

Inclusion Assistants in General Education Settings – A Model for In-service Training

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Abstract The inclusion assistant (IA) is a fairly new position in the education system and is the outcome of current ideological and legislative steps to include students with special needs into the general educational system. The IA's function is to personally accompany students with severe disabilities – autism, developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, and mental disorders – in the general class. The IA helps the student cope with the classwork and social environment, relieving the teacher of the inclusive classroom of the extra duties. Unfortunately, studies carried out in the United States, Europe, and Israel have indicated that IAs lack adequate training: they are not required to undergo any pre-service training and are frequently not offered any in-service training or guidance. This paper reviews the roles and characteristics of this challenging position and offers a model of an easy-to-implement, in-service, professional development program with minimal time demands that can serve to increase the IA's skills.

Keywords Inclusion Teaching Assistant, Inclusion, Special Educational Needs Students, TA Training in the Educational System

1. Introduction

The influence of legislative procedures on the developing role of the inclusion assistant in special education

The growing need for the inclusion assistant (IA) in the general educational system is a result of legislative developments in special education in the Western world.

In recent decades and in various countries, special-education legislation has been enacted to regulate the rights of students with special educational needs (SEN) and to ensure that they receive support in all areas required so as to allow them to maximize their potential within normative settings. As a result of these legislative procedures, SEN students are gradually being integrated into the general educational system. In the first stage, children with learning disabilities – a condition that is relatively common in the

population – were integrated into regular classrooms, and their inclusion was not considered too problematic. However, next in the ongoing and slow process came the inclusion of students with more complex disabilities such as autism, emotional disorders, physical disabilities, mild-to-moderate limited intellectual developmental, and more. The more complex the student's disability, the more that his inclusion into the general system requires a support system and greater accommodation, up to the point where some students cannot be integrated without the aid of a personal IA for each [1-5].

In every country where special-education legislation has been passed, there has been an increase in the number of students integrated into the regular school system. This has led to a greater need to bolster the teaching force in the various educational settings, and a parallel rise in the number of IAs, who are also known as “assistant teachers” or “teaching assistants.”

In Israel, the Law of Special Education was first passed in 1988. Within its framework, the rights of SEN students were regulated, and they became eligible to receive educational services, instruction, and therapy according to their needs. The law grants special-education services to “every person from the age of three to twenty-one years who, as a result of a developmental deficiency, whether physical, intellectual, emotional, or behavioral, is limited in his or her adaptive behavior, and requires special education” [6,7]. In addition, “the goal of special education is to promote the skills and ability of the exceptional child, to correct and improve his physical, intellectual, emotional or behavioral functions; and to provide knowledge, skills, and routines that will allow the child to attain societally-accepted behavioral patterns, with a goal to facilitating the individual's inclusion into society and the workforce” [8].

In 2002, Amendment no. 7 – the “Inclusion Law” – was approved and article D-1 was added to the Law of Special Education. This change endorsed integrating SEN children into the general educational setting, pursuant to an extension in the number of teaching hours and the amount of special services provided [9-11].

Implementation of this legislation saw a rise in the overall number of students integrated, with an especially sharp

increase in the number of children with complex learning disabilities. According to the Dorner Committee report [12], 128,000 children with special needs studied in the education system in 2007. Of them, 42% (53,760) were in special-education institutions and the others (58%, 74,240) were included in the general educational system. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics [13], 203,000 SEN students studied in the Israeli school system in the 2011-2012 academic year, of which 64.5% studied in the general education system (and only 35.5% in a special-education setting, mostly in small classes within the general schools). These statistics suggest that the number of SEN students within the normative framework in the general education system is soaring.

In all the countries in which laws have been passed encouraging the inclusion of SEN children into the regular school system, similar data has been exhibited. This sharp rise in the number of SEN students in the general educational system is, naturally, accompanied by a dramatic increase in the number of IAs employed by the education system [14-16].

Policies of the Ministry of Education in the matter of allocating assistance

The solution provided by the State regarding IA services is reflected in The Director General Circulars. Documents issued by the Knesset Research and Information Center [17, 18] that address the issue of assistance for SEN children in the educational system, make mention of two key Director General Circulars that reflect the current policy of the Ministry of Education in everything pertaining to the employment of IAs as a means of implementing the Inclusion Law. The first refers to assistants employed within special education programs; the second refers to the allocation of IAs in the inclusion program in the general education setting.

According to the Director General Circulars, a student's eligibility to receive the assistance of an IA in an inclusive learning program is determined by the type of the student's disability and his/her level of function. The disabilities for which IA support can be approved include cerebral palsy, severe physical disabilities, blindness, autism, moderate-level intellectual development disabilities, emotional disorders, and rare conditions and syndromes that require constant supervision (subject to presentation of appropriate documents signed by the relevant professional bodies, as detailed in the memorandum). The memoranda emphasize that IA support is only part of the overall support system offered to the student, and is assigned only when the student's functioning level demands it.

From these executive memoranda, it can be understood that IAs are meant to oversee the inclusion of students with complex disabilities into the system and also to assist the implementation of the particular individual program designed for that student. The complex demands of the IA's role, as implied by these executive memoranda and corroborated by the nature of the actual position, suggest that IAs should have unique abilities, thorough training, and

highly professional skills. In fact, though, most IAs employed at the time of this writing have not undergone any specialized training for the position. Below, we would like to show how this deficiency can be addressed and overcome by utilizing an easily applied method to train IAs for their complex role.

2. The IA's Role: Characteristics and Difficulties

Classroom assistants may have a number of appellations, depending on the framework in which they work and the job descriptions of their position: pedagogic assistants, inclusion assistants, therapy assistants, reinforcing assistant, and so forth. The multitudes of titles, along with the increasing functions they fill, have led to confusion when trying to define the role of an individual assistant in a particular setting.

2.1. Current Theories

Various studies [19-21] have examined how the concept of inclusion is expressed in practice. To this end, the researchers correlated the teacher's status, quality of teaching, training, and activities they present in class with the success of their students' inclusion. Until recently, studies have focused mainly on the teachers in the inclusive classroom, with almost no mention of the secondary figure in the class – the IA – who is, in fact, actively dealing with the student's inclusion and is directly responsible for its success. Even studies that do – to some extent – address the role of the assistant in such settings, frequently gather together all the assistants in the classroom, including those who are assigned to help in the general teaching process – especially in kindergartens – and not specifically those assigned to assisting the inclusive SEN children.

Studies by both Cook and Takala [22, 23], which examined the amount of cooperation and support between the teacher and the assistant, indicated many areas of activity that assistants are involved in within and without the classroom besides that of instruction – transportation, recess, and so forth – and the crucial importance of the assistant as a professional adjunct to the teacher is fully appreciated and accepted. These studies have specified the importance of defining a clear role for both the teacher and the assistant, providing a clear division of responsibilities while exploiting each one's professional expertise. This will allow them to work as a functional team, to obtain the utmost satisfaction from their roles, and – most importantly – to allow the most effective level of inclusion for the student.

In the 2009-2010 academic year, a study [24] was carried out on behalf of the National Authority for Evaluating Education to characterize the role of the IA in the case of SEN students. The study found that IAs were more involved in areas of learning, behavior, and social function, and less involved in organization or coordinating between the various

specialists.

An exploratory study carried out in Israel [25] endeavored to determine the current state of IAs, the goal being to ascertain their effectiveness. To this purpose, a limited number of factors were examined such as the decision-making processes of the institutional committees that determined eligibility for receiving IA assistance, the IAs' methods of working, and the perceptions of the various role players regarding IAs. The study surveyed a broad spectrum of functionaries and stakeholders in the field: directors of regional support centers, chairs of inclusion committees, educators, primary kindergarten teachers, parents, students, and, of course, the IAs.

The results of the study showed that there are some areas where teachers and IAs see the IA's role eye-to-eye. This is especially true regarding practical work with the student, which is similar to that of the traditional teaching assistant. However, significant differences were found between teachers and IAs regarding educational issues: here, the teachers pointed to major gaps between the requirements of the role and actual performance, and indicated deficiencies in the IAs' theoretical knowledge and awareness of the professional tools available. This is in contrast to the IAs, who usually expressed satisfaction regarding their level of professionalism.

2.2. The Complex Role of the IA

Special education includes a wide spectrum of activity: from settings entirely isolated from mainstream education (schools and kindergartens for special education) through special education classes combined within a general educational setting, and culminating where SEN students are included in the general classes and kindergartens. In all of these settings, assistants are present. While it is clear that personnel who are well trained in the field of special education are required in those settings that are separated from the general ones, as a result of the application of the Law of Special Education and the current preference for integrating SEN students into the general educational setting, the complexity of the situation has increased significantly. Accordingly, mainstream schools are in no less need than special-education institutions for IAs who are skilled experts in their field and who can efficiently cope with the needs and challenges entailed with inclusive students.

Studies carried out in the field indicate that IAs must provide solutions over a wide range of areas: educational, behavioral, emotional, social, and physical. The IA interacts with the student in all these areas based on an individual program designed especially for that student, and must address not only the student's individual development, but also (and perhaps with even more emphasis) the manner in which the student is integrated into the atmosphere of the school: inter-personal communication ability with peers, the interface with the educational system in the school, and so on [26, 27].

Another challenge to the IA's role involves her relationship with the classroom teacher. The IA must work in tight cooperation with the teacher, who is supposed to direct and instruct her on one hand, but also provide one-half of a coordinated team for the sake of the student. The ability to work in a team is especially important for the IA, who must also ensure appropriate coordination with the other role players in the child's care: parents, therapists, advisors, counsellors, and the school administration.

2.3. The Absence of Professional Training

In the United States, the IA is defined as a member of the para-professional teaching staff [28-31]. The inception of the "No Child Left Behind" act in the US in 2002 requires each state to construct a system of training and professional guidance for every para-professional worker who works with SEN students. Some of this training is given by professional teachers in the inclusive classrooms.

In Israel, the qualifications that an individual must have to be hired as an IA are 12 years of education, an orientation to special education, and sensitivity towards SEN students. There is no stipulation whatsoever for training in the field. This means that IAs in Israel do not have to receive any relevant training or education.

Director General Circular 4371/10(a) [32], stipulates only one condition for accepting a new worker in the role of a teacher's assistant (TA): the completion of 12 years of education. This circular refers to issues of the TA's training: "The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior and local government, will prepare a professional development program for assistants in areas that are relevant to their work. Such programs will confer on the TA a diploma confirming completion of the relevant courses, and allow them to receive remuneration as a result of their participation, in accordance with the criteria and procedures of the local administration." Nonetheless, this suggestion does not require the TA to present any certificate with respect to such professional training prior to employment. The emphasis is on receiving in-service training, in accordance to the accepted procedures in the local government.

The issue of preparing IAs for their role had come up in the Ministry of Education previously, in 2009, as part of the deliberations concerning the various issues for SEN students. Minister of Education (at the time) Prof. Yuli Tamir convened a public committee to examine the special education setting in Israel. The committee was headed by former Supreme Court judge, Dalia Dorner. The report presented to the Knesset included the following references to the role and training of teaching assistants:

- a) Personal assistants and inclusion assistants. The committee decided not to interfere with the Ministry of Education's policy, which recommended reducing the support of personal assistants and gradually increasing that of IAs [33]. Nevertheless, the committee recommended

that this policy be revised periodically based on new studies and field experience.

- b) State supervision. The Ministry of Education should oversee the budget it allocates to the local authorities to ascertain that it is indeed only being utilized for the purpose of acquiring assistants.
- c) Training. The Ministry of Education should ensure training of assistants by way of a 400-hour certification program.

Study programs of 120-300 hours to qualify IAs are, in fact, offered by a number of higher-education institutes in Israel.¹ These courses are intended for those already working as a TA or IA in the field of special education and who have not undergone any formal training in the subject. The courses are open, of course, to anyone wishing to prepare themselves for future employment in this challenging and interesting field. For most of the courses, admission criteria include a personal interview and 12 years of education, or practical experience in the field.

Even though such courses exist, it is important to recognize that completing such a program is not a condition of acceptance for the positions in question. Furthermore, these courses do not cover the full range of special-needs conditions and thus do not offer comprehensive training for the IA.

The inclusion of SEN students into general classrooms also changed the role of the teacher, who now also has the responsibility to support and guide the IA in that particular class. However, studies in the US, such as by Appl [34] have shown that novice teachers do not know how to supervise or monitor mature staff members who are ostensibly in their charge, and are incapable of properly guiding the IAs assigned to their classroom, since they themselves have not received any appropriate training to this end during their course of studies. A study done by Avisar and colleagues [35] in Israel regarding policy makers' perceptions with respect to the inclusion of SEN students into the general educational system indicated that during their pedagogical training, general education teachers are not taught how to meet the needs of inclusive students, let alone instruct IAs on how to support these students.

Without adequate training, the teacher changes from a director and leader who is supposed to be managing the pedagogic process into someone who must rely on the IA's experience and ability to cope with the academic, emotional, and social welfare of the inclusive student. Thus, the boundaries of the role of the teacher and assistant become blurred.

The result of the aforesaid is that personnel who must deal with students in very complex situations lack any relevant professional training. The IA are not required, and therefore

usually do not meet, any professional requirements, and even if they have attended some training program, it is only partial training at best. Furthermore, the regular classroom teachers have also not undergone any qualification to meet the challenge of the inclusive classroom or to be able to assist the IA. Thus, the IAs, on a daily basis, are forced to cope unaided with any difficulties that arise from the complexities of integrating the SEN student, difficulties that are exacerbated because they are not properly informed of the correct way to deal with the needs of their particular students.

3. A Proposal for a Basic in-Service Training Program to Qualify IAs for the Educational System

In the previous section, we described the problematic situation with respect to the training (or lack thereof) of IAs in Israel. In addition, one must consider the paltry compensation offered to IAs: minimum wage and no tenure. This reality demands address by the government and urgent change, especially in light of the continuing increase in the number of SEN students requiring the services of an IA.

In light of the complexity of the IA's role and the difficulties involved in its implementation (as detailed above), it is unfeasible to rely on untrained personnel and to simply assume that their personal qualities or professional intuition will suffice for the job. It is imperative that a comprehensive and relevant standard of training be implemented.

The need to train qualified IAs and to offer timely professional development is critical and urgent, and it is impractical to wait for government-level decisions or decisions based on economic factors, even though these decisions need to be taken. Immediate training is crucial, especially since IAs work in the general educational setting where the educational staff lack any special-education qualifications or training, and thus cannot give the IA any benefit of knowledge or skills. (This is in contrast to TAs working in institutes devoted to special education, where other members of the team have been trained in special education and can offer professional support).

For these reasons, I propose introducing a basic model for training IAs that can be implemented immediately and concurrently with her duties in the class. Content-wise, the model is based on one presently offered in the United States whose efficacy has been quantitatively proven. While it cannot serve as a substitute for the type of fundamental, comprehensive change that will affect all the aspects and complexities of the role as stated above, it can, as an intermediate step, offer certain solutions to the existing situation, and can serve to significantly improve the knowledge, skills, and functioning of IAs.

3.1. Three-Stage Model for Training IAs

In 2003, Cremin, Thomas and Vincett [36] tested the

¹ Courses offered in this field include the following: Shalom College in Beer Sheva – 180 academic hours in 36 sessions for about 5 months; Beit Izzy Shapira, Raanana – 120-hour training program in 30 sessions, once a week; College of Management Academic Studies – 200-hour (academic) study track spanning nine months, meetings twice a week; ORT Israel – 200-hour course lasting about eight months.

efficiency of a professional development model for IAs that placed emphasis on cooperation with the classroom teacher. The model was based on three stages:

- a) Preliminary planning: Room management. Early planning of the organization of the classroom space, both physically and from an educational standpoint based on the fact that two responsible adult figures are operating together at any particular moment. This requires the teacher and the IA to define the essential roles in the class based on the number of students at each of the different levels, and to define their goals and objectives for cooperative work.
- b) Division of roles: Zoning. Specifying a clear division of the IA's and teacher's responsibilities to the students, including defining the precise physical space assigned to each; using sound judgement to divide the students into heterogeneous groups, while taking into account the size of the groups; stipulating who will work with students who are having difficulty with the material and who will work with the others; deciding who will be responsible for bringing the relevant equipment and teaching materials; and determining who will deal with other parties who enter the classroom; and more.
- c) Staff feedback: Reflective team work. Reflective feedback regarding the extent of cooperation between the teacher and IA, their professional performance, and their feelings. This requires about 15 minutes a week when the two will compare goals and actual accomplishments. The discussion will make use of the various reflective discussion strategies: attentiveness, rules of conversation, empathy, non-judgmental language, assertiveness, effective question-asking (critical inquiry), positive feedback, problem solving, evaluation, and critical review procedures.

The results of the study confirmed that this training model significantly improved the quality of both the teacher's and IA's performance, and led to more effective inclusion of SEN students.

3.2. Two-Layer Training Model for In-Service Training

The model presented herewith is based on the three-stage model presented above, using the three aspects mentioned: preliminary organization of classroom space, clear definition of the teacher's and IA's roles regarding the SEN students and other students, and reflective discussion. In this way, the IA can obtain valuable information regarding her work with the students and her interaction with the teacher. The stages are carried out at three separate time periods: before, during, and after work.

The model can be considered to have two layers. The first is an explicit, more visible one and involves formal aspects of training and the direct acquisition of knowledge and experience on the part of the IA. The second, no less important, layer is implicit and takes advantage of the reality in which the IA already exists: currently working in the educational field and having already acquired some professional experience. It creates learning opportunities during many of the daily informal or professional interactions based on the assumption that every encounter or every action presents an occasion to acquire knowledge and improve professional behavior. This will be effected through the appointment of a mediator who will assist the IA in obtaining the most benefit from the interactions.

Below are the main elements of the training model with respect to key issues studied, method of implementing knowledge, the various stages, and the personnel responsible.

3.3. Teaching Content and Teaching Methods

The training includes both theoretical and practical aspects of the work of the IA, with emphasis on the fact that the inclusion takes part in the general education system. The practical aspects are accentuated since the IA is already part of the functional staff, and theoretical aspects need to be related to the work at hand.

The following lists a selection of topics covered in the program:

- definition of the various disabilities and their characteristics;
- manifestation of disabilities in class, during recess, academically, socially, and behaviorally;
- defining the role divisions between IA and teacher;
- tools that can be used with multi-professional staff;
- defining the goals of the IA and the teacher with respect to the SEN student, parents, and the inter-professional staff in the school;
- adapting teaching methods and reaching the inclusion goals.

The information will be delivered using a variety of methods, all within the confines of the school:

- accompanying the IA and observing her performance in class and at recess;
- theoretical analysis of incidents;
- dialogs with professionals in the school during formal meetings, in classes, or during breaks;
- guidance by a special-education professional, the classroom teacher, or an instructor from a regional support center.

In addition, SEN students will be involved in the decision-making process and defining goals for their personalized programs.

3.4. The Training Process

Explicit layer: This layer involves a series of meetings between the IA and the mentor. The meetings take place at specific times and require the cooperation of other professional stakeholders. During the meetings, the mentor will advise the IA of any specific content required for her position. These individual meetings are divided into four types:

a) Introductory meetings: Before the beginning of the academic year, and before meeting the student and the parents, two meetings will take place, one theoretical and one practical. Their goal is to prepare the IA for her first encounter with the student, which should follow a specific outline as prepared by the IA with the mentor during these meetings. The emphasis will be on possible pitfalls and challenges, and will include how the IA should approach getting acquainted with the student, understanding the characteristics of the disability, building a relationship of mutual trust, coping with emotional or behavioral manifestations indicating difficulties of inclusion, becoming accustomed to transitions, familiarity with new people, and understanding procedures and rules.

b) Weekly instruction: The school will allocate for each IA one hour weekly throughout the academic year during which the IA will attend meetings to advance her training. This hour may be a time when the student can be left to cope independently, or when the student is with a professional teacher who knows how to work with SEN students. During this hour, the IAs will be given – either individually or as a group – support and instruction regarding theoretical perspectives of the position. The following topics will be studied: building a professional team, strengthening the IA-student relationship, empowering the student's capability and independence, empowering the IA's capability and independence. Emphasis will be placed on how theoretical knowledge can be utilized when working with the students. The IAs will have the opportunity to raise any issues that have come up, and utilize these issues within the group to provide real-time learning experience. The classroom teachers will also participate in some of the meetings, giving them the opportunity to discuss teacher-IA cooperation issues and acquire tools for implementing the ongoing teacher-IA reflective dialog. These meetings will allow both parties to take decisions regarding division of responsibilities and their role definitions.

In parallel, there will be an ongoing dialogue between the staff and the student throughout the year in specifically scheduled sessions. The goal is to increase the students' awareness of any issues regarding their challenges and abilities, and to encourage them to listen to their inner selves and define their needs. The students become a partner in defining their educational goals by learning to appreciate and understand their abilities, thus promoting their right to obtain appropriate solutions for their needs.

c) Scheduled inter-professional staff meetings: Throughout the academic year, the IA will be invited to all

the inter-professional meetings regarding her charge. The professional staff will take it upon themselves to ensure that the IA is made aware of the procedures taking place during the meetings, will provide – as needed – explanations regarding the concepts and issues raised, and will share their considerations, recommendations, and decisions regarding the IA's student. These meetings are part of the implicit training layer, as will be explained later.

d) Summary sessions: At the close of the academic year, two meetings will take place to summarize and review the IA's work and define goals for the coming year.

e) Implicit layer: The guiding principle of implicit training is that every situation can be used as an opportunity for learning, and that every procedure carried out by a member of the professional staff can be used to improve the knowledge of the IA.

One member of the academic staff will be assigned to act as a mentor for each IA. This person will be responsible for making sure that the IA is aware of and participates in the series of scheduled meetings over the year (as described above). Even more so, the mentor will ensure that the IA's experience will lead to increased knowledge and improved performance. In addition, this staff member will provide an address to which the IA can turn if required.

During the inter-professional meetings, the staff may use professional terminology with which the IA is not familiar. It is imperative, therefore, that the mentor facilitate the introduction of the necessary vocabulary to the IA, and demonstrate how the terms relate to the concepts and situations being discussed: "This happened because ..."; "We also spoke about this characteristic of the child when we talked about ..."; "This incident also happened when ..."; "Do you remember/recognize this situation?"; "What did we once say regarding this ... that might help us here?" Such facilitation can take place during the meeting or after it; its goal is to provide the IA valuable knowledge and new skills for her work. In addition, it will allow her to become a relevant and significant component of the team.

During the weekly training meetings (explicit layer), the IA should become aware of the link between the theoretical information learnt and the information acquired in the inter-professional meetings. With the help of the mentor, the IA will be able to use classroom experience to validate the theoretical knowledge.

3.5. Who Provides the Training?

The training model offered here relies on the educational staff: special-education personnel in the school – the inclusion teachers, counsellors, or representatives of the regional support centers – all of whom possess relevant knowledge and can serve to educate the IA.

Of course, not every member of the staff has the capacity to be an effective mentor. However, it is possible to improve the ability of staff members to facilitate the passage of knowledge or to point out the link between a theoretical concept and putting that theory into practice. In order to

enhance the ability of the professional staff to guide IAs, their professional development programs should be altered to offer a component that deals with instructing IAs.

3.6. Other Considerations

It is important to be aware of factors that may hinder the implementation or progress of such a program. The goal is for the program to take place entirely during working hours, however it is possible that additional meetings or some time investment outside of teaching hours will be required (from the IA or other personnel), which may be objected to as these extra hours are not included as part of the job defined by the Ministry of Education or local government. This may lead to difficulty in recruiting the appropriate individuals on a voluntary basis. Therefore, it may be necessary to invest some funding to implement the program.

As part of the *Ofek Hadash* (New Horizons) program,² special-education teaching staff in schools and regional support centers undergoes annual training and professional development courses on the topic of integrating populations with complex needs. If it can be decided that all – or even just one – such courses will address the teaching model described in this paper and offer a program along the lines of “mentoring inclusion assistants in the general education classroom,” the system itself can be used to help solve the problems within it, and, hopefully, some significant changes in the quality of the work of the IA in Israel can be observed within minimal time.

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2 “Ofek Hadash” is a reform program initiated by Prof. Yuli Tamir. Over the course of six years, all of the principals and teachers in the elementary and junior high schools will undergo modifications of their employment terms and salary, the aim being to improve the status of the teacher, attract higher-quality teaching staff, and promote the goals of the teaching program. This reform program is based on the outline of the “Principles of Reform” from May 16, 2007.

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