

Do Educational Assistants Benefit Students in the Classroom?

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Next to the teacher, a teacher support aide is considered by many to be an important resource in the classroom. Recently a colleague commented on the number of teacher assistants who are available to teachers in the public school system. It does appear larger budgets make it possible for public schools to afford teacher assistants. Many of our Adventist schools accept students with a broad range of special challenges and could benefit from this kind of assistance. But are teaching assistants beneficial for the students in the classroom?

Increasing class sizes has heightened the classroom teacher's responsibility in many school jurisdictions across Canada. In addition to meeting the needs of mainstream students, teachers are now, more than ever, required to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of both gifted and challenged students. This increased responsibility is a cause of concern for many educators. There is a real fear that student's academic reading levels will decline. Low student academic reading achievement, as a result of increased classroom sizes, will certainly have negative future implications. The fear is grounded in the reality that students leaving the school system will be unprepared to meet the demands of both post-secondary studies and the job market.

In 2005, the Manitoba Department of education proclaimed Bill 13 as a positive step that entrenches the province's commitment to provide all students with the opportunity to participate fully in the academic and social life of their schools. The aim of the legislation reflects the province's philosophy of making Manitoba schools more inclusive. The bill places an onus on schools to ensure that they meet the needs of all students—including those classified as special needs and gifted.

Despite a large body of research on the factors affecting student achievement, there is little agreement on whether class size and educational spending do in fact improve average students test scores (Ludwig and Bassi, 1999). Ludwig and Bassi go on to conclude that even when additional school expenditures raise students test scores, it is not sufficient to conclude that increasing education budgets or expenditures on specific teaching, supports good public policy (1999).

There is much debate in the literature on whether the presence of teacher support personnel has a positive effect on student's academic achievement. In a longitudinal experiment called Project Star, students were randomly assigned to small classes and average-sized classes without an aide. The researchers also observed and collected data from regular-sized classes with a full-time teacher's aide. The results gathered from the project indicate that teacher aides have little if any positive effect on students' academic achievement (Jeremy Finn et al, 2001). While academic achievement may have been the benchmark for proving whether or not teacher assistants are beneficial, Richard Wollfson and Emma Truswell urge that the best way to demonstrate the effectiveness of teacher assistants is to examine the changes in student attitudes, rather than relying on statistical measures of change in attainments (2005). The common theme in the research is the need for policies and research to assist schools in selecting and training teacher aides to perform more effectively.

It is my observation that some classroom teachers do not know how to make effective use of an aide. In fact, I have heard complaints that “they only get in the way.” The quality of an educational program depends on the quality of those who provide direct services to the students. I am impressed by the three recommendations given by Nancy French for improving the responsibilities of teacher support aides: (1) assure appropriate supervision of teacher aides by trained teachers, (2) provide appropriate training to teacher aides, and (3) clearly define the role and responsibilities of teacher’s assistants.

What are the implications for Seventh-day Adventist schools? The fact remains that our teachers are the single most important resource available for our students. The effectiveness of our teachers has a significant bearing on the overall growth and development of our students. Teacher assistants can have a crucial role to play in our classrooms. But maximum student benefits are realized when teacher assistants are well trained, properly supervised and given well-defined roles and responsibilities.

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