional's Voice

Within the discussion of paraprofessional issues, only a very small part of the literature addresses additional issues pertaining to the actual experience of the work from the paraprofessionals' point of view. "The forgotten player in this game seems to be the person who is actually working in the field – the paraprofessional" (Jensen, 1994, p. 2). While paraprofessionals have participated in many of the surveys, for the most part these surveys have addressed the paraprofessionals' perceptions on their training and qualification needs. While there is much writing about paraprofessionals and their needs, there is little that includes an understanding of their experiences.

Issues that arise from paraprofessionals' work are often linked back to discussions of training and qualifications, with the assumption that these will remedy difficulties encountered. As an example, Frith and Mims (1985) discuss burnout among paraprofessionals, citing a number of different reasons that burnout is a strong probability for this population. These reasons include stagnation, lack of career advancement, inadequate training, poor organizational structure, undefined role descriptions, lack of support and recognition, poor salaries, and

misconceptions about the roles of others. These authors go on to suggest strategies that would be useful to help paraprofessionals cope with burnout, including training. Their recommendations that training would help alleviate burnout were then supported by a number of different authors (Jones & Bender, 1993). However, the incidence of burnout, probable causes of burnout, and implementation of strategies to deal with it are not based on empirical evidence. Paraprofessionals' experiences were not investigated, rather they were assumed.

Mueller's (1997) survey suggests that there are a number of issues that arise from paraprofessionals' concerns that are not directly, or even indirectly, addressed by the literature. Surveying 758 paraeducators in Vermont, Mueller's results suggest that there are a number of additional issues that are pertinent to paraprofessionals. These include "lack of ongoing feedback and support, relevant performance evaluations, and working environments which are characterized by mutual respect and support" (Mueller, 1997, p.6). Lack of valuing and support by other professional staff were concerns that are reflected in the following excerpt:

> The rewards to be had in doing this are from the kids. In the school where I work, paras are still thought of as housewives with part-time jobs…We never know what is going on, but are expected to implement decisions that we are never a part of. As far as pay goes, there is no differential for education or job performance. If you are one of the capable paras, you are asked to do more and more classroom teaching without any additional pay. If you love the kids and are hooked on the learning process, the administration gets an extra teacher in the bargain. If it were not for the parents and their children, paras would go pretty much unnoticed. (Mueller, 1997, p. 5)

The richness of the above quote, and the many issues that arise from it, are not reflected in the literature as a whole.

Paraprofessional Practice and Efficacy

Few studies have investigated the practice and efficacy of paraprofessionals supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms. However, three recent studies warrant discussion. Giangreco et al. (1997) investigated the use of instructional assistants to support students with multiple disabilities. "One of the most prominent findings that emerged from the data was that instructional assistants were in close proximity to the students with disabilities on an ongoing basis" (Giangreco et al., 1997, p. 9). While appropriate according to the needs of the students at some times, this on-going level of close proximity, or what the authors refer to as 'hovering', was found to be detrimental at other times. Problems that were "related to instructional activity proximity" (Giangreco et al., 1997, p. 11) included: interference with ownership and responsibility by general educators, separation from classmates, dependence on adults, impact on peer interactions, limitations on receiving competent instruction, loss of personal control, loss of gender identity, and interference with instruction of other students. The authors found that:

> Most of the classroom teachers in this sample did not describe their role as including responsibility for educating the student with disabilities who was placed in their class. Team members reported that the proximity and availability of the instructional assistants created a readily accessibility opportunity for professional staff to avoid assuming responsibility and ownership for the education of students with disabilities placed in general education classrooms. (Giangreco et al., 1997, p. 10)

This finding is consistent with Baker and Zigmond's (1995) investigation of five full-inclusion sites:

Based on their data, the researchers claimed that teachers did not individualize instruction or plan ahead for how to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. In fact, the individualization that did occur was most often carried out by peers (using peer-tutoring...) or paraprofessionals (teacher aides). (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2000, p. 60)

A recent study by Marks, Schrader, and Levine (1999) extends these findings. Marks et al. investigated the practices of 20 paraeducators supporting students with significant behavioural challenges through a series of in-depth and focus group interviews. Their findings also indicate that paraeducators "tend to assume high levels of responsibility for managing the academic and behavioral needs for special education students in inclusive settings" (Marks et al., 1999, p. 315).

What is striking about how paraeducators negotiated their roles and responsibilities is that many of them appeared to assume the primary burden of success for the inclusion students. This involved assuming primary responsibility for both academic and behavioral need in order to ensure that students would be successful (e.g., would remain in the inclusive setting, would be accepted by the teacher). Paraeducators, however, expressed that it was more appropriate for the classroom teacher to assume these primary responsibilities. (Marks et al., 1999, p. 318)

The authors identified four themes that addressed the reasons why these paraeducators assumed such a high degree of responsibility: 1) the paraeducators did not want the student to be "a bother to the teacher" (p. 318); 2) they felt the responsibility for the student's program as "waiting for teachers and other professionals to make curricular and teaching decisions was not feasible" (p. 319); 3) they perceived themselves as being the "hub", or the "expert" (p. 321) when it came to understanding and supporting the students they were with; and 4) they saw themselves as "representing inclusion" (p. 319) and a main advocate for the acceptance of the student.

The findings of these three studies suggest that the actual responsibilities of teacher assistants in the field go beyond those as defined in role descriptions. They support Pickett's (1996) stance that paraprofessionals are working at increased levels of independence and suggest that the issues and practices of teacher assistants supporting students with disabilities are complex and multilayered and warrant further investigation. As Marks et al. (1999) conclude, "examining individual experiences can help us to understand the context ..., it is this understanding of the context that can inform our efforts to improve practice" (p. 327).

Conclusions

In answer to the initial question that focused this review, "What is the nature of the current literature on paraprofessionals in education and how does it inform us?", the following points can be made:

- There is a large number of paraprofessionals supporting students in special education.

- The roles and responsibilities of the paraprofessional have changed dramatically, and continue to do so.

- There is lack of clarity around the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals.

- There are a lack of standards and qualifications for paraprofessionals throughout Canada and the United States.

- There is an assumption that there is a need for formalized training, standards, and qualifications for paraprofessionals.

- There is an assumption that there is a need for increased education of the classroom teacher on the utilization of paraprofessionals.

- There is little representation in the literature from paraprofessionals themselves about the nature of their work and the issues, concerns, and considerations that arise from it.

- There are a few recent studies that suggest that paraprofessionals supporting students with disabilities in general education classroom may be taking on the responsibilities for academic and behavioural programming rather than the classroom teacher.

Beyond these points, however, little more can be concluded. This review of the literature indicates that although there is a great deal of discussion concerning the use of paraprofessionals in special education, much of the current debate is based on position and opinion papers. There is little empirical evidence that informs the issues of paraprofessionals in special education. The need for further investigation, both quantitative and qualitative, is apparent in all aspects of this field of study.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A naturalistic-phenomenological research design was used to explore the perspectives of individual teacher assistants. This qualitative approach is "concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the participant's perspectives" (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993, p. 14). The purpose of this approach is to provide an in-depth understanding of the person or phenomena (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993), in this case, the phenomenon being the teacher assistant's experience of their work and their perceptions of it.

Qualitative research is an emergent design, one in which the initial questions develop and change as parts of the data are collected and examined. The initial guiding questions: "What are the experiences of the teacher assistant as they support students with disabilities in public education?" and "How do teacher assistants perceive and understand the work that they do?", provided a beginning framework for this inquiry. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with eight teacher assistants and analyzed for patterns of common themes in the participants' responses. The end purpose of this inquiry was to provide both a descriptive and interpretive discussion of the teacher assistants and their practice.

Methodology

The purpose of this inquiry was to understand the work of teacher assistants from their perspectives. As evidenced in the review of the current literature on teacher assistants, there is little representation in the research from the people who are actually doing the job. While there is much discussion and many opinions on what teacher assistants should be doing, there is very

little field-based information on what teacher assistants are doing. If we are to ultimately understand this work, investigate different practices, study the effects of training, and measure outcomes for students, all with a goal to continue to improve learning experiences for students with disabilities, then we need to understand what is actually occurring, in the field, at this time. Now that the role of teacher assistants is a reality in the public school system, how is it being actualized?

The use of a qualitative research design lends itself to this type of inquiry. Concerned with describing and interpreting "the points of view of other people" (Patton, 1990, p. 24), this design provides an opportunity to "add depth, detail, and meaning at a very personal level of experience" (Patton, 1990, p. 8). Qualitative research designs are characterized by naturalistic inquiry. Rather than manipulating or changing the context of the phenomenon and measuring outcomes, as is typical of a quantitative, experimental design, naturalistic inquiry focuses on "naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings, so that we have a strong handle on what 'real life' is like" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

For the purpose of this qualitative inquiry, a naturalistic-phenomenological approach was chosen. "A phenomenological inquiry focuses on the question: What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?" (Patton, 1990, p. 69). In this inquiry, the phenomenon being investigated was the work of teacher assistants. In-depth, open-ended interviews provided a means for these eight teacher assistants to share their experiences and perceptions and their words comprised the data. Analysis of these data sought to elucidate the "unique set of experiences" of each individual (Eichelberger, 1989, p. 6) and the identification of the "basic elements of the experience that are common" (Eichelberger, 1989, p. 6). The outcomes of such an inquiry are represented in rich, holistic, and thick descriptions of peoples' experiences

and their perceptions and interpretations of them (Miles & Huberman, 1994; McMillan & Shumacher, 1993; Patton, 1990).

The final guiding research question 'What are the experiences and perceptions of teacher assistants as they support students with disabilities in public education?' was initially posed as two separate questions: 'What are the experiences of the teacher assistant as they support students with disabilities in public education?' and 'How do teacher assistants perceive and understand the work that they do?'. The separation into two questions was meant to illustrate the two goals of this inquiry: to describe what teacher assistants do in their work, and to interpret how they think, feel, and come to understand what it is that they do. However, as Patton (1990) explains, "descriptions of experience and interpretations are so intertwined that they often become one. Interpretation is essential to an understanding of experience and the experience includes the interpretation" (p. 69). Thus, the question for this research becomes one, with a goal towards elucidating both the experiences and interpretations of teacher assistants through naturalistic-phenomenological inquiry.

Participant Selection

The participants of this inquiry were eight teacher assistants, currently supporting students with disabilities in the Kindergarten through Grade 12 public education system. They were selected using a purposeful sampling approach, specifically intensity sampling (Patton, 1990). Intensity sampling allows the researcher to select participants who are able to provide rich examples and insights into their situation.

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal

about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful*

sampling (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

Intensity sampling involves the selection of "information-rich cases that manifest the

phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely)" (Patton, 1990, p. 171).

The participants were selected through a process of nomination in consultation with

executive members of PEN B.C., school district personnel, and college coordinators of teacher

assistant education programs. The selection criteria for the participants included:

- Teacher assistants who worked in public schools in the Lower Mainland area of

  British Columbia;

- Teacher assistants who had worked in the schools for more than two years; and

- Teacher assistants who were identified as experienced, knowledgeable, and articulate,

  and willing to participate in the research.

The parameters for the final selection of participants were designed to ensure that there

was representation from at least four school districts. This guideline was included to reduce the

possibility that specific district perspectives and practices, rather than the individual and

collective perspectives of teacher assistants, would be reflected. In the final group of participants,

the teacher assistants interviewed worked in five different school districts across the Lower

Mainland area of British Columbia.

For the purpose of this study, two groups of teacher assistants were excluded from

nominations. The first group included teacher assistants currently working in the school which

my daughter attends. Selection of a participant from this school may have had the potential to

compromise confidentiality and relationships for the paraprofessional, other school personnel,

and the families of this school community to which I belong as a parent, rather than a researcher.

The second group included members of the executive of PEN B.C. and executive members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees of British Columbia (CUPE B.C.). PEN B.C. has an openly identified agenda that includes educational and political awareness for teacher assistants and its executive members have a comprehensive perspective on local, provincial, national, and international issues pertaining to paraprofessionals. CUPE B.C. is the union that represents teacher assistants, protecting and promoting their interests with the employer. While these perspectives are extremely valuable, the purpose of this study was to investigate individuals' experiences rather than broader, political perspectives[6]. Selection of executive members of PEN B.C. or CUPE B.C. would have been more appropriate for a type of purposeful sampling that Patton (1990) describes as extreme case sampling, which "focuses on cases that are rich in information because they are unusual or special in some way" (p.169).

Participants

It is my responsibility as researcher to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. While it would serve the purpose of this study to provide a full description or table with specific demographic information about the eight people interviewed and ascribe quotes from participant interviews to each individual, a deliberate decision has been made not to do so, the reasons being twofold. First, the community of special education practitioners in this province is a small one, and intimately bound. Due to the unique needs of children with special needs and specific contexts of practitioners, it has been my past experience that individual stories or examples can in some cases be easily recognizable. Second, the special education delivery

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[6] This is not to suggest that individuals' perspectives are necessarily different from those of PEN B.C. and CUPE B.C. but rather individual perspectives would emerge from the data rather than being represented by a collective agenda.

practices of individual school districts can be unique and readily identifiable. Specific demographic information, especially with gender included, has the potential to compromise the anonymity of the participants. Thus, the following discussion of the participants is general and non-specific.

The resulting group of participants then, consisted of six women and two men who were working as teacher assistants supporting students with disabilities in public education, four of whom were working in secondary schools, four in elementary schools. The participants ranged in age from 27 through 54 and had worked in the schools as teacher assistants from 3 ½ through 13 years. Six of the participants were past graduates of teacher assistant education programs at local colleges, and two had training in related fields and/or specific professional development and inservice training. Three of the participants held university degrees in other areas of study.

The participants worked in settings in a variety of contexts[7]: segregated class settings, resource room settings, and fully integrated classrooms. The brief summaries of each of the participants' context attempts to provide a generalized description of the different settings and contexts:

Pat[8] This teacher assistant worked in a large secondary school. Pat supported students identified as needing resource support in both the academic classrooms as well as in the resource room setting. On any given day, Pat was in at least four different classrooms, ranging from

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[7] Segregated classes are classes in which all of the students attending have been identified as having some type of specific learning need or disability. Students in a segregated class are taught by a special education teacher and are supported by teacher assistants, but may also integrate into other 'regular' classes in the school. A resource room setting is one in which students with learning needs or disabilities attend on a part-time basis to receive additional support; the students typically attend 'regular' classes and are scheduled into time in the resource room setting as pull-out, for further assistance.

[8] The participants' names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

grades eight through twelve, supporting different students in varying subjects areas, from academic English to life skills.

Chris. Chris worked in a large secondary school in a segregated setting. The students in this class participated in activities in the segregated class, but were also integrated into academic classrooms on modified programs, and participated in community activities. Chris worked closely with the special education teacher assigned to the segregated class and a team of other teacher assistants.

Alex. Alex worked in a large secondary school in the special education department. The students Alex worked with attended a segregated class and had multiple learning, behavioural, communication, and physical needs. The focus of the day involved mostly personal care support and community experiences.

Sam. This teacher assistant worked in a large secondary school in a resource room. Sam supported students both in the resource room setting and in the regular academic classroom. For most of the day, Sam worked with one particular student, and for the remainder of the time, worked in different academic classrooms.

Kim. Kim worked in a regular classroom in an elementary school, supporting a young student with autism in a one-to-one relationship. At different times, when the student Kim was specifically assigned to was working independently, Kim assisted other students in the classroom in their academic work. Kim worked closely with the classroom teacher. Kim also worked with the district-based resource teacher.

Lee. Lee also worked in an elementary school. The daily work took Lee into five different classrooms, in grades ranging from Kindergarten through grade seven. This teacher assistant's purpose was to support students with learning and behavioural difficulties; however,

working with five different teachers, the role Lee took on differed in each classroom. Lee also worked with a school-based resource teacher.

Terry. Terry worked in an elementary school on a one-to-one basis with a student. In this role, Terry's purpose was to provide personal care, language, and modified academic support. As a team member, Terry worked with the classroom teachers and a district-based resource teacher.

Kelly. Kelly also worked in an elementary school one-to-one with a student with physical and learning support needs. Part of Kelly's role was to provide learning, social, and physiotherapy support. Kelly worked as part of a team consisting of the classroom teacher, district-based resource teacher, physiotherapist, itinerant teacher for the visually impaired, and a speech therapist.

Initial Contact

Requests for consideration of participation were made through telephone or email contact (and in one case a chance meeting) with all participants agreeing to and booking an interview in this initial conversation. Follow-up information that outlined the intent of the study and the details of the requirements of participation was then delivered. These details included the number of interviews, the length of time each interview would take, a request to use audio and video recordings of the interviews, and location considerations. A letter of consent, summarizing the above, and a one page questionnaire requesting demographic information was also included. (see Appendix A)

For the initial interview, all participants except one[9] were provided with a page of interview questions before the interview (see Appendix B). I explained to the participants that the questions were designed to provide a framework for our discussion during the interview and requested that participants reflect upon them before meeting. Some participants came prepared with notes from these questions and others did not.

Data Collection

Data were collected by means of in-depth, one-to-one interviews with the eight participants. The initial interviews consisted of one to one-and-one-half hours of discussion and all were audiotaped[10]. The topics and specific questions were selected in conjunction with the researcher's advisory committee and a "general interview guide approach" (Patton, 1990; Schumacher & McMillan, 1993) was used. "The *general interview guide approach* involves outlining a set of issues that are to be explored with each respondent before interviewing begins" (Patton, 1990, p.280). This approach was chosen "to make sure that basically the same information is obtained from a number of people by covering the same material"(Patton, 1990, p. 283), but to also allow for the flexibility to address individual contexts and concerns. The researcher decides upon the sequence and the specific wording of the questions as the interview progresses, and then uses probes to further clarify and extend particular topics.

Once the initial interviews were coded and conceptually mapped, second interviews with each of the individuals, consisting of an hour to an hour-and-one-half, took place. Six of these

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[9] Due to scheduling constraints, there was not enough time to provide this participant with the written questions. A summary of the questions was provided during the initial telephone contact and the written questions were then provided at the beginning of the interview.
[10] A practice interview yielded sufficiently clear and detailed data using only the audiotape and as such, videotape was not used.

interviews were audiotaped and two were not. For the two interviews that were not taped (one due to the public location of meeting and one due to equipment failure), handwritten notes were taken.

Researcher's Role

From my previous roles as teacher and district consultant, and current role as coordinator of a post-secondary teacher assistant education program, I bring 20 years of experience working with teacher assistants to my role as researcher. My historical and current experiences influence the ways in which I perceive the work and experiences of teacher assistants. My on-going challenge during this research has been to listen to and hear the perspective of the other. Stake (1994) states that in order to gain a better understanding, "the researcher temporarily subordinates other curiosities so that the case may reveal its story" (p. 237). My task as interviewer has been "to make it possible for the person being interviewed to bring the interviewer into his or her world" (Patton, 1990, p. 279).

Within this framework and because of my previous involvement in the field, I run the risk of what Lather (1986) terms "theoretical overdetermination" (p. 64). "In other words, the researchers' political and theoretical enthusiasms are likely to overshadow the logic of the evidence" (Lenzo, 1995, p.18). To counteract my own 'enthusiasms', an interviewer/researcher log was kept before and during data collection and analysis. This log, consisting of both journal and memo entries, was used as a tool to identify biases and presuppositions that might influence the focus of the interview topics, selection of questions and probes, and identification of patterns of themes. "Qualitative research is marked by 'disciplined subjectivity' (Erickson, 1973), self-

examination, criticism of the quality of the data obtained, and the problems encountered"
(Schumacher & McMillan, 1993, p. 15).

In order to provide a context for the participants that I interviewed, I began each
interview with an explanation of what brought me to the questions that I was asking them. This
explanation was framed visually and verbally with a graphic that had been developed during an
ongoing project on developing learning outcomes for college curricula to prepare teaching
assistants framework (see Figure 1 on the next page). This framework, meant to visually
organize and represent our questions as coordinators/instructors of college programs, evolved out
of meetings addressing the issues of curricular review, relevancy, and re/development. Our goal
was to make explicit the purpose of these preservice programs and the perspectives that inform
us in our work as coordinators, and then to engage in a beginning analysis of what it is that
students need to know, be, and do to be effective as graduating teacher assistants. The questions
that arose from this curriculum work, specifically, "What are the issues of this emerging role?",
brought me to this research topic, for I felt that in order to define what preservice teacher
assistants need to know, be, and do, I needed to more fully understand the experiences of
practicing teacher assistants.

It is through the explanation of this visual framework that I contextualized my questions
for the participants and the importance of their responses for the development of my own
understanding, as a student, coordinator, and researcher. (A sample explanation is provided in
Appendix C.) In the first interview, I shared this graphic with each participant and explained the
curriculum work that I was engaged in. My purpose for using this framework was to provide
context for my need to understand their work with a goal towards ensuring that the curriculum

we were offering was relevant and addressed the values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills

necessary to be successful in the reality of the work.

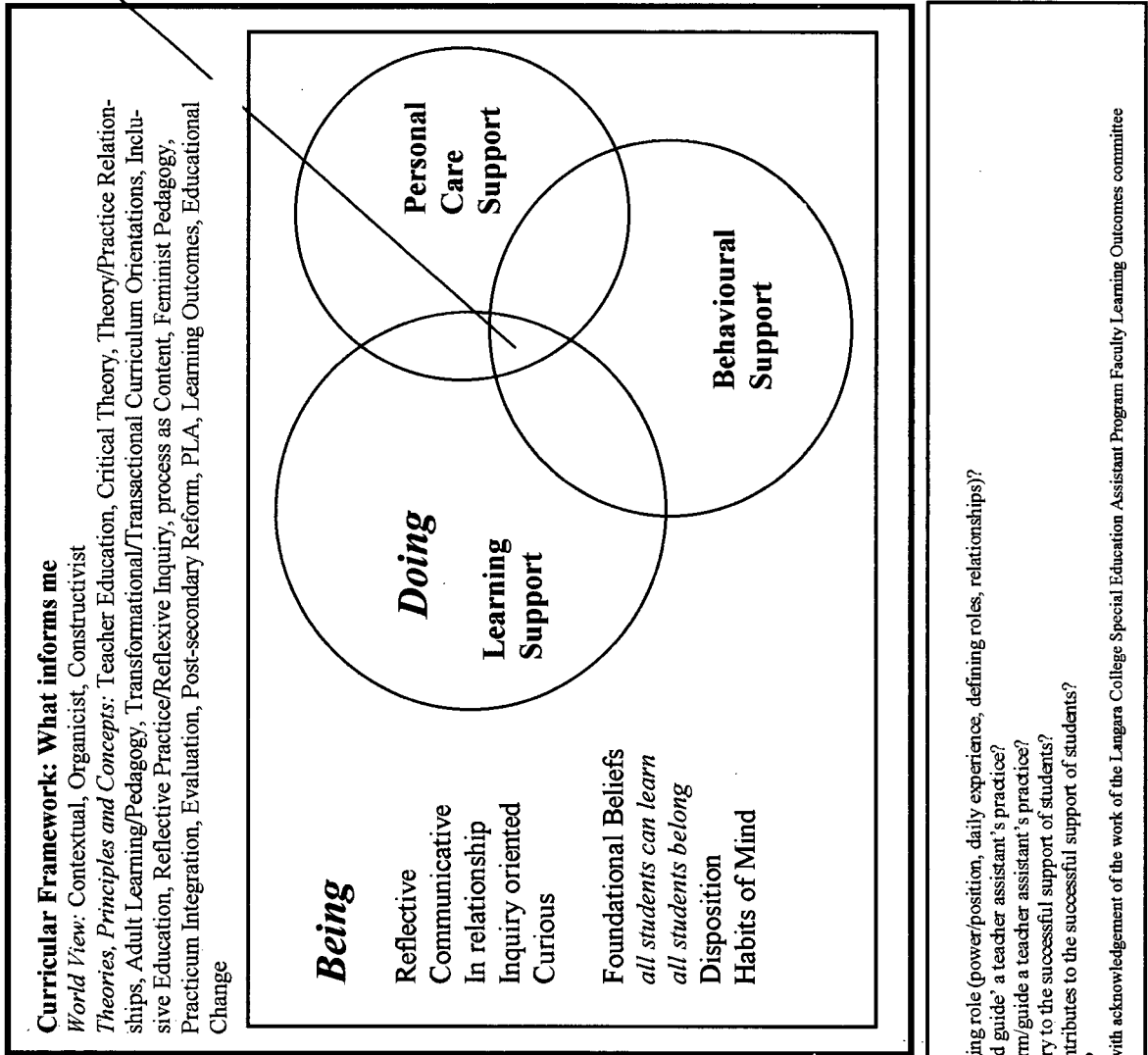# Figure 1 - Teacher Assistant Education - Developing an Explicit Framework

The purpose of the program is to graduate students who have the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that make them effective team members who can respond in an informed and reflective way to the needs of individual school-aged children. (Hoyano, Levitt, Nykon, Pawlak, & Robertson, 1998)

Towards an Integrated Practitioner

The purpose of the program is to facilitate the integration of:
- Values and Attitudes
- Theory
- Knowledge
- Technical Skills

as demonstrated through classroom representations and in practicum settings.

Curricular Framework: What informs me

World View: Contextual, Organicist, Constructivist

Theories, Principles and Concepts: Teacher Education, Critical Theory, Theory/Practice Relationships, Adult Learning/Pedagogy, Transformational/Transactional Curriculum Orientations, Inclusive Education, Reflective Practice/Reflexive Inquiry, process as Content, Feminist Pedagogy, Practicum Integration, Evaluation, Post-secondary Reform, PLA, Learning Outcomes, Educational Change

Being

Reflective
Communicative
In relationship
Inquiry oriented
Curious

Foundational Beliefs
all students can learn
all students belong
Disposition
Habits of Mind

Doing

Learning Support

Personal Care Support

Behavioural Support

Knowing

Foundational Elements: What informs the students

* Inclusive Education
* Theories of Human Dev.
* Principles of Teaching
* Multiple Intelligences
* Learning Styles
* Cooperative Learning
* Observation/Context
* Professionalism
* Roles & Responsibilities
* Theories of Behaviour
* Augmentative/Alt. Comm.
* Classroom Management
* Curriculum Philosophy
* Ministry Philosophy
* Reflective Practice
* Personal Inquiry
* Interpersonal Comm.
* Collaborative Teamwork
* Diversity
* Neurodevelopmental Functioning
* Natural Supports
* Caring
* Personal Care Knowledge
* Critical Thinking/Reflection
* Information Access
* Advocacy

Questions:
⇑ What are the issues of this emerging role (power/position, daily experience, defining roles, relationships)?
⇑ What values and attitudes 'should guide' a teacher assistant's practice?
⇑ What theory informs/should inform/guide a teacher assistant's practice?
⇑ What technical skills are necessary to the successful support of students?
⇑ What knowledge is necessary/contributes to the successful support of students?
⇑ What informs me in my practice?

Data Analysis

As the data were collected, each audiotape from the first set of interviews was transcribed verbatim for content analysis. During transcription or review, new questions and ideas emerged which were then incorporated back into the interviews of the subsequent participants. Miles and Huberman (1994,) who advise against leaving analysis until all data are completely collected, emphasize the importance of this early analysis.

> We believe this is a mistake. It rules out the possibility of collecting new data to fill in
>
> gaps, or to test new hypotheses that emerge during analysis. It discourages the
>
> formulation of 'rival hypotheses' that question a field-worker's routine assumptions and
>
> biases. (p. 50).

Thus, in an ongoing process, the transcriptions were reviewed to identify the "major themes, categories, and illustrative case examples" (Patton, 1990, p. 10). This initial review of transcripts, paired with a review of previous notes and journal entries, yielded a beginning list of broad categories for classifying the data.

The transcripts from the initial interviews were then subjected to a content analysis, which consists of "the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" (Patton, 1990, p. 381). This process, summarized by Patton (1990), involves "going over the notes, organizing the data, looking for patterns, checking emergent patterns against the data, cross-validating data sources and findings, and making linkages among the various parts of the data and the emergent dimensions of the analysis" (p. 378). As the coding of the transcripts was continued, the initial coding scheme evolved into more specific categories of patterns that were then reapplied to the earlier transcriptions to delineate them further in a cross-case analysis.

During analysis, the use of memoing was employed as a means to note definitional, descriptive, interpretive, and conceptual issues. Defined by Glasser, (1978),
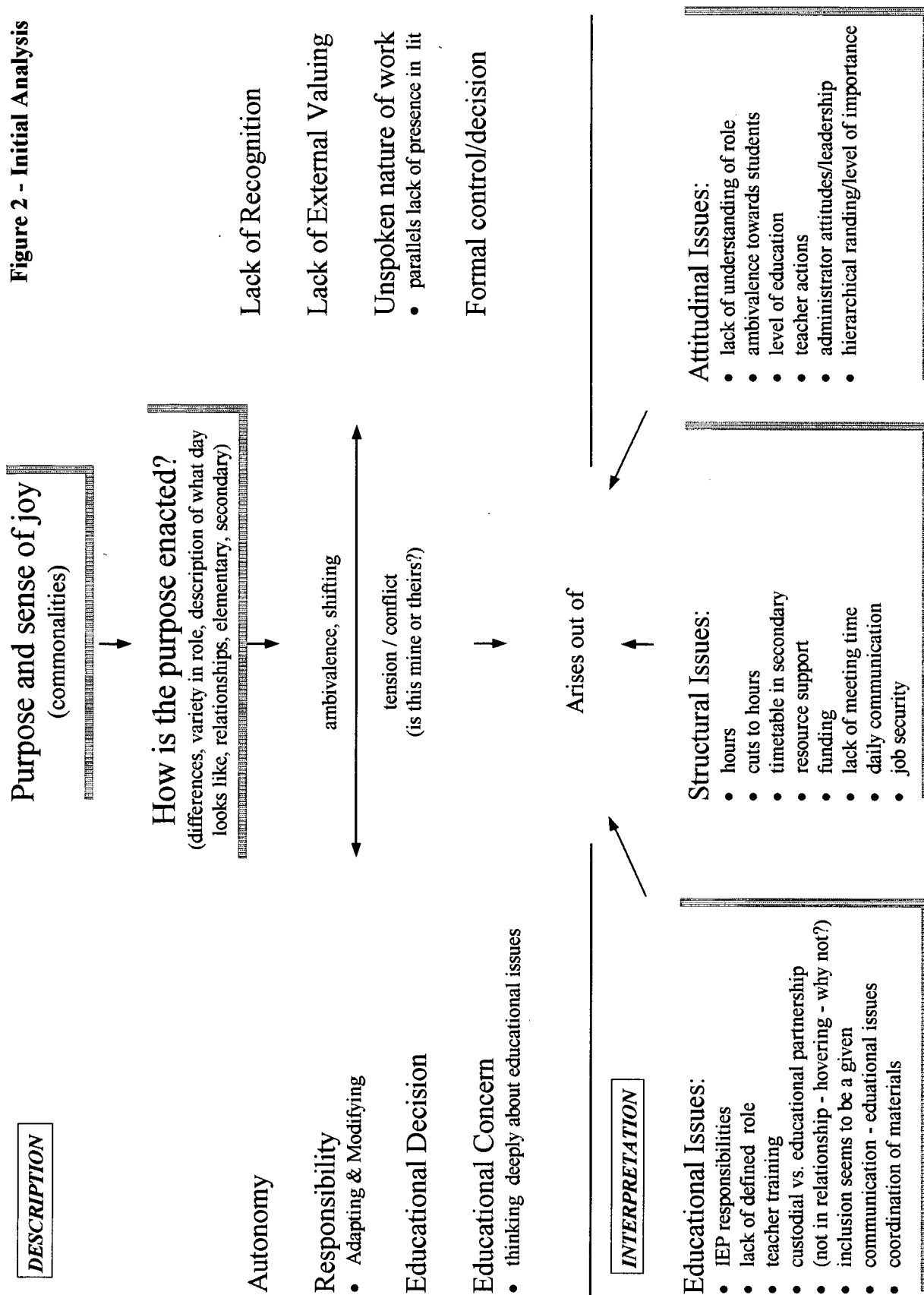
> [A memo is] the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding…. It can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages … it exhausts the analyst's momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration (p. 83-84).

Once the initial interviews were coded, a review of the memos provided a beginning point to conceptually map the data. A graphic representation of the major themes and emerging issues was then produced (see Figure 2 on the following page) to illustrate an emerging conceptual analysis.

Serving as a tool to begin to organize the information from the interviews, Figure 2 identified a number of emerging themes: the common purpose and sense of joy; the differences in how the purpose is enacted; themes related to their practice that included autonomy, responsibility, educational decision, and educational concern; and themes of their perceptions that included lack of recognition, lack of external valuing, the unspoken nature of the work, and little formal control and decision making. A number of sub-issues, grouped under three titles, Educational, Structural, and Attitudinal, were included. In this initial mapping, the arrows between the categories were used to illustrate emerging links or connection that I had begun to identify for further consideration. They do not represent a temporal or sequential relationship or a causal link, rather an emerging sense of influence and connection.

Figure 2 then provided a starting point for the second round of interviews with the participants. The goal of the second interviews was to share this conceptual map with the participants, describe my understandings of what I had heard, and ask their feedback on my

Figure 2 - Initial Analysis

DESCRIPTION

Purpose and sense of joy
(commonalities)

How is the purpose enacted?
(differences, variety in role, description of what day looks like, relationships, elementary, secondary)

ambivalence, shifting

tension / conflict
(is this mine or theirs?)

Lack of Recognition

Lack of External Valuing

Unspoken nature of work
- parallels lack of presence in lit

Formal control/decision

Autonomy

Responsibility
- Adapting & Modifying

Educational Decision

Educational Concern
- thinking deeply about educational issues

Arises out of

Attitudinal Issues:
- lack of understanding of role
- ambivalence towards students
- level of education
- teacher actions
- administrator attitudes/leadership
- hierarchical randing/level of importance

Structural Issues:
- hours
- cuts to hours
- timetable in secondary
- resource support
- funding
- lack of meeting time
- daily communication
- job security

INTERPRETATION

Educational Issues:
- IEP responsibilities
- lack of defined role
- teacher training
- custodial vs. educational partnership
- (not in relationship - hovering - why not?)
- inclusion seems to be a given
- communication - eduational issues
- coordination of materials

representation. The practice of returning to the participants for review, termed 'member-checking' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), provides an opportunity for the participants to validate, elucidate, or adjust the researcher's synthesis of the findings. "One way to avoid drowning out participants' voices by the researcher's voice is to have participants verify the text content" (Mott, 1997, p. 83).

The participants were then asked to read selections of the draft, including the description of the participants, the introduction to the Chapter IV, and the beginning section of the findings. The purpose of this review by the participants was to address any concerns regarding anonymity they might have had, to provide them with a context for the representation of the material, and to provide a selection that included their direct quotes to demonstrate how their words were being interpreted and represented in the text. We then went over the graphic in detail and discussed themes and issues. The participants were asked for clarification, expansion, and feedback throughout.

After discussing the graphic and the conceptual analysis it represented, the participants were asked in general if they felt it was a reasonable representation of their experience. They reported that they felt very comfortable with the themes that were brought forward and how they were represented and discussed. When asked if they felt it was accurate or if there was anything missing, they supported the findings as they were represented, using words such as "reality", "got it", and "I think you've done it, I think so".

In particular, the participants were asked about the tension between the high level of educational responsibility and low level of recognition and valuing. I was asking if this was my own perception of tension or a representation of their experience that included this tension. The participants agreed that they did experience this tension in their work. As one participant put it:

I:[11]   *Is that just me seeing it or is that...*

R: *No. No. It's, um, that's the way that it is. That's the way that it is.*

Participants were also asked, "Is there anything that you can think of to tell me that would say - if she <u>really</u> wants to understand what this work is about, she really needs to know this?". The participants reported that they felt that they had had an opportunity to say what they wanted and that most areas had been covered. One teacher assistant explained:

> *No. I think maybe it's, I have that comfort level with you, because I've just gotten a sense*
>
> *from you, your experience and so you see all these different areas and I don't have to go*
>
> *into huge detail about it because as soon as I might mention something you have a bit of*
>
> *an understanding already of where that might fit in and so..., so maybe, I need to look at*
>
> *that question in a different way. If it wasn't you, is there anything in particular I would*
>
> *want to say to somebody else about what I do that we didn't discuss? I think we covered*
>
> *most areas of what I do...*

The participants' feedback from this second set of interviews was then reviewed and incorporated into further drafts of the findings to create the final analysis and discussion.

Representation of Data

As will be discussed in the findings, a number of issues arose from the interviews that had the potential to bring into question the practice of other school personnel. As a result, the protection of the participants' anonymity became even more important. A dilemma for reporting

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[11] Participants' direct quotes have been indicated in three different ways. Quotation marks have been used when including short quotes within paragraphs, indented italics represent longer quotes, and indented italics, with *I:* indicating interviewer and *R:* indicating respondent, reflect the conversation between myself and the participant.

the findings then arose, as the identification of direct quotes with pseudonyms, when paired with the general descriptions of the participants' settings, created a further possibility of threat to the participants' anonymity. I brought back this concern to the participants during the member checks, showing them my first draft without pseudonyms attached to their quotes.

Seven out of eight of the participants were comfortable not having pseudonyms used to identify the individual quotes in the reporting of the data. A few of the participants expressed concern that they might be recognized through the combination of the description of their setting and their quotes, if identified by name. They preferred that the quotes be left unidentified. Another concern, however, was raised during these discussions. One participant felt that without crediting the quotes, there could be a tendency to both under-credit and over-credit individual experiences. If I wanted to provide a forum for 'voice' but did not provide a name, even in the form of a pseudonym, then I was under-crediting the participants and their words and not fulfilling my duty. I was also over-crediting the participants as it could be misconstrued that they all spoke from the same viewpoint. In this case, the participant did not have secondary experience and could not speak from that viewpoint, but might be misconstrued as having that experience through lack of individual crediting. In my attempt to address these concerns, I went back and identified quotes that were specific to either elementary or secondary contexts. The dilemma between maintaining anonymity, especially with the discomfort of some participants and in light of the power differentials that some experience in this position, and the under- and over-crediting of voice, presented a difficult choice. In the end, I chose the first in an effort to protect anonymity. Thus, in the following chapters, quotes from the participants have not been individually identified, although in some cases, distinctions have been made between those in secondary and elementary.

This lack of crediting of individual quotes also raises a methodological concern, and can be considered a threat to interobserver reliability, "the agreement on the description or composition of events, especially the *meanings* of these events, between the researcher and participants" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, p. 386). By not crediting, it opens up the possibility that only some of the participants' experiences and words are being represented rather than all of the participants. However, attempts were made to use data collection strategies that minimize threats to interobserver reliability, including the use of mechanically recorded data, verbatim accounts, memoing, and member checking with partial participant review (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, p. 387). The member checking was especially important to this process as it included all eight of the participants, each of whom read parts of the discussion and were shown how their words were represented in different sections. The participants were comfortable with my overall representation of their discussions and had an opportunity to view how I had used their quotes, minimizing the possibility that they were not included in the reporting.

Potential Weaknesses of Design

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the individual and collective experiences of teacher assistants through a case study of eight individuals. The qualitative design focuses on individual experiences and perceptions in an attempt to more fully understand the work of the teacher assistant. The end goal was to provide a description of these experiences and perceptions. There are, however, several limitations of this type of design, and to this particular inquiry, including:

- This sample cannot be claimed as representative of the experiences of all teacher assistants, especially in light of the small group of participants, the intent of the

methodology of the inquiry, the intentional selective sample, the varied roles in the schools, different school practices, differing school district practices and policies, differing collective agreements, and the varied needs and understandings of both students and teachers in each setting.

- This sample cannot be claimed as representative of all teacher assistants, in light of the qualifications held by these participants in comparison with those held in the field. Issues of teacher assistant training and qualifications may be different for those who do not have pre-service training.

- My relationship with the participants varied. In this case, three of the participants were former students of mine and as such, this relationship may have influenced their answers.

- Subjectivity, despite design safeguards, will always be an element of any research inquiry and therefore value positions that I hold inevitably will emerge in the way I have constructed the thesis and the participants' accounts of their work.

- The limited extent of the interviews. Future study should include on-site observations, discussions with other school staff, surveys of larger populations, and further in-depth interviews with other teacher assistants.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

My initial goal of this research was rooted in an urgency to bring a voice to teacher

assistants in special education. While underrepresented in the academic literature, in research

activities, and as voices in the field, teacher assistants are important participants in the endeavour

to include students with disabilities in public education. What I have learned in this process is,

however, that it is not possible to represent *their* voices and experiences, but rather to represent

my own growing understanding of their experiences through a discussion of our conversations.

As Karen Chalmers (1992) explains of her research experience, "I had been naïve to think that I

could speak for [him], but I discovered an [sic] new "voice" was developing in me" (p. 90).

My own experience in this field is that of a teacher and an administrator. Although I have

worked closely with teacher assistants in both of these roles, my perspectives are that of an

outsider, an observer, a listener. I have learned that it is not possible to speak for these 'others'

and to separate their words from my experience of them. Rather, it is only possible to provide my

understanding of their experience. My interviews with these eight teacher assistants have brought

me to a deeper understanding of my beliefs, values, and knowledge of teacher assistants' work.

Their sharing of their days, their concerns, their joys, and their frustrations in some instances, has

confirmed and clarified my previously held perspectives. In other instances, it has challenged me

to question my assumptions and examine these in different ways. I have also been surprised,

excited, and, at times, discouraged by what I have heard and learned. Through these

conversations I have come to a new position of 'knowing' and thinking about teacher assistants and their work.

Thus, the following discussion of my 'findings' represents my emerging understanding and interpretation based on my analysis of our conversations. Through observance of accepted qualitative research practices, I have attempted to address issues of design, validity, and reliability that help to maintain the integrity of these participants' voices. I no longer, however, attempt to speak for them but rather from them. In all, this process has brought me a profound respect for the depth of commitment, concern, and educational decision that I see as a foundation to these peoples' work lives. It is my goal to represent this understanding in a way that respectfully reflects the spirit and intent of their discussions with me.

Overview of Findings

On-going analysis of the data yielded both common themes and individual differences that occurred across each of the participants' discussions. The following discussion reflects both these commonalties and differences. It is not meant to represent group consensus; rather, the discussion of these points represents what I have identified as important and salient to the understanding of these participants' experiences.

Foremost, I was struck by the shared sense of purpose that these eight teacher assistants expressed. For me, this was the central place or grounding from which to understand their work. Their expressed purpose reflected a strong sense of commitment to the quality of life for, and relationship with, the students they supported. Their aim was to promote students' independence and success, using the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) as a guide. However, through their descriptions of their daily work, it was apparent that this purpose is enacted in very

different ways. The actual daily tasks of these teacher assistants were different in each context and as a result, it was difficult to draw parallels or create a profile of what the job 'looks' like on a daily basis.

In spite of the differences in the daily tasks, common themes arose as the participants discussed their work and thoughts on it. One grouping of themes had to do with their educational responsibility, and consists of what I initially identified as 'Level of Responsibility', 'Educational Decision-Making', 'Autonomy and Ownership', and 'Educational Concern'. It became apparent in discussing their practice *with the students they were supporting* that these teacher assistants had high levels of responsibility; were active in educational decision-making, including both the adapting and modifying[12] of learning materials and experiences; they had a fairly high level of autonomy and sense of ownership within their daily practice; and they were thinking deeply about educational concerns. Officially, it is the role of the teacher to make educational decisions and the teacher assistant to carry them out. Their descriptions of what they were <u>actually</u> doing in their daily work with students indicates that their role goes far beyond what is explicitly or formally acknowledged in the field, in the literature, and politically, as their job function.

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[12] An adapted program retains the learning outcomes of the prescribed curriculum but adaptations are provided so the student can participate in the program. These adaptations can include alternate formats [e.g., Braille, books on tape], instructional strategies, [e.g., use of interpreters, visual cues and aids], and assessment procedures [e.g., oral exams, additional time]. Students on adapted programs are assessed using the standards for the course/program and can receive credit towards a Dogwood Certificate for their work. (Ministry of Education, 1995, p.7) A modified program has learning outcomes which are substantially different from the prescribed curriculum and specifically selected to meet the student's special needs. For example, a grade nine student in a modified math program could be focussing on functional computational skills in the context of handling money and personal budgeting. Or, in Language Arts, a grade five student could be working on recognizing common signs and using the phone. In these examples, the learning outcomes are substantially different from those of the curriculum for most other students. (Ministry of Education, 1995, p.8)

The other group of themes I identified had to do with their experience of their work, and consist of what I initially identified as 'Lack of Recognition', 'Lack of External Valuing', 'The Unspoken Nature of the Work', and 'Little Formal Control/Decision'. Apparent in these themes was the low level of formal recognition, decision-making, and valuing that these people encountered *within the culture of the workplace*. As workers in the culture of schools, most of the participants described experiences that made them feel undervalued and unrecognized for the work that they were doing. Although highly involved in daily decision-making with students, they were not always involved in the on-going processes of goal setting and planning and much of the work that they were doing was not formally or explicitly recognized – it was 'unspoken'.

Thus, in tension with this notable level of responsibility was the often devalued and unspoken nature of their work. The work that they did and the messages received regarding the value of that work were often at odds. The level of recognition and valuing did not appear to be commensurate with the level of educational responsibility in which they were engaging. As the participants discussed their experiences and concerns, a number of issues emerged from the data that seem to give rise to this tension, some of which are isolated and some intertwined. For my own understanding, these issues were separated into three groupings – educational issues, structural issues, and attitudinal issues.

In spite of the tension these participants encountered in their work, they all expressed a sense of joy and meaning in their work. This sense of joy and meaning arose from their relationships with the students and the successes, however small, that the students attained. In spite of the frustrations that they encountered, they expressed a love for and high level of satisfaction from their work with students.

This chapter will address six main themes: A Shared Sense of Purpose, IEP Involvement, Variability in Daily Work, Educational Responsibility, Valuing and Recognition, and A Strong Sense of Joy and Satisfaction. Guided by the initial question: "What are the experiences and perceptions of teacher assistants as they support students with disabilities in public education?", the discussion will examine these themes in further detail, using the words of the participants throughout to illustrate their experiences, perceptions, and understandings.

The many factors initially identified in the groupings of educational, structural, and attitudinal issues on Figure 2 were not sufficient in depth and discussion to stand as themes alone. Rather, the groupings provide an organizational tool for my analysis and understanding. As interpretive groupings or larger themes unto themselves, they warrant further investigation. However, many of the individual issues in the groupings contribute to the understanding of the larger themes. As such, for the purpose of this discussion, some of these issues will be used to elucidate the larger themes but will not be addressed as separate themes or issues.

<div align="center">Main Themes</div>

<u>Sense of Purpose</u>

> *To assist the student to complete independence to the best of their ability, so that they can have a meaningful, happy, fruitful future. And that can be different for every student, you know, how you get there and how you'll try and do that, but basically you want them to feel a part of their community, to feel worthy, and you want them to be able to be independent so they can fulfill any wants and needs that they have. It's the same for the regular students... we're educating them and the reason we have the academic programs as well as all those other programs is that we want them to be useful members of society*

and to feel, to have a worthwhile and happy life, and it's exactly the same for our

students. It's just we have to go different paths to get to that goal.

A shared sense of purpose, that of supporting students towards a full and independent life, provided a common ground for the eight teacher assistants interviewed. These teacher assistants were guided by the basic assumption, "independent living as the goal for everyone". Prevalent in their descriptions of their daily work with students, and vision of their purpose, were references to students gaining "a sense of independence" and "freedom in their lives".

My purpose is to eliminate my job I think. If I can teach a child or support a child

enough that they learn to manage those skills on their own, and be a part of the

environment, a successful part of the environment, then I've succeeded.

"We've got specific goals for a few subjects and … most of them relate back to gaining independence. It all sort of comes, always comes back to that." However, the path towards, and the degree of independence varies with each student's unique strengths and needs. As one participant explained, "it's really dynamic and it's really individual."

Most participants described their purpose as being guided by students' Individualized Education Programs (IEP's). Mandated by the Ministry of Education, the IEP is the formal document that defines the individualized program for students with learning needs that require specialized support, including that of a teacher assistant. In the formal sense, the purpose of the IEP is to outline long and short-term goals, activities, strategies, and evaluation methods. For the participants interviewed, the IEP provided a framework that directed them in their practice. "We always have to work toward the IEP goals … and incorporate those into our learning."

My job is to, obviously, to keep up with his IEP goals and make sure we're working on

those on a daily basis. That things that we do in the classroom have meaning that is

connected to either the IEP goals or things that are meaningful for him as a member of

the class...

Guided by individualized programs, these teacher assistants were supporting students in a broad range of activities and learning experiences. For the teacher assistants working in integrated academic settings, mediating the learning activities and environment for the student was a primary purpose of their work. As one participant described, "I've been helping the student interpret what's going on around him. And helping him function and get the most out of the class and the material, as much learning as possible." Within the classroom, these teacher assistants were assisting students with the learning and/or application of concepts, knowledge, and skills.

They also identified their purpose as bringing meaning to curricula materials for these students. My "purpose is also to bring meaning and connection to the classroom, both with the student's peers and with material and learning activities they are encountering." The participants used terms such as "connection", "motivation", and "meaning" in their descriptions. In addition, providing organizational supports and assisting students to focus were identified in the data as integral to their work.

> *Has my student learned anything today? That also is a measure of success. Have they been able to complete some of the work they were given or all of the work they were given...? For kids that can't focus and organize, how can I help that student feel like he's got more control.*

The participants also described the purpose of their work as supporting students in areas such as behaviour, personal care, physiotherapy, social support, work experience, community involvement, and recreational activities.

It's so individual with each of our students because of their really varying needs. Basically, we just have to look at, on an individual basis and say okay, for some students my role is going to be ... taking care of more the personal care aspect of the job, or I'm going to be doing physio, or making sure the meds are given on time, and feeding and changing and doing things like that. And then with other students, the roles may be... looking more at the social issues that they might be dealing with and the work experiences and the community and the recreational things.

Supporting learning in these instances, takes the educational experience beyond the traditional bounds of 'academic' or 'school' learning into activities that enhance the students' whole development and quality of life. For some students, it entailed a "full, active, recreational life" or "just getting out there".

R: *... so you see a little thing like that. Just one little piece of it. You don't need to look at the big picture, you can look at something like that and say, okay, [if he can] go out with his family, go out and bowl, it's great... [It] doesn't have to be in terms of the education. It doesn't have to be reading or math or science. It can be bowling or swimming or something like that.*

I: *Quality of life?*

R: *Mhmm, very much.*

For other students, it meant being involved in activities with classmates in the classroom or in the school community; "just doing what rest of the class is doing to the best they can do it" or being a "member of the class, connected to what the class is doing". Small steps were seen as important and valuable. "We have to work hard and work in small steps and at each level at a time and [it's] not always happening really quick."

I have worked with quite a few kids with severe behaviour in the past and just making it

through the day without blowing our stack... where I can see behaviour rising, nip it in

the bud and talk them down, that was a huge success for me. Where kids if they would

blow, it would be dangerous. So I've had some good success with some students I've been

able to work with their behaviour, so that just getting through the day sometimes without

blowing up, that was a measure of success.

For these participants, the individual needs of each student were relevant to the school

program. Their purpose was to support students towards independence and enhanced quality of

life, using the IEP as a guide to define the path that they took.

IEP Involvement

I think that it's so important that classroom assistants be involved in those things,

because that's what your job is, to address those goals in the IEP, so if you're not part of

the planning and part of the solution, then it's not that easy.

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is typically developed in the beginning term of

each school year by the team involved with the student, including the teacher assistant; parent;

teacher; administrator; other related support staff, such as a physiotherapist or speech and

language pathologist; and sometimes the students themselves. The participating teacher

assistants all reported that they were involved in the IEP process to some degree and most of

them attended the IEP meetings for the students whom they most directly supported. While the

IEP was written by a teacher, usually the school-based or itinerant resource teacher, the

participants reported feeling like valued members in the process, in which they were able to give

input and feedback, and participate in the problem-solving process. "I am involved in IEP

meetings and actually, my opinions and my input are quite valued. I know that's not always the case. I really appreciate that, being part of the team."

Scheduling and time constraints were identified as obstacles to being included but these participants reported that an effort was made in most schools to provide an opportunity for the teacher assistant to attend the meetings of the students they were most directly involved with. In these cases, this was accomplished by providing a substitute, arranging for another teacher assistant in the school to take on the responsibility of the student, or having flexible meeting times (e.g., during lunch, early dismissal). The participants felt strongly about being involved, as they felt that they knew the student well, worked with them daily, and could provide valuable information on the progress and needs of the student. "Our school's pretty good. They really try hard to get us involved because we're the ones doing most of the [direct] work." Not only did they feel that it was important to provide information, but they found the process of the meeting to be an important one for their own practice.

> The brainstorming that goes on and the discussion that goes on during IEP, I mean, it's important to be involved in that so you can read it. The IEP that somebody else has done is not nearly as meaningful. It's being involved in the discussion around the student and the concerns. There's only so many things that go on a piece of paper.

Time constraints and the reduction of the hours teacher assistants work have resulted in some participants not being able to attend the IEP meetings for all of the students they are supporting. The large number of students a teacher assistant may be supporting, especially at the secondary level, also creates a logistical problem.

> If you've got one particular student that you really feel it's imperative that you're there, then you go. But we have 20 students in our program and I may not be dealing with them

one-on-one or one-to-two, but I am dealing with them in some aspect of their day and so

it really would help to know what their goals are.

Although for the most part, these eight participants were involved in the IEP process, some

suggested that it is still not common practice in all schools for teacher assistants to be involved;

they felt that their situations were somewhat unique.

In addition to the constraints they experienced on their involvement, concerns also raised

about the difficulties faced by itinerant resource teachers, who, while responsible for the writing

of the IEP, had little time to get to know students because of the demands of their workloads.

"Her time is really limited, [it's] a new job, a whole new group of students, it's taken her a while

to get to know him." In these cases, it was very important for these teacher assistants to be highly

involved, because they felt they were the ones who "know the student". Additionally, the long

timelines that can be involved in the writing of the IEPs resulted in a void for new students

transitioning into the high school. Although challenges arose in IEP development process, the

participants viewed the IEP as a useful tool. Once the IEP was developed and shared, it then

became the task of the teacher assistant to support the student towards meeting those goals on a

daily basis.

Variability in Daily Work

I'd say the number one thing is to help students to learn to their full potential, whatever

that is, and support student's learning or behaviour... and to help out the teacher

whenever I can. That's basically in a nutshell what I do.

While the eight participants were guided by IEPs and shared a similar sense of purpose,

the enactment of this purpose is notably unique to the individual context in which they work. The

daily experiences described by these teacher assistants were extremely varied. Even within each context, an attempt to describe a typical day could be problematic.

> *I: But I think as maybe a grounding piece, [we should] take a look at what your*
>
> *work looks like during the day. What do you do on a typical day?*
>
> *R: A typical day?*
>
> *I: If there's such a day.*
>
> *R: There isn't.*

As participants attempted to describe what they did in a day, they then went on to qualify their description with the differences and variability between their example and any other given day. "So [in that class], I felt I was more of a teacher's assistant whereas in the English class, I'm more of a student's assistant." For these teacher assistants, each day presents differing schedules, activities, challenges, and experiences. The term 'typical day' did not appear to apply to this type of work.

The daily experiences <u>across</u> participants were also extremely varied; these differences were reflected in all aspects of their work, from the types of settings they worked in, the particular needs of the students, the individualized goals and activities engaged in, the construction and tasks of their days, their role and expectations, their power in decision-making, to their relationships with others in the school. This variation made it impossible to create one description that captures the dynamic and varied nature of the work.

In exploring the guiding question of this study, "What are the experiences and perceptions of teacher assistants as they support students with disabilities in public education?", I found the variety of daily experiences to be a significant feature of the work. Unlike teachers, who train for and teach at specific grade ranges and subject levels, a teacher assistant may work

the full range of settings, from Kindergarten through Grade 12. While they may be hired into a particular job in either secondary or elementary, they are then subject to 'bumping', the relocation of positions due to staffing needs and seniority. The bumping process is a fairly common occurrence for teacher assistants and they may be moved during the year, or at the end of the year depending on school and district needs. The result can be the relocation into any and all types of position, at any grade level or subject area.

In addition to bumping, teacher assistant assignments within a school frequently change at the end of each year, depending upon the needs of that school's student population. One year, a teacher assistant may work in a grade six classroom supporting a child with behavioural and learning concerns, the next year they may be working in a grade one classroom with a child with a physical disabilities that requires personal care and medical support. In the secondary schools, the four participants interviewed supported students in a wide range of subjects: Earth Science 11, Math 8, English 10, Science 8, Foods & Nutrition 11/12, Music , Cafeteria, Accounting 11, Art 10, Electronics 11, Woodworking 8, English 8, P.E. 12, Band , Art 11, Humanities 8, Life Skills 8. In elementary school, the range can also be varied:

I: *How many classes are you in?*

R: *Like five.*

I: *Five in a day?*

R: *Five in a day, yeah. So one before recess, one after recess, then one after lunch, no, three after lunch.*

Depending upon school district and individual school practices, some teacher assistants will be "assigned to" and support just one student throughout the year, and even over a number of years. Other teacher assistants will work with a number of different students who have been

identified as needing support. In the case of these eight participants, three out of the eight were assigned to support one student, although as the student gained in independence, they would also work with other students in the classroom as time and context permitted. The remaining five participants supported a number of students across their day. The students they were supporting had a range of identified learning needs, and their disabilities were identified as being in either the 'low incidence' and 'high incidence' categories[13] for funding purposes.

Due to the differing learning needs of the students, and different contexts of service delivery and school settings, the types of tasks that the participants engaged in ranged from academic, personal care, social skills development, emotional/behavioural support, physiotherapy, life skills, organizational, and clerical.

Six out of eight of the participants supported students' learning in academic subjects, working with individuals and small groups in a variety of academic activities. This could involve assisting the teacher in general class activities and working with students needing additional help in regular curricular activities:

I would go to other classrooms and help teachers with whatever they needed the most

help in and they'd usually structure their day around when I would come because they

needed help during certain times like writers workshop and math. I might work with

small groups or individuals on a variety of things, helping them write, helping them with

comprehension, helping them with math... Usually we did math in the morning and I

might work with a group. I always worked with a group of students in math.... I might use

---

[13] Low incidence refers to a label assigned to students with disabilities that are identified as occurring less frequently in the general population but requiring a higher level of support and funding due to the severity of disability, (e.g., autism, severe cognitive disabilities). High incidence refers to a label assigned to students with disabilities that are identified as occurring more frequently in the general population but requiring a lower level of support and funding due to the nature of the disability (e.g., learning disability, mild cognitive disabilities).

the hundreds, ten, ones chart if we were doing place value [or] use some manipulatives

to help us work through some of the problems.

At other times, they worked with individual students on modified programs, where the learning

outcomes are different from the rest of the students.

He has a talking calculator because that's one thing that we think he'll need to be able to

use is a calculator for some independent living in the future...we're hoping that he'll

learn some sets of symbols. We can do that very easily with math, with just the basic plus,

minus, times, and divide symbols. So he does the textbook work, usually less. Like he'll

choose either odd or even numbers of the page and we'll do the same questions that the

kids do but with his calculator.

Often, the role would shift from one of providing direct support to the student to assisting

the teacher in general, "one drama class, I have a boy in one class and two girls in the other, but

they're all self-sufficient and I'm sort of the monitor in between, there to help the teacher more

or less"; to acting as an intermediary between the classroom teacher and resource teacher. This

liaison was more typical to secondary settings.

English 10, I have a handful of targeted students. Wherever the students are at, I'm more

keeping track of what's being covered, what assignments are supposed to be done and

when. I'm assisting less in the class because by grade 10 level many students are really

sensitive to how much or how long they've been helped and they feel, even if you pass

and talk to everybody, they still feel that they're being singled out.... Given the resource

block that they also have, where we can catch up with anything that hasn't happened or

wasn't understood, it's working fairly well with me being the little bit of a background

person. And being the liaison between the teacher and resource teacher.

In addition to direct instructional support and assisting the teacher, the participants also, at times, provided 'backup' support for the students while the teacher was instructing. This could include physically organizing learning materials, scribing, providing motivation, or prompting for directions:

> *So then, during the lesson, I would make sure he's on task, understands what he's supposed to do. If he doesn't, then I might give him a few hints. 'Okay, what did she say about ...', 'Do you remember what she said about doing your social studies?' ... and so rather than tell him what I want him to do, try and get him to use his own memory...*

For some of the participants, providing support for students with emotional and behavioural challenges was a central part of their job. In these instances, the types of activities could range from supporting social skills development, providing direct behavioural interventions, developing communication skills, and providing emotional support:

> *Some days it's just fine. I could not even be there, I could be at home. He would be just fine. And other days, because he has difficulty in expressing his emotions and putting his emotions into words, his first thing to do is to latch onto me and not want to let go and that is his sort of safety net.*

One participant described the preplanning that went into recess and lunchtime on the playground:

> *The student I was with had some issues with his behaviour and a lot of that came out in the unstructured times of the day which was recess and lunch so, on the way out, I would ask him, 'Who are you planning on playing with today?'. He would tell me and I would be, 'Great, okay, what game are you going to play?'. And if it was a game that we had some problems with before, I would say, 'Okay, if this comes up, what are you going to do? How are you going to handle that if it comes up and you don't think it's fair and you*

get angry?', and then we would discuss that. I might use a social story if it was something that we had an issue with before. Often we wrote social stories together so the next time it would come up, we could refer to that social story and how we could work through it.

Often, teacher assistants are hired to support students with more severe physical and cognitive disabilities and in addition to supporting the student in learning activities, will assist them with their personal care (e.g., toileting, dressing, feeding), medical (e.g., catheterization, gastro-intestinal tube feeding, medication administration), physiotherapy, and occupational therapy needs. Four out of the eight participants provided this type of support in their daily work. As one participant describes:

Late morning, before lunch, the student needs to go to the washroom. He needs some personal care there. So we do that, do some physiotherapy sort of exercises, part of the program, and then off to lunch. After lunch we're outside for a bit. The afternoon, that tends to his physical or physiotherapy needs - standing, changing braces, that kind of thing. He's got braces on his legs that lock up and [I'm] really working on some of his muscle groups that are really tight.

The development of life skills is also an important part of the role of teacher assistants. Life skills involve a variety of skills and activities that assist students in the long range with independent functioning in their communities. For example, goals in the life skills areas can include the use of money, functional reading, using public transportation, engaging in recreational activities, and engaging in work experience and vocational activities. Six out of eight of the participants supported students in this area. One participant described a life skills activity referred to as 'pop machines'. Although lengthy, this description provides a particularly

rich description of the variety of life skills, and the small successes, involved in the activity of loading the pop machines in a secondary school.

We'd go down and we'd open all the pop machines, ... write down what's needed. And then we'd go to the pop cupboard and we'd take out the pop that we thought we needed. And so everybody has to be able to carry a flat of pop which is two dozen cans. It's not light .... And then they get the key and they unlock the padlock. Then there's another key, it's a little trickier once in awhile, I sort of hand-over-hand push it in and pull it out. And then they have to turn it to open it and I find it takes just about a year of doing it hand-over-hand before they do it on their own. Abbie, it's her third year and she's just a whiz at it.

And then we've had to put all the pop, we have to be able to identify by name and then we have to match it to the pop that's in the machine and make sure the pop goes in the right way into the machine. So you have to have someone watching what they're doing because even after, I find, even after they've done it for years you turn around and they're putting it in the wrong place.... But they all, they could all do it, they can all match. Except they've got new machines now and they're too high and they can't really see when it gets to the top what kind of pop is in it, but we'll work it out.

In addition to the range of subjects, differing needs of students, shifting roles, and differing tasks, teacher assistants may also work with a variety of professionals. School-based resource teachers, itinerant resource teachers, speech and language pathologists, itinerant teachers for the visually impaired, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists were among the professionals that these eight participants reported working with. Depending upon the needs of the student, a psychologist, psychiatrist, mental health worker, itinerant teacher for the hearing

impaired, social worker, or pediatrician, among others, may also be a part of the team. This can also affect the daily tasks of the teacher assistant's work.

> R: *And occasionally people pop in, you know. He has a vision teacher, a special needs resource teacher, a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist if we need, regular classroom teacher, myself.... [Before], he had even more people coming in.*

> I: *So part of your role within there is to...*

> R: *Connect with those people, yeah. And sort of keep the lines of communication open. And every one of those people comes with their, um..., because for, say for the vision teacher, for her, it's all about vision, do you know what I mean? [chuckle]*

> I: *Their own agenda?*

> R: *So to kind of balance all that is, yeah, it's all about vision...*

> I: *And then the physio comes... [Chuckle]*

> R: *Yeah, and then, we're doing PE all day, you know. [Chuckle] So trying to balance that and then have him get really what he needs out of the day to meet what he needs and just for him to be able to be more and more independent. That's what my day looks like.*

Within and across just eight participants' daily work, the range of experiences are extremely varied. It becomes apparent that the roles and responsibilities of these teacher assistants shifts or varies depending upon the needs of the student, and the needs and practices of the teacher, the school, and the school district.

Educational Responsibility

And there are lots of decisions in the day that no matter how extensive an IEP you've got, you've still got a boat load of decisions to make that day, small and big, for that student. Decisions on his learning, and whether he or she will learn it or not, what you'll take from that...

One of the most striking themes that emerged from the data was the high level of responsibility, educational decision-making, and autonomy that the participants encountered in their daily work. As the participants discussed their practice, it was clear that they were responsible for many educational decisions, including goal setting, adapting and modifying of the content and materials, and delivery of instruction. One participant explained, "The work that the students are given, I just modify it on the spot. You know, simplify some of the things as we go in that particular class." For example, they may adapt the activity by reducing the amount of questions the student has to complete; "it was basically not doing a whole sheet so just folding the bottom part up so that he's not feeling like he has to do it all". They may modify the activity by adjusting the learning outcome;

"If the sheet comes around and then if he can't handle it, let's say it's three digit whatever and really can't handle it, I might just white out and make it a two digit number, as best I can so that he's still doing similar to what they're doing."

They may also adjust the delivery of instruction; for example, "novels are hard in general, let alone a big one or whatever, so I've been pulling him out[14]."

Some goals, while outlined on the IEP, needed to be adjusted for each class and unique situation. Depending upon the lesson or activity, the teacher assistant may decide to adjust it by

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[14] 'Pulling out' refers to the practice of taking students out of their classrooms to another setting and working with them on a one-to-one basis or in a small group.

scribing, reducing the amount of an assignment, "using alternate textbooks, more simplified textbooks", or "making visual supports". Other examples of decision-making were taking responsibility for choosing individual spelling words, rewording the questions for tests, highlighting relevant material for students, choosing resources from the library, and gathering and modifying materials.

At times, these decisions were made in collaboration with the teacher, or the teacher was aware of the decisions from observation or subsequent feedback.

That morning he was just really distressed and so I just started [the new program]. I just pulled him to the back table and so [the teacher could] see me at all times, or most times, and then I just explained to her after and she said, 'Yeah, that was fine'.

The participants attempted to discuss the activities and outcomes with the teacher as much as possible and described 'checking' with the teacher, seeing if they were on the right track, and asking for feedback.

If a big project comes up and the outline is given, there's more of a collaboration possible and I will come up with suggestions and certainly a discussion with the teacher as to what, you know, if it's acceptable for my student to say omit a presentation that would be part of a project but that would be very difficult for the student to do.

They felt that in these circumstances, the teachers they worked with were in agreement with their decisions and the level of responsibility they were taking on. As one participant stated, "The teacher is very comfortable with whatever decision I make."

At other times, however, this decision-making was autonomous and undirected by the teachers. In many instances, the participants described being solely responsible for deciding and implementing the student's activities. As they discussed these circumstances, they used phrases

such as, "I made the decision", "I decide", and "I choose". For example, "And the other day, when I made the decision that we weren't ready for regrouping…"

If there's a totally open, research project in Science, I narrow the choice down for my student to more concrete because that's what his level of understanding is, and give him a choice of some concrete topics that I feel he might be successful at.

While the overall goals may be outlined in the IEP, the day-to-day implementation was often left to the teacher assistant to carry out. Specifics about the student's program were not outlined in the teacher's daybook, nor were they discussed on a daily basis with the teacher. For the most part, the teacher assistant determined what was being taught by observing or discussing the lesson with the teacher and then carried out the student's individualized program by adapting and modifying as she or he went. They believed that this was a necessity of their role, "because essentially it's not my job but on the other hand if I don't do it nobody is, so [chuckle] this kid's not getting anywhere. He may as well stay home. Like, if nothing's gonna happen at school…."

This educational responsibility seemed to arise from a number of different factors, including organizational constraints such as planning time and resource support, variability of teacher input, and teacher preparedness. Participants reported that finding the time to communicate with the teacher was not always possible or realistic, given the responsibilities and constraints of both positions.

I: So basically the IEP's done up, you get the IEP and you start making the decisions?

R: Yeah, and you collect the materials, you modify, and if you are on top of things I would consult with the teacher and ask her opinion and say, 'Okay, how would

you do this?' and, 'You want to show me?', but, I mean, realistically, they don't

have the time and you don't have the time to have that meeting time, right?

Within the five school districts represented, cuts to the hours of teacher assistants have occurred over the past few years. These cuts have resulted in a reduction in hours from a 35 hour full-time position to 30 hours or less a week. Many positions are part-time positions, and may be, for example, 12, 15, or 24 hour positions. Some districts have predominantly part-time positions. Six out of eight of the participants have been affected by these cuts. The resulting hour assignment means these teacher assistants arrive at the same time, or after, the students have begun class and leave before, or when, the students leave. The implication, then, is that there is no time for meeting with teachers, gathering materials, discussing short-term or long-term plans, or even knowing what is being taught in the day. Once the students are in class, opportunities for discussion with the teacher are minimal. There is little opportunity to share student progress, set goals, problem-solve, or develop new strategies.

The material that I've read says that it's the teacher [that] has to modify. When you get

there, the teacher's teaching. She's teaching twenty-seven kids and as she's saying

something, you're thinking, how can my student do this? You gotta do it right there,

because tomorrow, they're doing something else.

Some of the participants, most often in secondary, reported that they often did not know what the students were going to be doing in a class until they got there.

I: In those blocks, who's responsible for the program? Is it the teacher that says

we're doing this today, here's the adapted or modified materials?

R: The responsibility lies with the teacher, resource teacher. The practicality of it is

that, I'm doing a lot of that, I guess for two reasons. Because I've worked with the

student for quite a long time so I probably know [the student] the best. But also

because… it's not prepared ahead of time as a modified program, so there's no

choice but doing it on the spot. For say, if it's homework or if it's an assignment

that's being handed out.

I: *So if you go in, say on a Monday morning, do you know what they're doing, what*

they're working on?

R: *I usually don't know until I get to the class.*

For the two participants who had not experienced a reduction of hours, planning time was also

identified as a concern.

The participants discussed the variability in teacher input and participation they

encountered, ranging from the teacher being fully involved and responsible for all aspects of the

program to not being involved at all. The individual working relationships with the teachers were

unique to each situation and the individual responsibilities evolved out of each context.

Again, it depends on the teacher, right. Cause there are some teachers, they want you to

take it all over and write down notes so that when it's time for report card, then they

know where they're at. And there are others, others that [say], "Don't you dare bother to

do that. That's my job as a teacher and I'll do the behaviors and discipline and

whatever".

In some cases, integrating teachers gave full responsibility to the teacher assistant. One

participant described a high school setting experience in which students were integrated into

regular classrooms.

[The teachers] were really having a tough time with kids coming from the LD [Learning

Disabilities] room that might need that extra support or just don't get it. And they're

feeling frustrated and angry about that. Now when I show up with a student... they don't

have a clue. They don't. I'd had more than one teacher say, 'I have no idea what to do

here or why, what you're doing, so just, they're your student, just do whatever you think

is right.'

The level of responsibility and ownership that some participants felt for the education of the

student was evidenced in the common usage of the terms, 'my' and 'yours'. Often, as the

participants described their days and experiences, they referred to the students they were

supporting as "my student" and indicated that teachers at times referred to them as "your

student".

Some participants expressed concern that some of the teachers who had students

integrated into their classes did not understand the IEP goals set for the student, their presence in

the classroom, or their individual needs. While they felt that support from the teacher would be

helpful, they also felt that the teacher was not able to provide it.

It would make my day easier if I had more instruction, it really would. But part of the

reason there isn't instruction is because they wouldn't know what to do. You know,

there's not a lot of time spent on special ed [in teacher education].

Because of the lack of forthcoming guidance, the teacher assistant felt obligated to take over

those duties for the success of the student.

Cause sometimes you think about all the decisions you make in a day and you think, 'Oh,

it's a lot of responsibility' but at the same time, it's what the student needs, so that's why

you do it. It's just what everybody needs.

Among the participants, there were varying degrees of comfort in taking on the

responsibilities of educational decision-making, from a high level of comfort, through

ambivalence, to discomfort. Some participants felt that they had enough experience and

education to take on the responsibility:

> *I think that's fair enough for the level of training that is expected now from teaching*
>
> *assistants or paraprofessionals. I think you should be, you're on the spot, you're the one*
>
> *that's been given this position. This is what you're going to do and therefore you*
>
> *shouldn't have to run to someone else to make all your decisions for you. You should*
>
> *have that respect and especially when you're experienced and you've proved yourself.*

Others seemed ambivalent about taking on that level of responsibility:

> *I think that's hard because, I felt when I first came to this job that I was, a little worried*
>
> *about, man, I'm deciding what he's learning and I was afraid of that because I thought*
>
> *they told me I wasn't supposed to do this.*

Although they felt quite capable of carrying out the job, some would have preferred more

support and input into the daily activities. "I think it's okay. I think it is. I think it would also be

okay if the teacher did some of it too. That would be very okay with me because essentially

they're the classroom teacher, not me." Some expressed concern about the level of responsibility

for the student, the fact that they were not supposed to be doing many activities that were outside

the bounds of their job description, and the lack of recognition for doing that amount of work.

> *So academically I have a lot of power I think, if I chose to take it. I could say, 'Well, you*
>
> *know, [this novel] really isn't working, so I'm gonna just do this novel. I could do that*
>
> *and I probably would have nobody.... But I don't believe in that, so I don't do it.*

Valuing and Recognition

> *Like you're not supposed to be doing this, all this work, but you do but you can't take credit because really you're not supposed to be doing it. So there's really not any recognition, although, we also don't need to have a pat on the back every time....*

The other most striking theme that emerged from the data was the low level of valuing, recognition, and belonging that most of the participants encountered at some point in their work. As the participants discussed their experiences, it was clear that the value of their work is not necessarily a given within the culture of all schools. The participants shared a range of experiences, some in which they felt highly valued, some in which they felt devalued. This low level of valuing and lack of recognition was in contrast to the high level of responsibility and educational decision-making these teacher assistants were engaged in.

Although there was a range of experiences described, all of the participants had encountered at least some experiences that contributed to this feeling of a lack of value and respect for the role that they undertook, whether it was from administrators, classroom teachers, resource teachers, or in the general school tone or operation. There were many 'messages' received, both subtle and explicit, that indicated their position and work was not important, or as important as the work of others in the school. Some described the position of a teacher assistant as being at the 'bottom of', or 'low in the hierarchy of the school', and used phrases that indicated they felt that they were not 'valued', 'respected', 'recognized', or 'understood' arose in the discussions. While there were examples of very positive, valuing relationships described, the participants' sense of belonging as valued members of the school community, as a whole, was not well established, or unconditional. A number of experiences contributed to this sense, including level of recognition in the school; acceptance by the teachers in the classrooms; access

to personal physical space; and acceptance into the school processes, such as staff meetings and accreditation.

Examples of not being recognized, through the use of one's name or identity was a powerful illustration of instances that contribute to this feeling. One participant described an experience at a beginning of the year assembly, where all other members of the staff were introduced to the students at the assembly, but teacher assistants were not. Others described instances that included being referred to as "what's her name over there", being confused with other teacher assistants working with the teacher in other blocks (after working there for the semester), and not having name plates on the doors or mail slots when the teachers did. One participant described a school in the district in which the principal had ordered name plates for the teacher assistants and how that spoke to the value that the principal ascribed to all school staff. When asked for an example of what that feeling of not being valued or recognized 'looked like', another participant in secondary described:

> *A really good example is when I started my first assignment. I did six weeks in [a school].*
> *Aside from one teacher that I can think of, every teacher introduced me to the class, and*
> *said, 'This is ___'. They talked to me beforehand and said, 'What do you go by?' or, 'I*
> *prefer [teacher assistants] to be called by Mr., Mrs., okay?'. And then they all would*
> *introduce me to the class: 'This is ____, a [teacher assistant], here to help out, so if you*
> *have any questions…. I went to [another school] and in all the classes I've been to over*
> *the last four years, never once have I been introduced. Or, it's just, 'You grab a chair*
> *back there'. That's it.*

The participants experienced differences in the extent to which they were welcomed by teachers in classrooms and resource rooms. In some circumstances, they felt highly valued and

welcome, and perceived themselves to be important members of the team. The teachers asked their opinions, incorporated their suggestions, gave them responsibilities which involved the whole class, and generally included them as valuable members in the community of the classroom. However, this was not consistent across the participants' experiences. There were also instances that gave them the feeling of not being accepted by the teachers and not being welcomed into the classroom. One participant described the experience of integrating students into classrooms at the secondary level:

> R: *I've been in other situations where the teacher's totally ignored me and the student. Then I don't feel valued at all. They might as well tell me, "I wish you weren't here. I know you have to be here but I don't want to see you, I don't want to talk to you, and I don't want to hear from your student, and if your student makes a peep, then please feel free to take him out of here".*
>
> I: *Without saying it, they say it?*
>
> R: *Yeah, they don't have to say those words, but the message is clear, right from the time you walk into a classroom.*

Another participant described integrating a student into a secondary class. The student and the teacher assistant were seated at the back table of the room and when other students in the class misbehaved, they were sent to the back to sit with the student and the teacher assistant, as punishment. Neither the student nor the teacher assistant were viewed as a part of the community of the classroom, and gaining access to that community became extremely difficult when viewed as the punishment, "so successful integration of my student is gone out the window".

Many of the participants did not have their own desks or work space where they could put their personal and work belongings. That access to physical space, for some, spoke to the level of importance ascribed to the job.

I: *Something I've heard quite a bit from people is the phrase, 'Just a TA'. What does that mean? What does that look like?*

R: *It could be something as simple as a physical thing. At the beginning of the year, (we've always had our own space in the room) but the first thing I was told was that a teacher needed my desk, so I didn't have one anymore. And that gets you off to a bad start. Okay, I don't need a desk...*

I: *That sort of does, yeah.....*

R: *Yeah, does that explain everything? (Chuckle) So I now have a little, like a kid's desk, you know, with just a flat table, with no drawers. And that's my spot. And I usually find it covered with books and stuff. (Chuckle) Yeah, and I think it's very important – if you're expecting people to be professional, to have materials that they can lay their hands on - these are the classes you're in, you've pulled the material together that you know the kid will be needing, you've got a space where everything that you're going to need for that particular semester or the next few weeks or months [is located] and you can just work from it, then you're going to need space. But if you're just a TA, where you walk in the room and the teacher says, "I want you to do this, this and this, and you're not expected to do any preparation, then obviously you don't need a desk."*

Out of these eight teacher assistants, one participant had work space with a desk, two shared desks with one or two other teacher assistants, and a fourth had a desk that was located in a

different wing in the school (this was not used because of the lack of proximity). The other participants had some table space or cupboard space to put their belongings in. Most of the participants had minimal area for storage of resources for the students they were supporting. This lack of storage space also suggested to some a lack of recognition of the value of work they did. "I know a lot of [teacher assistants] say they've got tons of stuff and they're not really allowed the space or the recognition that that material is important to them."

The participants also experienced differing levels of acceptance in the processes and organizational aspects of the school. Attending meetings, either staff or team planning meetings, was difficult. Some of the participants were welcome to attend school staff meetings and did so, sometimes during unpaid hours; others were not invited or it was school practice not to attend. Meetings were usually scheduled after school; with cuts to the hours and union expectations around not putting in extra time, attending could become problematic[15]. However, one participant described the practice in some schools of the principals holding meetings just for the teacher assistants, within the bound of their hours. Again, in reporting this practice, the teacher assistant felt that this indicated a valuing of the work of teacher assistants by the principals.

Participants also identified varying levels of involvement in the accreditation[16] process, professional development activities, and extra curricular activities. One participant described the experience of being excluded from the accreditation process and being told by the school district that only teachers, administrators, and parents were part of the process. With further discussion, that practice was changed and the teacher assistant did become involved, making the point, "if

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[15] Especially at this time, the erosion of hours from full to part-time positions is a central bargaining concern, and as such, there is often a strong union stance for teacher assistants to work only the hours they were contracted for. To work beyond the hours is perceived as giving upaid time to the school districts for hours which have been cut.
[16] Accreditation is the process by which each school is evaluated in entirety by an external team of evaluators, following Ministry accreditation guidelines.

you're evaluating the whole school, well again, that's the recognition that we are part of the school." Involvement in professional development activities and extra curricular activities was mixed, with some being welcome to take part and others not.

Some participants expressed the feeling of being devalued when they were not consulted about the student they were supporting, or processes that impacted their work. These included not being asked for direct feedback when assessment tools were being used (when they had the detailed information about the students' performance), not being consulted about a student teacher coming for practicum (when it directly impacted their work), and not having access to learning materials for the students they were supporting (because learning materials are for teachers, not teacher assistants). One participant suggested that sensitivity training for staff and administrators might be useful, as "people need to be aware that it's the little things that make the difference"; "all these little sayings, although they may be just words, they mean quite a bit."

Thus, in tension with the high levels of responsibility and educational decision making these teacher assistants were engaging in, were experiences that suggested a low level of recognition and valuing for the work they were doing. On initial review, this seemingly noticeable, and yet mostly unidentified, tension or imbalance between the level of responsibility and level of value ascribed to it, caused me to question whether I had constructed or assumed this myself in the analysis. Upon returning to the participants to ask them directly about it, they all confirmed that this was not my imposed interpretation, but a reality of the job. One participant described it as feeling like being in a tug of war while balancing on a tightrope, being pulled back and forth between competing interests; it was always a balancing act trying to keep things in harmony.

Maintaining the balance and harmony in working with others is a large part of the work of a teacher assistant, and it seems, it can be a difficult part. The amount of power these participants felt to address this balance seemed to be variable. Although power in decision, or power in relationships was not directly addressed in these interviews, some of the wording that was used by the participants suggests that at times, they felt that they did not have direct power to influence circumstances. Examples included, "I don't want to rock the boat", it "depends on how vocal you want to be", and "I just about said, 'Hey, how about one for us', but I didn't have enough courage to do it."

There are moments when you are just [a TA] and you wouldn't dare open your mouth and say anything, but some days you think, "Oh, I've been here just as long as you guys and I've gone through a lot of the grades." And some days, I'll do it to myself. I would just say, "Well, I'm just the assistant, so I really don't have a right to say that.

This would suggest that some teacher assistants don't feel they have a position of power from which to comment or discuss issues, or that this position is tentative. "I have a very good balance but on the other hand, sometimes you have to rock the boat in order to make people aware that what they're doing isn't okay."

In spite of the responsibility these teacher assistants were taking on, it was very clear that the teacher was perceived to be 'in charge' of the classroom. "Like I said, it's her room or his room, and so you have to do…." The participants seemed to feel as if they were in a large part responsible for reading teacher cues and maintaining harmony; the teacher held the direct power to determine their role, level of responsibility, and belonging. "I like when I'm in a room where a teacher allows me to be a part of their room." This determination can be highly rewarding, as in the example: "In general I get along with them and we're a part of a team. That's most exciting

to me, feeling like I belong." It can also be difficult: "But sometimes they're not [knowledgeable about the work] and you've got ten years of experience and they're now telling you what to do, and that gets difficult."

A frustration that arises from this relationship comes in the form of the 'unspoken' nature of the work of the teacher assistant. The teacher is formally recognized as being 'in charge' of the larger context of the classroom and responsible for the educational programs for all of the students. The teacher is the one who 'teaches'. In all role descriptions in the literature and job descriptions of the school districts, the word 'teach' is omitted from the responsibilities of the teacher assistant. However, it was clear from these teacher assistants that one of the activities that they engaged in daily was that of 'teaching'.

> *But in that process now, I'm saying okay, Tammie, this is a penny. Boom, I've taught*
>
> *something, right? This is a penny and five pennies equal a nickel. Boom, there's another*
>
> *concept that I've taught. So it's a really gray area and a funny line that everyone chooses*
>
> *to ignore.*

It was clear in the discussion that these teacher assistants were teaching new concepts and skills to students but in a formal sense, these undertakings were generally unspoken and unrecognized:

> *Life skills is the biggest one for most of our kids. So, if something arises like this kid has*
>
> *to cross the street by themselves, the classroom teacher is not going to stop the class and*
>
> *say, 'Okay, we're all going to learn how to cross the street'. No, the TA is going to do*
>
> *that, and say, 'Okay, first concept, get to the corner. Second concept..., all the safety*
>
> *issues around that. And next is to actually do it a couple of times and, you know, that's*
>
> *all teaching, without the consultation or information from the teacher.*

It was also clear that they did not feel that it was necessary to gain recognition in the form of accolades or to be equated with the teacher but rather to gain recognition in the form of a sense of valuing of all the tasks that they undertook, without having to threaten the work or political stance of teachers. They expressed a desire for the recognition that inherent in the process of engaging with students is the necessity of engaging in educational thinking.

Although not specifically asked about the role of administrators, a number of the participants spontaneously identified the approach of the administration as an important factor in the level of their recognition and valuing in the school, and their abilities to be successful in their job. They stated that the administrators played a major role in setting the tone in the school and influenced the teacher assistants' level of acceptance by others in the school community.

The administration was very, very keen on inclusion and kids with special needs are really important to them, so you got the feeling right from the top that you were a very important part of the school climate and they wanted everybody to feel very much part of the team.

They also discussed the importance of developing positive working relationships directly with the administrators. They felt that demonstrating their level of responsibility and commitment to the school and students to the administration was an important way of gaining a position of value in the school. They did not necessarily think that the administration had to fully understand the nature of the teacher assistant's job responsibilities and goals, rather it was more important that they saw the worth in that job contributing to the overall process of the school.

In discussing this lack of valuing as a theme, the participants saw it as a reality of the work, but also did not want it to be seen as 'whining' or wanting to usurp power from others, rather just an understanding of it as a difficult place to be in. The participants who worked in

elementary schools explained that the way they coped with this tension was by taking on their own responsibility for becoming involved, demonstrating their value, and being an active member of the school community.

They talked about the importance of taking an active role in establishing themselves as part of the staff: "I'm not going to be a wallflower, if I hide in a corner, I'll be ignored."; "If some of the parents don't know who you are, you should make it a point to introduce yourself". They also spoke of attending school activities, sitting with the rest of the staff at assemblies, joining committees, and attending staff meetings.

> *In order for us to have it the way we have it now, we had to commit to being present because there was a couple of things that we thought needed, some sort of changing in the school, and there was no way we had any say whatsoever unless we attended the staff meetings.*

In the secondary school, it seemed more difficult to become involved, although participants did make that effort; one was a member of the staff committee and another took part in accreditation. The difficulties in secondary are most likely due to the large number of people on staff and structural/organizational limitations. More barriers, including being excluded from staff meetings, departmental cultures, multiple staff room/meeting places, seemed to occur in these settings. In these settings, the participants connected more closely with others in their own special education departments, and gained value and recognition within that culture.

These participants also described the tension they experienced between being union members, being bumped from year to year, being bounded by the hours of work, yet feeling the need to participate in the community of the school to become more valued and belong. The

process of bumping emerged as a barrier to belonging in the school community. One participant
voiced the repercussions of bumping poignantly:

> *I have a lot invested in [the program] and it seems to be now, everyone's attitude has to
> almost shift from feeling like it's your job, to feeling like it's a job. Because if you know
> potentially you're going to move at the end of the year, and it's going to happen every
> year, year in year out, you know this is coming, you really don't want to put a whole lot
> more into it than you really feel like. You don't really want to put a lot of emotional
> attachment to it. You just have to try to detach from it.*

Some of the participants did become involved in activities beyond the realm of the job as defined
by the union and hours paid for by the school districts. Others felt constrained by union
expectations but held to them. It was the general feeling that these constraints, while understood
in the context of the erosion of job security and hours, did little to help their abilities to
participate in the educational process and to contribute to their sense of belonging within the
larger picture of the school community.

> *Like it or not there's a hierarchy in the school in the staff. Obviously there is,
> unfortunately, but it is like that. You'll stay there unless you act a different way and I
> choose to do that. You'll stay there and unless you stay committed, and not just
> committed to the one student you work with..., but if you're committed to all the kids in
> the class, the staff, and just the school as a whole, and what the school's goals are, you'll
> be where everybody else is and not be the one or two TAs at the bottom of the totem pole.*

To maintain one's balance, in light of all the competing issues and tensions, is indeed, to walk
the tightrope.

<u>A Strong Sense of Joy and Satisfaction</u>

> *I still think my worst day there is better than my best day anywhere else.*

In spite of the tensions and frustrations these participants encountered in their work, they all described a strong sense of satisfaction and joy in the work that they do. Most of the participants described the job as one that they loved to do. Half of them marveled that they had an opportunity to do it as a job. "I'm embarrassed, because I just love it so much. [It's] just so enjoyable, it's hard to imagine doing it for a job." Some described the sense of autonomy and level of responsibility as being rewarding, for others being part of a team was important. Gaining a sense of belonging, receiving positive feedback from the students' parents, and being able to have working hours that allowed an opportunity to parent their own children made a positive difference for some. However, most important to all of the participants was the satisfaction that they drew from seeing the students succeed and the relationships they had with the students.

Success was measured in small steps, in seeing students participate with others, in watching friendships emerge, in seeing students become motivated, in helping students learn. "Oh, there are little joys. Just seeing them succeed at anything is wonderful. Even if it's just a walk down the hallway, and the kids say 'hi' and they say 'hi' back." Because of the unique needs of the students, and the often extended period it takes for them to acquire new skills, the little accomplishments, such as "managing a whole hour" without support, or printing their name, or greeting people in the community, were just as valued as the larger accomplishments that other students would be making in the school.

> *Things that take our kids so long. When they finally accomplish it, it's just so exciting. Some days you get disillusioned when other people [say], 'Oh well, that's no big deal'. But when you put it all back into perspective, it's a huge deal.*

In speaking of these successes, the participants described the sense of satisfaction they gained from seeing students learn. One participant described the challenge of finding a different way to get more from a student, "so I can get the 'ah ha's', and that to me, it just makes my day to get those 'ah ha's'. Another participant explained that in spite of all of the difficult parts of the work, "those sorts of things keep you going and they're very positive". "When that child succeeds, we succeed."

Overwhelmingly, working with students provided a central source of satisfaction and joy for the participants. "I think for me, just working with kids in general is a joy." Working with students was described as "wonderful", a "joy", and "fun"; and the participants spoke of them with feelings of respect and affection.

> *"I just found what I liked. I've got no aversion to working with big, aggressive kids, kids that are really difficult, kids that other people have written off a long time ago. I love working with those guys, so really, it was just a blessing that I got where I did.*

They expressed feelings of making a difference in the student's lives, making a connection, and having a positive relationship. "Just a couple of good connections and it's a good day." These relationships went beyond teaching/learning relationships to ones in which students developed a sense of trust and comfort, and sought out the participants for help and conversation. Central to their work was the reward and satisfaction of being in relationship with the students. These rewards and satisfactions prevailed over the frustrations; the relationships with the students and the joys they experienced in them provided them with central purpose and meaning to the work.

> *In spite of all the other stuff, I mean, you're angry, you're frustrated at that moment when someone says, 'Don't use the photocopier, [because the teachers might need it]', but*

when the bell rings at 1:00 and you go back to your kid, all that other stuff is pushed

aside because it's irrelevant to the task. In any job, [there are] ups and downs, and good

and bad, but I think the kids make it, make the good outweigh all the bad.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Conclusions

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the experiences and perceptions of teacher assistants supporting students with disabilities in the public education system of British Columbia. The end goal of this naturalistic-phenomenological research design was to contribute, through description, to an informed understanding of the work of the teacher assistant. The intent of such an inquiry is not to generalize these understandings to represent all teacher assistants and caution is taken in light of the select sample of this study. The participants in this study were all experienced teacher assistants who on the whole, had a high level of training. Different issues may have arisen from a group of teacher assistants chosen through random sampling techniques. However, some conclusions can be made from these findings.

These eight teacher assistants shared a common sense of purpose towards promoting independence, student success, and quality of life for all students. They were involved in the IEP development to some extent and felt it was valuable to be a part of this process. The daily work, both in tasks and in role definition, varied dramatically across the eight participants and was notably unique according to each specific context. The participants had a high level of responsibility and engaged in educational decision-making and implementation that went beyond the Ministry of Education and British Columbia Teachers' Federation role and responsibility guidelines; they did engage in instructional tasks and were responsible for teaching new concepts and skills. In some cases, they were responsible for much of the educational program and some felt that unless they took that responsibility on, the child would not be receiving the necessary

individualized program. In contrast to this high level of responsibility was the low level of valuing and recognition that these eight participants experienced at times. However, in spite of the frustrations and concerns raised about the work, the relationships with the students, the satisfaction of seeing them learn, and the opportunity to participate in the enhancement of the students' quality of life were significant sources of satisfaction and joy.

These findings support a number of the claims in the current literature about teacher assistants, or paraprofessionals, in education, including the lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of teacher assistants, the high level of responsibility taken on by teacher assistants, and the need for preparing classroom teachers to work with teacher assistants and students with disabilities. The findings also provide points of discussion to add to the claims in the literature about the need for further training for teacher assistants. In addition, the lack of valuing and recognition experienced by some of these teacher assistants parallels the lack of recognition and unspoken nature of this work in the literature.

Discussion

The findings suggest that there continues to be a lack of clarity and understanding about the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals identified by Jensen (1994) and Pickett (1996), among others. The variability in daily work across these eight teacher assistants illustrates the range of diverse duties and responsibilities and the difficulty in defining the role. Pickett stated in 1980, "there is no paradigmatic job description for a paraprofessional" (p. 7). It appears that twenty years later, this is still the case. The data from this investigation support the notion that the role is open for interpretation within each individual classroom, school, and school district and it becomes individually negotiated depending upon the needs of the student, the practices of

the teacher, the direction of the team, the culture of the school, and the interpretation of the teacher assistant.

The examples of the responsibilities that these participants were taking on support Pickett's (1996) claim that paraprofessionals are working at increased levels of independence and are taking on increasingly complex and sophisticated responsibilities. The findings of this inquiry suggest that in actual practice, the role taken on by some teacher assistants is inconsistent with the role ascribed to them in the literature and by the Ministry of Education and British Columbia Teacher's Federation role descriptions. For the teacher assistants interviewed, the responsibility for education decision-making, in some cases, lies with the teacher assistant rather than the teacher and in practice, teacher assistants do assume direct instructional responsibility, present new material, and take responsibility for adaptations and modifications. They also receive differing degrees of support from professional staff, from a high level to none.

The findings of this inquiry are also consistent with those of Giangreco et al. (1997) and Marks et al. (1999), who found that teacher assistants in inclusive classrooms in the United States were taking on the responsibility of educational and behavioural programs for students with disabilities rather than the classroom teachers. Similarities in findings between these two studies and this inquiry include the sense of ownership these paraprofessionals felt for the students they were supporting; the perception of being the person who knew the student the best, or as Marks et al. (1999) coined, being the 'expert'; the high level of responsibility they experienced; and the perception of the need to take on this responsibility in response to the lack of educational programming coming from professional staff. In paralleling the findings of the 1997 and 1999 studies, Marks et al. (1999) summarize: "paraeducators felt alone with having to make on-the-spot curricular and academic modifications due to lack of teacher and other school

personnel time" (p. 324). This statement is consistent with the experiences of these eight participants.

The parallel in findings of this inquiry and the 1999 study by Marks et al. is notable for two reasons. A comparable methodology was used to investigate a comparable research question. While the sample was higher in the Marks et al (1999) study (i.e., 20 as compared to 8 participants) in-depth interviews were used to investigate the perspectives and experiences of paraeducators supporting students in inclusive settings. Very similar themes emerged regarding the experiences of these teacher assistants. It is also notable in light of the fact that I did not discover this study until <u>after</u> I had finished the first draft of this inquiry and was not influenced by these 1999 findings while analyzing my data or synthesizing the results. It would suggest that the experiences of these eight participants may not be completely unique, but have commonalties with other teacher assistants, or at least with those in the Giangreco et al. (1997) and Marks et al. (1999) studies.

These findings also support the position that there is a need to educate classroom teachers on ways to work with teacher assistants. As well, they suggest that classroom teachers may need more specific training in special education practices and the adapting and modifying of curriculum and learning experiences to meet the individual needs of all students. The experiences of these eight teacher assistants indicate that some classroom teachers are not knowledgeable or comfortable working with teacher assistants or students with disabilities and are handing over the responsibility of educational decision-making for these students to the teacher assistant.

These findings indirectly support claims in the literature for the need for specific education and qualifications for teacher assistants, especially in light of the complexity of the role and the level of responsibility and educational decision-making these participants are

engaged in. However, these findings also suggest that the assumption in the literature that training for paraprofessionals ss the primary means to waylay or reduce the amount of confusion and tension currently experienced in this work may not be entirely accurate. As a group, these teacher assistants were highly trained in their practice yet still experienced the ambiguity of role definition and tensions that Frith and Mims (1985) identified as possible causes of stress and burnout. This would suggest that additional issues, rather than just lack of training, impact these teacher assistants in their work. The participants cited a number of contributing external factors, including educational, structural, and attitudinal issues that the training of teacher assistants would not alleviate. Rather, these issues are a part of the larger context of the educational system. This, in turn, supports the findings of Giangreco et al. (1997) and Mueller (1997) that there are deeper and more complex issues related to practice and relations, including a lack of valuing and support.

The lack of formal recognition and valuing that these teacher assistants have experienced in some situations also parallels the lack of discussion of teacher assistants' work in the larger body of literature on special education and educational practice. In the literature, they are for the most part, absent, and their work is not spoken about. The findings from this inquiry would suggest that in the field, their work is not necessarily recognized and that there is an unspoken nature to it.

The inclusion of students with special needs in the schools is a relatively new initiative, and as such, the position of a teacher assistant to support students with disabilities is new as well. Our understanding of, and the enactment of this work, is developmentally in its infancy. Within the larger context of special education, or inclusive education practice, it appears to be evolving, just as is the practice of including students with disabilities in the educational system. However,

as Doyle (1995) suggested, "the role of paraeducators has continued to evolve, yet little attention has been directed toward identifying what their roles and responsibilities are in supporting the learning and growth of students with disabilities" (p. 90).

It is time that this role becomes a part of the spoken realm of the school and a subject of inquiry in inclusive education practices. That daily need, rather than informed understanding, dictates practice for such a large population of people working within the education system is unjustifiable. Just as the role of the nurse has evolved from one of 'assistant to' the doctor, to one that is unique, bounded, knowledge-based, and informed unto itself, it may be that the role of the teacher assistant will evolve, from one of 'assistant to' the teacher to one that is unique, bounded, knowledge-based, and informed unto itself. It is my hope that it may evolve into a role that is not a threat to, but in partnership with, the teacher. In the meantime, within the growing process of inclusive education, there appears to be a need for more awareness of the work that teacher assistants are doing, more investigation of it, and a review of the structures, attitudes, and educational issues that effect this practice. It may be, as is often the case with new initiatives, that practice becomes policy, and then goes unquestioned. It is now time to question.

Directions for Further Research

The exploratory nature of this study has addressed one small part of the work of the teacher assistant. The paucity of research on teacher assistants demands further investigation into all aspects of their practice. Recommendations for further inquiry at this stage of understanding are endless. Thus, for the purpose of this inquiry, the following recommendations for further research arise out of this study specifically. To more fully understand the nature of the role of the teacher assistant and their experiences and perceptions, further investigation should include:

- The investigation of the experiences and perceptions of other teacher assistants in the province, including those in different geographic locations, in different school districts, with different levels of pre-service and inservice education, as well as those who share similar characteristics as the teacher assistants in this inquiry.

- The investigation of the experiences and perceptions of teacher assistants using a variety of research methodologies, including on-site observation, in-depth interviewing, focus groups, and survey tools.

- The investigation of the experiences and perceptions of others working with teacher assistants, including students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

- Further investigation into each of the subsets of issues that arose in this inquiry; an examination of the educational, structural, and attitudinal issues that impact the experiences and perceptions of teacher assistants.

- An extension of this inquiry into more detail on the current practices of teacher assistants and their relationship to student outcomes.

- An examination of the work and role of teacher assistants from multiple theoretical perspectives, including feminist analysis, educational change, community building, and school reform.

In Conclusion

I have been honoured to have these eight teacher assistants share their work, their frustrations, their insights, and their joys with me. Each one has brought me "into his or her world" (Patton, 1990, p. 279). Their words, and the process of this inquiry, have brought me to a deeper and more personal understanding of the work of teacher assistants, an understanding that

I can bring back to my own work. It provides me an opportunity to explore with pre-service teacher assistants, in further detail, the complexities of the role of the teacher assistant.

When I shared my initial analysis with these eight teacher assistants, one participant, who had been a past graduate of the pre-service college program I coordinate, joked with me about sharing these findings with the students the first day of class, saying "that course would dry up pretty quick." The participant then went on to wonder what it was, then, that makes people come back to work each day, when faced with all of the issues and complexities of the job. When I asked, "What is it?", the question was answered in an instant:

"Well, it's the kids. I mean the bottom line – the kids."

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Appendix A - Letter of Consent to Participate in Study

October 14, 1999

Dear   :

Re: Master of Arts Thesis - Paraprofessionals in Public Education: A Qualitative Exploration
of Paraprofessionals' Experiences and Their Perceptions of Their Work

I am currently a graduate student at the University of British Columbia, completing the research
portion of a Master of Arts Degree in the Faculty of Education. My research topic is the work of
special education teacher assistants, or paraprofessionals; in particular, I am interested in the
perspectives of paraprofessionals and their experiences of their work supporting students with
disabilities in public education. I will be collecting information for this research through one-to-
one interviews with eight paraprofessionals, four working in elementary schools and four
working in secondary schools. I am seeking your written consent to participate in this research
project.

As a participant, I will be asking you to take part in a maximum of three interview sessions,
consisting of no more than one hour each. I will be conducting the interviews and will meet with
you individually. Each interview will take place at a convenient time and location that is
suggested by you. The initial interview will focus on obtaining demographic information and
beginning questions regarding the nature of your work. A follow-up interview will be used to
clarify any questions that arise from the initial interview and will then allow for time to explore
specific aspects of your work. A third interview may be conducted, but only if necessary for
clarification of previous interview material.

Attached is an outline of sample interview questions and topics. To assist me in gathering
accurate and complete records during interviewing, I will be using both audio and video tape
recorders. I will then be analyzing the data that I obtain and writing my results in the form of a
Master's thesis. A copy of the written results will be available for you to read once the project is
complete.

As a participant, it is important that you are ensured anonymity and the information that you
share is held in confidence. The following procedures will be observed:
1. All material gathered from the interviews, including audio and video tapes, raw data, and
    written notes will be stored in a locked cabinet;
2. All data will be confidential;
3. At no time during analysis or presentation of the thesis will the data be identified with your
    name, school district, or school name ;
4. Pseudonyms will be used for participants, school districts, or schools; and
5. All data, including audio and video tapes will be destroyed one year after the final report has
    been submitted.

You may refuse to participate or may withdraw at any time, without prejudice, *even if you sign this letter of consent*. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights and treatment as a research subject, you may contact Dr. Richard Spratley, Director of the UBC Office of Research Services and Administration, at 822-8598.

A copy of this letter and the attached interview information will be given to you to retain for your own records. If you have any questions or would like clarification to ensure that you fully understand the nature of the project and its results, you may contact me at 277-3682, or my Advisor, Dr. Anthony Clarke at 822-2003.

Thank you for your consideration,

Carolyn Robertson

I, _____ have read the above and have had the

opportunity to discuss in full the nature of this project, and to question Carolyn Robertson and

Dr. Anthony Clarke. I give my consent to participate in this project. I also acknowledge receipt

of a copy of this document and attachment.

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Appendix B - Sample Interview Questions/Topics

- If I were to follow you for a typical day, what would I see you doing? Describe a typical day.

- What do you see your role as being? What is the purpose of your work?

- How is the work that you do now typical of that of most teacher assistants in the field? How is it unique?

- How do you measure your success as a teacher assistant? At the end of a day, a month, a year? Overall?

- What are the positive aspects of the work? What are some of the things that you have really liked about the job? (Joys, Satisfactions)

- What are the negative aspects of your work? What are some of the things you don't like about the job? (Frustrations, Problems, Concerns)

- What do others think your job is? Teachers? Other teacher assistants? Administrators? Support staff? Is it consistent with what you see your job as being? In what way is it consistent? In what way is it inconsistent?

- What do parents see your role, your purpose as being?

- Are school staff members' perceptions of your work related to the nature of the needs of the student that you are supporting? If so, please explain.

- What gives you a sense of being valued? Not valued?

- How does the position of paraprofessional fit within the culture of your school?

- How did you come to choose this type of work?

- Thinking back to your initial reasons:
  - How is the job similar to what you expected it to be?
  - How is the job different from what you expected it to be?

- If you had the power to change things about the job, what would you make different?

- What do think is in store for the work of teacher assistants?

- Where do you see yourself in 5 to 10 years?

Interview Questions:

Demographic Information:

Name: _____

Phone Number: _____

Age: _____

School District: _____

1. How long have you worked as a teacher assistant?

   _____

   _____

2. What type of assignments have you had during this time?

   Elementary ___   Secondary ___

   Low incidence ___   High incidence ___

   Special class ___   Resource room ___   Regular class ___

   Other: _____

3. What type of support have you provided for the students you have worked with? Please explain:

   Learning ___   Behavioural ___   Personal care ___

   _____

   _____

4. What kind of training, formal and informal, do you have that assists you with this work?_____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

Appendix C – Sample of Interview Explanation of Figure I

Here is a graphic that I made to give you a bit of background of where this study comes from and why I'm doing it. Langara and Kwantlen have been working together on developing learning outcomes for the programs. We want to look at who the graduate is when they walk across the stage at the end of the program, what we are teaching and is what we're teaching relevant to the field, and is what we think we're teaching what the students are getting. So, we're looking at the really big picture. We sat down last year and started to take things apart. This [on the graphic] is the doing part of the job: the learning support, behavioural support, and the personal care support. If people are doing that in the field, what do they need to know that we would work on within the college setting. So, we went through and brainstormed some of the diferent pieces of knowledge and theories and skills here. And then, underneath, we felt that the really important part of that being, how they are with kids, how they develop relationships, should be here. If it's something that we can teach, if it's something that we can encourage, if it's something that just comes and then we acknowledge to that person who already has it.

These are the three things that we were looking at – the doing, being, and knowing. The Ministry is really doing quite a bit of the work on the doing part. It's coming through with the competency project they are doing, outlining what that tasks looks like on the job. We've been talking a lot about what we are teaching, and looking at what the research says and trying to put that together. But, in the literature, there's very little research from the field. There's lots of opinions, there's lots of people saying this is what the role is, this is what the role isn't. But there is not very much from the people who are doing the work.

So for me, when I started to look at what the questions were, what I wanted to look at is - what is your experience. What is the experience of people who are doing the work, and what do you think about it? What does your day look like? What are the issues? What are the frustrations? What are the joys? Let's hear from you about what the work is like. I felt that unless we do that piece to find out what the reality is, we can talk in the colleges all we want to about all of this nice stuff, but we won't really know. We really need to listen first about what the work is.