AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION INC.

POSITION PAPER

TEACHER AIDES

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POSITION PAPER ON TEACHER AIDES

SUMMARY

AASE believes that:

- **the teacher aide is one valuable avenue of support for some students with special education needs.**

An appropriately trained and supported teacher aide working under the supervision of a teacher can implement effective interventions and programs.

- **Responsibility for all students must remain with the class teacher**

The teacher aide should work under the direction of, and in collaboration with an appropriately qualified educator and/or special educator.

- **Aides should be assigned to support a classroom, that is the teacher and all students including the student with special education needs.**

TAs may be much more effective if their role is conceptualised as supporting the teacher and all students in a class.

- **Roles and responsibilities of teachers and aides should be clear and unambiguous, with the aide working under the direction of a teacher.**

Instructional decision-making should lie with the teacher. It is not appropriate for aides to take responsibility for decisions about curriculum or teaching strategies.

- **Further consideration needs to be given to the recruitment and professional preparation of teacher aides to determine best practices**.

There is currently little support to guide schools in recruiting and training TAs. Both broad-based and specific school-based preparation are needed.

- **There should be a clear career path for teacher aides**

There should be clear progression plan to train and retain competent aides, and such training should integrate with that of teachers.

- **Regular and special educators should receive professional development to enable them to plan for, work with and supervise a teacher aide as effectively as possible.**

Professional preparation of teachers should contain the collaborative and management skills needed to work with a TA.

- **Mentoring opportunities should be formalised as an essential component of professional development for teachers and teacher aides.**

Further professional development of TAs should be in part the responsibility of teachers and more highly qualified TAs.

Note on terminology: Teacher aide or teacher aide special are the terms commonly used in NSW, and are used in this paper. However the terms paraprofessional and paraeducator are used in the international literature. This paper when citing that research will also use the terms paraprofessional and paraeducator. In this paper the term general or regular educator refers to teachers responsible for a regular class in a mainstream setting. The term special educator refers to a teacher who has additional specialist training in special education and who may work in consultation and collaboration with a regular educator and others.

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Association of Special Education Inc (AASE) is committed to student learning, central to which is effective teaching, delivered by trained teachers, using appropriate curriculum. Teachers in inclusive settings who do not have special education qualifications should be supported by qualified special educators and other professionals and provided with appropriate resources

Effective teaching for students with special education needs is best achieved by utilising the expertise of relevant people to develop teaching plans and programs for the particular student. Those collaborating on such plans could include the student, parents or caregivers, teachers, special educators, teacher aides, executive teaching staff and/or allied health professionals

Therefore the role and responsibilities for teacher aides should be clearly defined within the context of a collaborative team, particularly in inclusive settings where the classroom teacher responsible for a student may not have special education expertise.

The purpose of this position paper is to focus on the role of the teacher aide within this collaborative team.

AASE believes that:

- **the teacher aide is one valuable avenue of support for some students with special education needs.**
- **Responsibility for all students must remain with the class teacher**
- **Aides should be assigned to support a classroom, that is the teacher and all students including the student with special education needs.**
- **Roles and responsibilities of teachers and aides should be clear and unambiguous, with the aide working under the direction of a teacher.**
- **Further consideration needs to be given to the recruitment and professional preparation of teacher aides to determine best practices**
- **There should be a clear career path for teacher aides**
- **Regular and special educators should receive professional development to enable them to plan for, work with and supervise a teacher aide as effectively as possible.**
- **Mentoring opportunities should be formalised as an essential component of professional development for teachers and teacher aides.**

THE PLACE OF TEACHER AIDES IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

With increasing numbers of students with special education needs enrolled in regular settings, the numbers of teacher aides have also increased. Many teacher aides working under the supervision of a regular educator and/or a special educator provide effective teaching and important personal care to students with special education needs. They also work with other students or on other tasks in order to support the classroom teacher in the delivery of educational programs. It is crucial however that the teacher takes responsibility for educational planning and decision making and actively supervises and trains the aide to ensure effective deployment

There is an assumption that the provision of paraprofessional support will improve outcomes for students, and many teachers see the provision of paraprofessional support as essential. There is, however, very little research to indicate that student outcomes are automatically improved by the provision of teacher aide support (Cremin, Thomas, & Vincett, 2003; French, 2003; Gerber, S.B., Finn, J.D., Achilles, C.M., Boyd-Zaharias, J. 2001; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001;). There are also no clear, research based guidelines to inform the preparation, employment, and supervision of paraeducators (Pickett, Likins & Wallace, 2003).

Giangreco and Broer, (2005) question whether the development of a system of education for students with special education needs that depends on paraprofessionals should be encouraged given that the current models "…lack an educationally defensible foundation from a conceptual, theoretical or data-based perspective." (p. 24). Alternative models might include the employment and effective deployment of more special educators to support regular educators, building up school wide natural supports (such as peer support), and building the capacity of educators to teach mixed-ability groups as well as the employment of paraprofessionals (Giangreco & Broer).

AASE believes that it is not appropriate to develop a system of education that depends on paraprofessionals providing educational services to students with special education needs. Improvements in the recruitment, training and employment of teacher aides should not encourage teachers to abdicate responsibility for the education of all students in their classes. Paraprofessionals should be a support to the teacher, not a substitute for a teacher.

However, appropriately trained and supported teacher aides working under the supervision of a teacher on tasks within their role and competence, can enhance a school's capacity to produce quality learning outcomes for students with special educational needs. The role of the teacher aide cannot be considered without a complementary consideration of the role of the classroom teacher and the special educator.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL STUDENTS MUST REMAIN WITH THE CLASS TEACHER

Benefits, which may be derived from teacher aide support, need to be weighed against risks of isolation or identification which may become more significant as students move through grades. Some identified risks of the use of paraprofessionals, especially those assigned to particular students are: the abdication of responsibility by the class teacher; the use of least-qualified personnel to teach students with the most complex learning needs; separation of children from their classmates; and consequent interference with peer interaction; over-reliance by children on the presence of an adult with loss of student autonomy; stigmatising of the student by constant presence of an accompanying adult; loss of gender identity as facilities appropriate for the gender of the aide are used (for example female toilets for a male students) and interference with the education of other students (Howes, 2003; Giangreco & Doyle, 2002; Giangreco et al., 2005).

Giangreco and Broer (2005) found that paraprofessionals spent around 86% of their time within feet of their assigned students, which provides an atypically high level of adult proximity for any child. It may be appropriate for school communities and planning teams to assess the supports available to them and consider how special educators may be used more effectively to support regular educators and how peers may provide supports in and out of class (Giangreco et al, 2004; Giangreco & Broer, 2005). Parents may need to be reassured that their child can be effectively supported by alternative strategies that do not require the presence of an individually allocated aide. The training of aides should include the development of an awareness of these issues in relation to students with special education needs.

Giangreco and Doyle (2002) propose a useful rule of thumb in deciding whether a paraprofessional is appropriately employed or delivering services in an appropriate manner. For example, would we find it appropriate for a student without special education needs to receive the bulk of their reading instruction from a paraprofessional? Would we find it appropriate for student without disabilities to work separately from their class or to be removed from class by a paraprofessional?

THE AIDE SUPPORTS THE CLASS, NOT THE STUDENT

Aides are appointed to or employed by the school. It is the presence in the school of one or more students with particular instructional, communication, behavioural, mobility, hygiene or health care needs which causes the appointment/employment of the teacher aide. Schools need to give consideration to the most appropriate and effective ways of deploying teacher aides. It is crucial to identify in the first instance whom the teacher aide is supporting, whether it is the teacher or the student with special education needs. Recent research (Giangreco & Broer, 2005) found that paraprofessionals assigned to individual students spent less time instructing students than those assigned to groups. They also spent more time in self-directed activities (that is in activities not planned by a qualified educator). Given the documented potentially detrimental effects of teacher over-reliance on aide support, AASE believes it is more appropriate to assign an aide to support a teacher and a whole class that contains one or more students with special education needs. The class teacher, supported as needed by a collaborative team, including a special educator, should take primary responsibility for student assessment, educational planning, delivery of instruction and behaviour management (French, 2003; Trautman, 2004).

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

For support to be delivered appropriately it is essential that the roles and responsibilities of teachers and aides be clearly delineated so instructional decision making lies clearly with the teacher, supported as needed by a special educator. Unclear and ambiguous role descriptions are frequently noted as problematic in the descriptive literature on the use of teacher aides. Many authors recommend clear definitions of roles and responsibilities as one way to improve the effectiveness of the employment of paraprofessionals (Giangreco et al, 2001; French, 2003; Downing et al., 2000; Trautman, 2004; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Appropriate roles for paraprofessionals include performing clerical work, carrying out teacher-planned activities with individuals and small groups, assisting teachers with activities, implementing behaviour management plans designed by teachers, organising and maintaining classroom resources and the general classroom environment, collecting information on student progress, assisting with personal care and medication of students, and assisting therapists (Trautman, 2004).

DESIRABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF POTENTIAL TEACHER AIDES

There is little information available to guide decisions about appropriate entry-level qualifications and experience for teacher aides. In the US, paraprofessionals are typically women re-entering the workforce who live near the school they work in (Pickett, Likins, & Wallace, 2003). Anecdotal reports suggest that this also the case in Australia.

The prerequisite skills for effective and suitable teacher aides need to be formally described. Consideration should be given to the level of formal education required by teacher aides working in different settings. In primary school, aides may be expected to have sound knowledge of basic literacy and numeracy if they are to offer academic support (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002). As included students progress to secondary schools, the issues of academic content competence for aides will be important. Secondary school teachers specialise in a limited number of subject areas, and it may be appropriate for paraprofessionals to mirror this specialisation. It is unrealistic to expect teacher aides to be highly competent across the whole range of secondary education content (Giangreco, 2003). In the US, all paraprofessionals must have some post high school education or meet specified competency standards (Mueller, 2003)

Paraeducators themselves, as reported in Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) suggest a range of personal qualities needed by paraeducators. They suggested that liking children, being able to interact with children, being patient, caring and firm, being flexible, being able to communicate with adults and children and being able to remain calm were important prerequisites.

PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Again there is little to guide decisions about content to be delivered and the competencies to be achieved in pre- and inservice training (Pickett, Likins, & Wallace, 2003).

Research reviews show that paraprofessionals engage in a wide range of roles, many of which they may be untrained to perform (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001). Paraeducators themselves believe that training is essential for their job (Downing et al, 2001; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). They suggest training in behavioural interventions, specific needs of students, teaching strategies, adapting curricula and materials, physical care, basic academic skills, computer skills and interpersonal skills. There is a need to clearly specify which tasks a paraprofessional can do independently, which can be shared with a teacher and which are the sole responsibility of the teacher.

In the US, the No Child Left Behind legislation requires that teacher aide training includes knowledge and ability to instruct in reading, writing and maths. It also specifies that teacher aides must work under the supervision of a teacher (Pickett, Likins, & Wallace, 2003)

It is clear that various standards of training and accreditation exist. Clarification is needed regarding who delivers both initial and ongoing training, how it is delivered, the nature of the content and focus as well as what mechanisms can be put into place for quality assurance. Delivery of training should follow best practice adult education principles and should include such elements as curriculum adjustment, behaviour support and

developing collaborative working relationships. System standards relating to occupational health and safety, child protection and confidentiality should be included. Core skills and competencies should be detailed, as well as additional skills for particular settings and mechanisms for progression clarified.

The huge variation in student needs, teacher skills, other resources available and the existing skills of paraprofessionals means schools and individual supervising teachers will need to accept responsibility for specific elements of initial and ongoing training (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002). There is an essential role for schools in initial training in providing an orientation that is setting specific and which should cover students and programs, behaviour management, health and safety procedures, child protection, home/school communication procedures, school procedures and policies and transportation arrangements (Riggs & Mueller, 2001; Trautman, 2004).

On-the-job training should also be at least partially the responsibility of schools. Supervisors should provide training in specific procedures and strategies required for particular students and small groups and should demonstrate how more generic skills acquired in preservice training can be applied to specific situations (Trautman, 2004). Teachers can train teacher aides in specific skills on the job though observation and performance feedback (Leblanc, Ricciardi, & Luiselli, 2005).

Teacher aides should be supported and briefed to enable them to work within the school's communication protocols, particularly with regard to communication with parents of students with special education needs. Sensitivity, confidentiality and empathy are crucial in assisting parents to work through the inevitably challenging issues they and their children will face during the course of the child's education. It is primarily the teacher's responsibility to communicate effectively with colleagues, parents and other professionals; however, the teacher aide working within this context needs also to communicate appropriately with stakeholders, and within his or her realms of responsibility.

Accreditation pathways, including Recognition of Prior Learning, should be explicit and consistent.

Ongoing professional learning should be promoted and provided so that teacher aides are encouraged to participate regularly.

CAREER PATHS

The progression for teacher aides should provide suitable grading systems to encourage retention and promote mentoring by more experienced and qualified people and to address succession needs.

Yearly evaluations have become common practice in the US and these formal evaluations can be helpful if linked to ongoing informal evaluations by supervising teachers (Trautman, 2004). The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1998) outlines appropriate competencies for paraprofessionals at entry level including assistance with informal monitoring, maintain equipment, and implement instruction under close supervision. At a higher level paraprofessionals may conduct screenings, provide supplementary instruction to small groups independently, record student progress, and implement behaviour supports.

There has also been a move in the US to address the shortage of special educators by providing further training for paraprofessionals so they gain a teaching qualification (White, 2004; Mueller, 2003). AASE believes integrating professional development of paraeducators and educators would be of benefit in Australia and provide an extended career path for those entering the education system at a paraprofessional level. However, the roles of teacher and teacher aide must always be seen as complementary, not identical or interchangeable. Teacher aides should not be employed on economic grounds where the position calls for the employment of a qualified teacher.

SUPERVISION

The ideal presented in the literature on teacher aides is that they should "…work under the direction and supervision of qualified professional educators, special educators, or related service providers" (Giangreco & Doyle, 2002, p.4). The limited research on this however, suggests that many teachers are reluctant to provide

supervision and are unprepared and untrained in supervision (French, 2001; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001).
Classroom teachers working with teacher aides need guidance regarding supervision. Unless they are in executive positions, teachers are unlikely to have the experience, skills or understanding of adult education principles to enable them to confidently and adequately supervise the work of teacher aides, nor to support their career progression. In the US, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1998) considers that failing to provide appropriate supervision to a paraprofessional is an ethical issue.

AASE believes it is more important than ever that the professional preparation and ongoing professional development of regular and special educators include skills in collaboration, staff supervision and working with a teacher aide. It is also important that time be available within school schedules for meetings between educators and teacher aides to occur.

MENTORING

The potentials for career progression and professional growth for teacher aides may be enhanced through mentoring opportunities. Mentoring by more experienced aides and teachers already occurs informally (Riggs & Mueller, 2001) and should be formalised. Teacher aides acting as mentors to less experienced colleagues can sharpen their own skills while contributing to the growth of others. Less experienced teacher aides can benefit from having regular access to a more experienced colleague in situations which challenge or concern them so that they can share ideas and identify solutions. Teachers who mentor teacher aides, or vice versa, broaden the opportunities for finding better solutions to the individual educational challenges facing the student with special education needs, thus potentially improving the learning outcomes for those students. Mentoring should be promoted as a valuable, individualised adult education avenue for teacher aides.

CONCLUSION

In summary AASE believes:

- Since the provision of a teacher aide does not necessarily result in better student outcomes, schools should consider carefully whether or not the employment of a teacher aide is the best use of resources.
- Teacher aides should support the teacher who is responsible for the education of all students in the class.
- School should delineate roles and responsibilities and provide supervision for teacher aides by experienced staff trained in the area of supervision.
- Teacher aides should not be expected to take primary responsibility for educational planning, teaching, or adapting curriculum.
- There should be guidelines for the recruitment of teacher aides focussing on personal qualities and knowledge of appropriate subject matter.
- Pre-service and in-service training should follow best practice and include curriculum adjustment, behaviour support, collaborative work practices, communication protocols, Occupational Health and Safety and Child Protection.
- Experienced and trained educators are responsible for mentoring, evaluating, and encouraging teacher aides along a chosen career path.

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