

INSTRUCTIONAL AIDES IN THE CLASSROOM

Ciara R. Oatman, M.S.

Sam Houston State University

Sandra A. Labby, Ed.D.

Texas A&M University - Texarkana

Robert M. Maninger, Ed.D.

Sam Houston State University

Abstract

Due to legislative measures such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act and No Child Left Behind, the roles and responsibilities of instructional aides in the classroom is an issue of growing importance. This research study examined the roles and responsibilities of instructional aides based on teacher- and self-reported surveys at one intermediate sized urban 5th and 6th grade campus. It was hypothesized that teachers and instructional aides would report similar roles and responsibilities of instructional aides served in general and special education classes.

Keywords: Instructional aide, classroom teacher, instructional aide roles and responsibilities

Over the past ten years, educators have seen an increase in the number of students with disabilities in their classrooms. This was due to legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA), which mandated that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment with their nondisabled peers. These students had modifications to the curriculum, most often through the use of extended time on assessments and the presence of an instructional aide in the general education classroom who assisted classroom teachers in meeting students' needs (Lewis, 2005; Patterson, 2006; Giangreco, 2010; Chopra, Sandoval-Lucero, & French, 2011). The role of the instructional aide has changed greatly due to new accountability standards. Previously, instructional aides only helped in special education classrooms. Now, instructional aides are required to monitor and help all students who require assistance in the general education classroom with a particular focus on their assigned special education students. With changing expectations and job related

tasks, it was vital that research be conducted with respect to the roles instructional aides have in the general and special education classroom.

Instructional aides have served as gatekeepers to the inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classes. However, their benefit to students relied on the working relationship they had with the classroom teacher (Giangreco, 2010; Steckelberg, Vasa, Kemp, Arthaud, Asselin, Swain, & Fennick, 2007). A limited amount of research has been devoted to this topic which has included self-reporting surveys, sole interviews with teachers, and interviews with instructional aides regarding their roles and responsibilities (Jones, Ratcliff, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2011; Liston, Nevin, & Malian, 2009; Lewis, 2005; Dauman, Silla, & Stufft, 2010). Studies have included state and nationwide responses from all school levels and focused on several outcomes including professional development opportunities, advice on the supervision of instructional aides, and suggestions for supporting instructional aides (Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan, 2016). Minimal research has been conducted with respect to comparing the roles and responsibilities of instructional aides, as reported by classroom teachers or the aides themselves. Research into this topic would allow for the two personnel groups to better work together, benefitting students within the classroom and school.

This study compared the assigned roles and responsibilities of instructional aides by classroom teachers with those instructional aides reported to actually perform. Instructional aides and classroom teachers at one urban intermediate school completed similar surveys. This allowed for a comparison between the two personnel groups. Determining how instructional aides view their roles, responsibilities, and relationships with students and teachers compared with how classroom teachers view these factors, would allow for training to be developed for future school years. In order to form relationships on a yearly basis due to changes in student and school needs, trainings for both instructional aides and classroom teachers emphasizing job responsibilities and appropriate tasks should be held at the start of the school year.

Literature Review

From the literature, three common themes emerged as significant to the topic of instructional aides and classroom teachers. The first was the training, or lack of training, of both instructional aides and teachers in their roles. The second theme was the roles and responsibilities often performed by those personnel. Finally, the third theme centered on developing effective relationships between instructional aides and classroom teachers.

Need for Additional Training

Although No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and IDEIA outlined the duties and qualifications needed by instructional aides, the importance of appropriate supervision, and the training of instructional aides, neither legislative piece detailed what that training should entail beyond earning an associate's degree and demonstrating proficiency in core academic areas through a state or local assessment (Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2009; Boudreau & Twigg, 2011; Capizzi & Da Fonte, 2012). Even though these legislative works provided a foundation for inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education classroom, the lack of specific training mandates left many instructional aides without appropriate training prior to entering the classroom. As stated in a study by Maggin et al. (2009), "How are paraeducators expected to provide quality instruction or support without sufficient training or supervision?" (p. 8). The researchers recommended that both teachers and instructional aides attend specific and continued professional development in order to work collaboratively in the classroom for optimal student engagement (Maggin et al., 2009).

According to several studies, instructional aides reported receiving little or no training prior to entering the classroom beyond on-the-job training (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsu, 2009; Caprizzi & Da Fonte, 2012; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). This led to confusion regarding responsibilities and expectations of instructional aides in the classroom, and also created an environment where "students with the most complex needs are being served by the members of the school community with the least preparation" (Maggin et al., 2009, p. 1). Further research detailed the lack of training provided to teachers in their roles as adult supervisors. While instructional aides reported receiving on-the-job training from classroom teachers, teachers reported no training during preparation programs, as well as little additional training related to supervising and working with instructional aides (Steckelberg et al., 2007; Bauman, Silla, & Stufft, 2010; Chopra et al., 2011; Caprizzi & Da Fonte, 2012). Teachers reported also utilizing on-the-job experiences to guide their supervision of the instructional aides (Giangreco, Sutter, & Doyle, 2010).

Classroom Roles and Responsibilities

A second emergent major theme was the roles and responsibilities concerning both instructional aides and classroom teachers. Instructional aides were utilized in varying capacities; their roles were as varied as their titles. Responsibilities included supporting individual students with disabilities to access the general education curriculum (Patterson, 2006; Bauman et al., 2010; Giangreco et al., 2010; McGrath, Johns, & Mathur, 2010; Jones et al., 2011), providing behavioral interventions (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2008) and, implementing and monitoring Response to Intervention (RTI) programs as called for in NCLB

(Liston et al., 2009). However, while many of these responsibilities involved instruction as a primary goal, a survey by Etscheidt (2005) showed a lack in academic familiarity as reported by aides and their supervising teachers, which then translated to a negative impact on the students they were charged with helping.

Classroom teachers' primary role in regards to working with instructional aides was that of a supervisor. NCLB required instructional aides to work "under the direct supervision of a teacher and in close and frequent proximity to the teacher" (Patterson, 2006, p. 1). Research was conducted regarding teachers' roles as supervisor to instructional aides. Chopra et al. (2011) identified teacher leadership as the most important factor in the effectiveness of inclusion of students with disabilities. Common topics in the literature suggested the development of a collaborative philosophy, effective communication, and preparing the instructional aide for the expected roles and responsibilities they were to perform (Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, & Sorensen, 2009; Douglas et al., 2016; Maggin et al., 2009).

Teacher-Instructional Aide Relationships

The final theme involved instructional aides' relationships with classroom teachers. In order to provide the richest experience for all students, it was vital that the adults in the classroom had "a cooperative relationship based on mutual understanding" (Jones et al., 2011, p. 19). Yet, studies showed that instructional aides felt marginalized, undervalued, and unsupported as team members (Giangreco et al., 2010; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). This not only caused discord between the adults, but also hindered student learning and growth. A good working relationship between teachers and instructional aides requires that all "who either have a stake in or assist in the education" (Patterson, 2006, p. 1) of students with special needs work together towards meeting the student's unique needs and goals in the inclusive classroom setting (Giangreco et al., 2010).

Conclusion

There were several implications for future research. The three themes described should be systematically investigated as the role of the instructional aide was further defined under the legislative guidelines. In addition, the core of much research focused on instructional aides or classroom teachers in their trainings, backgrounds, and job responsibilities, or the team dynamic of the two. This often neglected how those factors influenced and were influenced by each group.

Research Methods

This study was designed to determine the roles and responsibilities instructional aides served at one intermediate-sized urban campus using teacher- and self-reported surveys. Participants in this study were the classroom teachers and instructional aides at the campus. Currently employed by the district and campus were forty classroom teachers who taught content and elective courses such as reading, math, and physical education. Additionally, there were five teachers who worked in special services such as Life Skills, Adaptive Behavior, and Speech. The campus was composed of fifth and sixth grade classes, with teachers who worked with one or both grade levels.

Working with a number of those teachers were eight instructional aides including one author. Before beginning the school year, these aides were provided a schedule of teachers they worked with and the number of days they were in each class. This was determined based on students' Individualized Education Plan (IEP), projected need of support due to previous schoolwork, and the class size. The instructional aides worked equally between grade levels and content domains.

All teachers and aides at the campus were given the opportunity to participate in this study. Twenty-five (62%) teachers and four (50%) instructional aides responded to the survey request. The low response rate from aides could be due to time constraints during the work day or lack of computer access to complete the survey. Additionally, the author employed as an aide did not participate in the survey in order to maintain validity.

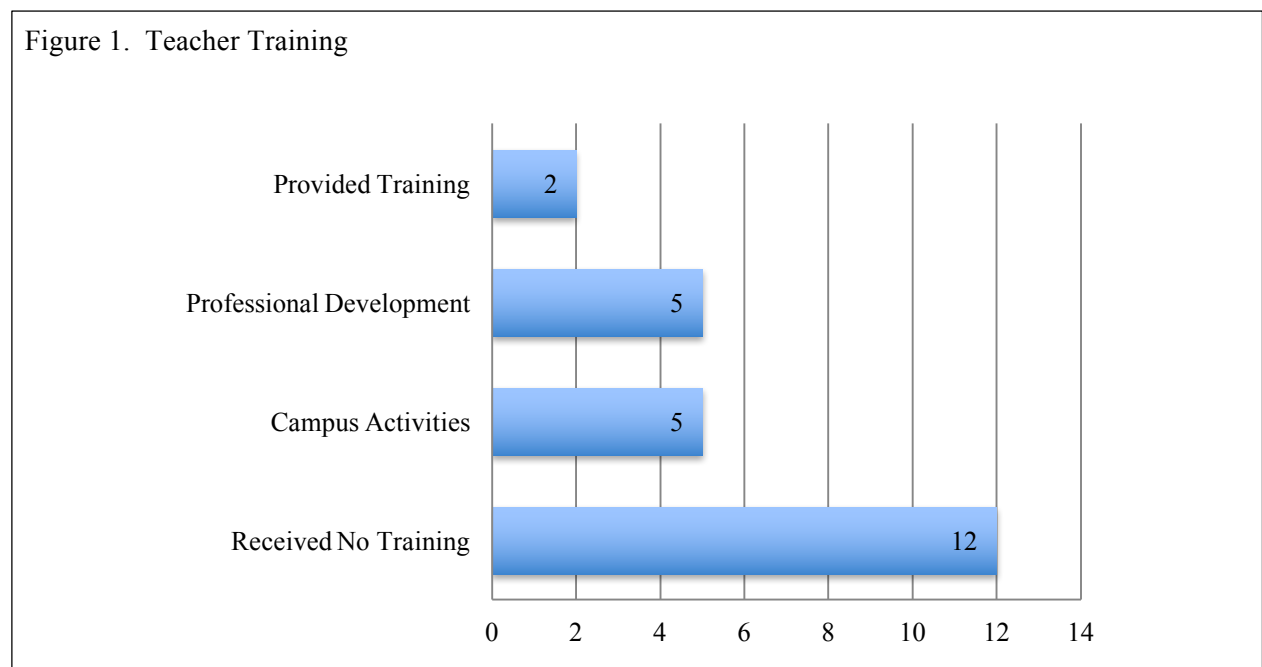
This research used a method of quantitative surveys for both teachers and instructional aides. The survey gathered data through either teacher or instructional aide input and included several Likert-type scale systems. All teachers were asked to complete an eleven-question online survey in regards to the roles and responsibilities instructional aides served in their classroom. Similarly, instructional aides were asked to complete an eleven-question online survey about the roles and responsibilities they performed. The surveys and requests were sent via school email, with an announcement at a faculty meeting the following week. Although participants were sent the request via their school email, they remained anonymous in order to ensure accurate responses. Participants had the ability to answer all, some, or none of the questions. The number who completed the online survey determined the total number of teacher and instructional aide participants. Survey responses were recorded in corresponding Google Sheet documents.

Data Analysis

This research surveyed twenty-four teachers to determine the role instructional aides had in the general and special education classroom. The goal was to compare the roles of instructional aides from teacher and self-reported survey questions about the type of work instructional aides performed, the feedback given and received, and the relationship between students and instructional aides. The data for this research was collected at the end of the second six-week grading period of the 2015-2016 school year. The data collection time frame allowed for relationships to form among aides, students, and teachers as well as for any scheduling conflicts to be clarified or changes based on beginning-of-the-year student data to occur.

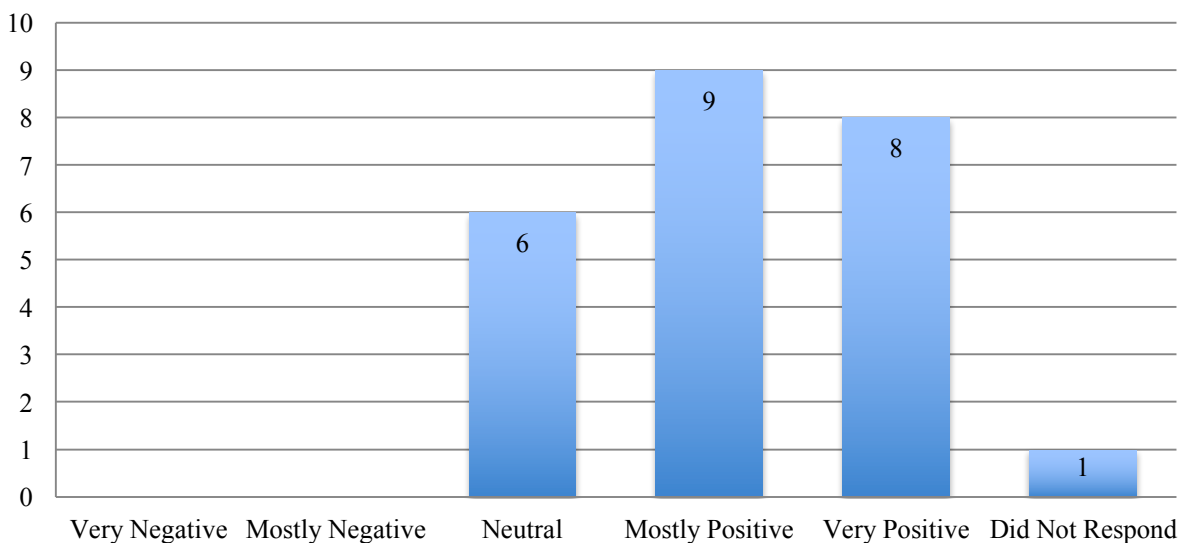
Teacher Data Analysis

The twenty-four teacher participants worked in a variety of instructional settings. In addition to subject area and grade level, teachers had a diverse background of educational experiences. From former instructional aides to campus special education department heads, these backgrounds impacted how teachers worked with instructional aides. Only seven teachers received formalized training or professional development to work with instructional aides. An additional five teachers participated in campus activities with respect to working with their instructional aides. One-half, or twelve, of the teachers reported that they had no training in working with their instructional aides in their classrooms. Classroom teachers were asked what, if any, trainings they received on working with instructional aides as seen in Figure 1.



A secondary question was asked regarding teachers' interest in professional development targeting effective ways to work with instructional aides in their classroom. The majority of teachers responded with "yes" or additional comments on the dire need of it. Satisfaction in the performance of instructional aides has impacted the roles and responsibilities they were assigned by teachers. In this study, teachers reported generally positive satisfaction in aide performance in their classrooms as seen in Figure 2. Additionally, all twenty-four teachers reported taking the feedback and advice from instructional aides into consideration when making lesson and assignment decisions.

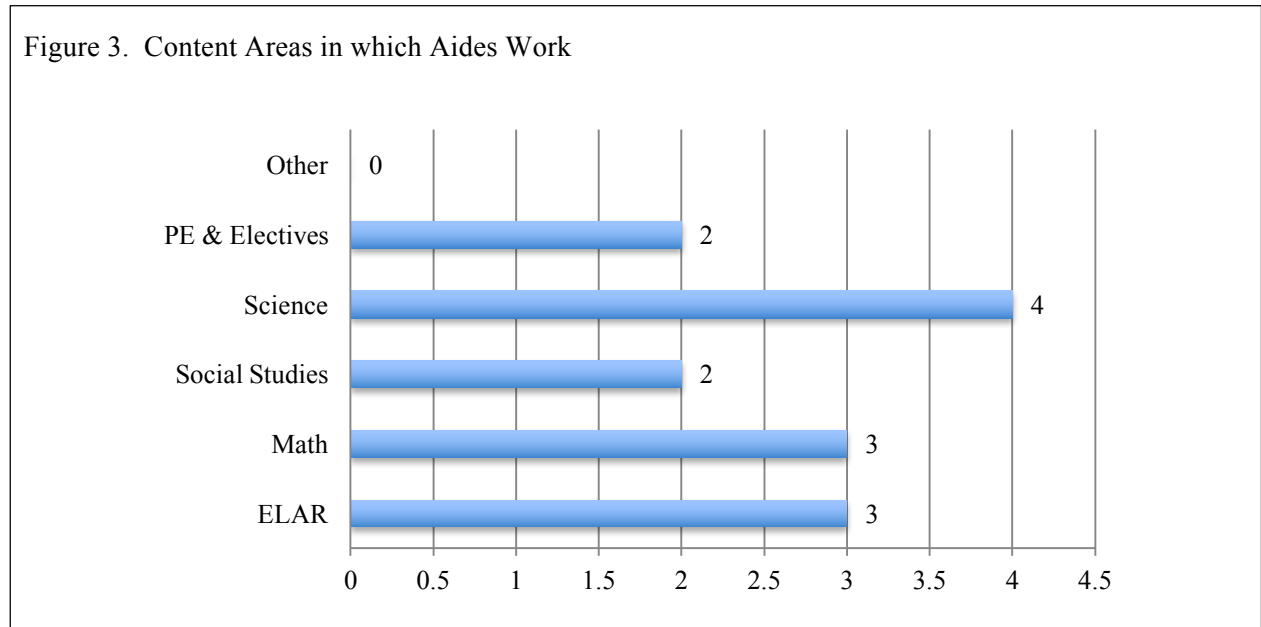
Figure 2. Teacher Satisfaction in Aide Performance



Instructional Aide Analysis

Instructional aides in this research worked in a variety of content areas, two different grade levels, and with several teachers. The range of content areas the instructional aides worked in were reported as science, mathematics, English language arts & reading, social studies, and physical education & electives (See Figure 3). Although instructional aides in this study worked in five possible content areas, all reported feeling comfortable in those content areas. In this study, instructional aides reported serving with both fifth and sixth grade students equally. However, almost all aides reported working with at least six different teachers.

Figure 3. Content Areas in which Aides Work



Comparative Data Analysis

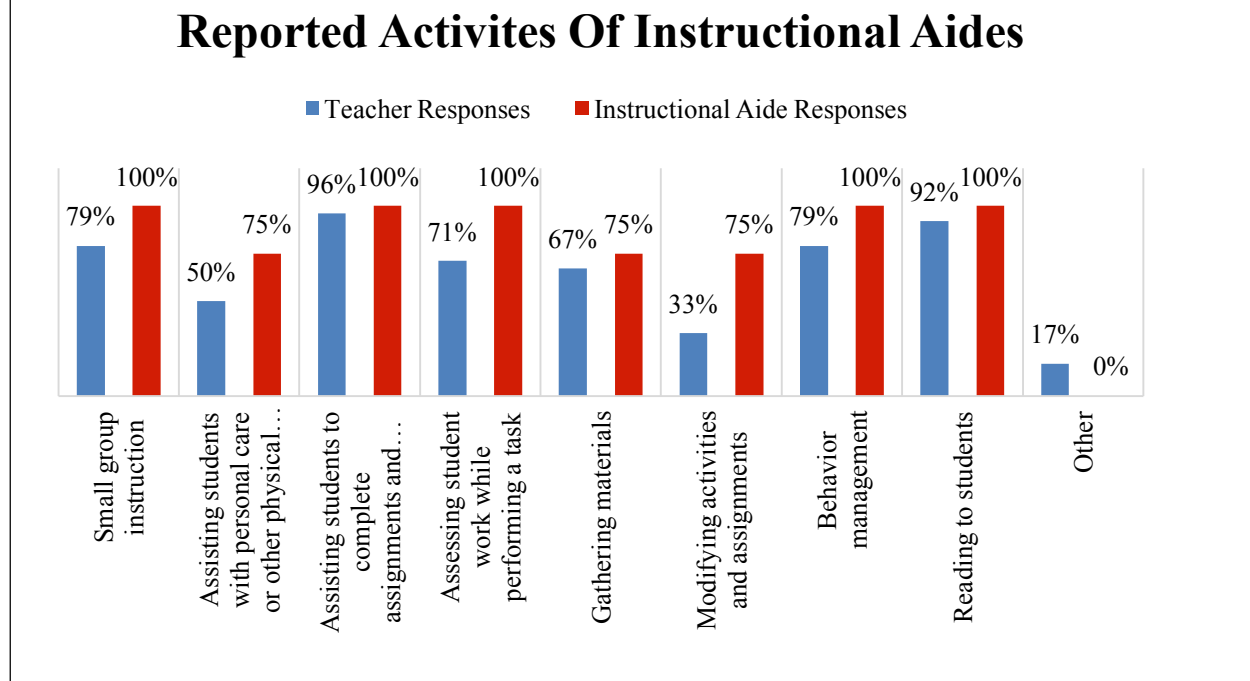
Teachers were asked the roles and responsibilities they assign instructional aides in their classroom. Similarly, instructional aides were asked to report the roles and responsibilities they perform throughout the day. Table 1 presents the comparative answers of this investigation while Figure 4 graphically compares the percentage of answer respondents.

Table 1

Roles and Responsibilities of Instructional Aides

	Teacher Reported	Instructional Aide Reported
Small group instruction	19	4
Assisting students with personal care or other physical needs	12	3
Assisting students to complete assignments and activities	23	4
Assessing student work while performing a task	17	4
Gathering materials	16	3
Modifying activities and assignments	8	3
Behavior management	19	4
Reading to students	22	4
Other	4	0

Figure 4. Reported Activities of Instructional Aides



Discussion

As more students with disabilities have been included in the general education classroom, the number of instructional aides needed to help those students be successful also increased. Although the aides were hired and assigned to help specific students, it was largely up to the classroom teachers how this assistance occurred. Therefore, a positive relationship between the instructional aide and classroom teacher was important. This study examined how instructional aides viewed their roles, responsibilities, and relationships with students and classroom teachers, and how classroom teachers from the same school viewed these same factors. It was postulated that because classroom teachers and instructional aides worked together closely, they had indicated similar answers to questions regarding these aspects on both the teacher and self-reported survey questions.

Interpretation

The research concluded that instructional aides and classroom teachers reported a similar frequency of roles and responsibilities that instructional aides performed in the classroom. One activity stood out as having a higher disparity in reporting. Only eight teachers, or 33% reported instructional aides as “Modifying activities and assignments”, while three or 75% of instructional aides reported this responsibility. Consequently, this had important implications, as instructional aides were often not trained to modify student work. Instructional aides had limited access to lesson plans prior to instruction.

Additionally, instructional aides lacked extensive knowledge of students' IEPs to know what modifications were appropriate.

Three of the reported activities had less than ten percent difference between classroom teachers and instructional aides. The first, "assisting students to complete assignments and activities," was indicated by 96% of teachers and 100% of instructional aides. This responsibility relates to the role instructional aides have had and continue to have in aiding students in the classroom. Second, 67% and 75% of classroom teachers and instructional aides, respectively, chose "gathering materials." This role raised some concerns because it detracted the aide from serving the students he or she had been assigned. Finally, "reading to students" was reported by 92% of teachers and 100% of instructional aides. This responsibility was, again, in line with aiding students who need assistance.

Several other questions were asked of respondents including the relationship instructional aides had with the students they work with. Both teachers and instructional aides reported a positive student-aide relationship. This was important since aides work closely with a smaller group of students or with individual students, a positive relationship has obviously impacted the work performed by both the student and instructional aide. Additionally, teacher respondents were asked about their satisfaction with the instructional aides they work with. In general, teachers responded with positive satisfaction.

Implications for Future Research

There are several implications for future research. First, since this study was composed of a small population, twenty-four classroom teachers and four instructional aides, results often showed a large discrepancy between survey questions when solely looking at the number of answers. Looking at the percentage of responses yielded a better interpretation. In addition, only about 50% of the campus staff population responded to the survey request. Thus, the data and interpretations may not be representative of a larger population. Since a major aspect of this research was comparing the results from the same campus, research at a larger school with more staff could offer more responses and thus a more in-depth review. Additionally, research could be expanded to a single school district, small or large, to determine the roles and responsibilities from a district's population. Finally, research in the training of instructional aides for the roles and responsibilities they perform could be of interest when comparing their reported roles and responsibilities.

One limitation to this research query is that teachers and instructional aides were asked to generalize their answers to the overall experience. Since instructional aides reported working with up to seven teachers, and teachers had up to seven class periods with instructional aides, the responses they

provided could vary based on whom they worked with. Additional research into individual aide performance (i.e. teacher satisfaction, roles and responsibilities, and student-aide relationships) would be of interest. Responses to questions with respect to work relationships, training needed, and cooperative planning may build more collaboration between the teachers and aides. Significant research is still needed to help better define the roles and responsibilities of the instructional aide.

References

- Bauman, D., Silla, V., & Stufft, D. (2010). First and second year teachers' comfort and training for working with paraeducators. *The International Journal of Learning*, 17(3), 501-507.
- Boudrea, J. & Twigg, N. W. (2011) The case for andragogy and social learning theory to support educators in the use of the paraprofessionals in special educations. *Global Education Journal*, (2), 23-31.
- Caprizzi, A. M. & Da Fonte, M. A. (2012). Supporting paraeducators through a collaborative classroom support plan. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 44(6), 1-16.
- Carnahan, C. R., Williamson, P., Clarke, L., & Sorensen, R. (2009). A systematic approach for supporting paraeducators in educational settings: A guide for teachers. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 41(4), 34-43.
- Carter, E., O'Rourke, L., Sisco, L. G., & Pelsue, D. (2009). Knowledge, responsibilities, and training needs of paraprofessionals in elementary and secondary schools. *Remedial & Special Education*, 30(6), 344-359.
- Chopra, R. V., Sandoval-Lucero, E., & French, N. K. (2011). Effective supervision of paraeducators: Multiple benefits and outcomes. *National Teacher Education Journal*, 4(2), 15-26.
- Dauman, D., Silla, V., & Stufft, D. (2010). First and second year teachers' comfort and training for working with paraeducators. *The International Journal of Learning*, 17, 501-506.
- Douglas, S. N., Chapin, S. E., & Nolan, J. F. (2016). Special education teachers' experiences supporting and supervising paraeducators: Implications for special and general education settings. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 39(1), 60-74.
- Etscheidr, S. (2005). Paraprofessional services for students with disabilities: A legal analysis of issues. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 30(2), 60-80.
- Fisher, M., & Pleasants, S. L. (2012). Roles, responsibilities, and concerns of paraeducators: Findings from a statewide survey. *Remedial and Special Education*, 33(5), 287-297.
- Giangreco, M. F. (2010). One-to-one paraprofessionals for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms: Is conventional wisdom wrong?. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 48(1), 1-13.
- Giangreco, M. F., Sutter, J. C., & Doyle, M. B. (2010). Paraprofessionals in inclusive schools: A review of recent research. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 20(1), 41-57.
- Hughes, M. T. & Valle-Riestra, D. M. (2008). Responsibilities, preparedness, and job satisfaction of paraprofessionals: Working with young children with disabilities. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 16(2), 163-173.
- Jones, C. R., Ratcliff, N. J., Sheehan, H., & Hunt, G. H. (2011). An analysis of teachers' and paraeducators' roles and responsibilities with implications for professional development. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 40, 19-24.
- Lewis, K. C. (2005). Seen but not heard: ESEA and instructional aides in elementary education. *Review of research in education*, 29, 131-149.
- Liston, A. G., Nevin, A., & Malian, I. (2009). What do paraeducators in inclusive classroom say about their work? Analysis of national survey data and follow-up interviews in California. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 5(5), 2-17.
- Maggin, D. M., Weby, J. H., Moore-Partin, T. C., Robertson, R., & Oliver, R. M. (2009). Supervising paraeducators in classrooms for children with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Beyond Behavior*, 18(3), 2-9.
- McGrath, M. Z., Johns, B. H., & Mathur, S. R. (2010). Empowered or overpowered? Strategies for working effectively with paraprofessionals. *Beyond Behavior*, 19(2), 2-6.
- Patterson, K.B. (2006). Roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals: In their own words. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 2(5).

Steckelberg, A. L., Vasa, S. F., Kemp, S. E., Arthaud, T. J., Asselin, S. B., Swain, K., & Fennick, E. (2007). A web-based training model for preparing teachers to supervise paraeducators. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 30*(1), 52-55.