

Building Effective Inclusive Classrooms Through Supporting The Professional Learning Of Special Needs Teacher Assistants

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BUILDING EFFECTIVE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS THROUGH SUPPORTING THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OF SPECIAL NEEDS TEACHER ASSISTANTS

Abstract

Teacher Assistants are employed in a variety of roles in schools to support the inclusion of students with special needs. Little research is available to indicate the efficacy and / or long-term benefits of Special Needs Teacher Assistants in building effective inclusive classrooms. Additionally, there is a lack of clear definition for the role of Special Needs Teacher Assistants in the learning process of students, within the context of both primary and secondary school classrooms. This has contributed to considerable role ambiguity for some leading to a detrimental 'hoverers or hinderers' stance sometimes observed during classroom practice.

Throughout 2002 and 2003, the Australian Catholic University (ACT), the Catholic Education Office (Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn) and Special Needs Teacher Assistants have worked collaboratively to develop a university-accredited Professional Development Certificate Program to address these needs. The program aims to support the professional learning needs of the Special Needs Teacher Assistants within the context of their school environments, through the development of a range of skills and understandings relevant to the enhancement and promotion of more effective and inclusive classrooms. The program commenced in March 2003.

This paper provides an overview of the collaborative processes undertaken in the development of the program's structure and curriculum, and in the implementation of the teaching and learning segments of the four modules that comprise the program. Progress to date, including the achievement of program outcomes, assessment strategies, and the value of the program in assisting Special Needs Teacher Assistants to address current issues related to their specific work environments, is considered within an evaluative framework. Some tentative conclusions are drawn regarding the long-term role development of Special Needs Teacher Assistants relative to classroom teacher responsibilities, the effectiveness of the program in effecting change within the classroom, and the success of the program in establishing a dynamic community of learners focused on interdependent, long-term learning that is more able to respond to changing education priorities and needs for the betterment of all concerned.

Introduction

Educational debates still surround the inclusion of students with special needs into regular classrooms. During the *International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP, 1981)* community attention was drawn to the right of those with disabilities to exercise greater choice across all areas of their lives. Previously it was not unusual to find people with disabilities interacting only with those who had the same or similar disability. This created little opportunity for the extension of learning and consequent improvement in lifestyle. As highlighted by Foreman (2001), a significant outcome of the IYDP was recognition that people with disabilities desired to be regarded as people first rather than labelled by their disability. Changes in legislation, as evidenced in the Disability Discrimination Act (1993), the Western Australian Disability Services Act (1993), the Queensland Anti-discrimination Act (1991), and the NSW Anti-Discrimination Act (1982) have also provided the impetus for attitude change within the community.

Foreman (2001) identifies a number of factors that have influenced the development of a more inclusive model of education: the fact that separate special schools did not produce improved academic or social outcomes over integrated settings, especially for those with mild disabilities; the current research suggests that students with more severe and multiple disabilities also benefit from inclusive education; there are overall beneficial effects of inclusive schooling; and there is growing acceptance of the right of all students to participate fully in regular education.

Nevertheless, effective inclusion of students with diverse learning requirements into regular classrooms still requires careful organisation and the creation of a learning environment that is accepting, caring and safe (Lang & Berberich, 1995). Of importance is the effective management of classroom and school learning environments and utilisation of specific teaching and learning strategies that

facilitate all students' active engagement and participation in the learning process. Further, there is an ongoing need for those within school communities to be alert to broader issues related to attitudinal change, parental involvement, and support networks.

The role of special needs teacher assistants

Special Needs Teacher Assistants (SNTAs) have become a fundamental component of the inclusive model of education in regular schools and there is little doubt that they now assume an important role in the classroom. Special Needs Teacher Assistants are employed to work with individual children who have identified special educational needs related to a specific disability that is recognised by the appropriate funding authority within each state or territory. While there is little research available to demonstrate the efficacy and/or long-term benefits of SNTAs in building effective inclusive classrooms, these 'frontline workers' can become very significant adults in the lives of these students and therefore have a significant positive impact on the development of their attitudes, skills and learning (Wasykowski, 2002).

The increasing use of teacher assistants to support classroom teachers to extend the learning opportunities of students has been a significant development in a number of countries (Moyles & Suschitzky, 1997). Further, the increase in enrolment of students with disabilities into regular classrooms has necessitated greater support for teachers who are now required to provide additional personal attention to cater for the specific needs of these students. As Ashbaker and Morgan (2001, p.60) predict, the number of teacher aides, classroom assistants, instructional assistants and other education paraprofessionals will by 2005 increase by almost 40%.

To effectively support the academic and social needs of students with disabilities there has been a substantial increase in the use of teacher assistants. The result of this increase is a significant need to support the teacher assistants in planning their life-long learning and career development. As highlighted by Pearson, Chambers and Hall (2003) improving the outcomes for students with special needs requires careful consideration of many factors and it is folly to assume these will automatically result from an increase in the number of adults in the classroom. The recent British report, *Working with teaching assistants: A good practice guide* (DfEE, 2000) contributes to the discussion and provides useful measures aimed at enhancing the quality of teacher assistants, including the need to create effective partnerships with teachers. The main issues outlined in the document include: clarifying and differentiating roles; ensuring participation in planning and high quality input; developing clear feedback mechanisms; teacher guidance with behaviour management issues; information sharing regarding student needs; and encouraging frequent reviews of the team relationship. Others have highlighted the need for effective teamwork when working with

students with diverse learning needs (Westwood, 1997; Foreman, 2001; Ashman & Elkins, 2002; Wasykowski, 2002).

Neill (2002) believes that eighty percent of classroom teachers recognise the potential benefits of support from teacher assistants while the benefits of joint professional learning programs for teachers and teacher assistants are also becoming more recognised by education authorities. These working partnerships have been shown to have positive effects in building cohesive teaching and learning teams within the school environment (Pearson, Chambers and Hall, 2003).

The school community holds high expectations of those directly involved in the education of its children. Given teacher assistants may spend up to fifty percent of their time providing instruction to individual students without the teacher present (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001:62), it is imperative that teacher assistants receive adequate and appropriate professional development to ensure they are able to work effectively with students with special needs. The motivation to receive training, particularly in the form of a distance education class, conference, or district workshop, is not in doubt. As Ashbaker and Morgan (2001) found, the ability to improve their effectiveness was a higher incentive than additional financial rewards for teacher assistants.

Defining the role of the SNTA within the classroom is an essential prerequisite to strengthening the utilisation and effectiveness of the Teacher Assistant model. The lack of a clear role definition can create confusion and considerable role ambiguity for teacher assistants resulting in a somewhat deleterious 'hoverers' or 'hinderer's stance apparent in some classrooms (Giangreco, et. al., 1997). It is therefore essential that teacher assistants receive support for their professional learning needs through formal professional development programs.

PD Certificate Program: Context and Rationale

The university-accredited Professional Development Certificate Program for SNTAs was designed collaboratively by the Catholic Education Office (CEO, Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn) and Australian Catholic University (ACU, Canberra) to meet the needs of the various members of the partnership. The developmental process has been collaborative and included contributions from all stakeholders, including staff from both Australian Catholic University and the Catholic Education Office (Canberra and Goulburn), and SNTA representatives. Underpinning the development and design of the Professional Development Certificate Program is a strong belief that effective learning outcomes for children with special needs can only be achieved when all members of the school support team understand the learning needs of their students, and possess the necessary pedagogical strategies to encourage and promote learning. SNTAs form an important part of these school teams and, as such, should be provided with opportunities for ongoing professional learning experiences that further their

understanding and professional growth. The SNTAs clear enthusiasm for increased opportunities to pursue further study provided one of the catalysts for the development of this Professional Development Certificate program.

Another factor in the development of the Program has been the increase, in recent years, in the number of Special Needs Teacher Assistants (SNTAs) employed within the Canberra and Goulburn Archdiocese. While ongoing professional development programs had been offered previously, there was a growing awareness of the need for more substantial quality professional development that reflected the ethos of the broader Catholic school community. Therefore, this joint CEO/ACU initiative was significant in its recognition of the worthwhile contribution of SNTAs in supporting teachers to develop more inclusive classrooms within the Catholic school community.

PD Certificate Program Outcomes

By the completion of the Program, it is envisaged that the SNTAs will have achieved the following outcomes:

- develop an understanding of the ethos of Catholic schools and the special needs policy and procedures adopted by the CEO and other regulatory bodies;
- gain an understanding of the organisation, general teaching and learning strategies, and the dynamics of the classrooms in which children with special needs will be included in the Catholic and other education systems;
- develop an awareness of the nature of disabilities;
- understand and become proficient in assisting with the basic management strategies that are appropriate to educational settings in general, and to those that cater for children with special needs;
- develop communication and interpersonal skills that will enable them to interact successfully with teachers, parents and other professionals; and
- acquire instructional skills that will enable them, under the direction of the regular class or special needs resource teacher, to assist in the provision of successful learning experiences for the children with special needs.

Entry Criteria

A requirement for SNTAs to enter the program was the submission of a short written application addressing the following criteria:

Completion of the Teacher Assistants' Course: A and B

A verbal refereed report from the Principal of the school

A written statement of purpose, including the reasons for applying for the program; details of contributions made as a member of a team in a Catholic school; ways in which the SNTA had assisted students in the inclusive classroom; and the ways in which the SNTA had supported the work of teacher(s) in creating effective learning environments for students with special needs.

The strong response to the opportunity to enter the Program and the comments received in regards to the questions highlighted the SNTAs commitment to further learning. As stated by one SNTA:

'I believed a university developed course would be able to offer a more challenging set of outcomes. Most of all, I felt that the children I work with would hopefully benefit from my learning, and I would gain a better understanding of their needs.'

Structure of the PD Certificate Program

The Program comprises four modules that are offered over a one-year period:

- Towards an inclusive Catholic educational community
- Special needs and effective learning
- Creating productive learning environments
- Literacy and numeracy for children with special needs

The current structure provides for the presentation of two modules in each semester of the academic year. Each module comprises 18 hours of contact time and is presented over one weekend session plus one full day. Any participant not currently working as a SNTA is required to complete a practicum. A set of program readings is included in each Module Package. The SNTAs are advised to read these before attending the Program sessions. It is envisaged that, by the completion of the four modules, the SNTAs will not only have developed new knowledge, skills and attitudes towards inclusive education, but be challenged to view their own learning as the beginning of a process that is both life-long and life-wide.

Although the content presented in each of the four modules has been developed around specific foci, the PD Certificate program should be viewed holistically with an emphasis on the development of theoretical and professional relationships that promote deep learning and relevancy. In this regard, the assessment tasks are designed to promote independent and self-directed learning through the completion of a variety of focused tasks, and the maintenance of a professional development portfolio across the entire program. Inclusion of a portfolio in the

assessment process has encouraged the SNTAs to reflect on their new learnings and further develop their personal and professional strengths within the context of their school learning communities. The teaching and learning strategies employed during the presentation of the first two modules include: workshop activities, role-plays, simulations, use of ICT, discussions, and cooperative learning tasks. Relevant members of the community, including those with disabilities, have made significant contributions to the Program and provided added breadth that might not have otherwise been possible.

Program Evaluation

Verbal and written feedback was sought after the presentation of the first two modules. As indicated below, results show a high level of satisfaction overall with the focus and teaching and learning process, as provided in the information provided below.

Level of overall satisfaction

Modules 1 and 2	1 (not satisfied)	2 (some satisfaction)	3 (average)	4 (very good)	5 (exceptional)
M1(n=25)	0	0	0	7	18
M2 (n=25)	0	0	2	11	12

Met participants' expectations

Module	No Response	No	Yes
M1 (n=27)	0	0	27
M2 (n=24)	2	1	21

As indicated above, the vast majority of respondents indicated they were overall very satisfied with Module 1 and 2. Further, the results indicate that the level of congruence between the SNTAs expectations and the Module content and presentation was high.

For some SNTAs the commencement of study brought with it new anxieties and challenges, especially for those where the learning process had been discontinuous. As one SNTA commented:

'We turned up on our first day feeling like a kindy class on their first day at school (now we know how they feel). It was reassuring to see a few familiar faces (all looked as scared as I) and also to have the support of staff from the CEO.'

Some participants expressed a sense of anxiety and lack of confidence in their ability to complete the Module 1 assessment tasks to an acceptable standard, especially as they had undertaken any professional writing for several years. A concern identified by three respondents was the feeling of being overwhelmed by the breadth of content covered during Module 2. In this regard, some SNTAs would have appreciated more opportunities and longer time period to absorb the content presented in the various sections of the module. A number of changes to Module 1 were suggested including: more time for discussion with other SNTAs, further input regarding assessment tasks and more information on the roles and responsibilities of SNTAs. In response to the evaluation of Module 2: four participants indicated they would like more time on specific areas, including vision impairment and computers; two participants would have preferred more time to share ideas and strategies; and a further three stated they would like more input from children and parents with disabilities. Two participants believed an extra day in the length of the program would have been beneficial, while another two requested more details regarding the completion of the assessment tasks. Eleven participants did not seek changes to Module 2.

The participants' responses showed that a number of areas were particularly stimulating and relevant to their work.

Module 1:

All areas	Lifelong learning	Emotional intelligence	Teams	Roles and responsibilities of SNTAs	Inclusive education/language
9	7	6	6	1	12

Module 2:

Vision Impairment	Autism	Learning Disabilities	Asthma	All areas	Practical Strategies	ADHD	IT Support
17	7	6	2	5	5	1	1

Further comments regarding both modules related to the SNTAs general satisfaction with the Program and presenters; for example:

'The lecturers from ACU are very supportive and are experts in making you believe in yourself.'

'Thank you for the great weekend. Once again we leave with knowledge introduced or enhanced. Keep up the good work.'

'Keep up the excellent work.'

'Lovely weekend with great people.'

'I am enjoying the course – much more than I expected. Thank you. I truly look forward to all the coming sessions.'

The growing confidence in learning is highlighted in the following comments; for example:

'Participating in this course is such a wonderful opportunity to gain further knowledge and understanding of the types of learning difficulties/disabilities that children have. We feel that because of our extended learning, we are sure the children we work with will benefit, and this is our ultimate goal.'

'I enjoyed the sessions greatly and am looking forward to the task ahead.'

'A most enjoyable weekend. Definitely not as scary as I anticipated.'

The positive effects of networking with other colleagues were also highlighted; for example:

'All the women I spoke to in regards to completing module one said how much they enjoy the social side of participating in the course and the networking that goes on between each of us.'

'Being together with SNTAs I had never met before and discussing our roles at school. I feel this day has brought a lot of people together.'

Of importance also is the strong sense of commitment by the SNTAs to their work and to improving the learning outcomes of individual children thereby freeing the classroom teacher to progress the learning outcomes for the whole class.

The Professional Development Certificate Program, implemented in March 2003, has proved an effective means to continue to support the professional learning needs of SNTAs, within the context of their school environments, through the development of a range of skills and understandings relevant to the enhancement and promotion of more effective and inclusive classrooms. As the program progresses it is envisaged the evaluative process will include school-based evaluations from classroom teachers and the school executive to ascertain the extent to which there has been effective transfer of knowledge, skills and attitudes into the work environment.

From the reflections and evaluative feedback provided by the SNTAs throughout this Professional Development Certificate Program it is apparent that they have developed a greater awareness of the nature and extent of disabilities experienced by the children in their care and have extended their understanding of the policies and procedures adopted by the CEO and other agencies for

children with disabilities. The strengthening of self-esteem and the development of life-long learning skills has also brought benefits to SNTAs.

Conclusion

Given a continuing focus on inclusiveness in the classroom, there exists a strong need for teacher assistants (SNTAs) to support teachers and the academic and social needs of students with disabilities. Further there is a continuing need for the provision of professional learning experiences that assist classroom teachers to deepen their understanding of the specific needs of the children in their inclusive classrooms, and the means by which to differentiate and individualise the curriculum as appropriate to the specific needs of their students. Recognition that both teachers and SNTAs have professional learning needs is important. Increased opportunities for both to engage in shared professional development programs should work effectively to enhance the skills of the classroom support team (Pearson, Chambers & Hall, 2003) and assist in building a dynamic, cohesive community of learners focused on long-term development and responsive to changing priorities.

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