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Project Independence: Training Educational Assistants to Work with Students with Disabilities in General Education Settings

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Abstract

Project Independence (PI) is a 3-year professional learning intervention for Education Assistants (EAs) to learn and deploy evidence based practices (EBPs) that provide support to students with disabilities (SWD) in general education settings. Created in a school division in northwestern Alberta, PI was introduced to address perceived minimal EA preparation, variable student successes, and low levels of SWD independence after high school. Initially the project included strategies for students with autism, but later the scope broadened to include all SWD, modeled on the practice guidelines of the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice (NCAEP). During the first year, a district coach team completed needs assessments, developed a theory-driven implementation plan, and chose AFIRM modules to guide EBP instruction. In Years 2 and 3, PI provided a structured professional development plan for EAs at a participation test site and then expanded to four other sites. Training sessions occurred every six weeks focusing on the use of EBPs, data collection, and collaborative consultation with classroom teachers. Assessment feedback, conversation, and observation of staff practice hint at a greater EA confidence, declining incidents of student behavior, and greater use of inclusive, student focused strategies. Although there were challenges involving time, technology, and data, the project was able to show that targeted PD for EAs could improve outcomes for SWDs and school culture. Results highlight the importance of ongoing training, joint responsibility, and administrative commitment. The project moves forward in Years 4 and 5 by scaling implementation, enhancing communication, and reinforcing the infrastructure for fidelity, data use, and long-term sustainability.

Keywords: educational assistants, inclusive education, evidence-based practices, professional development, student independence, paraprofessional training

1. Introduction

In our study, inclusive education refers to the educational conditions that allow students with disabilities (SWD) to attend the regular classroom with nondisabled peers. The term describes strategies, accommodations, and services that take individual learner needs into account and facilitate access to academic and social opportunities within school settings. The term references educational practice instead of political or ideological interpretations. Inclusion in the regular education classroom, can improve social skills, academic achievement and behavior (Agran et al., 2020). Non-disabled peers gain by developing appreciation for differences, enhancing academic outcomes, and practicing leadership through peer teaching (Molina-Roldán et al., 2021). However, effective inclusion is challenging due to teacher shortages, insufficient training, limited resources, and a lack of understanding on how to apply research (Agran et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2023; Mockovciak et al., 2023). As a result, SWD may not reach their full potential, and stakeholders question inclusion's effectiveness (Donath et al., 2023; Malhotra, 2024).

Study Rationale

Approximately 16% (1.3 billion) of the global population has some form of disability, while in the US, nearly 27% (67 million) have at least one disability (Varadaraj et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2011). In Canada, about (8 million) 27% of people aged 15 and older live with a disability (Statistics Canada, 2023). Unfortunately, many SWD in K-8 struggle to develop the academic and behavioral skills needed for independence later in life. The students are less likely to

graduate and often lack the skills required for independent living (Mazzotti et al., 2021). Students with disabilities in Alberta often fail to achieve their full academic potential but their specific achievement and graduation rates are not reported. The absence of disaggregated reporting makes evaluating progress and rectifying disparities challenging. SWD are more likely to face poverty, unemployment, lower wages, and mental health issues, including depression, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts (Morris et al., 2018). In Western Canada, adults with disabilities are 3.5 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation (McConnell et al., 2015). The rates of mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, are disproportionately high in people with disabilities in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022). Barriers like stigma, marked limitations to services, and lengthy wait times keep people from accessing care. The unemployment rate is notably high among SWD. Research indicates that 42% of individuals within this group are identified as having work potential, highlighting the importance of targeted support (Statistics Canada, 2024). Social isolation and lack of a sense of purpose develop when SWD do not develop independence skills in school, which can lead to further deficits in health (Morris et al., 2018). Students who experience academic and social-emotional success in K-8 environments are more likely to develop the skills needed to thrive in high school and beyond. Self-assured, goal-oriented, team-oriented students are also more likely to find jobs and build healthy relationships. Developing these skills can reduce the need for post-school support, lessening the financial burden on society while improving their quality of life (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

Context

Inclusive education in Canada has made significant progress over the past two decades; however, practices vary widely across the country due to the decentralized nature of educational governance. Each province and territory holds jurisdiction over its own education system, resulting in a diverse range of models - segregated special education to fully inclusive classrooms (Bunch, 2015). Alberta maintains a dual system, offering inclusive and segregated options. The province's educational landscape provides parents with choices, including public and separate schools, charter schools, private institutions, home education, and online learning (Government of Alberta, 2025*a*). Within this array, private schools specifically catering to neurodiverse students are available; however, the majority of autistic students are educated in publicly funded, traditional classrooms with varying levels of support. Unlike the US, which mandates uniform special education services under federal legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Canada lacks a national framework. Access to and quality of special education services are inconsistent across provinces and territories. Canada's approach is shaped by provincial legislation, funding structures, and advocacy efforts, leading to notable disparities in policy implementation and service delivery (Mann et al., 2022).

This study takes place in a northwestern school district in Alberta, Canada, which serves 6,200 students (preK-12) in 36 schools, supported by 375 teachers and 600 non-teaching staff (Government of Alberta, 2025*b*). Since 1993, Alberta has adopted a full inclusion model, and the goal is to integrate all students into regular classrooms with necessary support (Alberta Teacher Association, 2014). Alberta, the fourth-largest province, part of Western Canada, had a population of 4.8 million in 2023 and spent $9.3 billion on education for 802,336 students in 2023-24 (Government of Alberta, 2025d). Of these students, 15% (118,790) were identified as having special education needs (Government of Alberta, 2025*c*; Statistics Canada, 2025).

Educational Assistant Support

While the goal of full inclusion in education is to benefit all learners, SWD may struggle to meet academic and social expectations in general education settings (Agran et al., 2020). Many educators and Educational Assistants (EAs) receive minimal training to support SWD effectively. Teacher training is different from what is typical in the US where a teacher may earn a degree and certification in special education that helps them to be better prepared to teach students with disabilities. In Canada, general education teachers (K-6) typically take only one university course on special or inclusive education, and EAs often lack specialized training in disabilities or evidence-based practices (EBPs). Educational Assistants may be uninformed about SWDs, their Individualized Program Plan (IPP) goals and lack guidance on specific interventions and EBPs (Bennett et al., 2021). Teachers with large, diverse classes generally focus on meeting the curricular needs of the majority in an effort to meet curriculum milestones which can potentially leave SWD at a disadvantage if they lack prerequisite skills or cognitive and social abilities to engage meaningfully. Although differentiated instruction is expected, it is not consistently implemented and can result in student disengagement, disruptive behaviors, and slowed progress (Donath et al., 2023; Malhotra, 2024). Managing students with severe needs is challenging, and EAs may be expected to individualize instruction without training, potentially leading to ineffective strategies. Alberta ALIS reports there are currently 15,500 EAs earning a median wage of $18-31 hour (MacLeod & Emes, 2019). Applicants possess a high school diploma or equivalent, with prior experience in a classroom setting considered an asset. The role requires availability for meetings or responsibilities outside of regular school hours, as well as ability to work effectively within a collaborative team. The one-year postsecondary education requirement is often waived, particularly in rural areas, where the candidate pool is limited (Government of Alberta, 2024). Specialized training in

education is not a requirement and many EAs are parents or grandparents with limited knowledge of instructional strategies. Ideally, classroom teachers lead programming and guide EAs, but this collaboration is often minimal due to a lack of time to collaborate or limited knowledge of the teacher on how to support students or EAs. The teacher may expect the EA to observe what is going on in the class in real time and do whatever they can think of to help the student complete assigned tasks. As a result, SWD may receive most of their support from the least-trained personnel, leading to frustration, overdependence, isolation, and behavioral issues (Robert, 2023). EAs need training to more effectively address the needs of SWD in their care (Babin, 2020).

2. Purpose of the Study

The lack of understanding about EBPs and how to properly record and analyze data for informed decision-making is a major challenge for teachers and EAs. Project Independence (PI) was created to train and support teachers and EAs working with SWD in inclusive settings. Initially focused on autistic students, the project goal was to help EAs implement EBPs for autism as recommended by the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice (NCAEP). The NCAEP offers free online training on 28 evidence-based practices through the Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Models (AFIRM). The modules provide specific guidance on the research support, implementation tools and data collection (Steinbrenner et al., 2020). The project was later expanded to support all SWD in inclusive settings. What was initially designed to be a response to increased concern over the limited independent functioning abilities of autistic students in K-8 inclusive settings has now become a multi-year program designated project: Project Independence. The goal is to build a sound foundation with long-term independence and academic attainment. PI focuses on educating EAs to recognize and apply EBPs that address the student needs. Providing knowledge and support to staff so they can make data-driven decisions will help to promote achievement, self-advocacy, and independence. In a three-year time frame, PI was designed to strategically draw upon accessible resources to more effectively serve SWD (Donath et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2021).

Study Design

This multi-year project was rooted in real-world practice and combined both qualitative and quantitative methods. By using an implementation science framework, the PI team had a clear, theory-based roadmap to guide our work. At the same time, the action research approach kept things practical, collaborative, and flexible—making sure the process fit the unique needs of each setting. This blend allowed us to create an implementation that was grounded in solid evidence but also responsive to the day-to-day realities, helping build a sense of ownership and adaptability among everyone involved, and paving the way for lasting change. Throughout the project, the PI team aimed to identify key challenges and encourage ongoing reflection. We followed an iterative cycle, constantly gathering feedback, planning together, and providing hands-on coaching tailored to each site.

Project Independence Year One

At the onset of PI, the school division had nine District Education Coaches who assisted staff in supporting the needs of all students. Once a month, the team met in person to review student plans, discuss projects, and address challenges. The meetings were led by the superintendent of inclusive education. PI emerged in response to statistics regarding poor outcomes for SWD after leaving high school, including low levels of independence, limited employment opportunities, and overall poor quality of life. At a monthly meeting of Education Coaches, the first author raised the concerns, questioning whether new strategies were needed. The group agreed on the importance of prioritizing these issues. Consequently, four coaches formed a subcommittee, the PI team, to address these needs. Members of the team shared communication and observation results from their schools. Teachers had expressed frustration about the lack of support for SWD.

Initial Needs Assessment

Subsequent data collection confirmed the necessity and value of PI. The team found that many teachers reported underutilizing EA support due to a lack of guidance on how to better involve them in direct and indirect student support. EAs expressed concerns about being overly relied upon for planning while feeling their efforts had limited impact on academic and behavior for SWD. The PI team held monthly full-day meetings at the district office to ensure regular in-person collaboration to generate long- and short-term plans and goals of PI. Key collaborators included a district principal overseeing inclusive education, a district psychologist, and a district speech pathologist. In the early stages of Year One, the PI team developed pre-project surveys for teachers and EAs with the intent to gather data on current student autonomy, teacher involvement, EA direction, and other related questions that would help to inform the project's initiation and direction. These surveys were developed over the span of one meeting by the PI Team, independent of any existing template or related survey. A ***Teacher Needs Assessment Survey*** for teachers on the effective use of EAs was developed and distributed. This survey was based on a 1-4 scale with 1 being lowest confidence and 4 being highest confidence. A paper copy of the ***Teacher Needs Assessment Survey*** was distributed to teachers with a 59% return rate in person to the

first author. The survey assessed teachers' collaboration with EAs and focused on utilization, confidence, and training needs. Teachers rated their confidence regarding their insights on the use of Educational Assistants in the classroom with a mean score of 3. At the next monthly meeting, the PI team created a complementary ***Educational Assistant Impact Assessment*** to assess EAs' communication, role clarity, collaboration, impact, and perceived value in supporting students. Educational Assistants rated their overall confidence on a 1-5 scale with a mean score of 1.8. The paper survey was distributed at a meeting at the start of the school year to EAs with 100% of surveys being returned. The cumulative survey results show that teachers and EAs indicated SWD were productive 58% of the time unless receiving one-on-one support. The ***Teacher Needs Assessment Survey***, along with the ***Educational Assistant Impact Assessment***, also focused on knowledge, skills, attitudes towards inclusion, EA roles, and student independence. Participation for the teacher needs assessment included 13 out of 22 teachers and 16 out of 16 EAs participated in the educational assistant impact assessment. The results highlighted the need for improved utilization of EAs to better support SWD. Among teachers, 71% expressed confidence in programming for students with EA support, but only 50% felt they had enough time to collaborate with EAs. Many teachers also voiced concerns about the underuse of EA support largely due to a lack of PD for staff on how to effectively use EAs and implement evidence-based practices for SWD. For EAs, 69% reported making a positive impact on students' academic progress, while 53% indicated a positive effect on behavioral progress. Additionally, 71% of EAs were aware of Individual Program Plans (IPPs), and 73% felt they were valuable members of the team. The survey results validated the PI team's initial goals and highlighted new priorities, such as scheduling regular monthly meetings between teachers and EAs to discuss student needs. The data was organized, reviewed in subsequent meetings, and shared with the superintendent of inclusive education, solidifying approval to proceed with PI.

Resource Selection

The PI team identified several EBPs that were scientifically supported in addressing the needs of autistic students. Notably, many of these evidence-based practices were effective for other SWD as well as those without disabilities. The team also reviewed recommendations from the NCAEP (Steinbrenner et al., 2020) as valuable training tools. After extensive research, collaboration, and discussion, the PI team selected the Autism Focused Intervention Resource Modules (AFIRM) as the core source of support and information. AFIRM was chosen because they were affordable (free), backed by research (Steinbrenner et al., 2020), easily accessible online and open to all users. AFIRM required minimal technological background or training and offered a variety of resources in the form of data collection alternatives, checklists, etc.

Site Selection

A K-8 school within Northern Alberta was selected as the test site for implementing PI. The city has a population of 64,141 with the median age being 32.8 years and a 50/50 distribution of females to males. The average household income is $113,200 with an employment rate of 65.6% and a low-income rate of 8.6%. It is a predominately white (72.4%), English speaking community (91.7%), with an indigenous population of 11.7% as well as a visible minority composition of 15.9%. The school was chosen for its central location, target population (K-8 students), and positive relationship with school staff. The student population included students with varying academic, social, and behavioral needs with a mix of rural and urban families. The school had a total enrollment of 358 students, with a gender distribution of 56.15% males (201 students) and 43.58% females (156 students). The school supported a diverse range of student needs ranging from severe to mild/moderate totaling 15.64% of the student population. The school staff included two administrators, 22 teachers, and 16 EAs. Data-Driven Decision Making was one of the prime objectives, where attention was given to making changes to plans based on constant feedback and data collection (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021). Providing relevant and appropriate training to staff was a key element in the plan to provide monthly 90-minute PD to EAs on EPBs (Steinbrenner et al., 2020). In the first year of the PI project, the focus was on building a strong foundation to better support SWDs. The goal was to strengthen staff skills and introduce practical strategies that could directly improve student outcomes. The PI team sought and received full approval from the test school's leadership and the district. The support allowed the team to schedule regular meetings to monitor progress and maintain strong collaboration. Dedicated time was set aside during the school day for delivering professional development (PD), and a system for ongoing data collection was put in place to help guide and adjust the project as it evolved. Throughout the process, the team followed Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) guidelines closely when collecting teacher feedback, ensuring methods remained professional and respectful. The project was formally introduced to the host school during the first two days of the school year. During this launch, the team shared a summary of the ***Teacher Needs Assessments Surveys*** which revealed a clear desire among educators for more support and practical tools. Monthly PD sessions were scheduled for the following school year from September through June, with December and June intentionally planned for reflection and check-ins. The check-ins were to be more informal sessions led by the first author with the two established EA groups. The responses were to be collected verbally/anecdotally. Each regular PI PD session was focused on an EBP, giving staff the opportunity to learn and apply new strategies over time. Most EBPs were planned to be presented in two parts (presented consecutively with the six weeks between) with two topics presented in one session. After each PD session, EAs would be

asked to complete a ***Post-Training Reflection Assessments*** to potentially help the team make informed adjustments. Monthly PI team meetings were used to review new data and collaboratively plan.

Year One Results

At the conclusion of Year One, the PI team successfully accomplished all its main priorities by finalizing the project's mission, vision, values and goals. The effort was supported by ongoing support from the host school and district office. Development, distribution, and analysis of pre-project data collection tools were accomplished, offering valuable insights and the information was shared with stakeholders and arrangements were made to share this information among other District Education Coaches in the fall of Year Two. Dates for Year Two's meeting were scheduled and communicated with stakeholders. PI also became a recurring agenda item at monthly Coach Team meetings. The project started generating growing interest and support among the coaching team.

Project Independence Year Two

In Year Two of PI, the participants included stakeholders who played key roles in the initiative. The school administration provided leadership in terms of scheduling, planning and EBP presentations. The on-site IET worked closely with the PI team to facilitate the implementation of project goals. The test school employed 16 EAs and all were directly involved in the PD sessions. Training of EAs was designed as a combination of formal staff development sessions and ongoing in-classroom support from the inclusive education teacher on site (Donath et al., 2023; Ledford et al., 2018). The short-term goal was to improve the quality of assessment-driven instruction and support to improve academic and behavioral success for SWD in K-8 general education. The long-term goal was to help SWDs experience more success in regular education, build skills to become more independent and to advocate for themselves and improve overall education experiences. At the same time, creating consistency in how EBPs were used across classrooms was expected to benefit all students. This led to one key phrase used often in PI: "Good for all, critical for some" which implied a potential universal impact.

Professional Development

Initially, regular monthly PD sessions, each lasting 90 minutes, were planned based on the AFIRM content. The selected EBPs were based on input from all staff. Initially, the team had planned to use the AFIRM modules directly for these sessions. EAs were given time to create an account at the onset of the session or log in if they had already done so prior to the first presentation. The approach faced challenges, including overly complex language, technology issues, and low engagement as some EAs had created the account prior to the start of the session and others had not, taking up some of the intended session time. To address these issues, the PI team immediately revised its delivery methods. User-friendly presentations in Google Slides were created by the PI team covering key ideas from the AFIRM modules and the trainings were linked to concerns noted in the data as well as personal and professional examples and stories to help illustrate the ideas and put them into further practical terms for the participants. Each EBP topic was divided into two presentations: the first focused on foundational concepts and planning, while the second covered a brief review of part one core concepts, EBP implementation, monitoring, and data collection. The revised presentations incorporated practical examples, videos, and data collection tools, ensuring markedly better engagement and comprehension while taking any demand besides active in person engagement off the adult participant. *Post-Training Reflection Assessments* were distributed following each PD session. Due to the administrative changes at the test school, adjustments were made in scheduling, delivery and methods. The PD delivery schedule was changed to six-week intervals. The administration divided the EAs into two groups and the sessions were 60 minutes. EAs received binders with the hard copy prepared keynotes pages summarizing each presentation, along with additional related resources stored digitally in Google Drive. One key points page was shared related to each specific presentation and the EAs were to bring their PI binders to each session to continue adding to them, building the EBP information over time.

District Engagement

Throughout the year, the PI team worked to raise awareness of the initiative across the district. Presentations at IET District Days introduced PI's mission, vision, values, and goals to IETs from across the district. The fall session emphasized the importance of EBPs, and promoted independence among students, showcasing the mantra "Good for All, Critical for Some." The spring session provided updates on the project's progress, with the test school principal sharing positive outcomes (e.g., increased collaboration, strategy-based language use, and a proactive problem-solving culture). PI was presented by the first author at provincial professional Education Conferences, where it received enthusiastic feedback. Educators and administrators praised the initiative as a clear and cost-effective approach to addressing long standing challenges in inclusive education. The *Teacher Needs Assessment* revealed that most teachers felt somewhat confident (86%) in communicating with EAs about student programming. However, confidence in addressing challenges with EAs varied. A major concern was the lack of time for teachers and EAs to collaborate with most participants reporting very little to little time arranged to meet. Despite teachers feeling confident in expressing student needs (71%

reporting very confident), EA utilization in classrooms was inconsistent, and the time they spent working in the classroom versus alternate locations varied. Student productivity without EA support ranged from low to moderate, and the frequency of reviewing student goals with EAs was inconsistent with 29% reporting only meeting three times within a school calendar year. EA input in student programming was generally limited, and teacher confidence in programming for EA-supported students varied. Key recommendations include structuring teacher-EA collaboration time, clarifying EA roles, and offering professional development on EBPs to maximize EA effectiveness.

3. Year Two Results

Year Two of PI marked significant progress. Adjustments to the PD delivery model and active involvement of the administration strengthened the initiative's foundation. Based on the positive anecdotal verbal feedback from all stakeholders throughout year two, the program promoted the use of EBPs and positively benefited students. After a year of strategy-focused PD, the school experienced a significant culture shift, largely due to the enhanced capacity of EAs. EAs became more confident in meetings with administrators, teachers, and parents, actively sharing strategies to incorporate EBPs. The *Post Training Reflection Assessment* indicates that 80% of the EAs reported feeling extremely motivated by the initiative. The principal also commented on the improved knowledge and vocabulary of EAs, highlighting the enhanced quality of their professional growth plans to the first author. The professional development approach resonated with EAs, inclusive education teachers, classroom teachers, and administrators. By simplifying the language and tailoring examples, staff engagement and buy-in improved significantly (Sharma & Salend, 2016). This led to purposeful, effective strategy use for addressing specific student goals, reducing office referrals, even among SWD as reported by the vice principal to the first author near the end of year two. EAs displayed a notable shift in attitude, focusing discussions on EBPs and collaborative solutions rather than frustration. The EAs verbally commented regularly and informally reported that they felt more valued, supported, and equipped with practical tools to address students' needs. Anecdotal feedback was collected from a range of educational staff, including administrators, inclusive education teachers, classroom teachers, and educational assistants (EAs). Respondents highlighted several positive aspects of the PD sessions. Many appreciated that the PD was scheduled during the school day and directly related to the students they currently supported. One administrator noted that EAs, "valued the opportunity to focus on research-based strategies and felt less pressure to 'hover' over students unnecessarily." EAs commented on the relevance of the content. One EA shared that a student who had previously struggled with reading made significant progress after a new strategy was implemented, noting, "His confidence was the most noticeable improvement, and it positively impacted all other academic areas." Additional feedback emphasized the personal and emotional impact of the content. One participant expressed deep appreciation for a session on the connection between physical activity and learning, stating that the topic was personally meaningful and had significantly benefited her own children. Another described her own professional growth, saying that the learning had been transformational and evoked a strong emotional response. Simple, practical solutions shared during the sessions were well received. For example, a class experiencing frequent disruptions related to snack time implemented a tap light system: when the light was on, snacks were permitted. This minor adjustment significantly reduced interruptions and preserved learning time. One staff member remarked, "I like hearing these ideas because you can't think of everything on your own—and 99% of the time, these strategies actually work." Following the Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA) presentation, staff shared with the coach that the session was "the best ever." One teacher reported that after learning about visual strategies, a parent created a "First/Then" board at home, mirroring the one used in the classroom, and noticed a significant improvement in their child's ability to transition between tasks. Project Independence has also strengthened the home-school connection. Coaches reported sharing reinforcer surveys with families, which led to the development of individualized, strength-based plans for students. The strategies were implemented multiple times across different schools, with parents expressing appreciation for the outcomes and the staff's ability to explain the rationale behind the EBPs. One coach described a significant milestone for a student in Grade 5 who, with consistent support, no longer required pull-ups for the first time in their life. The involvement of school psychologists during initial planning and periodically throughout implementation helped establish a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach. This aligned with trauma-informed practices and the district's broader focus on wellness (including exercise and self-regulation). Across all roles, the team of professionals involved in PI has consistently affirmed its impact, publicly and privately, recognizing its importance in advancing inclusive, research-based educational practice. A key realization for EAs was that constant proximity to students is not always best practice, as it can create dependency or behavioral issues as reported by the onsite IET. Instead, teachers and EAs used therapeutic exercises, sensory breaks, and antecedent-based interventions to address behaviors proactively. The approach improved teacher-student relationships and reduced administrative referrals (noted by the administrative team). Students increasingly utilized calming/sensory rooms to self-regulate before escalating behaviors. The mindset shift extended to teachers, who began recognizing that some students could remain engaged in class without direct EA support for short productive periods of time. The tangible binders provided to EAs proved invaluable as they served as a practical reference and were independently brought by each EA consistently to the sessions. Feedback (primarily shared verbally/informally) from post-PD evaluations was

overwhelmingly positive. EAs appreciated the sequential, high-quality sessions and valued revisiting previous topics to celebrate progress and address challenges. Having PI staff on site regularly for clarification and implementation support helped ensure some level of implementation accountability and integrity. This ongoing PD boosted EAs' job satisfaction, confidence, and efficacy, directly improving student engagement and independence. Addressing the diverse needs of multiple learners and facilitating change among adult learners proved somewhat challenging. Successful program implementation depended on several factors, including the technological proficiency of EAs, only about 30% were comfortable with technology so the team shifted quickly from relying primarily on AFIRM modules for the PD to creating new presentations. Obtaining data from the online ***Post Training Reflection Assessment*** was a challenge as many preferred to complete paper copies which were not consistently completed. In Year Three, the project goal was to build on its progress, expand its outreach, and strengthen communication with upper district administration about PI. The plan included continuing PD at the test school. The project was expanded to other district schools that expressed interest in participating.

Project Independence Year Three

In year three, the project remained centered on the original core PI team meeting monthly. The test school continued as the primary participant, supporting the project by facilitating strategy presentations for EAs, providing necessary funding, supplies, scheduling, and including updates in staff meetings. Four other schools agreed to implement PI, bringing the total to five participating schools. While the first author continued to lead sessions at the test school and one other participating school, other PI team members shared this responsibility ensuring as much consistency in delivery and support across all participating schools. The PI team continued monthly meetings to maintain consistent, in-person communication and ensure the project stayed on course. Recognizing that new initiatives in education often face mistrust or misunderstanding, the team emphasized clear messaging, proactive planning, and thorough communication. Drawing on research about the six stages of change, the team worked to address potential resistance and promote an open mindset (Castillo et al., 2018; Murphy, 2020). Initial data collected from the test school's *Teacher Needs Assessment Surveys* and *Educational Assistant Impact Assessment* in conjunction with anecdotal data from the team's interactions with school staff reinforced the need for additional support and structural changes. During the first two monthly meetings, the PI team also created a new PI summary presentation intended to share the project and results at the district central office in the late fall. The presentation was attended by all upper district administrators and superintendents and resulted in positive feedback as they acknowledged the importance of investing in EAs and the benefits for students. Throughout Year Three, the test school adhered to its six-week presentation schedule for participating EAs. PD presentations and resources were provided in digital and hard copy formats, ensuring accessibility, following the same formula as Year Two. The PI team continued to create and deliver each strategy in two parts to enhance understanding. The EBP presentations were chosen in collaboration with school staff and administration based on current student needs per participating school. Each school added PI to their individual school PD plan. PI staff delivered the introductory PI PD session to each staff of the four new schools to ensure continuity of messaging and understanding. After each EA PD, the participants were asked to complete the *Post Training Reflection Assessment*.

Year Three Results

Throughout the third year, school administration of the test school remained supportive and EAs expressed continued appreciation for their continued learning opportunities. Some EAs mentioned that other EAs they knew were eager and expressed a desire for similar PD in their schools. A visiting coach observed that the EAs at the test school seemed more content and engaged compared to her previous visit, some directly referencing PI as a source of their positivity, which suggested further success of the initiative. By the end of year three, the test school's administration observed EAs discussing data collection and supporting each other in informal unprompted hallway conversations. There were fewer requests for SWD to leave school early or go on modified schedules, and incidents requiring office referrals had decreased, as per verbal reports made by the administration team. The Superintendent of Student Services had referenced a significant decrease in OH&S reports since implementation, relating that correlation directly to PI. The four other district schools that agreed to implement PI for the first time followed the example of the test school and created six-week rotations for the session delivery. They followed the same EBPs that were offered and delivered to the test school for their initial year of implementation. The PI team delivered PD to participating schools in a similar manner. The key points pages were used in the same way. Formal and informal data collection was administered as per the test school with an alternative data collection created to accommodate anecdotal feedback.

4. Limitations

While efforts were made to maintain consistent implementation and messaging for PI, expanding to five participating schools introduced new challenges. Even slight differences in how PI was introduced and understood led to confusion that had to be addressed. For example, some slide presentations were renamed or modified without saving original versions,

resulting in difficulties accessing consistent Google Slides materials across sites. The new sites experienced similar problems with EAs accessing their email, Google Drive, and online resources so it was harder to consistently gather data. Another issue was the lack of follow-up communication between teachers and EAs after PI sessions. Teachers were inconsistently informed about what was covered during EA training, and no formal time was built into their schedules to discuss PI implementation. As a result, many of the EPBs may not have been consistently implemented with fidelity. Despite district approval to allocate time for this project, time constraints were a significant challenge. Many of the planned EBP presentations were developed during monthly meetings which required substantial time to ensure all members understood the content. Each presentation included real-life examples to engage the audience and clarify concepts, which needed to be fully explained in detail to be retold by others as secondhand experiences. The goal was to gather and analyze pre-PI school year data ***(Teacher Needs Assessment Survey*** *and* ***Educational Assistant Impact Assessment)*** as well as ***Post Training Reflection Assessment*** data and make any adjustments. Unfortunately, most EAs preferred giving verbal feedback immediately following a session which was welcomed but not consistently recorded and then forgotten. The school administration also received positive feedback from EAs and teachers during staff meetings. Again, the feedback was rarely formally documented.

5. Conclusion

Over the first three years of the project, the PI team found that providing EAs with easily understood, regular training on EBPs leads to better decision-making regarding increasing students' independence and self-advocacy skills. We saw a clear demand for professional development and research-based knowledge, which contributed to the success of PI. Addressing student dependence on adults was important; without a clear plan, patterns of overreliance would persist. Notably, increased job satisfaction and cohesion among EAs emerged as unexpected benefits. The openness to collecting more formal student data on the effectiveness of newly introduced EBPs was an unanticipated outcome in the first year. Providing EAs with data collection sheets from the AFIRM module successfully highlighted the importance of this practice, and this focus will continue in the remaining years of PI. More direct support, monitoring and feedback is needed to make this process more widespread. The school administrator's full support of the project proved key to successful implementation, scheduling, communication and facilitation of PI. Our findings can offer valuable insights for other school systems interested in better supporting SWDs in general education. One of the most important lessons has been the positive impact of training EAs to use EBPs and to make data-driven decisions. As more schools begin to implement or expand PI, it has become clear that a more efficient and attainable system for collecting data is needed. The team has proposed offering a variety of simple ways to gather feedback at the end of each professional development session. Gathering this information immediately increases the accuracy and usefulness of the data. Having a regular, formal and timely way to capture the voices of EAs in our schools today is important. EAs are a substantial resource within any school and finding ways to truly listen to their ideas and experiences, collate the data and include EAs in more meaningful ways, can positively impact all stakeholders. The team learned how important it is to bring in the voices of students. By offering simple surveys to students, the initiative can better understand how young people perceive their own growth in independence and self-advocacy. The feedback, alongside that of educators, brings a more complete picture of the impact the program is having. Consistent communication has proven to be another vital piece of the project's progress. At the district level, regular communication with administrators helps keep the momentum going. The PI team is working to ensure that the project continues to grow by developing a robust library of PD sessions. Through this ongoing work, the PI initiative has created a model that other districts can learn from. By focusing on meaningful data, strong communication, and strategic training, school systems can build environments that truly support students with disabilities and help them become more independent, confident, and successful in general education.

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Authors contributions

Carmen M. Moore and Diedre E. Crocker were responsible for study design, creation, implementation and data collection. They drafted the manuscript in close collaboration, equally contributing to the study. Dr. Glennda K. McKeithan was responsible for ongoing direction of the manuscript, revising and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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