

# Teacher Assistant Supports in Inclusive Schools: Research, Practices and Alternatives

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In this article, I summarise the primary content included in a keynote address I delivered via videoconferencing in July 2012 at the national conference of the *Australian Association of Special Education*, held jointly with the annual conference of the *Tasmanian Principals Association* in Hobart, Tasmania. The address focused on three major topics pertaining to the utilisation of teacher assistants in inclusive schools: (a) persistent and emerging research trends, (b) contemporary conceptual and data-based concerns, and (c) ideas about what schools can do to provide improved educational opportunities and supports for students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms. The article concludes that the potential overuse or misuse of teacher assistants is a symptom, not cause. Building integrated models of general and special service delivery in schools can address the challenges associated with questionable teacher assistant utilisation.

Keywords: inclusive education, service delivery, teacher assistants, paraprofessionals

In July 2012 the Australian Association of Special Education held its national conference jointly with the Tasmanian Principals Association in Hobart, Tasmania. In this article, I summarise some of the primary content from a keynote speech I presented via videoconferencing during that event. The address focused on three major aspects related to utilising teacher assistants in inclusive schools: (a) persistent and emerging research trends, (b) contemporary conceptual and data-based concerns, and (c) ideas about what schools can do to provide improved educational opportunities and supports for students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms without excessive or inappropriate overreliance on teacher assistants. Before proceeding further, I would like to clarify three foundational points related to (a) cross-cultural comparisons, (b) terminology, and (c) the locus of responsibility for change that will have an impact on interpreting the remaining content.

As an American writing to an international audience, I am keenly aware of my limited knowledge and understanding of the legislation, educational policies, and cultural influences that have shaped current Australian special education. It is with the realisation that cross-cultural comparisons can be fraught with complications (D'Allesio & Watkins, 2009) that I encourage the reader to take into account that

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of students with disabilities (ages 6–21) in general education classes (at least 80% of the time) fluctuated annually between approximately 82% and 88%. By 2004, the percentage of students with disabilities in Vermont who were placed in general education had declined to 76.54% (and dropped to as low as 70% in 2007 and 2008). During this time, the number of special education teacher assistants in Vermont rose from 1186 to as high as 3462 in 2005. When adjusted to account for changes in population, the ratio of special education teacher assistants to students receiving special education in Vermont had changed from approximately 1:9 to 1:4 during that period. It is notable that para-professional utilisation in Vermont has steadily risen despite the fact that the percentage of students with disabilities included in general education classes has declined by nearly 20 percentage points from its historic high point; therefore inclusion of students with disabilities does not explain the substantial increase in teacher assistant utilisation.

While teacher assistants engage in a wide variety of duties (e.g., clerical, personal care, social/behavioural support, supervision of students), their roles have become increasingly instructional over time (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Groom & Rose, 2005; Riggs & Mueller 2001). Current literature suggests that when teacher assistants are utilised to support instruction a basic set of foundational practices should be in place (Causton-Theoharis, Giangreco, Doyle, & Vadasy, 2007). First, any potential instruction provided by teacher assistants should

From the 1970s to the present day, a series of longstanding issues have been persistently reported in the professional literature. Chief among these include (a) the need to improve working conditions (e.g., pay, perceived respect, orientation, career ladders); (b) lack of role clarity; (c) inadequate skill levels and training commensurate with identified roles; and (d) inadequate supervision (French, 2001; Ghore & York-Barr, 2007; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; Tillery, Werts, Roark, & Harris, 2003; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). Although not stated explicitly, the persistent focus on these topics seems to infer that if we just treated teacher assistants better, clarified their roles, and provided appropriate training and supervision, many problems would be solved. While these are all worthy aims, a closer analysis suggests that they may be necessary but not sufficient actions to support students with special educational needs in inclusive settings.

Well-intended training of teacher assistants can inadvertently lead to a "training trap" (Giangreco, 2003, p. 51). This occurs when professionals unadvisedly relinquish ever more instructional responsibility for students with disabilities to teacher assistants based on those assistants receiving virtually any, even a scant, amount or level of training and then reasoning, "Now they are trained!" In a conceptual analysis of teacher assistant instructional roles, Giangreco and Broer (2003) described six possible scenarios for their utilisation as a "conundrum" (p. 3), because whichever path is chosen represents a different type of problem:

1. Teacher assistants report ambivalence or feeling exploited when asked to do teacher-type work for substantially lower compensation.
2. It can be inconsistent with education laws and regulations (not to mention ethical practices) if inadequately trained or underqualified personnel are allowed to instruct students.
3. Teacher assistants report feeling respected if their capabilities are not recognised and utilised, potentially leading to low morale and turnover.
4. Teacher assistants, especially those who have a college or university degree or who are certified teachers functioning in assistant roles, report feeling frustrated if they are not expected or allowed to engage in higher-level duties, such as instructing students.
5. As schools scrutinise costs, they typically do not want to pay higher than traditional wages unless an employee is engaging in higher-level duties. So some schools consider it to be ineffective budgeting of resources to pay teacher assistants more without evidence that assigning them higher-level duties is resulting in better student outcomes or other benefits.
6. If schools extend teacher assistant models by providing more extensive training and paying them commensurately more for engaging in higher-level instructional duties, it may result in questionable personnel utilisation as the gap between teacher assistant and special education teacher compensation decreases, at what point does it make more sense to simply hire additional fully qualified teachers or special educators?

one to one. On average, special educators (a) spend a smaller percentage of their time in instruction than do the teacher assistants they supervise, (b) spend about three-quarters of their instructional time outside the general classroom in homogeneous (special needs students only) pullout service provision, and (c) provide only about 2% of their time to

reflects the devalued status of some students with disabilities disguised in a cloak of helping.

### Excessive Proximity

Descriptive research has documented that the seemingly well-intended assignment and excessive proximity of a teacher assistant to a student with a disability can lead to a wide range of inadvertent detrimental effects such as (a) separation from classmates, (b) unnecessary dependencies, (c) interference with teacher engagement, (d) interference with peer interactions, (e) insular relationships between students and teacher assistants, (f) stigmatisation, (g) limited access to competent instruction, (h) loss of personal control by students with disabilities, (i) loss of gender identity, and (j) risk of being bullied (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, & Al-Khabbaz, 2008; Giangreco, 2010; Giangreco, Boer, & Edelman, 2001; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Hemmingsson, Borell, & Gustavsson, 2003; Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; & Kamm, 2001). Over 46% of teacher assistants in one study indicated that some of their students with disabilities communicated, via their language or behaviour, that they found supports provided by assistants to be unwanted (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). Even the small set of studies that have reported positive or mixed results about the close proximity of teacher assistants (Tews & Lupart, 2008; Werts, Zigmond, & Leeper, 2001; Young, Simpson, Myles, & Kamps, 1997) have acknowledged concerns such as interference with peer interactions and dependence.

### Special Educator Caseload Challenges

Given the international shift away from self-contained special classes toward placement of students with a full range of disabilities in regular education classes, the roles of special educators have changed and expanded (Giangreco, Carter, Doyle, & Suter, 2010; Giangreco, Suter, & Graf, 2011). Simultaneously, service delivery models that effectively incorporate special education supports within general educ







in part because they are rooted in reactive justification models that inappropriately put too much emphasis on student characteristics:

**TABLE 1**  
**Alternatives to Overreliance on Teacher Assistants**

<i>Category of alternatives</i>	<i>Brief description of alternatives</i>
Resource reallocation	Resources may be reallocated by trading in teacher assistant positions to hire additional special education teachers. Typically, one early career special educator can be hired for approximately the same cost as three teacher assistants.
Co-teaching	Co-teaching involves assigning a teacher and special educator to work together in the same classroom. To maintain a naturally occurring number of students with special needs, it may be necessary to share the special educator across three or four classes, depending on class size.
Building capacity of teachers	Building teacher capacity (e.g., expectations of teacher engagement with students with disabilities, differentiated instruction, universal design, response to instruction, positive behaviour supports, curriculum overlapping, assistive technology) can reduce overreliance on teacher assistants.
Paperwork assistants	Teacher assistants may be assigned clerical paperwork duties that free time for special educators to collaborate with teachers and work directly with students.
Improving working conditions for special educators and classroom teachers	Reducing caseload size, the grade range covered, and the number of teachers with whom special educators interact can improve their working conditions. Exploring changes in class size, availability of special educator support, scheduling coordinated meeting times, and providing access to adapted materials are examples of steps that can improve working conditions for teachers.
Peer supports	Encouraging peer support strategies can provide natural ways to support students with disabilities that may also benefit students without disabilities.
Self-determination	Purposely teaching self-determination skills provides opportunities for students with disabilities to have a voice in determining their own supports.
Teacher assistant pools	Establishing a small pool of highly skilled teacher assistants (or one floating position for a small school) allows for their temporary assignments to address specific, short-term needs.
Fading plans	In cases where a student is receiving a substantial amount of teacher assistant support, developing a plan to fade that support as much as possible can lead to greater student independence and more natural supports.
Dual certified teachers	Hiring teachers who are certified in both general and special education provides enhanced personnel capacity for all students.

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