



## Research Article

# Clarity of the Educational Assistant Role: A Look toward Policy and Practices

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### Abstract

As an Educational Assistant (EA) working in an urban Ontario School Board, I aim to explore my ontological and epistemological views on policy implications that impact my work. Over the past two decades, I have witnessed the evolution of the EA role from providing academic and one-to-one developmental support to managing multiple student caseloads with the most challenging school needs. While the demands have increased, my concern is that the voice of EAs needs to keep pace with the changes in the role. From my position through a reflexive self-study and literature review, I examined my frontline experience, detailing anonymous work experiences related to the language within the Ontario R.R.O. 1990, Reg. 306: Special Education Programs and Services using the theoretical lens of critical policy theory. A literature review found data specific to Special Education and the marginal frontline employee voice. The critical policy theory framework supported an in-depth examination of the relationship between meaning making within policy and practice outcomes. The self-study method allowed engagement with my experiences and research findings to advocate for authentic policy for a changing role.

**Keywords:** Educational Assistant; Special Education Policy; Self-Study; Critical Policy Theory; EA Barriers

### Research Inquiry Overview

As I set the context for my research on Educational Assistant (EA) system-level change, I want to share a bit about my positioning and background. I am one of many EAs who have worked in Ontario in a large urban centre for the past 20 years. My story is one of passion and frustration for the future state of this field. Timing is crucial surrounding pedagogical issues at all system levels. As such, there has been growing organizational burnout with the lack of policy improvements [1]. My paper is situated on field experiences with past students, families, and educational teams. My goal is to explore ways system-level improvements can bring the role of the EA a step closer to meeting legislative language around inclusion. This will help create a more equitable and inclusive learning space for diverse learners in the school's fabric. There is a cloud of uncertainty hanging over the work I do. Since new inclusive legislation passed, there have been progressive

yet small steps toward what inclusion is and could become [2]. As a result, system improvements and research for EAs have become shadowed by the depths of literature and research surrounding other education levels, such as administrators and teachers [3]. Therefore, I saw a gap to contribute further research into the field I love, to lay a sustainable foundation for the coming generations of EAs and to build a sustainable path forward for the demands of the job. Exploring and understanding organizational friction was necessary for me. Reflexive self-inquiry allowed me to consider my practice and seek improvements. To begin, I went back to consider a pivotal career moment that sparked my curiosity for EA clarity and voice. Several years ago, I embarked on a three-year program offered to members at any system level who demonstrate leadership. Although I felt excited, I quickly realized EAs did not have a clear model to implement system-level knowledge to effectively impact the organization. With EA staffing shortages, workplace injuries, retention challenges, and attraction issues, my concerns grew that the lack of role clarity felt unsustainable [2]. What I understood to be important skills for my students

was not indeed teacher or administrator training, but rather field development specific to special education from a multi-disciplinary team. The problem with inclusive and equitable language is that it takes decisive steps to move it from entry point words to meaningful actions and experiences for all [4]. My day-to-day job involves inclusive decisions for classrooms, students, and staff in terms of programming ideas. I raise accountability concerns when I am involved with student program knowledge before creating an Independent Educational Plan (IEP). I am concerned when I am the one sitting alongside exceptional students, sharing pictures as learning evidence alongside summative notes of evaluation for teachers to utilize for report time and new IEP term goals. At report card times, my voice, in the most indirect way, is what families read from the work and input I have given. The student support services I provide are grey areas outside the policy. There is importance in understanding what will unlock system-level silence in a dynamically changing field. Currently my leadership is informal. For instance, when a novice EA seeks to support, I am happy to offer suggestions that may explore a student's needs for a program with steps to scaffold success and reduce the behaviour. Leadership opportunities for system-level voices and leaders are nonexistent. Instead, the policy aligns with the voice of teachers and administrators in special education, where many EAs build intel. The real takeaway I gained from that leadership development was that my problem of practice was born. I turned my eye toward the Ontario R.R.O, 1990, Reg 306 Special Education Programs and Services language to consider in my discussion. The voice of an EA is not a primary voice in education, but EAs are often a key stakeholder in programming and student services. In addition, I explored barriers to cultivating EA voice in the education field to foster an equitable and inclusive education system for all students.

## Research Questions

The complex demands of an EA supporting students continues to grow. EAs remain within a misleading paraprofessional framework with growing professional standards and responsibilities without a governing body. EAs develop strong relationships with students in the close proximity of work and, as such, gain knowledge for IEP programming goals. With increased student instruction and the absence of policy to require the EA voice and clear service parameters, confusion is created amongst system-level practices. The policy maintains that principals are to attend team Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) meetings with an additional supervisor and third member while involving the student and their family [5]. In policy language, other relevant educators' input could be 'encouraged' at a principal's discretion toward the IEP annual progress [5]. Policy language directs accountability, and there should be a shared effort to support inclusive legislation at all system levels and find that accountability in future policy. The EA voice is silent without changes to match the workplace realities. As such, experiencing

this problem has led me to explore my main research question: Where is the EA voice in special education policies? My three sub-questions include the following:

S1: With principals and teachers central in the school-inclusive legislature, how does that look in practice?

S2: What measures will improve an equitable voice for the EA role?

S3: What steps are needed to build equitable and inclusive practice for EAs?

## Theoretical Framework

Walsh et al. (2020) [6] considered five-core components to develop sustainable and transformative learning and social justice goals as objectives for a new curriculum. The components were loving, seeing, healing, envisioning, and acting based on knowing (epistemology), being (ontology) and doing (ethics). These areas spoke to the qualitative approach that could allow me to construct my practice experiences as an EA and how, following a literature review, I could incorporate new knowledge back into the layers of my ontological premise for future field improvements. When framing my self-study, I looked at the impacts of silenced voices under those five core components. In doing so, I explored organizations' hierarchical voices. It is here where an examination of praxis disconnection found themes that impact an entire educational framework with the movement of inclusive policy and lack of clear role expectations to uphold inclusive practice [7]. Throughout my program at Yorkville University, I have considered my praxis with a deeper focus on diversity, equity, and leadership topics. As such, the learning process has opened my mind to my research questions and how I view inequitable organizational voice. My research looks through a social justice lens with an interest revolving around organizational cohesion. It was here that I reflected on the impactful student work that relates to policy language yet is absent in accountable actions. Critical policy theory supported my research around the missing educational assistant voice and found barriers that exist in practice [8]. My ontological view explored authenticity in role value and equity in policy positioning for EAs. A membership made up of a large majority of women with lower income status is situated in a role that grows exponentially without the added compensation and valued voice to match evolving work realities [9]. Using ontological layering through a constructivist approach enabled me to take work knowledge and build meaning making, both subjective and objective [10]. My research within a qualitative approach allowed through a self-inquiry, a reflection of experiences surrounding my problem of practice. My research positionality needed to be situated in theory to bring forth the most meaningful explorations for possible social change in policy and practice [11]. Critical policy and critical pedagogy theories are the theoretical framework that guided my literature search, challenged

my thinking, and validated areas within my workplace reflections. A literature review following a constructivist paradigm, allowed my experiences to be a reflexive resource to visit improved policy and system practices. Emerging themes occurred at three levels strengthening the breadth and depth of organizational concerns at the micro-level, mezzo level, and macro-level [12]. In addition, I found limitations within the literature search on Ontario exclusively, so I included other provinces within Canada and global countries with inclusive policy. The constructivist theory centers on the work of Piaget, who saw learning as an evolving construction of meaning influenced by individuals, context, and experience, which seeks to construct improved learning outcomes from these experiences and one understands. Here, through self-study, I explored my understanding and examined how my experiences have shaped my ontological development to strive for future improved practices for EAs that reflect the services for students. Critical pedagogy considers research surrounding power imbalances, especially of marginalized populations, allowing the social justice lens to frame my research. Furthermore, this theoretical lens allowed me to explore through the constructivist aspect how societal changes could come about with advocacy when understanding of self and other experiences disrupt traditional norms.

### **Research Methodology**

My major academic report used a qualitative research approach, which considered my praxis reflexively. Doing so allowed me to view policy language and how it relates to my experience alongside a research perspective to understand system impacts. I explored a literature search within a critical paradigm to view data on the experience of an EA and those who engage with policy and system levels to support student needs [13]. This approach aligned with my epistemology guiding principles to incorporate knowing, being, and doing while using critical policy and pedagogy to support the scope of future change [6]. The literature search focused on what barriers exist at various system levels to uphold inclusion as a precursor toward new organizational modelling. My self-study offered my experiences that considered barriers to role confusion, the devalued paraprofessional, and its increased role demands. To ensure multiple views, I considered ethical steps to conduct a literature search with aligning and opposing views around my problem for depth to provide multiple perspectives [13]. Bringing reflexivity into my paper was necessary to understand personal frustrations and consider what literature has found around my role. Although my lens of experiences can point to concerns at a micro level, I also found literature findings that weaved micro-level issues that impacted mezzo and macro-organizational system levels around the inequitable EA voices in policy and practice. Agostinelli (2017) [14] found that “the self must be considered in its interconnected entirety” (p. 3). I was interested in this idea of the self as interconnected in a paper where I viewed my professional problem to explore how that could ripple

at all organizational levels [7]. As Nash and Bradley (2012) [15] suggest, “at the deepest levels of human experience, our voices will overlap with others, even though, on the surface, each of us may look, and behave, very differently” (p. 9). From my ontological premises, special education policy and work practices should overlap with all relevant voices to advocate for special needs students. From my epistemological view, not all organizational voices working closely with special needs students are equitable. As such, there remains a top hierarchal organizational leadership voice [16].

### **Methods**

Through critical policy and pedagogy framework, I explored my research questions through a comprehensive literature search. This method allowed me to engage my experiences with research findings. Traditional policy analysis views policymaking as linear as the means to fix or solve a problem [2]. Critical policy analysis situates and unpacks the complexity of the problem, in this case, policy language, with consideration of contexts [2]. This is valuable when I searched the literature to be mindful of the complexity of how I interpret findings as there could be varying contextual features embedded. Self-study was a space to allow for reflection and I used this paper as a brave space to challenge and reconceptualize policy to practice [17]. The advantage of self-study allowed me to speak to a field that I believe requires advocacy. It helped me unpack my experiences through guiding epistemological components [6] to converse with the literature findings around voices in education [18]. Furthermore, self-study allowed me to speak from my heart as an EA in a fast-changing field, which allows reflective practice. Critical framework enabled me to draw from my position within my role to advantageously serve as an advocate for future practice [7]. Furthermore, utilizing a critical paradigm offered me a space to be both subjective and objective while collecting data on policy to support the significance at a social level within EA roles [7].

### **Data Collection**

For the literature search, considering my research questions that relate to the evolving landscape and role shifts for educational assistants, I employed the most recent articles focusing on EAs who support students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings. I needed to be open to literature outside Ontario as my search findings were too narrow and limited to one province. Articles ranged from 2001 to 2022, with most articles within the past five years. I sought provincial and Canadian reports for contextual reasons and compared them globally to schools offering inclusive classrooms with the diversity and equity policy language like my setting. The Yorkville University library was an excellent resource tool for my literature search. My search led me to articles and e-books under databases such as ProQuest, EBSCO, SAGE, eBooks, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. In addition, I

utilized keywords to guide the data, including inclusive classroom, special education, educational assistant, paraprofessional, equity, policy in special education, critical policy, and critical pedagogy in special education.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were required to help mitigate bias throughout my self-study. First, I needed to position myself and provide background while keeping organizations and names anonymous. Positionality, reflexivity, and the meaning of knowledge were essential in my data collection to relate my thinking concerning the greater system level. To further reduce bias, I turned to recent peer-reviewed literature to invite different perspectives to build an understanding [13]. Finally, I practiced a reflexive journal and note-taking [13] to build reflexive inquiry around literature findings. The journaling process was a roadmap to account for the findings and emerging themes and guided my self-study to reflect on my experiences reflexively.

### **Literature Review**

There is a stark increase in demand for inclusive practice, and the number of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) receiving special education services in public schools has increased by more than 480% since 2000 [19]. Since the right for all students to have inclusive and equitable learning has passed at that same time, the role of a paraprofessional EA shifted from clerical and academic student support to instructing and leading with complex behaviours and student needs [20]. There may be various job responsibilities between school districts, but most are employed and specialize in supporting students with disabilities [20]. While inclusive language is in place to help all students toward equitable space, it has system challenges.

### **Educator Role Change**

The rate of role change has led to system-level confusion, which does not support a sustainable future. Educational assistants are experiencing increasing burnout and feelings of devaluation with the increase in role demands [21]. With policy and practice focused on supportive, inclusive classrooms without clear guidelines of who does what, the blurry professional versus paraprofessional roles lead to findings of devalued and overworked paraprofessionals [21]. In addition, increased role confusion around legislated pieces such as Individual Education Plan progress and student team meetings become unethical in policy that does not match shifts in work realities [22]. With the role changing towards multiple student caseloads and further student instruction versus assistance, many EAs are looking for a career change and exploring higher education to follow this identity change [23]. There is growing educational research to explore the worker's disconnection with policy, meaning matching actual

work realities. Traditional approaches to educational policy place value on the practical way to understand and approach practices [24]. Critical policy theory in special education compares and evaluates who is heard in organizations and considers behaviours that oppress others' voices [25]. Giangreco (2013) [26] collected data for a study done in Vermont which showed percentages of three-quarters of the special education instruction was taught by an EA and less than a quarter by special education teachers or other professionals, such as speech-language pathologists. There are more EAs than special education teachers; 70% of EAs plan instruction and make decisions without a professional following [26]. Findings pointed out that students with disability and complex learning profiles do not receive as much teacher or professional accountability, which calls into question equity for students of ability and disability [26].

### **Educator Preparedness**

Most children with ASD receive education in public schools [19]. While there are proven and highly effective behaviour practice strategies for ASD, classroom instruction surveys indicate that many teachers and paraprofessionals do not feel prepared to instruct students with ASD and other disabilities effectively [19]. One area of concern is pyramidal training, where teachers train EAs. Although the idea is for teachers to gain training and then train EAs, these 'train-the-trainer' approaches could be more effective [19]. While EAs provide frontline work with limited training, accountability is a deep concern. Families turn to policies as guides for children with a disability only to view a teacher educator as the primary voice, even though data finds that EAs make up one-third of the educational workforce [9]. There is growing evidence of exceptional student needs moving further away from classroom teacher support and learning toward work under an EA [27]. With this shift in workload, without shifts in policy and practice recognition, there is a sense of underappreciation [22]. EAs reported feeling undervalued, leading to perceived and unfavorable relationships with teachers [22]. Instead, EAs have training and expertise as system-level educators with increased inclusive responsibility but maintained a marginalized voice in education [9]. Special education educators experience role inequalities and increased expectations of low pay levels, which stem from neoliberalism and marginalize this educational sector [8]. Inclusion coaches found that in Ontario classrooms, the responsibility of programming for students with disabilities fell under the EA rather than the classroom teacher leading to questions on the lack of modelling for inclusive EAs [22]. Areas of concern centred upon worker respect, system-level confusion, and role creeping mostly from low-income earning women in education [23]. In addition, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have experienced a 29% increase in assistant roles and only a 12% rise in teaching job postings.



## **Policy and Teacher Voice**

Teachers are essential in the classroom and have a broad background of skillsets. However, with policy and programming to meet the most exceptional needs in a general education classroom, it is challenging to meet inclusive legislation effectively. There is an increase in educational assistant jobs supporting close inclusive measures, yet language remains unheard of in policy [23]. In addition, EAs have experienced “role stretch” and “role creep,” noting that this adds to the problem of role definition with the increased work demand [28]. EA’s support for the education of students with disabilities has increased in several countries, including Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Malta, the United Kingdom, and the United States, all linked to the success of inclusive education in these places [26]. One problem with the increased volume of EA workload is that teachers have little instructional training to guide students with disabilities to effectively support EAs and exceptional needs students. Nevertheless, EAs who only have brief training often are the closest to carrying out instruction for students with disabilities [26]. As such, teacher assistants have taken over most of the role with students’ frontline classroom support with disabilities such as autism, intellectual disabilities, and behaviour disorders [29].

## **The EA Voice**

Exploring policy language connected to organizational behavior begins with understanding who has the dominant voice [21]. The dominant voice in education policy holds top-tier organizational voices, despite the EAs taking on the dominant hand within this sector of student work leading to a lack of shared knowledge to lead to meaningful practice [30,31]. What remains is special education policy reflective of a time before increasing and complex needs that are linear and top-down [32]. Policy language must keep up with students’ complex needs to provide growing knowledge and prepare educators to deliver effective services [33]. Policy language in education continues to empower teachers and allow for local control of schools, which poses a disconnection between reality and policy [28]. The impact of this disconnection between policy words and EA job reality is that it restricts the autonomous practice of workers to take control of their professionalism [28]. In addition, EAs have increasingly been the educators’ making decisions and programming for those with complex needs; however, role confusion may be due to varying EA skill sets resulting in the problem of inconsistent policy and practice [34]. EAs often work closest to exceptional student needs with ASD. However, there are EA reports that point to inadequate preparation for this role’s complex needs [35]. Many skills EAs have gained have been through experiences shaping their professional background. By identifying paraprofessional perceptions and considering the diverse characteristics (e.g., training, experience, setting), organizations can better determine

how to construct effective and individualized professional development with students identified with ASD [35].

## **Differing Attitudes around Inclusive Practice**

In recent years, educational assistants (EAs) have played an integral role in special education. They often work with the most challenging and vulnerable student population. To prepare EAs, some of Ontario’s publicly funded colleges have developed pre-service training programs. In Ontario, the number of students receiving special education services from kindergarten to Grade 12 is increasing, and policy trends advocate for inclusion. Literature has suggested that educators’ attitudes toward inclusion may impact how inclusive strategies turn into classroom practice [3]. Despite the importance that EAs bring to the special education team, only a few studies have investigated varying EA attitudes toward inclusion. Freer (2018) investigated four pre-service EAs’ attitudes toward educational inclusion through semi-structured interviews. Participants held positive attitudes toward inclusion but expressed concerns about implementation. Despite the importance that EAs bring to the special education team, only a few studies have investigated varying EA attitudes toward inclusion. Findings linked the severity of students’ exceptionality negatively correlated to the best interest of that student’s needs in an inclusive classroom setting [3]. The concern was of inclusion of students who have complex needs. Only some students will find a general education class to meet their needs, as policy would suggest. A recommendation for the Ontario Ministry of Education is to develop documentation on the best practices for including students with high needs to support adoptions of inclusion to include those with severe and complex needs [3]. A separate Norwegian study also examined school policy for students with intellectual disabilities and found limited opportunities to choose functional life skills in an inclusive setting. Limiting life skills in general education classrooms circled an ethical issue in practice when programming needs for students were not accessible in every class and curriculum [36]. In Ontario, education is committed to inclusion for all and including ‘at-risk’ children [37]. Special education has historical roots of learning from a past stripping away student rights of inclusive classroom settings [37]. All specialists, teachers, principals with their school board, the Ontario Ministry of Education, and parents are to identify, by following the special categories by the ministry for children who experience difficulties [37]. Therefore, a student with exceptional needs requires the identification process to protect the equality rights of students who, in the past, were stripped of those rights in mainstream classroom settings [37].

## **Practice Barriers**

A study examined what barriers and positive factors exist surrounding inclusive educational settings. Positive factors for inclusion were: (a) appropriate support for inclusion, (b) creating

an inviting environment, and (c) training regarding disability [3]. Barriers to classroom inclusion were: (a) poor attitudes toward disability, (b) an imbalance of power between teachers and EAs, and (c) limited or brief training in evidence-based practice strategies [3]. In another survey of EAs around training and skills, there were 768 surveys completed and researchers found a solid need to individualize professional development based on the Board/School needs [35]. Training for EAs has evidence for improved programming and practices, which lead to positive student outcomes [35]. Across 23 studies, EA training improved the implementation of practices specific to ASD students, such as discrete trial training, pivotal response training, prompting, and function-based intervention [35]. Despite evidence-based practices for ASD, teachers are not always prepared for paraprofessional training responsibilities that paraprofessionals deliver as instruction. Not surprisingly, paraprofessional EAs report preparedness as a strong barrier in their roles. Alongside, teachers are only sometimes confident in their ability to train and provide adequate support for an EA paraprofessional [35].

### **Hiring Practices of EAs**

Inclusive education is said to be a global aim of education research, policy, and practice toward student meaningful and equitable learning [38]. UNESCO defines inclusive education as every learner matters and matters equally [38]. In Ontario, EA hiring practices that work closest to students with complex diagnoses and needs have loosened hiring restrictions. Shockingly, even just a high school diploma completion has been all that is required to meet the demand. All school boards across the province must develop a hiring policy for graduates that reflects the special education field [38] as EAs are instructing more with growing student needs within the area of disability. Currently, teachers remain at the system level that receives more in-service training (e.g., additional qualification courses). In addition, EAs need to receive more support for their expanding role in special education. Finally, evidence points to EA-specific additional qualification courses relating to behavioural or ASD specialists that could balance out training opportunities for EAs [3].

### **Self-Study: Constructing Meaningful Connections to Research**

As an EA over the past two decades, I have felt the effects of limited field research surrounding my system-level role [3]. Policymakers have maintained a top-down organizational voice that limits knowledge sharing between system levels [24]. I have seen workload changes from academic and one-to-one developmental support toward multiple exceptional student caseloads. An EA is not to program or instruct students. Despite that policy fact, my experiences have led me to go outside policy out of a need to often prevent student behaviours from escalating

in the absence of inadequate programming requirements. My role is hourly, not salary, unlike many other system staff. Despite that detail, I am often at home drafting or changing schedules for students and myself to follow based on changing needs. My work schedule then becomes my supply notes that I have created, and a supply EA should follow if I am away. A teacher and administrator are required to provide an EA with direction. However, the guidance EAs need is from leadership with a student perspective around exceptional needs, which often comes from the lens of an EA rather than a teacher or administrative background [28]. My field knowledge was built around past student needs alongside specialists in speech and language, occupational therapy, and applied behaviour analysis to inform evidence-based practices rather than from teacher guidance. I have concerns with policy language and practice under the Ontario R.R.O., 1990, Reg 306 Special Education Programs and Services [5]. One aspect I have often considered is my pay scale for the growing direct support work I have undergone. I reflect now that I am one of many women in lower economic class roles who continue to maintain a policy that practices under a power imbalance [9]. Power imbalances have not only been observed from vast pay scale to work disparity but also through the absence of my system-level voice in IEP and IPRC areas specific to direct student work under the Ontario R.R. O, 1990, Reg 306 Special Education Programs and Service language [5]. The misleading imbalance of power is maintained in policy rather than a reflection of educational trends within special education [35].

### **Research Findings**

My main research question asked, where is the EA voice in special education policies? Education policy around special education in inclusive settings maintains principals and teachers around IEP and IPRC meetings that relate to upholding students with special needs programming goals. EAs maintain a support service and are there to implement teachers' programming and instruction for students [5]. Both my experience and literature findings needed to be more consistent with policy language. Underprepared system levels were a strong theme around inclusive policy for special education of exceptional needs students. However, my preparedness has only increased with training from specialists in the multi-disciplinary field that offer PD training rather than training gained through principals and teachers. My first sub-question explored principals and teachers central in the school-inclusive legislature and how that looks in practice. My story of practice as an EA began in 2001. I looked to the principal and teacher for guiding students but quickly realized that I was offered the role of an EA without background and training and then given a great deal of autonomy [28]. I looked to experienced EAs in my field to guide me when faced with intense student behaviours. My qualifications were in the social sciences and child development without any special courses or background other

than hands-on experiences in the developmental disability field. I had just completed my Bachelor's degree in Sociology and was taking my Early Childhood Education. In the early 2000s, I often supported academic and social communication skills or one-to-one with a developmental diagnosis. From 2010 onward, I have seen a steady increase in my role which has not kept up with policy language [22]. Caseloads have changed to an increase of support with severe mental health and a sharp increase in ASD student caseloads [35]. I have gained training from specialists such as SLP and OTs who follow a core clinical model for special education to build my skillsets. Therefore, my learning is not from teachers but from other multi-disciplinary fields of knowledge. Many students I have supported had a comorbid diagnosis and some undiagnosed exceptional needs where I put knowledge from field specialists to use. I have had a great amount of autonomy to shape students' school days to reduce behaviour and meet their needs. Often ideas that have been developed early are input for teachers to support writing IEP goals and summative discussions around annual IEP and IPRC input. I do this, yet policy has not kept up to grow with my experience [5]. In Ontario, school principals are responsible for ensuring the delivery of programs and services for students with special education needs [39]. One finding that arrived from the COVID-19 pandemic occurred with the disrupted traditional delivery of these supports, and principals needed to find ways to support students with exceptional learning needs, and teacher attitudes questioned why they would begin to support students whom they never worked closely with in regular class [39]. Top school leaders acknowledge they need help with the amount of information they are dealing with from school systems and government ministries [39]. The top-down organization structure, alongside growing student challenges and new policy, has made inclusive legislative responsibilities unstable, unpredictable, and underprepared to meet the complexities of diverse needs [40]. I share the strong consensus that every student's education and learning deserve equity, as acknowledged by UNESCO (2017). Yet, in policy and practice, there remains an acknowledgement that upholding this consensus, especially with complex exceptionalities, is not easy with current field directives for every student [2]. For instance, a student arriving without diagnosis or immediate access to resources and services may have an EA required in the interim for immediate risk to student safety, such as the case of flight risk – e.g., leaving the classroom and school property. While principals oversee the entire school's needs, they are troubleshooting rather than knowledge providers in areas specific to whom I support. I have found more significant student dysregulation when students are not programmed appropriately. From my background around emotional dysregulation with similar student profiles, I pull from my knowledge bank. That may sometimes work, though I acknowledge that due to the vast aspect of the EA role, skillset requirements will vary between schools and even boards [35]; therefore, having modelling and a

clear path for EAs may be advantageous. My second sub-question examined what measures will improve an equitable voice for the EA role. Research and my experiences share the findings of educator role stretch and inadequate system-level training. As an EA, I have observed a growing trend for only the most challenging students with behavioral needs to gain EA support. The risks to safe work and injuries have increased with this trend. In these instances, programming, instruction, and summative notes from my experience often fall upon my role as an EA despite the policy. What is required is more data around safe work and the changing behavioral needs; however, current research at the EA system level is scarce [8]. Finally, I examined in my third sub-question what steps are needed to build equitable and inclusive practice for EAs? As a working staff in general education classrooms, I model inclusive practice from the position of advocacy for the direct support of my student. Often, I consider that a student cannot always speak on behalf of what is right and fair, and opportunities to join with peers in activities create meaningfulness across the levels surrounding that student. Moreover, attitudes around inclusion in general education classrooms are a grey area. Findings favored inclusion at every system level; however, evidence that segregated classrooms were more meaningful for severe needs as the gap between functional life skills in mainstream classrooms was difficult to achieve [36]. While Canada's provinces are committed to upholding inclusive education policy for all students, it has not gone as seamlessly and always felt as inclusive and meaningful as it should [41]. As I have come to understand, EAs, once offering school services such as clerical and help with academics, are now often instructing and leading with complex behaviours and student needs. In addition, inclusive policy language adhered to hiring more assistants to 'ensure' inclusive classroom supports for students identified with exceptionalities, yet teachers find themselves coming up short [2]. Another area that could close the gap towards equitable practice for EAs is opening meaningful leadership pathways to access growing field knowledge. A theme around limited and inequitable system training between teacher educators and EAs was evident throughout the research. Even though further training opportunities exist for teachers, there was no evidence relating that the training resulted in changing attitudes of teacher preparedness for supporting and instructing students with severe exceptionalities alongside their mainstream students. From my experience, I have had little in the way of EA or EA-style leadership training or workshops where I can learn from someone within my system staff. For example, opening EA leadership to inviting their voice and experiences could reduce the power imbalance of teachers and lead to inviting the perspective of EA around their fieldwork [8].

## Discussion

To me, bottom-up knowledge is where EA field experiences build within special education. Without EAs found accountable

within policy, it dismisses valuable perspectives that may be hidden within special education to unlock the demands felt throughout education to uphold the inclusive policy. The voice that I am accustomed to is from how I have always known organizations to be, which is with top-down voices and knowledge keepers. Educational stakeholders like principals and teachers are knowledge keepers from my top-down view who are there to provide programming goals, evaluate, and guide students' needs to uphold legislative policy language. While education remains top-down and linear in policy and practice [25], role stretch where EAs straddle the instruction and programming roles are rapid realities in organizations without their leadership and voice heard [41]. Every level is stretched, yet the workload is not shared to ensure policy language is viewed from all levels within. 'Humbled' is a word I often use when I refer to my field. Even after twenty-plus years of student experience, I take cautious steps with every new student and understand that I do not live their learning experience. Though it makes sense that field training arrives from evidence-based strategies, the literature points out that it can vary depending on the school district and the needs and experiences of EAs. As I come from a large Ontario urban centre, I feel fortunate to have gained a broad background of strategies, yet I am not sure that smaller cities and towns have the same access. Even so, that is one part of training, and I feel that mentorship and collaboration times within teams increasing could complement this sharing of knowledge. What stands out with bottom-up knowledge in several research articles is that there is reliance on paraprofessionals to support students at risk or with disabilities, yet teachers still wear a professional hat to uphold the training for EAs [42]. EAs have been referred to as 'inclusion ambassadors' that strive for classroom teaching, modelling, strategizing, and programming that could bridge inclusive legislature into classroom reality [8]. My experience has observed that teachers on special assignments (TOSA) are roles to collaborate with educators [5]. I feel that creating this similar role for experienced EAs could have a few advantages based on emerging research themes. Doing so opens the gate for people at my system-level to grow their qualifications and become more prepared with training and, as evidence points out, there is a growing distance between the role of a teacher supporting the most complex and exceptional students [2]. Creating a new pathway of training and new role qualifications could be a steppingstone for attraction, retention, and all issues currently within my system level in need of role clarity. Inclusive education policy states that "classroom teachers are responsible for instructing all students. Teaching and interventions are expected to happen most often in a common learning environment, such as the classroom. Classroom teachers cannot do this alone" (Province of Nova Scotia 2019b, p. 3). An increase in teacher responsibility was to ensure more educator collaboration. Many teachers' programming for students with special education needs meant meeting with a resource teacher. However, the resource teacher too has seen role shifts with

the inclusive legislature to move them further away from direct student support and is taking on teacher support in many cases [41]. Limited findings explored the benefits of having a governing body for the EA role, with findings around unclear role confusion. For example, occupational licensing would ensure that workers maintained consistent skillsets and standardized educational levels to uphold the quality of service [43]. Adding professional license requirements may require further research to consider the potential gains and risks associated with regulation. Wage increases have the potential to follow for any occupation that undergoes licensing [44]. In the social service field, licensing could create a demand and market for competition in education and away from other needed social sectors. On the same notion, this could occur outside of education, and retention issues could arise if licensing for education within social field work becomes more specialized [43]. One benefit to all systems, students, and families is an assurance of minimum standards of competence and integrity that come with becoming a licensed practitioner [44].

### Significance of Study

An inclusive education policy is a necessary piece that highlights that students who have a diagnosis can gain access to support services, but that alone does not ensure inclusive practice [45]. Unfortunately, I have come to find that hiring practices for EAs come without adequate training and a trend to lower the hiring qualifications to fill the staffing shortages [2]. Surprisingly, an area shared at all systems levels was findings of unpreparedness to uphold complex needs under inclusive language. Knowing this, steps toward improving training could shift from teachers training EAs to more effective evidence-based training for all system levels [19]. Research at the EA system level remains shadowed in comparison to all other education system levels [8]. As such, the practice has remained unclear around role shift, role confusion, and devalued system level of EAs, and system levels all experienced varying attitudes toward classroom inclusion [8]. To address concerns around worker retention, feelings of value and accountability for authentic voice accounting for upholding inclusive legislation, I needed to examine where the power imbalance rests between policy and how that presents in practice. Throughout my self-study, I have challenged my thinking around literature findings and present experiences. I found connections and limitations within this reflection. A part of me slipped into emerging themes around the EA role confusion where the role overlaps teacher accountability around programming, instruction, scheduling, communication, evaluating and summary for reports. In those times, I connected to the findings around feelings of isolation from policy language and that sense of devaluation [23]. I felt excluded when I did not feel part of the organizational picture. I fall short of building inclusion when the system is not coordinated with policy. Even if it was, there is context and features with students and needs that will change and evolve. Best evidence-



based practice, equity, voice, and inclusion will help [28]. More advocacy and research to awaken and explore are needed.

## Conclusion

Throughout my self-study, I challenged my thinking to envision my problem of practice to consider measures and be aware of barriers that inhibit the future of the field I love as an EA. It is through literature findings and workplace experiences that I seek change. I found connections and limitations within this reflection. A part of me slipped into emerging themes within the EA role confusion where the role overlaps teacher accountability centering on programming, instruction, scheduling, communication, evaluating and summary for reports. In those times, I connected to the findings around feelings of isolation from policy language and that sense of devaluation [21]. I felt excluded when I did not feel part of the whole policy picture. I fall short of building inclusion for my students when the system is not coordinated with policy. My paper would not exist without equal passion and frustration for growing concerns and a better understanding of improved educational practices. Authentic and meaningful practice should mirror policy to challenge and improve inclusive and equitable experiences. I share with the consensus of UNESCO (2017) that all students deserve equitable and meaningful learning experiences with their peers [2]. My hope for students and educators is that research and advocacy can build new understandings toward policy and practice connectedness to share in the responsibility of inclusive and equitable learning at all system levels. All levels have shared unique features from where they are situated, and whether at the micro, mezzo, or macro level, and sharing that broad or narrow view for all to hear will be part of an inclusive and equitable classroom story [42, 46-50].

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