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ABSTRACT

A study examined management practices of general and special education teachers and therapists who work with paraeducators in K-12 inclusive classrooms. Surveys focusing on the actual and ideal performance of 27 specified supervisory tasks were completed by 369 general and special education teachers and therapists from 12 school districts, 11 of them rural, within 2 eastern Kansas special education cooperatives. Respondents had experience working with paraeducators, but the majority did not have preservice or inservice training in working with paraeducators. Actual and ideal task performance differed significantly. General and special education teachers reported performing about the same number of management tasks as well as sharing the responsibility for other tasks. Ideally, the overwhelming majority of the tasks should be performed or shared by both the general and special education teachers. The ideal task performance indicated a shift from individual to shared responsibilities. General and special education teachers had different perceptions about actual and ideal paraeducator management, but those differences were more pronounced in actual task performance than in ideal performance, indicating a possible lack of collaboration and communication. Ideal responses were impacted by building level assignments. Respondents appeared willing to take on increased responsibilities associated with effective paraeducator use in their inclusive classrooms. (Contains 16 references.) (TD)

Instructional Management of Paraeducators in Inclusive Classrooms:

The Perspectives of the Teachers

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INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT OF PARAEDUCATORS IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE TEACHERS

Recent professional literature indicates the dramatic increase in number of paraeducators used to support special needs students in inclusive placements (Demchak and Morgan, 1998; Vergun and Chambers, 1995). The rationale for appropriate supervision and management of paraeducators is well documented (French, 1998; Giangreco, et al., 1997; Pickett and Gerlach, 1997). Federal special education guidelines call for assurance that paraeducators are adequately supervised while supporting students with disabilities (French, 1998). A review of current and past literature points, however, to issues and concerns regarding paraeducator supervision, the lack of preparation of special education personnel and general classroom teachers for supervision (Ashbaker and Morgan, 1999; Demcek and Morgan, 1998; Friend and Cook, 2000; Salzberg and Morgan, 1995). The manner in which paraeducators have been supervised in the past is not necessarily effective in inclusive settings (Friend and Cook, 2000; Likins and Morgan, 1999; Mueller, 1995; Pickett and Gerlach, 1997).

Inclusive settings pose unique challenges for the appropriate management and supervision of special education paraeducators (Friend and Cook, 2000; Likins and Morgan, 1999; Mueller, 1995), including a lack of role clarification, communication problems (Mueller, 1995) and "remote" placement of paraeducators away from the direct supervision of special educators (Likins and Morgan, 1999).

This session reported the results of a research project examining the specific instructional management practices of general education teachers and special education teachers and therapists who work with paraeducators. The study focused on the actual and ideal performance of specified supervisory tasks as perceived by 369 general education and special education teachers and therapists from Kansas. The teachers and therapists surveyed were purposefully selected based on their actual experiences working with paraeducators in inclusive settings. Kansas serves a large rural school population and has provided special education services to rural students through special education cooperatives (Kirmer, et al., 1984) and paraeducator support. The survey participants were general education teachers and special educators from 12 school districts within two eastern Kansas special education cooperatives. Eleven of those school districts are considered rural school districts.

The survey results are useful to general education teachers, special education teachers and therapist, and administrators responsible for assuring appropriate supervision of paraeducators by creating a picture of current practices and preferred ideal supervisory and management practices.

Paraeducators are increasingly being used around the country to support the broad range of special education services to students (Friend and Cook, 2000; Giangreco, et al., 1997). Schools and special education cooperatives in Kansas have long utilized paraeducators to support the programs of students with special needs. Gathering and applying the perceptions of Kansas teachers with experience working with paraeducators will provide vital information regarding appropriate management tasks and effective collaboration. Such information will help to ensure that no child receiving instructional support from a paraeducator is left behind.

Methods and Procedures

A survey developed specifically for this study was used to collect the opinions and perceptions of grades P-12 educators with experience working with, supporting, or supervising paraeducators. Perceptions and opinions regarding actual and ideal performance of instructional management tasks associated with the placement and use of special education paraeducators in general education or "inclusive" classrooms were sought from general education classroom teachers and special educators. Special educators included special education teachers and related service therapists.

Study Sample

Key-informant and "snowball" sampling, types of purposive sampling, was used. Oliver (1997) describes "snowball" sampling as a process of asking key-informants to name other people who may have specialist knowledge to establish a chain of "experts". Because of geographic and special education service delivery homogeneity and established use of special education paraeducators, two Special Education Cooperatives were chosen as study sites. Special education teachers and therapists and general education teachers within the two Cooperative service areas would provide the study's survey respondents.

Development of the Survey Instrument

The survey instrument, Managing Paraeducators in the General Classroom: A Survey for Teachers and Other Certified Staff, was developed for use in this study. Using the paraeducator instructional management and supervisory skills defined and discussed in the existing literature, specific management and supervisory tasks were identified. The final study survey instrument included 27 specific tasks associated with the instructional management and supervision of paraeducators in inclusive classrooms.

Survey Process

Two procedures for survey distribution and collection were defined based on the preferences of the participating special education cooperative. One procedure involved the use of special educators to distribute and collect surveys from general education teachers within their individual school or educational placements. The second procedure involved whole group, on-site survey administration to school and district staffs. Participation in this study was voluntary. No names were attached to the surveys.

Survey respondents were asked to consider each task twice – once to consider who, in their opinion, actually performed the task and a second time to consider, which ideally should perform the task. Response choices offered on the survey included general education teacher (GenEd), special education teacher or therapist (SpEd), Both, Other, or Don't Know.

A total of 1270 surveys were distributed through both procedures. Results of both distribution procedures yielded 383 returned surveys. Of the 383 returned, 369 surveys were used in the study's analyses.

Methods of Data Analysis

Research questions No. 1 and No. 2 were answered through descriptive analysis and examination of frequency data generated for each of the 27 tasks.

To answer Research Question No. 3, survey responses of general education teachers and special educators were compared for significant differences using a Chi-square test for independence. Responses with job titles of "other" and those with no answer were not used.

A contingency table was created for each task twice – once for the "actual" responses and a second time for "ideal" responses. The desired level of significance for this study was $\alpha = .05$. To compensate for the repeated testing of the variable, Bonferroni's adjustment technique was used to define the alpha level of significance at or below .002 ($\alpha <= .05/26 <= .002$). If the relationship between the job title and survey responses were found to be significant, Cramer's V (Cramer's Phi) was used to estimate the strength of that relationship. The Chi-square showed a relationship and the Cramer's V showed the practical significance of that relationship.

The same techniques were used to answer Research Question No. 4. This question compared the response choices of building level assignment, indication of in-service or preservice preparation to work with paraeducators, years of educational experience, and years of experience working with paraeducators. The level of significance for these comparisons was $\alpha <= .002$.

Research question No. 5 utilized the chi-square goodness-of-fit test to compare the percentage split between the actual and ideal responses of general education teachers and special educators. The percentage levels of

"actual" responses were used as the expected value and the "ideal" percentages as the observed value. The level of significance for these comparisons was $\alpha <= .002$.

Results

Respondent Demographics

Job Title - Of the 369 respondents, about 57% indicated job titles of general education teachers, 39% indicated special educator or related services therapists, 5% indicated "other" and .3% did not indicate a job title.

Building Level Assignment - Of the total respondents, about 39% indicated elementary, 30% indicated middle school, 20% indicated high school, and 4% indicated a preschool assignment.

Experience in Education - Responses for all ranged from 1 to 50 years of experience with an overall mean of 14.7. General education teachers had a mean of about 15 years (M=15.2) experience and the special educators had slightly less than 14 years (M=13.9) experience. The largest group of special educators had between 1 and 5 years of teaching experience, while the largest group of general education teachers had between 6 and 10 years of teaching experience.

Experience with Paraeducators - Responses for all ranged from 1 to 26 years of experience with an overall mean of 8.6. General education teachers had an average of almost 8 years (M=7.8) experience working with paraeducators. The special educators indicated an average of more than 9 years (M=9.3).

Specific Preparation for Working with Paraeducators - About 26% of all respondents indicated they had received preparation. About 72% indicated no preparation. Special Educators indicated a higher percentage of preparation (about 40%) than general education teachers (about 16%). Respondents assigned to elementary schools indicated the smallest percentage of preparation (about 19%).

Results of the Research Questions

Research Question 1. Who was perceived to be performing specific paraeducator instructional management tasks in inclusive classrooms? According to the percentages indicated by the survey responses, general education teachers, special educators, or both perform the tasks in almost all cases. The percentages reported as "Other" and "Don't Know" or those surveys with no responses indicated were negligible. Handout Table 1 provides a summary of paraeducator management tasks perceived to be actually performed by general education teachers, special educators or both according to survey responses of 50% or more.

Five tasks did not yield one response choice with a percentage of 50% or more. Those tasks were evaluating the paraeducator's overall job performance, clarifying instructions, tasks, or duties, regulating the level of help provided to a student, providing supplemental materials and supplies, and monitoring the paraeducator's day-to-day classroom activities.

Research Question 2. Ideally, who should be performing specific paraeducator instructional management tasks in inclusive classrooms? According to the respondents, the general education teacher, the special educator or both, should be performing the tasks in almost all cases. Again, the percentages reported as "Other" and "Don't Know" or "No Answer" was negligible. Handout Table 1 provides a summary of ideal paraeducator management tasks performance for general education teachers, special educators or both according to survey responses of 50% or more.

Five tasks did not yield one response choice with a percentage of 50% or more. Those tasks were providing classroom rules and student behavior expectations providing classroom schedules and procedures, providing lesson topics and unit topics assisting in the assignment of the paraeducator, and providing a written job description.

Research Question No. 3. Do general education teachers and special educators differ in their perceptions of the actual and ideal performance of paraeducator instructional management tasks? There were significant differences noted in 18 of the 27 "actual" task performance responses among general education teachers and special educators. The effect size (Cramer's V) of those 18 tasks ranged from .470 to .196. The Cramer's V statistic of .100 can be labeled as "small" and the statistic of .500 can be labeled as "large" (Aron and Aron, 1997).

Significant differences were noted in 12 of the 18 "ideal" task performance responses among general education teachers and special educators. The effect size of those 12 tasks ranged from .309 to .189.

Research Question No. 4. Was there a significant relationship between the opinions and perceptions of ideal task performance of the survey participants and the other demographic variables? Significant differences were noted in 7 of the 27 "ideal" task performance responses among the perceptions of respondents assigned to elementary, middle, or high schools. The demographic variables of specific preservice or inservice preparation, years of educational experience, and years of experience working with paraeducators did not significantly impact the "ideal" answers of the survey respondents, according to the study's analysis.

Research Question No. 5. Does a discrepancy exist between opinions and perceptions of actual task performance and ideal task performance? According to the survey respondents, the "ideal" task performance for 25 of the 27 tasks differed significantly from the "actual" task performance. Significant differences were not noted for the tasks of providing classroom schedules and procedures, and providing books, worksheets or other instructional materials.

Summary of Results

The Respondents had Experience Working with Paraeducators - Overall, the General Education teachers had almost eight years experience and the Special Educators had over nine years experience working with paraeducators. The length of classroom experience with paraeducators lends to the credibility of the study's findings.

The Majority of Respondents did not have Preservice or Inservice Training for Working with Paraeducators - Overall, only slightly more than one-fourth of the respondents indicated any specific preparation while slightly less than three-fourths indicated no preparation. These figures are comparable to findings in other studies by French (2001) and Morgan (1997). There is no indication as to the quality or specifics of the preparation or whether the preparation included any training in the supervision and management of paraeducators in an instructional setting.

Actual and Ideal Task Performance Differed Significantly - This study provides a picture of what is actually happening in some inclusive classrooms and what the respondents thought should be happening regarding the management of paraeducators. As reported by the survey respondents, general education teachers and special educator are performing about the same number of management tasks as well as sharing the responsibility for other tasks. In an ideal situation, the respondents indicated that the overwhelming majority of the tasks should be performed or shared by both the general education teacher and the special educator. In this study sample, what is actually happening in the classrooms does not match what the respondents perceived as ideal.

The Ideal Task Performance Indicates a Shift from Individual to Shared Responsibilities - When closely examining the differences between the actual and ideal responses, all 27 tasks showed an increase in the percentage of respondents indicating "Both" when comparing the actual and ideal performance. Both general and special education teachers indicated ideal practices of sharing the responsibilities of paraeducator management and supervision.

The clear indication of an ideal practice of shared responsibility in a majority of the tasks is both surprising and encouraging. French, (1999) stated that when faced with changing roles, special educators tend to keep tasks they have traditionally fulfilled or to take more tasks on themselves. The special educators in this study appear willing to either give up or share some tasks. Considering the numerous and diverse instructional tasks and duties of general education teachers, their willingness to share paraeducator management tasks is impressive to this investigator.

General Education Teachers and Special Educators have Different Perceptions About Actual and Ideal Paraeducator Management - Those differences are more pronounced in the actual performance of the tasks than in the ideal performance perceived by the respondents. Fourteen of the 18 tasks had a medium to large practical difference. The strength of those differences may indicate that general education teachers and special educators do not have the same understanding of who is actually performing those tasks. General education teachers and special educators who "share" the services or the use of paraeducators should have a higher level of agreement if they are effectively communicating and collaborating about the paraeducator. These results may point to a lack of collaboration and communication.

On a more positive note, "ideal" selections showed fewer significant difference. Their level of agreement is higher and their differences not as strong. According to the study's participants, both should perform the vast majority of the management tasks.

Ideal Responses were Impacted by the Teachers' Building Level Assignments - The assignment of the teachers to elementary, middle or high schools significantly impacted the responses of ideal task performance in 7 of the 27 tasks. For each of those tasks, a comparison of the percentages for the three levels revealed information useful in the paraeducator program development and on-going support at different building levels. This information may be particularly important for those general education teachers and special educators who serve in multiple buildings or have multi-level assignments.

Conclusions

If, in a traditional sense, the supervision or management of paraeducators is considered an administrator duty, it was not indicated in this study. The survey respondents did not "shy away" from management and supervisory tasks by assigning ideal task performance to others. Their responses could be interpreted as with a willingness to share in or a desire for increased input into the responsibilities associated with effective paraeducator use in their inclusive classrooms.

The following recommendations may help collaborating teams of general and special educators move toward the ideal performance of paraeducator management and supervisory tasks.

Recommendations

According to the results of this study, shared responsibility of paraeducator management and supervisory tasks was perceived as the ideal in most tasks. If general education teachers and special educators are willing to share a great number of management responsibilities, they deserve administrative support at the district and school levels. They also deserve to be adequately trained and prepared. Recommendations resulting from this study include high priority topics for collaboration and consultation, short-term strategies to increase paraeducator support through instructional management, and long-term strategies aimed at moving actual instructional management practices closer to the ideal.

1. Districts and schools should develop guidelines & practices regarding paraeducator management and supervision
2. Districts and schools should encourage and increase opportunities for collaboration between general and special education staff
3. Issues of management and supervision need to be seen as a priority to collaborating teachers and IEP/student planning teams
4. Paraeducator management and supervision topics should be included in preservice course content and curricula
5. Paraeducator management and supervisory topics should be included in school/district inservice and staff development programs
6. Increase the expectations for special educators to inform general educators of paraeducator management responsibilities

7. All those who work with paraeducators should be reminded and encouraged to maintain ongoing communication and feedback
8. Collaborating teams should ask and answer 14 questions (Handout) providing immediate support and management to paraeducators working in inclusive classrooms.
9. Collaborating teachers and planning teams should better define paraeducator roles, responsibilities and task assignments
10. Individual and shared teacher management tasks should be specifically defined
11. Teachers should develop written plans for observing and recording paraeducator performance
12. Teachers should be encouraged and trained to provide on-the-job training
13. Paraeducators should attend school workdays and inservice programs to increase teacher contact time and planning opportunities.

Further Study

Since only the perceptions of general education teachers and special educators were compared in this study, the perceptions of other key personnel should be sought for examination and comparison.

This study did not involve classroom observations or collection of evidence (i.e., copies of paraeducator schedules, written job descriptions, collaborative team agendas). Further investigation with this same population or a similar population should include classroom and meeting observations, collection of evidence, and interviews. The collection of observational data could provide a picture of paraeducator supervision and management that is not based on perceptions, but based on actual performance of management and supervisory tasks. The collection of observational and interview data would also provide insights into techniques or "how" tasks are addressed. The study population would not necessarily involve this study's population, but could use other schools and districts using special education paraeducators in inclusive classrooms.

Another area of further study should involved the use of interviews or focus groups to determine barriers and challenges preventing ideal task performance, solutions to barriers and challenges, necessary administrative supports, and successful strategies, techniques and best practices regarding management and supervision of paraeducators in inclusive settings.

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Actual and Ideal Performance of Tasks Associated with Special Education Paraeducators in General Education Classes (Assigned by Response Percentages of 50% or Higher)

Actual Task Performance	Ideal Task Performance
General Education Teachers	**General Education Teachers**
• Introducing the para to the class	• Introducing the para to the class
• Providing classroom rules/behavior expectations	
• Providing classroom schedules and procedures	
• Providing lesson plans	
• Providing lesson topics and unit topics	
• Providing information about the general Curriculum	• Providing information about the general curriculum
Special Education Teachers	**Special Education Teachers**
• Developing the paraeducator's schedule	
• Providing IEP information	• Providing IEP information
• Providing info about areas of disability	• Providing info about areas of disability
• Providing info about confidentiality	• Providing info about confidentiality
• Assisting in hiring the paraeducator	• Assisting in hiring the paraeducator
• Assisting in the assignment of the para	
• Providing a written job description	
• Providing on-the-job training	
• Determining the para's training needs	
Both	**Both**
	• Developing the para's schedule
• Providing books, worksheets, and instructional materials	• Providing books, worksheets, and instructional materials
	• Providing lesson plans
	• Providing supplemental materials/supplies
• Providing ongoing communication	• Providing ongoing communication
	• Providing on-the-job training
• Directing instructional activities of the para	• Directing instructional activities of the para
• Providing support/instruction in modifications	• Providing support/instruction in modifications
• Assigning specific tasks	• Assigning specific tasks
• Correcting inaccurate instruction by the para	• Correcting inaccurate instruction by the para
• Providing feedback on classroom perform.	• Providing feedback on classroom perform
	• Monitoring the day-to-day activities
	• Clarifying instructions, tasks and duties
	• Regulating the level of help to a student
	• Determine the para's training needs
	• Evaluating the para's overall job performance

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