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Helping or Hovering? Effects of Instructional Assistant Proximity on Students with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT: *This study presents data on the effects of the proximity of instructional assistants on students with multiple disabilities who are placed in general education classrooms. Based on extensive observations and interviews, analyses of the data highlighted eight major findings of educational significance, all related to proximity of instructional assistants. Categories of findings and discussion include (a) interference with ownership and responsibility by general educators, (b) separation from classmates, (c) dependence on adults, (d) impact on peer interactions, (e) limitations on receiving competent instruction, (f) loss of personal control, (g) loss of gender identity, and (h) interference with instruction of other students. The article concludes with implications for practice related to policy development, training, classroom practices, and research.*

As students with disabilities increasingly are placed in general education schools and classes, the use of instructional assistants has greatly expanded. Recent national figures estimate that over 500,000 instructional assistants are employed in public schools, and increases are anticipated in the coming years (Schelble, 1996). Although their changing roles and responsibilities have gained recent attention (Pickett, 1986; Pickett, Faison, & Formanek, 1993), the proliferation of instructional assistants in public schools often has outpaced conceptualization of team roles and responsibilities, as well as training and supervision needs of instructional assistants. Nowhere is this more evident than in schools where students with severe or multiple disabilities are included in general education classrooms.

In our work in public schools, we have noticed instructional assistants playing increasingly prominent roles in the education of students with disabilities. With pressure from parents, who

want to ensure that their children are adequately supported, and general educators, who want to make sure they and their students are adequately supported, the use of special education instructional assistants has become a primary mechanism to implement more inclusive schooling practices. Although we have been encouraged by situations where students with disabilities have been provided with previously unavailable educational opportunities, we are concerned that some current approaches to providing instructional assistant support might be counterproductive. Current research on the use of instructional assistants to support students with disabilities in general education classes is limited to a small number of studies that sought to clarify existing roles and responsibilities (Doyle, 1995), to explore the expanded use of natural supports (Erwin, 1996), and to use activity schedules and decreased prompts to foster greater student autonomy (Hall, McClannahan, & Krantz, 1995).

The purpose of this study was to further extend this recent research by highlighting some of the key issues we observed in general education classrooms where students with disabilities were supported by instructional assistants. The nature of these findings holds important implications for evaluating how we use, train, and supervise instructional assistants so that their work can be supportive of valued educational outcomes for students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities in general education classrooms.

METHOD

Research Sites and Study Participants

Throughout the 1994-95 and 1995-96 school years, data were collected in 16 classrooms in 11 public schools in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Utah, and Vermont where students with multiple disabilities were educated in general education classrooms. The grade levels included preschool (with students without disabilities), kindergarten, and Grades 1, 2, 3, 5, and 11 (Grade 11 was primarily education within integrated community and vocational settings). Primary study participants included students with disabilities and the adults who supported their education in these general education classes.

The seven female and four male students with disabilities all were identified as deaf-blind, though each had some residual hearing and or vision. The students ranged in age from 4 through 20 years. All of these students were reported to have significant cognitive delays and additional disabilities such as orthopedic impairments (n = 10, 91%), health impairments (n = 7, 64%), and behavioral impairments (n = 4, 36%).

A total of 134 educational team members participated in this study, including 123 females (92%) and 11 males (8%). This number does not include the many special area teachers (e.g., physical education, music, art, library), other school personnel or volunteers, and classmates encountered in the course of our observations. Thirty-four of the team members were related services providers (i.e., speech/language pathologists (n = 14), physical therapists (n = 13), nurses (n = 8), occupational therapists (n = 7), itinerant teachers of the blind and visually impaired (n = 4), itinerant teachers of the deaf and hearing impaired (n = 4), deaf-blind specialist (n = 2), orientation and mobility specialist (n = 1), employment specialist (n = 1), and family support consultant (n = 1). The remaining respondents included 20 special educators, 17 instructional assistants, 16 general education teachers, 15 parents (i.e., mothers [n = 11], fathers [n = 4]), and 9 school administrators. In all but one classroom, one or more instructional assistants were assigned to support the student with disabilities. Four of the instructional assistants had completed a bachelor's degree, 12 had graduated from high school, and one had not completed high school.

Data Collection

This qualitative research study relied primarily on extensive classroom observations (n = 110) of the students with disabilities and their teams, averaging 2 to 3 hr each. Observations consisted of typical school day activities such as large and small groups with peers who did not have disabilities, individual and community-based activities, lunch, recess, class transitions, and individual therapy sessions. Field notes were collected using laptop computers by the five-person research team.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with team members in an effort to more fully understand the classroom observations. From May through September 1995, the research team conducted 40 semistructured interviews with a subset of team members from each team, including related services providers (n = 14), special educators (n = 9), parents (n = 8), classroom teachers (n = 4), instructional assistants (n = 3), and administrators (n = 2). Interviews typically lasted between 45 and 75 min; they were audiotaped and later transcribed. Each interviewer asked questions pertaining to (a) how support service decisions were made by the team historically, (b) the interactions among classroom staff providing and receiving support (e.g., classroom teacher, instructional assistant, special educator, related services providers), (c) the roles and responsibilities of the instructional assistants, (d) strengths and weaknesses of the teams' approach to providing classroom support, and (e) potential improvements in the provision of support services.

Data Analysis

The observational and interview data were analyzed by the first author inductively using categorical coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). These analyses were reviewed by the other research team members in an attempt to clarify the data presentation and ensure accuracy. The first author ensured his familiarity with the data by (a) participating in data collection (i.e., 31 observations, 17 interviews), (b) reviewing all transcripts of observations and interviews conducted by other research team members, (c) maintaining ongoing contact with research team members, and (d) being involved with research sites over an extended period of time.

First, transcripts of observations and interviews were read and marked by hand using over 150 separate codes consisting of words or phrases descriptive of text content (e.g., scrutiny, fringe, defer); particularly descriptive passages were highlighted and separate notes were maintained on emerging themes. Each observation and interview transcript was imported from a word processing program into HyperQual2 (Padilla, 1992), a text-sorting program designed to assist in qualitative data analysis. Each observation and interview was reread and codes were rearranged and collapsed into 25 categories using HyperQual2 to generate 25 code-specific reports. Inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) was applied to the code-specific reports to assist in the identification of themes. One theme with extensive data pertained to the proximity between the student with disabilities and the instructional assistants. Further analysis of this data highlighted eight distinct subthemes, which are presented in the results.

Triangulation was employed, using a series of techniques that can, "contribute to verification and validation of qualitative analysis" (Patton, 1990, p. 464). Credibility of the finding in this study was supported using methods triangulation to explore the consistency of findings generated by different methods. In this case, extensive observations and interviews allowed for comparison across time at the same sites. Additionally, this allowed for comparison of what was actually observed with what people reported in their interviews. Triangulation of sources was also used to explore the consistency of different data sources using the same method. For example, because teams were studied, it provided a unique opportunity to explore the nature of participant responses to the same issues queried during interviews.

RESULTS

One of the most prominent findings that emerged from the data was that instructional assistants were in close proximity to the students with disabilities on an ongoing basis. This was evidenced by (a) the instructional assistant maintaining physical contact with the student (e.g., shoulder, back, arms, hands) or the student's wheelchair; (b) the instructional assistant sitting in a chair immediately next to the child; (c) the student sitting in the instructional assistant's lap when classmates were seated on the floor; and (d) the instructional assistant accompanying the student with disabilities to virtually every place the student went within the classroom, school building, and grounds.

Although study participants indicated that some level of close proximity between students with disabilities and instructional assistants was desirable and sometimes essential (e.g., tactile

signing, instructional interactions, health management), they also recognized that unnecessary and excessive adult proximity was not always necessary and could be detrimental to students. As one mother who had observed her son's classroom stated:

> At calendar time in the morning she (instructional assistant) doesn't have to be right by his side. She could kind of walk away. She doesn't have to be part of his wheelchair. That's what it feels like. I just think that he could break away a little bit (from the instructional assistant) if he were included more into all the activities with the regular classroom teacher.

A speech/language pathologist from the same team independently stated, "I think there is some unnecessary mothering or hovering going on."

Analysis of the data revealed eight subthemes pertaining to proximity between instructional assistants and students with disabilities that are presented in the following sections (see Figure 1).

Interference with Ownership and Responsibility by General Educators

Most of the classroom teachers in this sample did not describe their role as including responsibility for educating the student with disabilities who was placed in their class. Team members reported that the proximity and availability of the instructional assistants created a readily accessible opportunity for professional staff to avoid assuming responsibility and ownership for the education of students with disabilities placed in general education classrooms.

Different expectations regarding the role of the classroom teacher was a point of conflict within many of the teams. As one related services provider stated, "She (the classroom teacher) doesn't take on direct instruction (of the students with disabilities). In fact, . . . she stated at meetings that she doesn't see that as her role. And I disagree with that. I mean she is a teacher."

Although special educators and related services providers were involved in each case, almost universally it was the instructional assistants who were given the responsibility and ownership for educating the students with disabilities. Teachers were observed having limited interactions with the student with disabilities, proportionally less than those with other class members. Involvement by the teachers that did occur most often was limited to greetings, farewells, and occasional praise. Instructional interactions occurred less frequently (e.g., being called on to answer a question in class). A special educator summed up the need for clarification sought by many educational team members when she said, "What should the classroom teacher's role be? Even in our most successful situations we don't have a lot of classroom teachers who are saying, 'I have teaching responsibility for this kid.'" Most teams we observed had not confronted this issue. "We haven't as a team come out and said, 'All right, what is the role of the classroom teacher in teaching this child?'"

Data consistently indicated that it was the instructional assistants, not the professional staff, who were making and implementing virtually all of the day-to-day curricular and instructional decisions. One speech pathologist said, "[W]e (the team) have talked about this many times. We have our most seriously challenging students with instructional assistants." A special educator explained, "The reality is that the instructional assistants are the teachers. Though I'm not comfortable with them having to make as many instructional decisions." An experienced instructional assistant explained, "I never get that kind of information (about instruction related issues and planning). I just wing it!"

The instructional assistants demonstrated unfettered autonomy in their actions throughout the day as evidenced by entering, leaving, and changing teacher-directed whole class activities whenever they chose with no evidence of consulting the teacher. As one instructional assistant said, "We do not do a lot of what the class does. I do what I think he can do." She justified her role as decision maker by saying, "I am the one that works with him all day long." Instructional assistants reported becoming increasingly comfortable with their role as the primary instructor for the student with disabilities, as one stated, "[We are] the only people who really feel comfortable with Holly."

The instructional assistants in this study reported that they received mostly on-the-job training from other instructional assistants by talking with each other and job shadowing so that pat-

FIGURE 1

Problems Related to Instructional Assistant Proximity

Interference with Ownership and Responsibility by General Educators

- "I'm not sure how Holly is going to be involved in this activity, but that's her aide's job." (Physical education teacher)
- "The teachers tend to kind of let the individual (assistants) kind of run the program." (Mother of a student with disabilities)

Separation from Classmates

- An instructional assistant waited until all the other students had lined up at the teacher's direction and had filed out of the classroom before prompting the student with disabilities to leave the room, trailing the group by about 10 yards.
- In the middle of an activity, after James had one turn, the instructional assistant quietly removed him from the group while the class continued their activity.

Dependence on Adults

- During a large group literacy activity, the instructional assistant had positioned herself near the back of the group, a few feet away from Annie (the student with disabilities). Annie looked away from the teacher and toward her instructional assistant every few seconds as the instructional assistant offered her signed instructions (e.g., look at the teacher, sit down). After a couple of minutes, Annie walked back to the instructional assistant and sat on her lap.

Impact on Peer Interactions

- "A shadow is not necessarily good. It's more of a stigma. I really hadn't considered the fact that Mrs. Kinney (the instructional assistant) is always very close to Jaime, although there are times when she is out on a break or whatever and he is in very capable hands with his peers. I think it would be better to have her integrated more in the classroom and maybe not feel that she needs to hover so much. (Classroom teacher)
- "It (close proximity of instructional assistants) may be kind of intimidating to them (peers). It may sort of be a barrier to them interacting with him." (Speech/language pathologist)

Limitations on Receiving Competent Instruction

- In attempting to use discrimination learning to teach the differences between named objects, pictures, symbols, or colors, lessons yielded little because the instructional assistants demonstrated limited knowledge or application of basic instructional design issues such as position bias, use of negative exemplars/distracters, and establishing mastery criteria prior to introducing new items.

Loss of Personal Control

- Did Holly really want to eat lunch apart from her classmates in a separate room? Did Helen really want to play the math game with an adult rather than a classmate like all the other students were doing?

Loss of Gender Identity

- Loss of gender identity was most commonly observed in reference to bathroom use when a male student was taken into a women's bathroom by a female instructional assistant.

Interference with Instruction of Other Students

- An occupational therapist reported that the students without disabilities were more distracted by the instructional assistant doing different activities than by the "noises" of the student with disabilities.

terns of interaction by instructional assistants were passed on. Inservice training that a small number received typically was conducted in groups that included only other instructional assistants. Ironically, experienced professionals who said things like, "We do not have the training to work with these high needs kids" turned over the education of their most challenging students to instructional assistants, many of whom were high school educated, had no previous classroom experience, and had minimal training. As one special educator acknowledged, from a logical perspective, "It doesn't make sense."

In one site where an instructional assistant was not present, the classroom teacher, with support from special educators and related services providers, successfully assumed the primary role for instructing the student with disabilities. She directed his instructional program, spent time teaching him within groups and individually, used sign language to communicate with him, and included him in all class activities. This teacher stated, "You know the teacher needs to be the one who makes the decisions a lot because she is working with Mark (student with disabilities) and she knows Mark and knows which areas he needs help in." A special educator in this site acknowledged that not every aspect of this student's individualized education program (IEP) requires significant support and that some aspects of the IEP, "left to the regular educator would be just fine." The specialist for the deaf-blind on this team said, "I think a lot of it (the teacher's success with the students with disabilities) is that she has high expectations for Mark. She does not do for him; instead she shows him how to do things. She considers him very much part of the class."

Separation from Classmates

Instructional assistants were regularly observed separating the student with disabilities from the class group. For example, when it was time to go to a special area class (e.g., art, music, physical education) one instructional assistant consistently left class a couple minutes before the rest of the class to wheel the student with disabilities to the specialty classroom.

Even when the students were basically stationary, such as seated on a rug to hear a story, the instructional assistant often physically separated the student with disabilities from the group by positioning him on the fringe of the group (e.g., the farthest away from the teacher). Instructional assistants reported that their positioning of the student allowed them to leave the activity whenever they chose.

Sometimes separation from the class occurred during circumstances where the match between class activity and the student's individual needs appeared highly compatible. For example, Annie entered the classroom during an individual writing time. As the instructional assistant began an adapted writing activity using large chart paper and markers, a second instructional assistant approached her and said, "She can do this writing just as easily in the other room as here." With that prompt, the instructional assistants separated Annie from the class without consultation with, or resistance from, the classroom teacher.

Dependence on Adults

Instructional assistants in close proximity to students with disabilities were observed prompting most every behavior exhibited by the students in this study (e.g., using writing implements, using gestures, following instructions, using materials). There was little evidence of fading prompts to decrease dependence and encourage students to respond to other people (e.g., school staff, peers) and more naturally occurring cues (e.g., the presence of certain toys or school supplies). Alternatively, an instructional assistant who was cognizant of Helen's dependence on her, encouraged her to do things for herself through redirection, especially when the student sought unneeded assistance with tasks such as dressing and grooming.

An example of dependence on adults was observed on the school playground during recess. The student with disabilities was being shadowed on a large wooden play structure by an instructional assistant. The student was capably crossing a wooden bridge where safety was not a concern. The student charged toward the bridge, letting go of her assistant's hand. A few steps onto the bridge she stopped abruptly and quietly turned back toward the instructional assistant who was only a foot behind her. The instructional assistant smiled, saying, "You know me. I stick right with you." The student reached back and took the in-

structional assistant's hand instead of crossing the short span of the playground bridge on her own. Sometimes the school system's dependence on instructional assistants was so strong that when the instructional assistants were absent, the family was asked to keep the child home from school or the mother was asked to be the substitute instructional assistant.

Impact on Peer Interactions

Data indicated that close proximity of instructional assistants had an impact on interactions between students with disabilities and their classroom peers. As one special educator shared:

> Sometimes I think it inhibits her relationship with her peers because a lot is done for Holly and Holly doesn't have the opportunity to interact with her peers because there is always somebody hovering over her, showing her what to do or doing things for her. I'd like to get the instructional assistant away from Holly a little bit more so that peers will have a chance to get in there and work more with Holly.

A classroom teacher offered her perspectives on how instructional assistants might be used differently.

> I would definitely prefer having a paraprofessional assigned to the classroom and then just as necessary to have her work with a child (with special educational needs) when there is a specific activity, but not exclusively to work with just that child. I think it is important for two reasons. One is that you don't want to give the child any extra stigma that is associated with a special education label. Second is that it is more healthy for the paraprofessional to work with other children so that he or she doesn't get burned out with working with just one child all the time.

Interference with peer interactions did not occur in all cases. Some team members said that if the instructional assistant was well liked by the other children it had a positive impact on the student with disabilities' access to peers. As a physical therapist described, "I have also seen it (proximity of instructional assistants) be very, very positive, in that the instructional assistant is really well liked and has done a lot to establish wonderful friendships for the student."

Conversely, if the instructional assistant was not well liked it had a corresponding negative impact. Sometimes the close proximity students had with instructional assistants led peers to perceive them as a package deal. As one mother cautiously shared, "I don't know if I should say this or not, but a lot of it was that kids didn't like the aide, so they would stay away from Annie for that reason."

When teachers assigned students to student-directed pairs or small groups, instructional assistants were often observed dominating the group's interactions. In some cases, the involvement of the instructional assistant was so omnipresent that children without disabilities simply left the group with the instructional assistant and joined a different group with only classmates, no adults. In other cases when students without disabilities initiated interactions, they were rebuffed by the instructional assistant. Ronny (a student without disabilities) asked the instructional assistant, "Do you want me to help Jamie?" She answered, "No, not yet." Ronny was never asked back to assist his classmate. At other times instructional assistants interrupted initiations made by peers. For example, in a physical education class, Michael went over to Jaime and began to run with him in his wheelchair to participate in the activity. The instructional assistant interrupted this interaction saying to Michael, "If you want to run, I'll push Jaime." After a hesitant pause, Michael reluctantly gave way to the instructional assistant. At times, prolonged close adult proximity adversely affected peer involvement even when the instructional assistant was not present. As one special educator shared:

> We've tried (reducing adult proximity) . . . like in the lunchroom. Like putting Maria or any of the other students (with disabilities) in the lunchroom and then backing off a little bit. But I think that it (close adult proximity) has been done for so long, that the peers have stayed away for so long, that they are just kind of hesitant to jump right in and do anything.

When the instructional assistant was not in close proximity to the student with disabilities, peers were more likely to fill the space the instructional assistant had vacated. The following example is typical of what we observed.

As the instructional assistant leaves momentarily to get some materials, Mallory (student without disabilities) walks over to Elena (student with disabilities). She puts her hand gently on her shoulder and calmly says "easy hands" in response to Elena being a bit rough with her book. Elena turns to look at Mallory and then makes some vocalizations and moves her hands as Mallory talks to her about her book. As the instructional assistant starts to return, Mallory stops talking with Elena and returns to her seat.

Limitations on Receiving Competent Instruction

Observations and interviews indicated that students in this study participated in classroom activities that typically were not planned by trained professional staff. While several team members praised the work of instructional assistants in their "caregiving duties" (e.g., feeding, dressing), they expressed concerns about their role as assistants of instruction.

Many classroom teachers expected capabilities and performance from instructional assistants that were potentially unrealistic. As one teacher explained, "My problem is that I will be teaching a class and my expectations are that the paraprofessional will get the gist of what I am doing and glean some kernel out of it that can be used right then on the spot." Making such on-the-spot decisions requires a depth of instructional knowledge and skill that many paraprofessionals and professionals do not possess.

When instructional assistants are assigned to a task, many of them say they feel compelled to go through the motions of an activity even when it seems apparent to them that their efforts are not being effective. As one instructional assistant explained, "Sometimes it gets discouraging because he is asleep, but I try. I just feel like I'm baby-sitting. I don't feel like I'm doing what I am supposed to be doing." This instructional assistant was observed repeatedly continuing to speak to the student and presenting activity-related objects, even though it was obvious that the student was asleep. In other cases, instructional assistants would both ask and answer questions posed to students with disabilities. "Would you like to paint the turkey?" (after a 1 sec pause with no observable response) "You would!", then the activity would begin.

Loss of Personal Control

When students have significant communication, motor, and/or sensory difficulties, it can be a challenge for students to advocate for themselves, express their preferences, or at times to reject the decisions of the adults who control most aspects of their personal daily functions at school (e.g., eating, toileting, mobility, selection of leisure activities, choice of friends with whom to spend time). A vision specialist put it succinctly when she pointed out the limited opportunities for choices provided to students with disabilities who "can't verbalize and say 'stop talking to me like that' or can't run away." Instructional assistants frequently made such choices for the student under their supervision. In cases where student communication is unclear, we are left to wonder if the decisions are those the student would make. As one parent wondered, "I think it would be intimidating for me if I was a kid. Just being watched over all the time."

The following examples from our observations, presented as questions, highlight the kinds of decisions made every day that represent a loss of personal control by the students:

- Did Mary really want her cheeseburger dipped in applesauce before she ate each bite?
- Did James really need to be excused from the fun activities in the gymnasium early to have his diapers changed?
- Did James really want to stay inside during recess because it was too cold outside?

Loss of Gender Identity by Students with Disabilities

In cases where the instructional assistant and the student were the opposite gender we observed some interactions that suggested the gender of the student with disabilities was secondary to the gender of the instructional assistant. For example, the gender of the instructional assistant superseded that of the student with disabilities in a physical education class. The teacher divided the class into two groups for warm-up activities. The girls were directed to take five laps around the gym and the boys were directed to do jumping-jacks. As the

physical education teacher said, "OK. Let's go!", the female instructional assistant grabbed James' wheelchair and began running around the gym with him along with all the other girls. When the activity was switched, she assisted him in moving his arms to partially participate in jumping-jacks, again with the girls.

Interference with Instruction of Other Students

Students without disabilities did not seem to be distracted much by idiosyncratic behaviors of their classmate with disabilities (e.g., coughing, vocalizations, stereotyped body movements) or common classroom sounds and movements (e.g., small group discussions, questions being asked of the teacher, talk among classmates, computers, pencil sharpener being used, doors and drawers being opened and closed). However, in some cases instructional assistant behaviors were observed to cause distraction during large group lessons taught by the teacher. During these times, if the instructional assistant began doing a different activity with the student with disabilities in the midst of the teacher's large group activity (e.g., reading a story, playing a game, using manipulative materials), those students without disabilities closest to the instructional assistant turned their attention away from the teacher and toward the instructional assistant.

DISCUSSION

Although many team members acknowledged that instructional assistants can and do play an important role in educating children with disabilities, our interviews and observations identified a series of concerns regarding their proximity to the students they are assigned to support. These data are limited to the cases that were studied, and any generalization to other situations should be approached cautiously, especially considering the modest number of sites, the limited geographic distribution of sites, and their homogeneity in terms of serving students with multiple disabilities in general education classrooms.

It is hoped that results from this study can be used to address related issues and practices in other situations where students with disabilities are supported using instructional assistants. Too often students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms without clear expectations established among the team members regarding which professional staff will plan, implement, monitor, evaluate, and adjust instruction. This absence of clarity helps create an environment in which the instructional assistant directs a student's educational program and maintains excessive proximity with the student. We believe this occurs not because instructional assistants seize control, but rather because instructional assistants are the people in the most subordinate position in the school hierarchy. When supervisory personnel (e.g., classroom teachers, special educators) engaged in limited planning and implemention of instruction for the student with disabilities, the responsibility fell to the assistants. These observations highlight that some decisions about the use of instructional assistants are not necessarily rational, but rather may be driven by teachers' (a) fear of difference or change, (b) adherence to customary routines, (c) a reluctance to add another substantial task to what many perceive as an already extensive set of responsibilities, or (d) lack of knowledge and/or support for teaching the student with disabilities. Instructional assistants can play a valuable educational role in assisting the teaching faculty, but generally we believe it is inappropriate and inadvisable to have instructional assistants serve in the capacity of "teacher."

Although awareness of the effects of proximity is an important first step in addressing its potential hazards, teachers and instructional assistants may need specific training in basic instructional methods designed to fade assistance and encourage students to respond to natural cues (e.g., chaining, time delay procedures, errorless learning, fading, cue redundancy, task analyses, correction procedures that use naturally occurring cues as prompts for the next steps; Alberto & Troutman, 1995; Snell, 1992). Otherwise adults may inadvertently be strengthening the student's cue and prompt dependence. To some extent, many students are initially dependent on cues and supports from the adults who teach them. This starting point needs to change so that adults are increasingly aware of fading their supports to allow students greater autonomy. While capable learners can often overcome less than stellar

teaching approaches, those students with more significant learning difficulties often require more precise planning and instruction in our efforts to help them learn. We believe that this problem is not an issue of placement location, since these same problems can exist in special education classes. Therefore, the concern over increasing instructional integrity is appropriately an important issue that can and should be addressed within the context of general education classrooms. We suggest that the classroom involvement of instructional assistants must be compatible within the context of the broader plan for the classroom that is developed and implemented by the classroom team for the benefit of all the students.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings of this study demonstrate that there are a number of areas of concern regarding the roles of instructional assistants who support the education of students with disabilities in general education settings. The following is a list of considerations for future policy development, school-based practices, training, and research.

- School districts need to rethink their policies on hiring instructional assistants for individual students. We suggest that alternatives be explored that include hiring assistants for the classroom rather than an individual student. This would allow general and special education teachers to distribute instructional assistants' time and job responsibilities more equitably to benefit a variety of students, both with and without disabilities.
- School staff and families need to reach agreement on when students need the close proximity of an adult, when that proximity can be appropriately provided through natural supports such as classmates, and when to appropriately withdraw supports that require close proximity.
- School staff and community members (e.g., classroom teachers, special educators, parents) need awareness training on the effects and potential harm to children caused by excessive adult proximity, such as described in this study (e.g., loss of personal control, loss of gender identity, interference with peer interactions, dependence on adults).
- School teams need to explicitly clarify the role of the classroom teacher as the instructional leader in the classroom including their roles and responsibilities as the teacher for their students with disabilities. It is the classroom teacher's role to direct the activities of the classroom, including the activities of instructional assistants in their charge.
- School staff (e.g., classroom teachers, instructional assistants) should be afforded training in basic instructional procedures that facilitate learning by students with special educational needs in the context of typical classroom activities. Additionally, training should specifically include approaches related to decreasing dependence and fading prompts often associated with excessive and prolonged proximity of adults.
- Students with disabilities need to be physically, programmatically, and interactionally included in classroom activities that have been planned by a qualified teacher in conjunction with support staff as needed (e.g., special educators, related services providers). Such changes in practice should decrease problems associated with students with disabilities being isolated within the classroom.
- Instructional assistants should be provided with competency-based training that includes ongoing, classroom-based supervision by the teacher.
- Instructional assistants should have opportunities for input into instructional planning based on their knowledge of the student, but the ultimate accountability for planning, implementing, monitoring, and adjusting instruction should rest with the professional staff, just as it does for all other students without disabilities.
- Use of instructional assistants in general education classrooms must increasingly be done in ways that consider the unique educational needs of all students in the class, rather than just those with disabilities.
- Research on the aforementioned items should be ongoing in order to explore efficacious ways of supporting students in our schools.

This study suggests that assigning an instructional assistant to a student with special educational needs in a general education class, though intended to be helpful, may sometimes result in problems associated with excessive, prolonged adult proximity. In questioning the current use of instructional assistants, we are not suggesting that instructional assistants not be used or that the field revert to historically ineffective ways of educating students with disabilities (e.g., special education classes, special education schools). We are suggesting that our future policy development, training, and research focus on different configurations of service delivery that provide needed supports in general education classrooms, yet avoid the inherent problems associated with our current practices. Undoubtedly, these service provision variations will necessarily need to be individualized and flexible to account for the diverse variations in students, teachers, schools, and communities across our country. We hope that by raising the issues presented in this study, we can extend the national discussion on practices to support students with varying characteristics in general education classrooms and take corresponding actions that will be educationally credible, financially responsible—helping, not hovering!

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