

RECOGNITION & RESPECT



Education assistants in British Columbia: an educational profile and agenda

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Formal qualifications reported by education assistants.....	2
a. Qualifications related to crisis, emergencies and medical issues.....	4
b. Core-area qualifications	5
c. Specific skill or competency areas	10
3. Multiple areas of EA qualification.....	11
4. Courses, workshops and upgrades reported by EAs.....	12
5. Educational aspirations of EAs.....	13
6. Conclusion: a skills enhancement agenda for BC education assistants.....	16
Appendix 1: Survey questions used to compile EA educational information.....	18
Appendix 2: Distribution of school districts by region.....	19

1. Introduction

In November of 2008, CUPE's BC Region published findings from survey research into the working conditions of education assistants (EAs) in the province. The report – titled *Recognition & Respect: Addressing the Unpaid Work of Education Assistants in BC* – focused its major attention on the issue of unpaid work routinely performed by the province's 10,000 plus public school EAs.

The online survey instrument used to gather information for this report was not limited to working hours and conditions. When the instrument was initially developed, a decision was made to gather additional data relating to the educational qualifications and interests of the EA workforce. In addition to asking EAs about areas of formal educational qualification, the survey also inquired into what subsequent upgrading – courses, seminars, workshops, etc. – had been undertaken by EAs in their own personal efforts to broaden knowledge and expand skills. Finally, the survey gathered information relating to the specific educational interests and priorities identified by EAs for further educational upgrading in the future.

This is the first time such a profile has been attempted for those working in an education assistant capacity within BC public schools. While teachers' work has historically received and continues to receive significant research attention, the jobs performed by education assistants and the skills and qualifications required for this type of support work have not generally been the subject of focused or sustained investigation, at least in Canada. It is hoped that making this survey information available can help deepen our collective understanding of the important work performed by EAs. Further, it is expected that development of an EA educational profile can assist with the formulation of an agenda for EA upgrading and skill development. The latter can play an important role in ensuring that future steps are taken to align the requisite skill sets, qualifications and interests of EAs with the demands they face in their jobs on a daily basis in the work they perform with students.

The purpose of this report therefore is to present survey results to help constitute an educational profile for EAs in BC. In addition, the document examines directions that can and should be taken in the formulation of an agenda for EA upgrading and skill development.

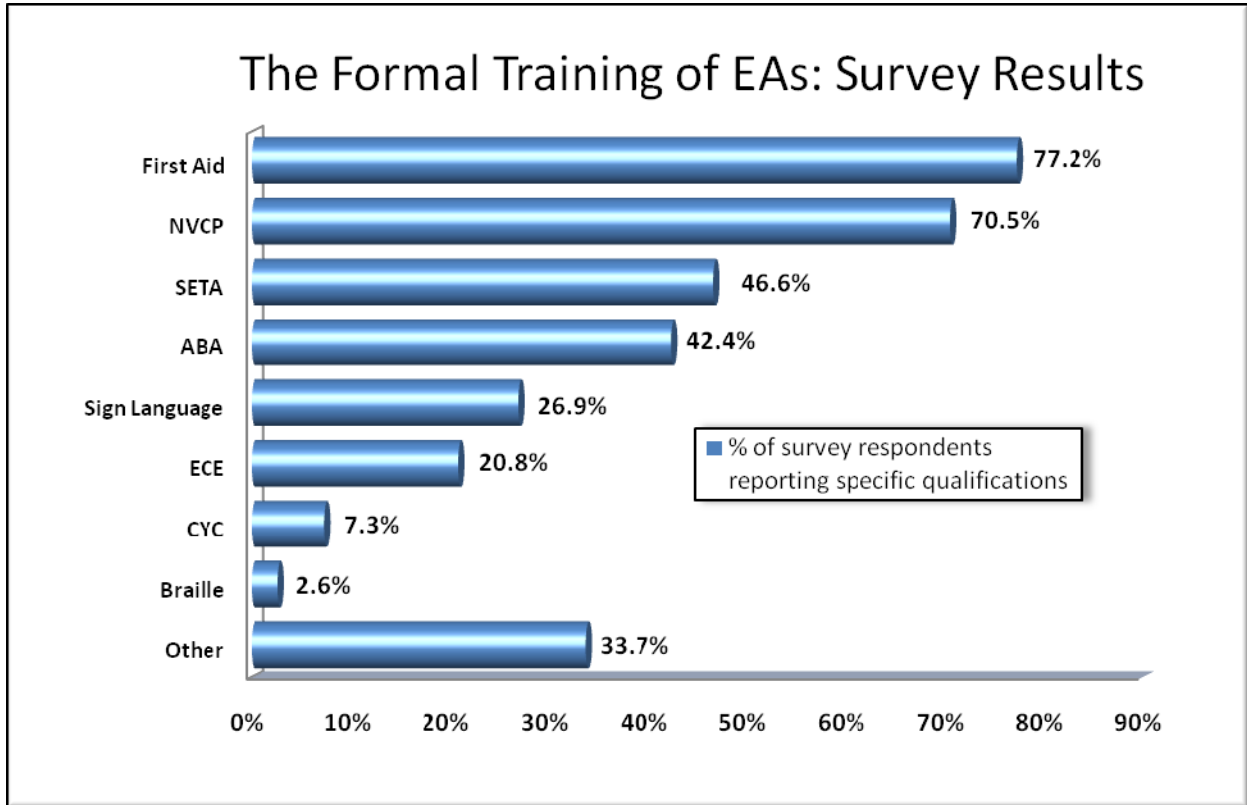
2. Formal qualifications reported by education assistants

Developing an EA educational profile requires the use of different types of information and analysis. At the heart of such a profile is a need to inventory the formal qualifications and credentials that education assistants currently possess for their work. To this end, the 2008 survey instrument was amended to include questions listing common areas of training and credentials believed held by EAs. A list of eight areas of training was presented on the survey instrument and those completing it were invited to check off which of these credentials they currently possessed.¹

¹ See Appendix 1 for a list of actual survey questions.

The following table shows the overall distribution of educational training and credentials reported by the close to 4,000 EAs who took part in the survey.

Figure 1. Formal training and qualifications of EAs: overview



As reflected in the previous chart, areas of training listed in the survey instrument were as follows:

1. First Aid training
2. Non-Violent Crisis Prevention Certificate (NVCP)
3. Special Education Teaching Assistant (SETA) type credential, of which there are a number of variants
4. Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), a form of training oriented to the provision of services to students on the autism spectrum
5. Sign Language, for work with hearing impaired and deaf students
6. Early Childhood Education (ECE) credentials, for the delivery educational programs to pre-school aged children
7. Child and Youth Care (CYC) credentials, for work with children and youth

These qualifications can be grouped and differentiated on the basis of their relationship to the work performed by education assistants. For the purposes of the analysis presented in this report, qualifications are organized into the following groups:

- **Management of emergencies, medical issues and crises**
(This group includes First Aid and Non-Violent Crisis Prevention)
- **Core-area skills related to education assistant work with children**
(This group includes SETA and, to a lesser extent, ECE and CYC)
- **Specialized skills relating to particular areas or aspects of disability**
(This group includes ABA, Signing and Braille)

To gain a deeper sense of skills and qualifications held by EAs participating in the survey, the following sections of this report provide more detailed breakdowns of qualifications in relation to variables such as age, experience and geographic location.

a. Qualifications related to crisis, emergencies and medical issues

The most predominant areas of formal qualification are held by sizable majorities of education assistants and relate to the areas of First Aid training and Non-Violent Crisis Prevention (NVCP). Both of these areas of training are geared to anticipating or dealing with crisis/emergency situations involving students.

While fairly evenly distributed across the age spectrum, first aid training is slightly more predominant amongst younger EAs. A total of 29.1% of EAs under the age of 40 had this qualification while this group reflected a total of 27.6% of those participating in the survey. Overall, efforts made to provide First Aid training to education assistants have been relatively successful although, with more than 20 per cent of EAs report not having training in this area, some work remains to be done to ensure maximum training coverage.

Non-Violent Crisis Prevention (NVCP) is an area of training intended to enable EAs to anticipate, prevent, diffuse and, when required, mediate conflict involving students. As was the case with First Aid, NVCP training is fairly evenly distributed across the age spectrum with a slight bias in the direction of higher training coverage for younger EAs. This indicates that most EAs generally either come to work in schools with this training or acquire it once employed in the field.

Together, the predominance of these two areas of formal skill qualification reflect a public school system that has relied on growth in the ranks of educational support staff largely to assist with the management of behavioral problems and crisis situations within schools. These skills are connected with assisting the special education field only to the extent that certain categories of special needs students may have a higher likelihood of involvement in behaviour that requires intervention, or may require medical assistance.² Beyond this connection, there is little about First Aid or NVCP qualification that relates specifically to requirements inherent in the delivery of educational services – whether special or more mainstream – to students.

² Some EAs are qualified to provide specialized medical assistance and intervention that goes well beyond skills and areas covered under first aid training. Such training is geared to enabling students who need it to participate in classrooms and in overall school life. In some CUPE K-12 collective agreements, EAs with this training qualify for higher remuneration.

b. Core-area qualifications

The next overall area of skill qualification differs because of its intrinsic connection to the duties that EAs perform. This applies most clearly in the case of Special Education Teaching Assistant (SETA) credentials. SETA certification is a qualification intended to train and certify education assistants working with special needs students in the school system. As such, SETA-type programs currently constitute what are a core set of qualifications for work within schools in an education assistant capacity.

SETA-type qualifications comprise an array of diploma (60 credit) and certificate (25 – 45 credit) programs available at a number of BC public post-secondary institutions, and elsewhere.³ Currently there are 14 public post-secondary institutions involved in the delivery of programs situated along the “Community and School Support” continuum.⁴ These programs deliver courses leading to credits that generally can be used for SETA-type credentialing. These institutions are:

Figure 2. BC post secondary institutions offering SETA programs or components

- Camosun College (Community support and education assistant)
- Capilano University (Special education teacher assistant)
- College of New Caledonia (Education assistant)
- College of the Rockies (Education assistant)
- Douglas College (Classroom and community support)
- Kwantlen Polytechnic University (Special education teacher assistant)
- Langara College (Education assistant)
- North Island College (Education assistant and Aboriginal education assistant)
- Northern Lights College (Education assistant)
- Okanagan College (Education assistant)
- Selkirk College (Classroom and community support worker)
- Thompson Rivers University
- University of the Fraser Valley
- Vancouver Island University

Institutions within this group are also linked in a consortium arrangement. Courses taken at one institution currently benefit from a range of credit transfer options that can connect into certificate and a growing number of bachelor degree programs at other institutions.

Just over 47 per cent of those participating in the survey report having SETA-type training. This figure does not differentiate credentials earned at private as opposed to public post-secondary institutions. The training shares a common orientation towards providing skills suited to employment as an education assistant working with special needs children in a K-12 setting.

³ There are a number of SETA-type programs currently offered by private colleges in BC but graduates of these programs may find the credential received is not acknowledged or recognized by all school district employers. Nor do these credentials typically qualify for transfer credit into BC public post-secondary programs.

⁴ Some BC school districts – like Delta, Surrey, Maple Ridge and Victoria – offer their own SETA-type training but such programs are also not always recognized by other districts or by public post-secondary institutions.

SETA-type qualifications also tend to be slightly more prevalent amongst younger EAs. Education assistants between the ages 20 and 40 hold 27.7% of reported SETA credentials while accounting for a slightly lower 26.6% of the survey population. On a regional basis, EAs reporting SETA credentials tend to be concentrated in the Metro and Fraser Valley regions, and are under-represented in the Northern and Vancouver Island regions.⁵ Other regions of the province have concentrations of this credential that are roughly proportionate to their percentage share of EAs within the province. The following table provides details in this area.

Figure 3. Levels of SETA-type credentials by region

Region	% of all survey EAs with SETA credentials, by region	Survey respondents % by region	% variance
Central Region	7.9%	8.2%	-0.3%
Kootenay Region	5.7%	5.6%	+0.1%
Metro Region	47.0%	39.8%	+7.1%
Northern Region	2.0%	5.8%	-3.8%
Okanagan Region	9.9%	9.5%	+0.3%
Valley Region	10.8%	8.5%	+2.3%
Vancouver Island Region	16.7%	22.5%	-5.7%

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the second major area of core qualification.

ECE credentials were reported by close to 18 per cent of EAs participating in the survey. Qualifications of this nature focus on formalized training for educational work with pre-school-age children. Despite the different age focus, ECE qualifications can be relevant to the provision of specialized supports to students within the K-12 system because of a strong special education focus inherent in the “post-basic” stream of ECE training. In addition, ECE programming has added relevance within the K-12 system in light of 2006 changes to the formal mandate of public schools with the inclusion of school system responsibility for literacy programs and early learning. The subsequent proliferation of new initiatives such as StrongStart along with plans for significant future expansion in this area suggest that ECE-level skills and credentials will face increasing school system demand in years to come.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs can be found at many private and public post-secondary institutions throughout the province. To achieve credentials in this area, students are typically required to complete basic ECE training, after which they are entitled to apply to be licensed as an ECE practitioner. Students may, however, go on to supplement basic with additional training which focuses on the specific areas of infant/toddler programming and special needs education. Post-basic training of this sort is available at a range of BC post-secondary institutions. Credits attained in this area also carry different options for transfer into other degree-oriented programs (such as those in the Child and Youth Care area).

⁵ Breakdowns of BC school districts by region are provided in Appendix 2 of this report.

Identified curricular connections into the field of special education also mean that some ECE-qualified staff have credentials related to some degree to those carried by EAs with SETA-type training. It is by reason of this relationship that ECE can justifiably be seen as forming part of core area qualifications for work in an education assistant capacity.

There are currently at least 18 post-secondary institutions and three adult continuing education programs operated by school districts that offer ECE training. All are authorized by BC's Ministry of Child and Family Development to provide the post-basic "special needs" supplementary training.⁶ These institutions are:

Figure 4. BC post secondary and continuing education programs offering ECE

- Camosun College
- Capilano University
- College of New Caledonia
- College of the Rockies
- Douglas College
- Langara College
- Vancouver Island University
- North Island College
- Northern Light College
- Nicola Valley Institute of Technology
- University of Victoria
- Northwest Community College
- Okanagan College
- Selkirk College
- Thompson Rivers University
- University College of the Cariboo
- University of the Fraser Valley
- Vancouver Community College
- Burnaby (SD 41) School District Continuing Education
- Delta (SD 37) School District Continuing Education
- North Shore (SD 41) Continuing Education

Qualifications relating to early childhood education are more concentrated amongst specific age groups. Such qualifications are under-represented amongst EAs aged 25 and younger, and aged 40 to 55. At the same time, they are over-represented amongst EAs aged 30 to 40, as well as for the small group of EAs over age 60. This breakdown could reflect a tendency towards mid-career acquisition of specific ECE skills on the part of EAs. Indeed, an examination of ECE qualifications by years of job experience shows a modestly disproportionate concentration of these skills reported by EAs who have from 14 and 20 years of work experience in the field.

As the next chart illustrates, there are also variances in the distribution of ECE qualifications by region.

⁶ A number of institutions also offer ECE credits via distance education, among them the College of New Caledonia, Northern Lights College and the Pacific Rim Early Childhood Institute. In addition, a growing number of private post-secondary institutions are active in this area.

Figure 5. Levels of ECE credentials by region

Region	% of all survey EAs with ECE credentials, by region	Survey respondents % by region	% variance
Central Region	9.0%	8.2%	+0.8%
Kootenay Region	8.6%	5.6%	+3.0%
Metro Region	35.7%	39.8%	-4.1%
Northern Region	5.5%	5.8%	-0.3%
Okanagan Region	11.9%	9.5%	+2.4%
Fraser Valley Region	5.2%	8.5%	-3.3%
Vancouver Island Region	24.1%	22.5%	+1.6%

ECE qualifications are more concentrated in the Kootenay and Okanagan regions and are under-represented in the Metro and Fraser Valley regions. Other regions of the province have concentrations of this qualification that are more closely proportionate to the percentage share of EAs within the province taking part in the survey.

CYC refers to Child and Youth Care, an area of practice aimed at work with children, youth, families and the community. Programs of this nature exist at a number of BC college-level and university institutions. Public post-secondary CYC programs are also linked together in a consortium arrangement created in the early 1990s which provides for cross-institutional coordination and expanded transfer credit opportunities. Unlike the SETA and ECE programs, some CYC programs provide undergraduate and graduate-level university degrees in addition to diploma and certificate-level credentials.

Currently the following institutions provide some level of CYC credential. The first four entries in the list provide degree-level credentials.

Figure 6. BC public post secondary institutions offering CYC programs

- Vancouver Island University, Child and Youth Care Department: Number of programs including diploma, First Nations diploma, and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Child and Youth Care
- University of Victoria, School of Child and Youth Care: Undergraduate, Master’s and Doctoral-level degrees in Child and Youth Care
- Douglas College: Child and Youth Care Counsellor Diploma; Bachelor of Arts degree in Child and Youth Care
- University of the Fraser Valley, Child and Youth Care: Bachelor of Arts in Child and Youth Care plus other diploma and certificate options
- Thompson River University, Human Services Department: Human Service Diploma
- Justice Institute of British Columbia: Child and Youth Care Training Program
- Selkirk College: Human Service Diploma Program with Child and Youth Care Specialty

Although held by just 7.4% of EAs responding to the survey, this group of qualifications reflects an important area of core skills for EAs. This is because public schools in BC are increasingly called upon to provide support to youth and their families in areas ranging from immigrant settlement to violence, suicide risk and addictions.

CYC credentials are disproportionately held by younger EAs – those under the age of 40 account for only 27.5% of all survey respondents yet report 45.4% of all CYC credentials.

On a regional basis, EAs in the Central and Metropolitan Vancouver regions have the highest percentage levels of CYC credentials while those in the Northern and Okanagan regions have the lowest.

Figure 7. Levels of CYC credentials by region

Region	% of all survey EAs with CYC credentials, by region	Survey respondents % by region	% variance
Central Region	11.3%	8.2%	3.1%
Kootenay Region	6.7%	5.6%	1.1%
Metro Region	45.8%	39.8%	6.0%
Northern Region	3.3%	5.8%	-2.5%
Okanagan Region	3.3%	9.5%	-6.2%
Fraser Valley Region	7.1%	8.5%	-1.5%
Vancouver Island Region	22.5%	22.5%	0.0%

For the other regions, reported CYC credentials are roughly proportionate to the percentage share of the overall EA population taking part in the survey.

What percentage of education assistants in the province possesses at least one of these areas of professional qualification? When allowances are made for certain percentages of EAs reporting multiple core-area credentials, the overall tally comes to 64.6% of those EAs who participated in the survey and reported qualifications. For the survey as a whole and including those who offered no information regarding their skills and credentials, 54.8% reported core-area qualifications.

On a regional level, core-area credentials are more concentrated in the Metro Vancouver area and less concentrated in the Vancouver Island and Northern regions. Other areas of the province report levels of core-area credentials roughly proportionate to the percentage of EAs taking part in the provincial survey. The following table offers details.

Figure 8. Distribution of “core area” credentials by region

Region	% of all survey EAs with core area credentials, by region	Survey respondents % by region	% variance
Central Region	7.9%	8.2%	-0.2%
Kootenay Region	6.5%	5.6%	0.9%
Metro Region	44.5%	39.8%	4.6%
Northern Region	3.0%	5.8%	-2.8%
Okanagan Region	9.8%	9.5%	0.3%
Fraser Valley Region	9.2%	8.5%	0.7%
Vancouver Island Region	19.0%	22.5%	-3.5%

c. Specific skill or competency areas

EAs also reported a variety of other training they had undertaken reflecting the acquisition of different skills or competencies. In addition to areas already reported on, the questionnaire listed three specific skill areas which are closely related to the work routinely performed by EAs. These areas are Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), Signing and Braille.

Applied Behaviour Analysis or ABA refers to a specific area of behavioural science and intervention. Within the BC school system ABA-related training has developed in conjunction with the proliferation of programming initiatives related to the education of children on the autism spectrum. Over a quarter of all EAs completing the survey report have received some specific training in this area. ABA-trained EAs are more heavily concentrated amongst staff between the ages of 45 and 60 and the prevalence of these qualifications is less amongst younger EAs. When examined in relation to levels of work experience, ABA training is more heavily clustered amongst those reporting 12 to 20 years experience as an EA, and is significantly less common amongst those with fewer than six years work experience.

Regionally, ABA qualifications are more often found in the Metro, Fraser Valley and Vancouver Island regions of the province. The following table provides a more detailed regional breakdown.

Figure 9. Distribution of ABA credentials by region

Region	% of all survey EAs with ABA credentials, by region	Survey respondents % by region	% variance
Central Region	7.6%	8.2%	-0.5%
Kootenay Region	7.8%	5.6%	+2.2%
Metro Region	35.5%	39.8%	-4.3%
Northern Region	3.1%	5.8%	-2.8%
Okanagan Region	8.4%	9.5%	-1.2%
Fraser Valley Region	9.4%	8.5%	+0.8%
Vancouver Island Region	28.3%	22.5%	+5.8%

The next area of specific training listed on the survey relates to Braille literacy. Braille qualifications are relatively uncommon and are reported by less than three per cent of those taking part in the survey.

Those Braille qualifications that do exist are disproportionately concentrated amongst EAs aged 40 to 55. They are also more heavily clustered amongst EAs with from 12 to 18 years of work experience. Findings of this nature suggest that EAs acquire this skill later in their work careers. Braille training is also more concentrated in the Vancouver Island and Okanagan regions of the province and, by significant margins, less commonly found in the Metro Vancouver, Fraser Valley and Northern regions.

Signing represents the third specific area of training and qualification used in the survey instrument as was reported by close to 23 per cent of EAs involved in the survey. Signing skills are most common amongst EAs aged 30 to 40. They are also more likely to be found amongst EAs who have from eight to 12 or more than 14 years work experience. On a regional basis, the following breakdown of signing credentials presents itself.

Figure 10. Distribution of Signing credentials by region

Region	% of all survey EAs with Signing credentials, by region	Survey respondents % by region	% variance
Central Region	7.6%	8.2%	-0.5%
Kootenay Region	4.9%	5.6%	-0.6%
Metro Region	36.7%	39.8%	-3.2%
Northern Region	4.0%	5.8%	-1.8%
Okanagan Region	7.9%	9.5%	-1.7%
Fraser Valley Region	12.7%	8.5%	+4.2%
Vancouver Island Region	26.1%	22.5%	+3.6%

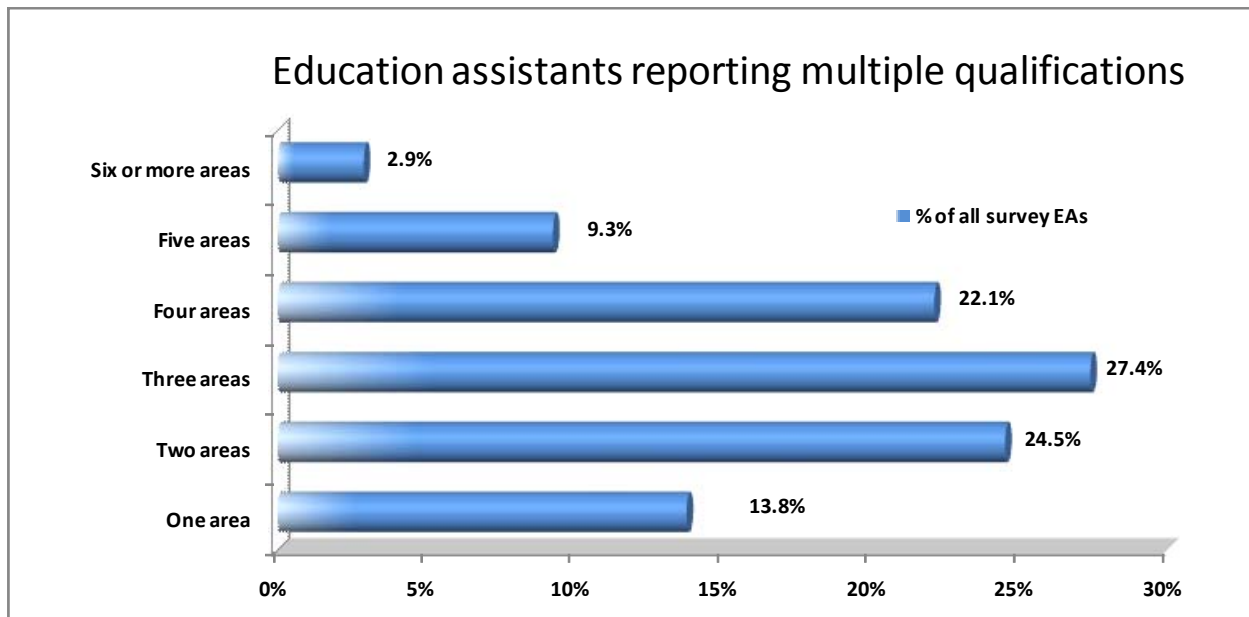
As is apparent, EAs trained to sign are disproportionately concentrated in the Fraser Valley and Vancouver Island regions and under-represented in the Metro, Northern and Okanagan regions.

Demographic patterns related to the above three specific areas of additional training point to a general prevalence of mid-career and mid-age acquisition of credentials and skills. They also suggest that EAs tend not to enter the occupation with these skills in hand, nor do they generally acquire them in the initial years of their employment.

3. Multiple areas of EA qualification

A large majority of education assistants report multiple areas of formal qualification. The following chart shows the breakdown.

Figure 11. Multiple qualifications of EAs



As the above chart shows, almost two-thirds of EAs participating in the survey report at least three areas of formal qualification. As indicated in the main *Recognition and Respect* report, the most common

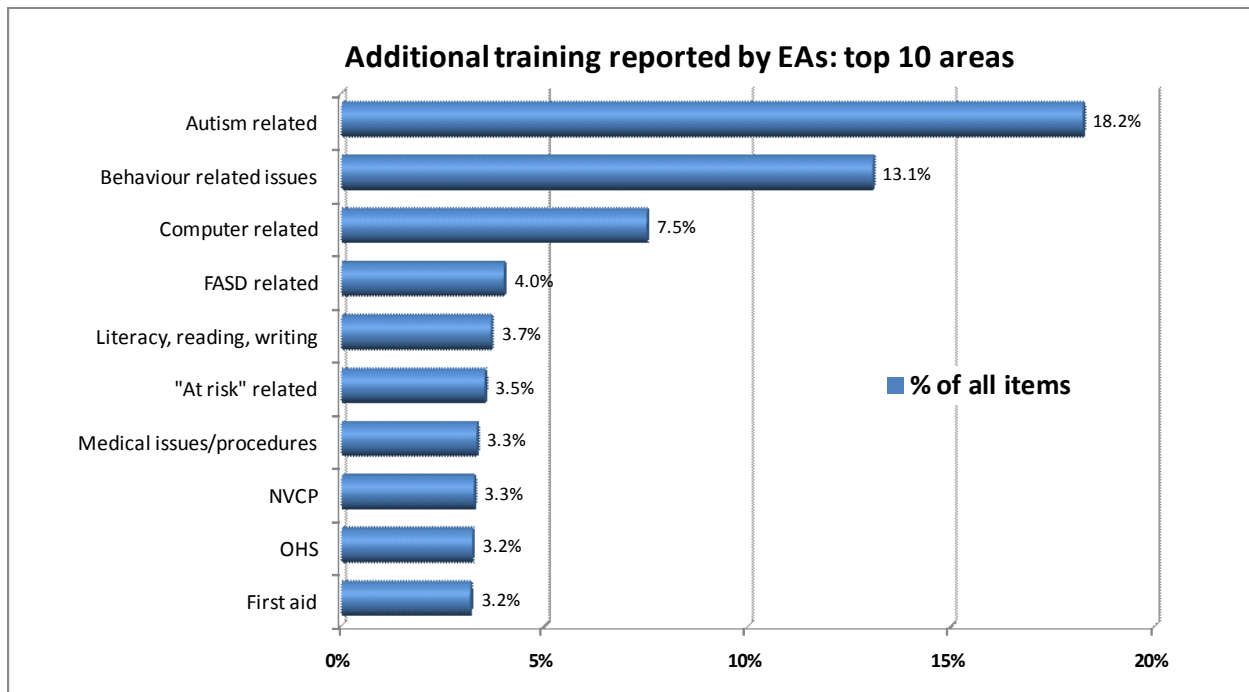
areas of multiple qualification include First Aid and Non-Violent Crisis Prevention together with additional credentials such as SETA certificates, ABA or Signing.

Whether an EA is young, middle-aged or older does not appear to have a significant bearing on the number of formal areas for which they report having qualification. Similarly, the likelihood that an education assistant will report fewer or greater areas of formal qualification does not vary to any real extent when examined in relation with reported years of work experience. Most “experience groups” report levels of multiple qualifications that are close to consistent with the percentage share these age groups represent of those taking part in the larger survey.

4. Courses, workshops and upgrades reported by EAs

In the course of completing the survey, education assistants listed over 7,600 additional seminars, courses and workshops they had completed to further their education. The following chart presents an overview of major topics and areas covered by this additional training.⁷

Figure 12. Additional training reported by EAs



As is evident, EAs report a wide range of additional courses, workshops and other kinds of training, with the top three areas being autism, behavioural issues and computer-related training.

Age appears to have little impact in determining whether an education assistant has taken additional training or the number and type of courses taken. Years of job experience, on the other hand, emerges as a more significant variable. In looking at the top areas of reported additional training, autism-related

⁷ As this was an open-ended question on the survey, the information presented in this chart has been compiled into the groups reflected in the charts.

training is more concentrated amongst lesser-experienced EAs (those with less than 12 years of experience). The opposite is true for additional courses reported in the behaviour-related area. EAs with above average job experience report more training in this area as compared with those having less experience. A similar picture presents itself in the case of computer training as EAs with above average experience report the highest levels of additional training. The fourth most popular area of additional training – FASD or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder – reflects more of an “hourglass” pattern of training concentration, with more additional courses grouped at the top and bottom of the experience spectrum and less situated in the middle.

The greatest range of variance in regards to additional courses exists however with respect to regional breakdowns. Autism-related additional training is significantly more predominant amongst EAs living in the Metro Vancouver Region, and less common in areas such as Vancouver Island, and the Central and Northern regions. For behaviour-related courses, additional EA training is more commonly reported in the Okanagan and Vancouver Island regions, and less commonly found in Metropolitan Vancouver. Computer-related training is more concentrated on Vancouver Island and in the Okanagan, and is less prevalent in Metro Vancouver and the North. When it comes to FASD, there is a significant preponderance of additional training in the Northern region of the province – most likely a reflection of greater social and educational need in this specific geographic area.

5. Educational aspirations of EAs

EAs were asked on the survey what their own priorities were for additional training and upgrading. The following table shows the overall response tabulation, grouped by age and area categories.

Figure 13. EA interests in additional training, by overall category

Category⁸	Count of responses	% of total responses
Autism-related	706	16.1%
Behaviour-related	633	14.4%
Software & technology	454	10.3%
Instructional strategies for work with students	330	7.5%
Youth: at-risk or in-crisis	290	6.6%
Medical / physical disability	277	6.3%
Violence-related	256	5.8%
Signing	237	5.4%
First aid	227	5.2%
Collaborative practice	148	3.4%
Academic support	133	3.0%
Occupational health and safety	118	2.7%
FASD	117	2.7%
Literacy, reading, writing	116	2.6%
Adaptation of curriculum	107	2.4%
Communications-related	104	2.4%
Cultural sensitivity	51	1.2%
Alcohol & drug-related	51	1.2%
Parent or community relationships	21	0.5%
Professional aspirations	21	0.5%
Total	4,397	

Data in that chart shows that education assistants give the highest priority for additional training to a range of specific skills or areas of need. At the top of the list is a request for increased training in relation to the area of programming for students on the autism spectrum. The priority given this area is likely a direct reflection of the increased profile given the issue of autism, within the public school system and within society in general. Second on the list is the topic of behavioural issues. Within this area, EAs are voicing a collective interest in additional training support related to challenges they face on a day-to-day basis in their dealings with students. At the same time, the high priority accorded this issue points to EAs' perceptions of a lack of adequate support and assistance on the part of the school system in this key area.

Software and technology rank third on the above list. This is not a discrete or separate area of training unto itself but rather has implications for all areas of training interest or need. The priority it is given by EAs is a clear reflection of the pace and extent to which technological change continues to overtake the field of special education service delivery. Within this context, EAs are voicing a concern with their own need to stay abreast of current technology and practice, and to have at their disposal up-to-date technology when dealing with student needs in a range of special education areas.

⁸ As the question on the survey was open-ended, answers provided by EAs were coded in order to enable summary tabulation of results.

The next item on the list – strategies for dealing with students – is a general reflection of perceived needs to stay abreast of changing research and practice, also in regards to student needs and learning within today’s classrooms.

The following item deals with the area of students “at risk.” Many education assistants work with students who fall into this category. The call for additional training can best be interpreted as indicating a need for greater levels of support in dealing with the identification of “at-risk” issues, and for the provision of adequate services and supports to students affected by these issues.

Medical and physical disability issues come next in the priority list. Many EAs work with high needs students who present significant medical and physical disability challenges. The signaling of this area as a high priority is again a call for the public school system to provide additional levels of training support to enable education assistants to work to the best of their abilities to address student needs in these demanding areas.

The seventh item on the list deals with the issue of violence. Again, this is an issue which relates to immediate and everyday challenges faced by education assistants who work with special education students, some of whom by virtue of their particular circumstances may display increased propensity for violent behaviour. Better training support in dealing with this problem therefore emerges as a high priority for the many EAs who see themselves facing these challenging predicaments.

The next two items—signing and first aid— relate to skill areas already examined in the context of this report. As such, they reflect interest on the part of some EAs in either acquiring basic skills, or in deepening and extending existing skills so as to enhance their own abilities to deal with situations they encounter in their day-to-day work.

The next item on the list is labeled “collaborative practice” and relates directly to a significant problem highlighted in the *Recognition & Respect* report. In that document, education assistants voiced a collective concern with the lack of time and opportunity to engage in meaningful collaboration and consultation with work colleagues – whether teachers, administrators or other EAs. The fact that some EAs have signaled a need for further training and skill development in this specific area offers further confirmation of their interest in expanding genuine collaborative opportunities in their workplaces.

The final item raises the issue of training support for “professional” level certification in areas relevant to work. The relatively low percentage of EAs selecting this option is likely a product of the fact that wording of the survey question may have inclined individual EAs to think more in terms of specific courses or course areas. This being said, in many cases, individual choices for particular skill areas may reflect interest in finding training opportunities that would move many EAs, particularly those currently lacking core-area training, in the direction of completing the requirements for gaining a credential in this area.

6. Conclusion: a skills enhancement agenda for BC education assistants

Educational information gleaned from CUPE's 2008 survey of unpaid EA work yields a detailed picture of the distribution of skills, qualifications and credentials amongst the province's 10,000 regularly employed education assistants. Among other things, this picture is one of rapid overall growth in the ranks of education assistants and their deployment throughout the K-12 system in the provision of a host of specialized services to students. In large measure, the picture is also one of current training initiatives reflecting efforts to provide basic levels of EA training capable of ensuring student safety and security within our public school system.

The most commonly reported training falls in the areas of first aid and non-violent crisis prevention. Both relate primarily to anticipating and dealing with emergency or crisis situations involving students. With 70 to 80 per cent of EAs from all areas of the province reporting having received such training, the K-12 system can be seen as having achieved considerable success ensuring that most education assistants carry required proficiency in these specific areas and for these specific purposes.

At the same time, however, survey findings show lesser success ensuring EAs have the skills to deal with students' specific *educational* needs. Dealing with the issue of violent behaviour from the vantage point of crisis management likely means less training or attention focused on skills related to positive behavioural support which, by forestalling crisis, is better suited to enhancing opportunities for student learning.

The survey data also indicates that less than half of all education assistants working in the province possess SETA-type training and qualifications. These qualifications relate clearly and directly to work undertaken by EAs in relation to special education programming and, as such, reflect a core-skill credential for this type of work. Close to another 20 per cent of EAs possess formal qualifications in related areas – such as Early Childhood Education, or Child and Youth Care. However, while clearly important, these latter fields of expertise are less oriented to either the age-range of the K-12 population or to the specifically *educational* quality of the work EAs routinely perform. Combining these latter areas with SETA-equivalent qualifications shows that likely almost two-thirds of EAs have received some training in at least one identified core area.

This summary provides both a context as well as a starting point for articulation of an EA-specific skills enhancement agenda within BC's public school system. Different possibilities are present in this area, ranging from efforts to deliver training support in specific skill areas, through development of a more comprehensive and EA-focused upgrading initiative, and up to the provision of formal support for EAs expressing an interest in seeking SETA-type certification, whether through the provision of funding or other measures to enhance the accessibility and availability of such training.

Examining a range of future skills development options raises important questions for CUPE EAs and their local unions to consider. There are EAs with CUPE who believe that movement towards a more uniform system of EA certification in a core skills area like SETA is the preferred route for the Union, and the best option for enhancing over the long-term the status, recognition and respect accorded this demanding job classification. Alternately, there are CUPE EAs who favour a non-prescriptive approach

based on a more gradual acquisition of increased skills in discrete areas where EAs have indicated they need better support. At the present time there is no consensus amongst EAs themselves on these divergent views.

What this means is that any current skills' enhancement initiative for EAs will need to take a broad and all-encompassing approach. It will have to be based on a voluntary as opposed to mandated approach to EA skill development. It will have to recognize differing levels of EA access to training, as well as geographic and small-district challenges. And it will need to acknowledge varying levels and areas of training interest on the part of EAs themselves. CUPE and other unions representing EAs in BC public schools currently participate, with the BC Public School Employers' Association, in a joint Support Staff Education and Adjustment Committee (SSEAC) which has a mandate for work on training and upgrading. It is this Committee, working with EA members, which will have to take the lead in facilitating the development of a complete agenda for EA training and upgrading in the province.

This report has been prepared in a context characterized by an overall lack of empirical information regarding the skill profile and educational needs of EAs working with children in our public schools. This gap in knowledge works at cross purposes with efforts to make educational upgrading a reality for EAs and helps frustrate efforts aimed at planning for skill needs and shortages in this area. It is important therefore that formulation of an agenda to increase overall levels of EA skills and credentials contain provision for the continuation of research into this area. A specific research component is required to document further SSEAC experience with EA upgrading, to compile evidence from the field as regards best or promising practice, and to report findings to stakeholders at a later time for purposes of evaluation and assessment. Research of this nature would be of enormous value in efforts to expand our collective understanding of the educational needs of EAs, and of the best ways to ensure that students within our public schools – and in particular those within special education programs – are able to benefit from staff empowered with appropriate knowledge, skills and credentials. The responsibilities we place on the shoulders of education assistants and the expectations we have of them in working with the most vulnerable students in our school system suggest we should never be content to settle for less.

April-2009

Appendix 1: Survey questions used to compile EA educational information

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Section E. Training and qualifications

1. Do you have any of the following formal training or qualifications?
(Check as many items as apply)

- SETA Certification (college diploma)
- ECE (Early Childhood Education)
- ECE + Special needs certificate
- Non-Violent Crisis Prevention Certificate
- First Aid
- Child and Youth Care Degree
- Sign Language (Level ____)
- Braille
- Interventions in Autism (ABA)
- Other _____

2. Have you taken any additional workshops related to your job as an education assistant?
(List the most recent five).

3. What are your top priorities/needs for additional training?
(List your five top choices in descending order of importance).

Appendix 2: Distribution of school districts by region

Region	SD	Name
Central Region	27	Cariboo-Chilcotin
	28	Quesnel
	57	Prince George
	58	Nicola-Similkameen
	73	Kamloops/Thompson
	74	Gold Trail
Kootenay Region	5	South East Kootenay
	6	Rocky Mountain
	8	Kootenay Lake
	10	Arrow Lakes
	20	Kootenay-Columbia
	51	Boundary
Metro Region	35	Langley
	36	Surrey
	37	Delta
	38	Richmond
	39	Vancouver
	40	New Westminster
	41	Burnaby
	43	Coquitlam
	44	North Vancouver
	45	West Vancouver
93	Conseil Scolaire Francophone	
Northern Region	49	Central Coast
	50	Haida Gwaii/Queen Charlotte
	52	Prince Rupert
	54	Bulkley Valley
	59	Peace River South
	60	Peace River North
	81	Fort Nelson
	82	Coast Mountains
	87	Stikine
	91	Nechako Lakes
92	Nisga'a	
Okanagan Region	19	Revelstoke
	22	Vernon
	23	Central Okanagan
	53	Okanagan-Similkameen
	67	Okanagan-Skaha
	83	North Okanagan-Shuswap

Region	SD	Name
Fraser Valley Region	33	Chilliwack
	34	Abbotsford
	42	Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows
	48	Howe Sound
	75	Mission
	78	Fraser-Cascade
Vancouver Island Region	46	Sunshine Coast
	47	Powell River
	61	Greater Victoria
	62	Sooke
	63	Saanich
	64	Gulf Islands
	68	Nanaimo-Ladysmith
	69	Qualicum
	70	Alberni
	71	Comox Valley
	72	Campbell River
	79	Cowichan Valley
	84	Vancouver Island West
85	Vancouver Island North	