TRAINING STAFF TO SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS - AN AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION SUPPORT PROJECT

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Abstract

The futures of many vulnerable students are being shaped by untrained Education Support ES staff in Australia. ES, assist and support teachers in classrooms where students can have intellectual, physical, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Worldwide, ES staff have many titles, such as Teaching Assistants, Integration Aides, Allied Educators, Teacher Aides, Learning Support Officers and Inclusion Aides. Whilst a growing number of ES are employed in our classrooms it is not compulsory for ES to be qualified to work in schools in Australia.

Method/Objectives:

At EDULEARN19 I propose an interactive format to share knowledge about Education Support and promote international strategic networking. I will introduce myself and the research I have discovered as part of my Fellowship and then ask for people from varying countries to merge into groups to discuss four questions/objectives:

1. Are qualifications for Education Support ES staff necessary in your country?
2. How does your country provide support to ES staff when managing student behaviour?
3. How are teachers advised to work with ES staff?
4. How does your country provide Professional Development to ES staff?

The small groups will then report back to identify similarities/differences.

Data Collection:

Australia has identified a need to improve the support practices for ES staff and is working towards offering ongoing Professional Development to deal with the barriers to learning they encounter daily. Australian Teacher Aide (ATA) is the peak industry organisation for education paraprofessionals in Australian schools. Their goal is to develop the capacity of all teacher aides in Australian schools by providing relevant professional development. ATA and I are in collaboration and have agreed for me to share their research data globally.

I am an experienced classroom teacher, who moved into training adults on how to be Education Support ES staff in Victoria, Australia. I have observed ES staff working with students with special needs in over 45 schools and have noted they are often given minimal direction from classroom teachers who expect ES are behaviour specialists. ATA have conducted surveys and I will be sharing their research findings on how teachers and education support staff can collaborate to improve the outcomes for students.

Results/Conclusion:

In 2018, I travelled to the UK to learn about best practice in this area. Upon my return I was awarded an International Vocational & Education Training VET Practitioner Fellowship sponsored by the Victorian Department of Education and Training DET. This has allowed me to travel overseas in June and July 2019. I hope the interactive nature of my session from EDULEARN19 and the networking opportunities will assist with my research. I intend to report my findings back to the DET to promote positive change and hope other countries will be inspired.

Keywords: inclusion, support, assist, training, issues.

1 INTRODUCTION

It's obvious! If education staff are trained, then successful student outcomes will increase. Why in Australia, and many other parts of the world are we neglecting to support our teacher aides (TA’s)/Education Support (ES) staff who work in the classroom with teachers and students?
This paper will focus on TA staff in Victoria/Australia, who are employed to work in the student/teacher support area, and how we can improve. A summary of the existing Victorian TA role is to undertake routine tasks as instructed by the classroom teacher and follow clear policies and procedures. TA’s are not to teach and/or plan full classes. The responsibility for the student remains clearly with the teacher [1].

G’day, my name is Sheree Chevalier and I have been a teacher for over twelve years in Africa and Australia working in Government schools. For over two years I have been a trainer and assessor for national training package qualifications Certificates III CHC30213 and IV CHC40213 in Education Support, working for Registered Training Organisations (RTO) in Victoria, Australia. Training packages are developed to meet the training needs of an industry and specify the skills and knowledge required to perform effectively in the workplace [2]. The packages are taught in the Vocational Education Training (VET) sector. Qualifications are not compulsory for TA staff working in schools in Australia.

Part of the role as an assessor for these Certificates is to observe TA students working in the classroom with students and teachers and paid TA staff. I noted gaps when I compared the role of the teacher and the role of the TA in the classroom. Briefly, it is not compulsory for TA staff to be trained: there are communication issues between teachers and TA staff, and TA face ongoing challenges with school student behaviour.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) in partnership with the International Special Skills Institute (ISSI) offer overseas fellowships and I was inspired to research the role of TA staff further and apply for their International VET Practitioner Fellowship [3]. The aim of my work is to develop opportunities within the VET sector to assist Victoria to produce excellent TA staff, and thereby reduce the impact of disadvantage.

As a recipient of the 2018 International VET Practitioner Fellowship, I will focus this paper on the role of Education Support/Teaching Aide staff internationally by exploring if TA staff are required to have qualifications, if they are provided support on managing student behaviour, how teachers are advised on how to work with TA’s, and how TA ongoing professional development needs are monitored.

This paper is in collaboration with Australian Teacher Aide (ATA) [4], the peak industry organisation for education paraprofessionals in Australian schools since 2015. ATA provides professional development customised to teacher aides in Australian schools, designed to improve teacher and teacher aide collaboration and support practices which lead to more successful outcomes for students.

Under this fellowship, I research how other countries are achieving excellence in the growth area of education support, focussing on TA staff whom assist in the classroom. This is a current Australian Education Support research project, still in progress, which welcomes input from your country to promote positive change.

2 CONTEXT

2.1 Australia

Australia is often described as a vast country and is well known for the Sydney Opera House, beaches, friendly people, unique wildlife and Uluru (also known as Ayers Rock). We have over 9000 schools. Most students are enrolled in Government schools. Many schools are heavily populated, especially around coastal regions but some schools are very remote such as Tjuntjuntjara Remote Community School which sits 700 kilometres/434 miles from the nearest city. Food deliveries arrive once a fortnight whilst mail is flown in on a weekly basis [5].

Schools apply to the Government for funding to pay for the salary for TA workers who are employed to assist students who have learning needs during school hours. In remote schools, which often attract many indigenous students, there are often only one or two TA’s employed to assist students, with no relief staff available. In city areas, government schools may have teams of TA staff and relief staff and volunteers are readily available. Education Support, which includes TA’s is a growth area in Australia.

Education Aides whom are also called ES are mainly female and the average age is 46 years. There were 90,500 jobs in 2018 with an anticipated rise to 109,300 by 2023. [6]
2.2 Australia's world ranking

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a worldwide study by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). PISA conducted a test of 15-year-old students from seventy nations on their scholastic performance in mathematics, science and reading. Australia had the worldwide ranking of 21 out of 70 countries in 2015-2016 [7].

2.3 Singapore

Singapore is ranked No1 on the PISA list. Singapore call their ES staff Allied Educators (AE) and this paper will concentrate on the AE area of Learning and Behavioural Support.

The AE is required to have a minimal tertiary qualification. In terms of professional development, the AE’s are guided by professional learning frameworks developed by the Ministry of Education and are provided with relevant training as well as professional development opportunities which are relevant to their role. These include sponsored pre-service training/on-boarding, milestone training programmes, in-service courses, network learning communities and training and professional development support schemes. AE’s have professional development plans which are annually discussed with supervisors and are continually monitored.

Singapore’s AE’s provide leadership and work with school management to review and improve school systems/processes to support students’ special educational needs. AE’s provide consultation to teachers and build the capacity of teachers and other school personnel on learning and behavioural support for those who have special needs [8]. On my upcoming trip to Singapore I look forward to learning how AE’s engage stakeholders to identify and support students who require learning and behavioural support.

In summary, Singapore are aware of the qualifications of their AE staff, offer ongoing professional development in all areas including behavioural issues and promote AE’s as leaders in their schooling system. Perhaps this is a main contributor to the successful outcomes for their students?

2.4 United Kingdom

In 2018 I met Phil Naylor, Assistant Director of Blackpool Research School in the UK. The Research Schools Network is a collaboration between the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Institute for Effective Education (IEE) to create a network of schools which support the use of evidence to improve teaching practice. Phil referred me to the EEF Guidance Report which is designed to provide practical, evidence-based guidance to help primary and secondary schools make the best use of teaching assistants (TAs). The Report contains seven recommendations, based on the latest research examining the use of TAs in classrooms. Many schools are taking onboard the suggestions and throughout the guide further training for TA’s is suggested. The recommendations are:

- ‘TAs should not be used as an informal teaching resource for low attaining pupils
- Use TAs to add value to what teachers do, not replace them
- Use TAs to help pupils develop independent learning skills and manage their own learning
- Ensure TAs are fully prepared for their role in the classroom
- Use TAs to deliver high quality one-to-one and small group support using structured interventions
- Adopt evidence-based interventions to support TAs in their small group and one-to-one instruction
- Ensure explicit connections are made between learning from everyday classroom teaching and structured interventions’ [9]

In the UK another project is underway called Maximising the Impact of TAs (MITA). MITA provides school improvement and training services based on their internationally-recognised research and guidance. They provide consultancy, and run courses for school leaders, teachers and TAs to help ensure TAs thrive in their role and contribute to improved outcomes for pupils. They have been involved with producing leading national guidance on Making The Best Use of Teaching Assistants and the Professional Standards for TAs. [10]
2.5 Education International

In 2011, at the Sixth Education International World Congress, it was noted ES personnel ‘share many challenges and issues of teachers and academic staff but also face distinct problems such as lack of respect and recognition for their work’ [11]. Education international (EI) is committed to supporting Education Support and continue to research and raise awareness of the vital role of ES for quality education. EI established an ES task force and in May 2018, Brussels hosted the first ever international Education Support (ES) conference. If any of you were there, I would love to talk to hear all about it.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Inclusion

Our aim to have inclusive classrooms has stimulated recent changes in Victoria:

- From 2017 teachers were required to build their capacity to teach learners with a disability and undertake relevant training/Professional Development (PD) to retain Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) registration. [12]
- Student teachers now learn how to teach students with special needs/disabilities in their courses. [13]
- The Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA) provides the blueprint of what should be taught in schools. In 2016-2017 a new curriculum was launched for students with disabilities called ‘Towards Foundation Level Victorian Curriculum A-D’. The VCAA are currently working on a curriculum called English as an additional language EAL [14].
- Victoria’s Department of Education works with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI) to promote education as a life long process. ‘The Marrung; Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026 will ensure Koorie families, and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people from other parts of Australia who live in Victoria, have the doors held wide open to all learning and development services, from early childhood onwards.’ [15]

3.2 Observation

I have observed adult students who are training to be TA staff and employed TA staff, working with school age students with special needs in classrooms. As a teacher in Victorian Government schools for over ten years and as a trainer of TA adult students, I have observed adult students volunteering their time in over 40 primary, secondary and specialist Victorian schools in government, private and faith-based settings. 100 to 120 hours of voluntary time is required in schools as part of the training. I observed adult TA staff/students were often given minimal and questionable directions from teachers because it is presumed TA’s have prior knowledge. Student progress is at risk because TA’s work with students who need the most help.

3.3 Formulated Questions

From the research and observations so far, many questions have been formulated for consideration. They include:

- How are the appropriate numeracy and literacy levels of TA staff working in the classroom tested?
- Do teachers really know what the role of TA is?
- Do teachers realise how much knowledge and how much life experience TA staff already have?
- How do teachers know how to work with TA staff?
- Are teacher’s aware TA staff are waiting for them to give them clear direction?
- Why do some teachers expect TA staff to be behaviour specialists?
- Why are some TA’s planning lessons?
- Why isn’t professional development compulsory for all TA staff when it is for teachers?
- Why doesn’t the DET offer free professional development for TA staff to support them?
- Why is the salary for TA staff so low?
- How do other countries monitor ongoing TA professional development?
- How do other countries determine the skill level of TA workers?
- Do other countries offer induction such as pre accredited courses?
- If TA’s are not trained before they enter the classroom, how many students are being disadvantaged?
- How do other countries support TA staff to achieve excellence in their classrooms?

As advised, this Fellowship research project is still underway. So, if you are reading this paper, you can participate in international strategic networking and contact me on shereechevalier@gmail.com and respond to the following four questions. If you are at the EDLEARN19 presentation, please participate in the information sharing activity.

1. Are qualifications for Education Support ES staff necessary in your country?
2. How does your country provide support to ES staff when managing student behaviour?
3. How are teachers advised to work with ES staff?
4. How does your country provide Professional Development to ES staff?

3.4 Australian Teacher Aide - Data Collection

Stella Liliendal and Mandy Bell are the Managing Directors and Founders of Australian Teacher Aide (ATA) [4]. They have extensive experience in the Education Support and training sector and are leaders in online professional development for schools. Their data from live polls and surveys is currently being used by SKILLS IQ [16] to ensure the proposed Education Support qualifications meet future industry needs in Australia.

The ATA research data includes the results from a recent survey, Help Shape the Future of Teacher Aide Training [17]. The survey results were published by Australian Teacher Aide in March 2019.

ATA collated the survey responses from 285 people: 235 Teacher Aides, 19 Education Support Trainers, 10 Teachers, 5 School Leaders and 16 Others who identified mostly as education support students, volunteers and administrators as well as teacher aides with specialist roles. Most participants in the survey were from the Primary and Secondary sector. 146 had between 2-10 years’ experience, and 100 had over 10 years’ experience. The survey was conducted via the Australian Teacher Aide website www.australianteacheraide.com.au.

ATA also conducted a series of live polls to learn more about how Teacher Aides (TA’s) viewed their support role. The results of these polls were published in A Collaborative Framework for Student Success, an online video published by ATA in June 2017 [18]. The poll results were collected live from 24 TAs from four different states in Australia, who worked with Prep to Year 12 students in a range of direct education support roles.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Survey Results

The following results are from the Australian data collected from the ATA Help Shape the Future of Teacher Aide Training survey [17]. These results directly relate to the questions posed in this paper focusing on current ES qualifications, roles, professional development/training and student behavior.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Please select your highest qualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate I or II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma or Higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Which of these skills and knowledge are essential to Teacher Aides performing their job? (numerous responses permitted)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills and Knowledge</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability and Additional Needs</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. How much of the working week do Teacher Aides spend providing social and emotional support?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Duration</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most of their time</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of their time</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. What amount of time do Teacher Aides spend supporting students with learning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Duration</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most of their time</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of their time</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Poll Results - Teaching Assistants and Teachers working together

The following results are from the live polls published in the video A Collaborative Framework for Student Success [18]. These polls identified how teachers and teacher aides work together to support student learning. The TA’s were asked to choose one response to each of the following statements:

Table 5. Lesson preparation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most of the teachers I support always make sure:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am prepared for a lesson</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sometimes make sure I am prepared for a lesson</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>usually leave it to me to prepare for a lesson.</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Time to practice a new task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice Time</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most of the students I support get:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sufficient time to practice a new task</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited time to practice a new task</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no time. to practice a new task</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Time to hear about student prior knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior Knowledge</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much time do your students get to talk about what they already know about a task?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students get sufficient time</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students got limited time</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students get no time at all</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ATA also collected anecdotal data from teachers and teacher aides in in schools.

- Many teachers said they didn’t know how to work with TA’s.
- Teacher Aides reported that they:
  - lacked knowledge of curriculum.
sometimes had little idea what students were learning, and ‘winged’ it (Australian slang for improvise).
- had little time to prepare or communicate with teachers
- were not given a lesson outline.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Considering the data provided by ATA, it is evident professional development and training for teachers and education support staff, can contribute to successful outcomes for students. The data presented indicates that of the teacher aides surveyed:

- Teacher aides spent most of their time supporting learning
- Two thirds did not feel fully prepared for their support role
- Almost half of TA’s spent most of their time providing social and emotional support to students
- Skills and knowledge in behaviour, teaching and learning, and disability were considered essential to perform their job role
- There were time constraints on teachers and support staff to collaborate
- Almost half of the students supported by teacher aides only received limited time to practice a new task
- There was limited recognition of the effect of prior knowledge on learning during planning time

The results relate to the focus of this paper as follows:

5.1 Highest Qualifications

Table 1 displays the results for ‘Please select your highest qualification’. There were 285 ATA survey participants, comprising of 10 teachers, 5 school leaders, 19 ES Trainers, 235 TA’s and 16 others [17]. In order to learn more about the qualification level of TA’s, we can easily remove the teachers, school leaders and ES trainers from the table because teachers and school leaders need higher than Diploma qualifications and Trainers need a minimum Certificate IV qualification. The results then appear as ‘Diploma or Higher’ drops to 80, ‘Certificate IV’ drops to 61, ‘Certificate III’ remains at 92, likewise with ‘Certificate I/II’ as 5 and ‘No qualifications’ at 13. The highest response qualification level left on the table is Certificate III which closely relates to the TA’s who were surveyed.

5.2 Behaviour

Dealing with student behaviour plays a huge part in the role of a TA. Table 2 supports this notion with 263 responses indicating ‘Behaviour’ is a skill and knowledge essential to TA’s performing their job. TA’s indicated they needed to know more about challenging behaviour strategies, to support students with a disability as outlined in Table 4.

The behavior of students can closely relate to their social and emotional state. As per Table 3, TA’s spend ‘most of their time providing social and emotional support’.

Getting to know and understand a student can assist with managing their challenging behavior. It can take time to build rapport with students. Many students communicate via their behavior and communication is the key to progress. Often conversation can be initiated in relation to the task the student has to work on. The TA can determine the student’s existing knowledge about the task topic, control the flow of conversation with the student through questioning and therefore learn more about them. As displayed in Table 7, 60% of TA’s polled by ATA felt the students they work with, got limited or no time at all to talk about what they already knew about a task. Time management could be an indicator of how TA’s can be supported to assist students with challenging behaviour.

Behaviour is certainly a vital area which needs to be investigated to support successful outcomes for all stakeholders.
5.3 Teachers and Teacher Aides - Roles and collaboration

Teaching Aides spend ‘most of their time’ supporting students with learning (Table 4). Teaching and Learning have a high response rate in Table 2 as a skill and knowledge that is essential to the TA job role. It is alarming that during the poll [7] TA’s reported they were not given a lesson plan, had little time to prepare or communicate with the teacher and sometimes had little idea about what students were learning. Table 6 indicates 47% of TA’s said students got limited time to practice a new task.

However, there were some signs of great working collaborations taking place between teachers and TA’s. 39% of TA’s said their teachers made sure they were prepared for the lesson (Table 5) and 53% thought most of the students they support ‘got sufficient time to practice a new task’ (Table 6). It would be advantageous if there was an increase in these percentages.

It is concerning nearly a quarter (22%) of TA’s were left to prepare the lesson (Table 5) even though it is not part of their job role. As mentioned in the Introduction of this paper, ‘A summary of the existing Victorian TA role is to undertake routine tasks as instructed by the classroom teacher and follow clear policies and procedures. TA’s are not to teach and/or plan full classes. The responsibility for the student remains clearly with the teacher.’ [1]

The results show learning is being hindered here. Achieving successful outcomes for students is at risk. Yes, TA’s are following the instructions of the teacher, but they are being asked to plan and possibly teach without qualifications. Teachers are at risk of not following their Duty of Care obligations. As per the ATA anecdotal data collected from teachers in schools, ‘Many teachers said they didn’t know how to work with TA’s’. This supports my experiences and observations.

The ES role is to ‘undertake routine tasks as instructed by the classroom teacher’ [1]. However, survey results as indicated in Table 2 show TA’s realistically do a lot more than routine tasks. Responses indicate TA’s require skills and knowledge about Disability and Additional Needs, Behaviour, Teaching and Learning, Information Technology and Administration. These are essential for TA’s to perform their job. It is quite obvious TA’s do a lot more than undertake routine tasks!

5.4 Australia’s Future

Whole school collaboration is vital to achieving successful outcomes for all and this can be done through further professional development and training for all.

ATA are passionate about enabling support staff to work with teachers to support successful student outcomes. In addition to their live polls, the online video, A Collaborative Framework for Student Success [18] describes how an understanding of the relevant international research, as well as contemporary teaching and learning principles, are essential for effective support practices in schools.

As a result, ATA developed four professional learning resources called eTAPS: Effective Teacher Aide Practices for Schools ([19], [20], [21], [22]) aimed at providing TA’s in schools with the knowledge and skills necessary to provide effective student support. These resources are four modules which assist TA’s to collaborate with teachers, prepare for student learning, support student learning and give feedback to students and teachers (2017 – 2019).

The future is promising for change in Australia. The fact that this Fellowship has been granted is a positive move as I am obliged to report my findings back to the Department of Education and Training (DET) and International Specialised Skills Institute (ISSI). Perhaps we can adopt procedures like Singapore and offer a more structured, specialized supported role for ES? Perhaps we can learn from the UK and work on maximising the impact of teaching assistants [10] and create a strategic plan, aiming for excellence as we train staff to support successful outcomes for students.

Further research is required to gather more information both in and outside of Australia. Given what was found in Australian studies, would you expect to find a similar result in your country? What do you do differently? I would love to hear from you, so please email me at shereechevalier@gmail.com.

The four areas under review include:

1. Are qualifications for Education Support ES staff necessary in your country?
2. How does your country provide support to ES staff when managing student behaviour?
3. How are teachers advised to work with ES staff?
4. How does your country provide Professional Development to ES staff?
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to show my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, of elders past and present, on which meetings and the research from this paper continues to take place.

Stella Liliendal and Mandy Bell from Australian Teacher Aide (ATA). Thank you for sharing your survey results, research data, guidance and expert advice.

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REFERENCES


