

## Research Notes

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### The Role of Instructional Assistants in Regular Classrooms: Are They Influencing Inclusive Practices?

The placement of instructional assistants to support students in inclusive environments has increased dramatically during the past two decades. Assignment of instructional assistants to regular classrooms has become a primary tool in schools for the provision of inclusive placement of students with severe disabilities (Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Snyder, & Lisowski, 1995). The employment of instructional assistants has occurred with limited research and has been characterized as one of the least studied in special education (Jones & Bender, 1993; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001).

Teachers and administrators are often reluctant to accept regular classroom placement for exceptional students without the support of an instructional assistant (French, 1999). Additional supports are deemed necessary because of safety, behavior, or curricular concerns. Parents have encouraged schools to provide the maximum resources available for their children (Mueller & Murphy, 2001).

The limited research concerning instructional assistants has been characterized by two themes: responsibilities and training. Gaps exist in the research on topics such as guidelines for hiring and supervising instructional assistants, acknowledgment of their work, and examination of interactions between instructional assistants and students (Giangreco et al., 2001). Observational studies exploring interactions in the classroom have shed some light on the effect of the instructional assistant's role in inclusive classrooms. Young, Simpson, Myles, and Kamps (1997) reported that teachers' interactions with students with disabilities were infrequent, but increased when an instructional assistant was more than two feet away from the student. Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997) have described the close proximity of instructional assistants to students as *hovering*, noting that it may result in separation of exceptional students from their classmates and interference with peer interactions.

Marks, Schrader, and Levine (1999) interviewed instructional assistants and found that instructional assistants (a) assumed primary responsibility for inclusion, (b) did not wish exceptional students to be a *bother* to teachers, (c) felt responsible for daily academic needs, and (d) were valued by teachers as an *expert* regarding the student.

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As the primary support in regular classrooms, instructional assistants are in a position to influence inclusive practices. The present study examines how their role, as well as their interactions, can facilitate the goals of inclusion.

### *Method*

Observations occurred in 10 regular elementary classrooms located in seven Winnipeg schools. Classes ranged from pre-kindergarten to grade 6. Classrooms were selected where instructional assistants were assigned to students with severe disabilities for a minimum of 2.5 hours each day. Data were collected at 1-minute intervals. During each 1-minute interval, the observer recorded activities in which the instructional assistant was involved, who participated in the interaction, and whether the interaction occurred in or out of the classroom. Observations occurred for 2-2.5 hours in each classroom for a total of 23.5 hours.

The percentages of time for which instructional assistants assumed responsibilities were recorded using the following categories: (a) assisting the teacher with instruction, (b) supervising individuals or groups, and (c) assisting the teacher with preparation and recording materials. Data collection also included an analysis of the time instructional assistants spent: (a) with the exceptional students in one-to-one situation, (b) with small groups including a special education student, (c) with regular students only, (d) with the teacher only, and (e) when the instructional assistant was interacting with no one. The amount of time instructional assistants and exceptional students spent outside the classroom was also recorded.

### *Results*

Observations in this study identified the important role of the instructional assistant in influencing inclusive practices. The most prominent finding was that instructional assistants interacted more often with regular and special education students together (37%) than with special education students alone (34%). Although hired to provide service on a one-to-one basis, it is important to affirm that spending time with exceptional students may isolate them from classmates.

Instructional assistants spent 71% of the time observed with special and regular education students and the remaining time with regular education students (10%), the classroom teacher (2%), and having no interactions (17%). Instructional assistants were involved in activities that did not include special education students almost one third of the time. Adult proximity was not excessive, thereby allowing exceptional students to have some degree of independence in their activities and interactions. Most of the activities (87%) occurred in the regular classroom.

Instructional assistants spent 54% of their time on instructional assistance, 26% on supervision, 13% on assistance to the teacher, and 7% on other duties. It has been reported that instructional assistants identify direct instruction as their main classroom responsibility (Riggs, 2001). However, although instructional assistants may believe that they are spending most of their time providing instructional assistance, the present data indicate that nearly half of their time (46%) was not spent on instructional assistance. Time spent on activities other than direct instruction is not necessarily detrimental, because it may

allow students to increase their level of independence, and teachers may feel more supported when instructional assistants help them with classroom tasks.

Only 2% of the time was spent in communication between instructional assistants and teachers. This unanticipated finding demonstrates the need for designated time to meet outside assigned class time.

### *Discussion*

The data obtained in this study have implications for schools with supported inclusion through the employment of instructional assistants. In studying the activities and interactions of instructional assistants, it was found that they indeed had an important role in influencing inclusive practices.

Instructional assistants facilitated inclusive practices by (a) interacting more frequently with both exceptional and regular education students together, rather than with the exceptional student alone; (b) spending a significant amount of time assisting in activities that did not include exceptional students; (c) providing most of the support in the regular classroom; and (d) promoting independence by limiting the amount of direct instruction provided to exceptional students. The literature on the role of instructional assistant is limited, perhaps reflecting a failure to recognize their importance in the education of exceptional students as documented in this study.

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