

Five Ways to Facilitate the Teacher Assistant's Work in the Classroom

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Abstract

A teacher and a teacher assistant, working together in an inclusive grade-six classroom, provided an invaluable insider perspective on the kind of context that leads to effective support for all students. Findings from this case study revealed five ways in which the teacher could facilitate the work of the teacher assistant, by: 1) focusing on relationship building (nudging instead of nagging); 2) monitoring the amount of teacher talk to afford mini-lessons; 3) applying the basics of differentiation and universal design; 4) negotiating classroom management roles and sharing responsibilities for students; and 5) using an action-oriented format to shape the communication agenda.

Keywords

teaching assistants, paraprofessionals

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Case Study

This case study focused on the ways in which the teacher assistant, Shelby (pseudonym), provided support for three students with a learning disability (LD), and the teacher's role in facilitating the teacher assistant's job. I observed and made an audio recording of Shelby and Beth (the teacher) for a total of 15 hours (1 hour per week for 15 weeks) during language arts instruction, and conducted interviews with both of them. Although Shelby had no formal training for her role as a teacher assistant, she had been working in classrooms for six years and had attended training sessions provided by the school district. This was her fourth year working with Beth, who was an art specialist in her early thirties who had taught middle school for eight years. There were 28 students in a Grade 6 classroom set in this mid-size city in Western Canada. In addition to the three students with identified learning disabilities, there were six other struggling readers and writers, one student with a hearing impairment, and one student identified as gifted.

The data consisted of 15 hours of transcribed audio recordings of classroom interactions generated throughout the research period which were coded using QSR NUD*IST and were analyzed using a constant comparative method, searching for recurring categories, that led to the themes identified in this article. In addition to the observations, the teacher and teacher assistant participated in tape-recorded interviews related to support practices in the language arts classroom. This was part of a larger study that focused on inclusion practices in middle school.

Changing Roles

Teacher assistants have seen a shift in their responsibilities in the past decade, having become active participants in all stages of the instructional process (French & Gerlach, 1999; French, 1998; Moshoyannis, Pickett, & Granick, 1999; Mueller, 1997). The relative ease with which they are able to do so is determined frequently by the classroom teacher with whom they work. Despite the substantiated need for teachers to work effectively with teacher assistants, much development still needs to be done in this area, as teachers are very reluctant to provide supervision (French, 1998; French & Pickett, 1997), and teacher assistants are often unclear about their roles and responsibilities (French & Pickett, 1997). Due in part to this lack of direction, teacher assistants are often left to figure out the best way to do their jobs in a variety of classroom contexts, working with students with a range of difficulties. Changing roles and responsibilities of teacher assistants place an increasing importance on the direction they receive from teachers (Giangreco, 2003; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001). In an extensive review of the literature, researchers comment that no article focuses on how teacher assistants interact with students and school personnel, although aspects are embedded in discussions of their roles and responsibilities (Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001); yet it is within the interactional dynamic where effective support plays out. Based on the findings from a case study, this article outlines five ways in which the work of the teacher assistant was carried out and how it was directed and facilitated by the teacher in the inclusive classroom.

Results

Focus on relationship-building with students: Nudge instead of nag

Consistent with research findings which cite the importance of negotiating enabling identities with at-risk learners through positive interactions (Jordan & Stanovich; 2001), Beth facilitated her teacher assistant's work by providing opportunities for building relationships with her students. Beth made time every day in Shelby's schedule for her to do *locker checks* in order to help students stay organized. During this time, Shelby engaged students in conversations about their friends, hobbies, and current school events and projects. Additionally, in early September, Beth ensured that her students with LD worked with the teacher assistant to get their individual needs met while establishing rapport with her. Beth directed Shelby to take care of some small, yet important, things such as ensuring that two students who had difficulty with recall had both received single digit combination locks, and that Shelby helped them practice opening their locks. Beth also arranged for Shelby to take the three students with learning disabilities on a tour of the school so they could become familiar with some key areas in the school (the computer and art room, library, etc.). Such small *leg-up* measures eased the transition for the students and gave Shelby time to get to know them in a small group setting.

Shelby understood the importance of connecting with students and the central role that affective aspects may play in their learning. She took the time every day to inquire about their lives both in and outside the classroom, and to fuse this knowledge about their interests and relationships into her conversations with them.

Another important component of relationship-building involved Beth's use of language that validated the students' worth, which served as an example for her teacher assistant and for the students themselves. Her tone and attitude conveyed both respect and a sincere interest in seeing the students' *best selves*. Frequently, she would tell students "You're onto something," as well as encouraging them to show others what they were "onto" by preparing an aesthetic or creative response to the text, such as a taped conversation, a tableau, or a picture. The idea that they could be "onto something," without completion of a single paragraph, seemed to motivate them to construct something with their ideas that related to the text, while temporarily freeing them up from the rigor and criteria of text-based formats.

Both Beth and Shelby used a communication style that may be best described as nudging; that is, a less direct way of communicating in which students were prompted and queried in a respectful and even tone of voice, rather than nagging them. For example, Shelby refused to engage in nagging students regarding lost materials and forgotten notebooks. She simply provided backups of instructions and supplies and kept the conversation about their learning.

Shelby was also discreet and showed considerable skill in recognizing when students needed to be *let off the hook*. Her favorite phrases in response to confused learners, or to her unanswered requests for clarification, included: "I probably didn't explain it too well"; "Let me try it again, okay?"; "Let's try this a different way"; or "I didn't put this exactly right". This owning of misunderstandings and offering alternative explanations helped learners save face and re-engage with the learning task.

Shelby also used routine prompting phrases such as:

"Tell me one thing you understand about it [the assignment]."

"You probably have lots of good ideas. Tell me the first one and I'll write it down for you."

"Let's use one of your graphic organizers."

"I'll be back in a few minutes to see the first part."

"What's the next thing you need to do? Could you start here?"

She kept them focused by saying such things as: "You can do this part," or "Try it this way," or "I'll get you started."

Both Beth and Shelby paid close attention to the manner in which they spoke to the students, recognizing the importance of discernment and flexibility in responding and connecting with students –key components in the challenging process of building a productive inclusive learning environment. This dimension of classroom interactions is particularly critical for at-risk students, whose perceptions of how others will respond to their requests for help actually determine who they ask for assistance, or from whom they will accept help (Adams & Marshall, 1996).

This attention to how educators attend to, validate, and position struggling learners can not be overestimated. Effective discourse moves of the teacher and teacher assistant can position vulnerable students for academic success when educators carry out what Rex (2000) describes as interactional inclusion. In such a context, vulnerable students are positioned to be observed as capable classroom members. The educator's role is to create the conditions of active participation through particular discourse patterns and to facilitate the relationship between the teacher assistant and

the student.

Monitor the amount of teacher talk affording opportunities for mini-lessons and more student talk.

"It's better when the teachers will teach the lesson, do examples on the board. They're not just talking, but they're doing examples - holding up things, showing things...but [when] the teacher is talking all the time, it doesn't give you any avenue to get in there without interrupting her to see if they [students with learning disabilities] are actually getting it."

Shelby recognized the importance of the teacher's instructional style as a major determinant in whether she would be able to help her students, seizing opportunities for mini-lessons within the flow of *teacher talk*; that is, the tendency for teachers to depend too much on their own talking without providing sufficient openings for students to converse with one another, and not providing more interactive ways of learning (Cazden, 2001). Shelby sometimes viewed the teacher's flow of talk as an impediment to helping, and depended on discourse breaks and mini-lessons to help her students. Mini-lessons with students usually lasted five to ten minutes, and were used to either clarify or teach a specific concept that was essential to the effectiveness of the overall lesson. For example, Beth would provide Shelby with pictures on the topic of inquiry with the purpose of building up background knowledge with a small group of students, or she would guide the students through a graphic literacy strategy such as a plot profile, or a sociogram (a web that shows relationships between the story characters) prior to a writing assignment. Frequently, Shelby was called upon to

scaffold an assignment that otherwise would have been too complex for the student. For example, she would work alongside a student and scribe a brainstormed list of ideas for a descriptive passage they were asked to write. At other times, she would encourage peer-to-peer support. Teachers who pay attention to the amount, type, and timing of their own talking can make a critical difference in facilitating the work of the teacher assistant. Unfortunately, in most classrooms whole class instruction remains the predominant instructional grouping format. This happens regardless of the profile of students enrolled in the class and despite ample research documenting the benefits of collaborative groupings and small group instruction in which student voices are privileged and learning is augmented (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Schumm, 2000).

Apply the basics of differentiation & universal design

Shelby's work was made easier when her three students were asked to do assignments, read materials, and participate in projects and activities that were appropriate to their needs and interests. Since Beth used the basics of differentiation, students were often working on different tasks that interested them and that were at their level. The basic premise of differentiation is that what a student learns, how he or she learns, and how the student demonstrates what he or she learns should be a match for their readiness, interests, and learning profile (Tomlinson, 1999). This does not mean that a teacher is taking into account the individual interests, profiles and readiness of thirty students, five hours per day. Rather, differentiating means that a teacher is approaching the curriculum with flexibility and is willing to share some of the decision-making power with the students re-

garding what is to be learned and how it is to be learned. While Beth designed the differentiated instruction, Shelby often supervised the learning activity. Some examples of how Beth and Shelby routinely differentiated for their students included:

- (a) providing choices in reading materials for learners across the ability spectrum, taking reader interests into account as well as their reading levels;
- (b) providing choices in literacy responses so that some learners could be interviewing a character from a book while another may be writing a prequel or sequel [for the book], depending on the learner's profile;
- (c) providing mini-lessons for 1-4 students with a clear focus and specific goal, such as using descriptive words, how to revise sentences, etc.;
- (d) asking for, and encouraging, creative work products and representations;
- (e) use of open-ended questions about the topic of inquiry, which encouraged students to speculate, elaborate, imagine, and connect with their own experiences (Tobin, 2005).

Beth was responsive to the developing needs of diverse learners, and provided the direction to Shelby required to differentiate the program appropriately. A fundamental support to differentiated instruction in Beth and Shelby's class was *universal design* in literacy instruction. Universal design refers to a "designed-in" flexibility to accommodate the instructional needs of diverse learners in a single classroom (Orkwis & McLane, 1998). The underlying premise of universal design is the largest number of people possible should benefit from the products and environments without the need for additional modifications beyond those incorporated in the original design. In Beth's classroom she built redun-

dancy into her literacy lessons during whole-class teaching, so that the teacher says it (through questioning, verbal description, read aloud); shows it (through pictures, graphics, transparency, white board, or video); models it (through demonstrations, think aloud, constructions, manipulatives); and uses different media (such as video tape, internet, television, manipulatives, computer) (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2000). Universal design supports diverse learners by providing simultaneous ways of storing and retrieving information. This in turn gave the teacher assistant multiple reference points to use in her follow-up work with students.

Negotiate classroom management roles and share responsibilities for students

Foundational to effective inclusion are the teachers' skills in classroom management or student engagement (Weiner, 2003). Without effective engagement of the whole class, it is difficult to differentiate instruction for exceptional learners and to parcel out attention as needed.

"The teacher will sometimes indicate to you that she wants you to take care of the student who is disturbing the whole class, which means maybe sitting near them. They are very capable of doing the work, but they do not want to do the work. So you may be over here with this fellow who is more capable, and there are four over here who do need your help".

Shelby found that keeping the emphasis on those who needed academic help, rather than on managing behavior problems, was key to student learning, and lamented some situations where she would be asked to "look after" students with behavior problems, instead of students with learning challenges. It was only after bringing the topic forward onto their communication agenda that Shelby

and Beth were able to negotiate classroom management roles that best met the needs of the students. Their solution was to seat students with challenging behaviors more strategically so that the teacher could better attend to them, and Shelby could assist with more learning tasks.

To ensure that she "had the pulse" of the whole class, the teacher circulated among all of the students, while Shelby conducted mini-lessons during small group work and seat work. During whole class and small group instruction, Beth made it clear through her interactions that she was still responsible for the three students with learning disabilities. In particular, she would call on the three students regularly during whole group instruction and facilitate their learning by repeating part of their answer and scribing it on the board. She also used a purposeful traffic pattern during seat work that included an early check-in with the students with learning disabilities. She held them responsible for agreed-upon assignments and had them display or present their differentiated work alongside that of their classmates. She sent a clear message that all of the students were "her Division 11 students." The teacher also often chose judiciously well-timed questions over reproaches for off-task behaviors and worked behind the scenes with the teacher assistant to match up compatible students, tier assignments, highlight texts, and otherwise "set the stage" for success. Shelby was never left with the sole responsibility for the three students; however, to achieve this appropriate balance of roles and responsibilities involved negotiation and skillful communication, led by the teacher.

Use an action-oriented format to shape the communication agenda

One successful and practical tool for communicating about the students and the classroom support in a proactive way was a “starter sentence” format to shape the agenda, allowing the teaching team an opportunity to track the bi-weekly progress with students. Some examples included:

“Katelyn continues to ...”

“The one thing that I would like Sam to do that most learners in my class are doing ...”

“Increasingly, Noah communicates ...”

“We are working toward...”

“One change I need to make in working with Noah is...”

“Katelyn merits special recognition for her efforts/achievement in...”

“One challenge to working in the classroom is ...”

“One thing I would like to do more of ...”

“One thing I would like to do less of ...”

An action-oriented format kept the focus on what had been accomplished and on next steps to be tackled. Also it provided opportunities to troubleshoot areas of difficulties that frequently can arise among teachers and teacher assistants. Administrators showed support for the team by providing some release time for meetings focused on developing ‘responsive curriculum’. Such a focus and an action-oriented agenda made it more likely that discussions resulted in action plans centered on pragmatic student outcomes.

Conclusion

Learning how to facilitate the work of the teacher assistant gets little attention in teacher preparation or in-service programs; yet knowing how to work with a TA, and how to guide a TA’s interactions with students in the classroom, may be critical to the success of students with LD. By identifying some of the ways by which a teacher can facilitate or inhibit the work that a teacher assistant can accomplish, the case study of Shelby offers a valuable insider perspective. Teacher assistants need guidance in how to interact with students, as well as encouragement and support to build a trusting relationship (French & Pickett, 1977). Since teachers hold the position of power and leadership in the classroom, it is incumbent upon them to take responsibility for shaping the classroom environment so that the teacher assistants can effectively carry out their jobs. Teachers can do this by monitoring their own discourse and interaction, by ensuring that the teacher assistants’ efforts are dispatched to the students with disabilities in discreet and respectful ways, by differentiating instruction and adopting universal design, and by regularly reviewing their action plans. Finally, we need to continually ask teacher assistants for their perspectives on how to best facilitate their important roles in the school system.

Five ways to facilitate a teacher assistant’s work

1. Focus on relationship-building with students: Nudge instead of nag.
2. Monitor the amount of teacher-talk affording opportunities for mini-lessons and more student talk.
3. Apply the basics of differentiation and universal design.
4. Negotiate classroom management roles and share responsibilities for students.
5. Use an action-oriented format to shape the communication agenda.

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