

Brief Report

The Role and Responsibilities of Teaching Assistants in Inclusive Education: What's Appropriate?

Stacey Minondo, Luanna H. Meyer, and Joy F. Xin
Syracuse University

This study describes a social validation of appropriate roles and responsibilities for teaching assistants (TAs) in inclusive classrooms. A self-report survey was rated by a sample of general education teachers, special education teachers, and TAs employed in urban and rural inclusive programs. Test-retest reliability of the survey was established for the TA sample. A factor analysis of all ratings suggested five major role components: (a) instructional; (b) school support; (c) liaison; (d) personal support; and (e) one-to-one in-class support. Statistically significant differences between mean group ratings indicate a lack of clarity regarding the appropriateness of these role components for TAs. We discuss how school districts might utilize our list to clarify TA job descriptions and shared understandings regarding roles and responsibilities among educational team members.

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Traditionally, teaching assistants (TAs) have performed a variety of educational support roles—clerical,

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All authors were affiliated with Syracuse University when the study began. Currently, Stacey Minondo is with the New York City Board of Education, Luanna H. Meyer is with Massey University in New Zealand, and Joy F. Xin is with Rowan College of New Jersey.

Address all correspondence and requests for reprints to Luanna Meyer, Massey University College of Education, Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North, New Zealand. E-mail: L.Meyer@massey.ac.nz

personal, and instructional. In special education classrooms, TAs provide school and individual student support for children's basic needs including feeding, toileting, and positioning/handling (French & Chopra, 1999; Pickett, 1988). TAs also tutor individual students and small groups, serve as liaison between school and community, and provide other direct and indirect services to students and their families (Jones & Bender, 1993; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). As students with significant disabilities increasingly access general education classrooms, the TA has become an essential special education support (Downing, 1996). Grenot-Scheyer, Jubala, Bishop, and Coots (1996) noted the growing expectation that inclusion entails the assignment of TAs to individual students throughout the school day in general education classrooms. The TAs carry out varied tasks including physical positioning, providing nutrition (e.g., through a gastrointestinal tube), facilitating appropriate communication and interactions with adults and peers, intervening with challenging behavior, adapting materials, and providing direct instruction (Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999).

Empirical evidence regarding actual and appropriate roles and responsibilities for TAs in inclusive classrooms is minimal. We searched more than a dozen of the most frequently referenced books on quality inclusive schooling published from 1990 to 1998 and found few references to the role of the TA. Materials used to train TAs are based on educational best practices on inclusion, rather than on empirical research on aspects of the TA's role to provide classroom support for students (Doyle, 1997; Hammeken, 1996). Two studies highlighted the importance of clarity regarding the role of the TA. Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997) observed that TAs providing one-to-one support who "hovered" alongside the student with severe disabilities in the general education classroom interfered with the social and academic inclusion process. Parents in the French and Chopra (1999) study reported that their children's TAs performed essential instruction and communication roles that might more appropriately be professional responsibilities. Brown, Farrington, Knight, Ross, and Ziegler (1999) ques-

tioned the increasing use of TAs in these roles as less expensive alternatives to professional expertise. Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman (1999) stressed that clear understandings of the roles of the various members of the educational team and the responsibilities of the TA are critical for quality inclusion.

This study provides a social validation of the appropriateness of roles and responsibilities performed by TAs in inclusive classrooms.

Method

We developed a self-report survey of TA role and responsibilities to assess the perceptions of general education teachers, special education teachers, and TAs.

Development and Administration of the Survey

An initial listing of 116 role and responsibility statements was compiled from two sources. First, we conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on TAs in school settings, including any references to teaching assistants, teacher aides, paraprofessionals, and paraeducators. This included an ERIC search covering the years 1982–1995 and relevant journals and newsletters such as *Remedial and Special Education*, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *Impact*, *Journal of The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, and *The Journal of Special Education*. Second, we examined job descriptions from a dozen diverse urban, rural, and suburban New York school districts; these districts were experienced in providing inclusive schooling for students with severe disabilities. Five researchers with expertise in inclusive education for students with severe disabilities then sorted the 116 role and responsibility statements into 15 item categories, reaching consensus through discussion when there was initial disagreement. After categorization, district administrators edited the list for clarity. They were from two large school districts who had professional development responsibilities for staff in inclusive programs.

The 15 item categories (Table 1) comprised the survey instrument. Respondents were instructed to rate the appropriateness of each item as an area for the TA role, using a 7 point-Likert scale, from 1, not appropriate, to 7, most appropriate, and the mid-point of 4, appropriate.

Participants

The 94 practitioners who rated the appropriateness of the survey items included 34 general education teachers, 31 special education teachers, and 29 TAs. All worked in inclusive classrooms with students with severe disabilities in urban and rural schools in New York and Pennsylvania. Respondents included 19 general education elementary school and 15 general education middle school teachers; 20 special education elementary and 9 special education middle school teachers;

and 22 elementary and 7 middle school TAs. In addition to previous experience in special education/general education, respondents reported a mean of 2 years teaching experience in inclusive settings. Detailed information regarding the administration of the survey and informed consent procedures is available from the authors.

Results

Reliability

The survey was developed originally for use by TAs to self-assess job tasks in inclusive programs to support the development of a TA training package (Minondo, 1998). Thus, test–retest reliability was assessed for TAs only. An expanded sample of 52 TAs participated in a test–retest study at a 1 month interval. Thirteen who had participated (at first testing) in the first sample agreed to take the retest and an additional 39 TAs were recruited specifically for the test–retest study. All had worked in inclusive classrooms in urban areas of New York and Pennsylvania (35 at the elementary and 17 at the middle school level) for a minimum of 2 years. To assess intrarater reliability, Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated for the items across the 1 month interval. Correlation coefficients of test–retest reliability indicated low to moderate stability of survey items. All correlations were significant at the .05, .01, or .001 level (Table 1). Questions that addressed specific objectives or tasks (e.g., personal care to students with severe disabilities, peer facilitator [Questions 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, and 15]) showed the highest test–retest correlations, with coefficients ranging from .51 to .78. Test–retest reliability across the 1 month interval for the total scale score was .98 ($p < .001$).

Validity

Table 1 reports the group mean ratings for the 15 survey items.

Construct validity. A factor analysis was carried out to identify major category groupings or constructs for the role and responsibilities of TAs. Responses including the three groups for the 15 item scores were factor analyzed using a varimax oblique rotation (SPSS for Unix). Table 2 shows the loadings of items onto five factors, labeled instructional role, school support role, liaison role, personal support role, and one-to-one in-class role.

Group differences. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze possible differences in responses across the three groups (general education teachers, special education teachers, and TAs) for the five role constructs. Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation scores for the five factors for the three groups. The ANOVA reveals significant between-group differences for school support role,

Table 1
Item Reliability on Test–Retest and Mean Item Scores (*SDs*) of Special Educators (SPE), Teacher Assistants (TA), and General Educators (GE)

TA role and responsibilities survey items ^a	TA (<i>n</i> = 52) Stability ^b	SPE (<i>n</i> = 31) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	TA (<i>n</i> = 34) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	GE (<i>n</i> = 29) <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
1. Personal care: Feeling, lifting/carrying, positioning, grooming; toileting; bus loading	.78***	5.4 (.995)	4.7 (2.37)	5.4 (2.19)
2. One-to-one in-class: One-to-one support for student in classroom, assist student movement	.30*	6.0 (1.48)	6.0 (1.74)	5.8 (1.59)
3. Therapy objectives: Assist therapists and implement procedures designed by therapists	.48***	5.4 (1.52)	5.1 (1.82)	5.1 (1.49)
4. Material adaptation: Modify written materials and equipment; follow-up based on procedures designed by teacher	.45***	5.1 (1.60)	5.7 (1.22)	4.3 (2.04)
5. Assist w/ entire class: Meet needs of student with disabilities while also assisting others; provide support role	.75***	5.6 (1.97)	5.8 (1.51)	5.2 (1.96)
6. Peer facilitator: Support and encourage relationship between students with and without disabilities; intervene in positive ways	.70***	5.9 (1.23)	6.4 (1.08)	5.3 (1.97)
7. Classroom support: Do “gopher” errands, xeroxing for classroom and teachers	.74***	3.4 (2.12)	3.7 (1.92)	2.7 (1.52)
8. Community instruct: Carry out community based instruction and/or job training	.59***	3.8 (2.29)	4.5 (2.33)	3.1 (2.24)
9. General school duties: Cafeteria/lunch duty; playground; health office	.49***	4.3 (2.14)	4.6 (2.20)	3.4 (2.06)
10. Family liaison: Serve as liaison between home and school following guidelines established by teacher; serve as translator (e.g., Spanish)	.67***	3.5 (1.96)	3.8 (2.05)	3.5 (2.03)
11. Team member: Attend team meeting; assist team daily and weekly planning	.33**	5.7 (1.71)	5.4 (1.63)	5.4 (1.84)
12. Monitor performance: Assist in maintaining student records; check and grade homework	.41**	5.3 (1.62)	4.9 (1.77)	3.5 (2.03)
13. Emotional support: Support emotional needs; be a motivator; model/praise positive behaviors	.51***	6.4 (.995)	6.2 (1.24)	5.8 (1.66)
14. Staff development: Participate in staff development; develop positive working relationship with school personnel and families	.44**	5.9 (1.39)	6.1 (1.09)	5.6 (1.53)
15. Take on student’s role: Help students do work; physically assist student to do work; do work for the student	.52***	4.9 (2.04)	4.9 (2.01)	4.8 (1.91)

^a A sample list of the descriptions is provided for each survey item; the actual survey is available by writing to the authors.

^b Correlation coefficient of Pearson product-moment. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

$F(2,91) = 4.05, p < .05$, and liaison role, $F(2,91) = 5.28, p < .01$. A post hoc analysis using the Scheffe test determined that TAs rated the items in these two categories significantly higher than did the general education teachers. Special education teacher ratings were not significantly different from the comparatively lower general education and higher TA ratings. All three groups rated the single item factor one-to-one in-class support role highest of any factor, with agreement across groups that this was a most appropriate role for TAs to perform.

Discussion

Our intention was to develop the TA Role and Responsibilities list for TA self-assessment of specific job profiles. In addition, the survey list could be used by

school districts to establish job descriptions for TA positions as well as by educational teams to develop shared understandings of responsibilities and priorities for roles of individual team members including the TA. The survey would appear to be sufficiently valid for such uses. The five factors emerging from our factor analysis are similar to the four primary roles of connector (liaison), team member (school support), instructor (one-to-one and instructional), and physical caregiver or health service provider (personal support) identified by the parents in the French and Chopra (1999) study. With three exceptions, the items on the survey were also rated as appropriate roles and responsibilities for TAs working in inclusive programs by teachers and TAs. Intrarater test–retest reliability coefficients were modest for individual items, with high reliability for the total survey score. The survey might be used to develop

Table 2
Factor Analysis Results to Identify Item Categories and Role Constructs for the Teacher Assistant

Factor and item numbers	Factor loadings (Varimax rotation) ^a				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Instructional role					
11. Team membership	.80	.00	.00	.22	.00
13. Emotional support for students	.75	.00	.19	.19	.31
12. Monitoring student performance	.54	-.18	.44	.00	.14
14. Staff development	.52	.33	.39	.13	.10
2. School support role					
9. Provide general school duties	.12	.84	.00	.10	.00
7. Basic support tasks	-.25	.70	.19	.21	.00
8. Community based instruction	.47	.60	.10	-.13	-.27
3. Liaison role					
4. Material adaptation	.12	.14	.80	.00	.00
6. Peer facilitator or connector	.44	.12	.63	.22	.26
10. Family liaison	.00	.25	.50	.43	-.19
4. Personal support role					
1. Personal care	.19	.00	-.13	.72	.12
3. Therapy objectives	.32	.21	.15	.61	.30
15. Take on student's role	-.16	.00	.26	.60	.38
5. Assist with entire class	.35	.32	.00	.58	.12
5. One-to-one role					
2. One-to-one in-class support	.12	.00	.00	.00	.84

^a Most loadings are positive for each factor because the scoring was determined according to the polarity of the statement; high scores indicate the "most appropriate" responses on that item and the factor to which it contributes. Note that only items loading above .50 on varimax rotation are included in each factor.

Table 3
Adjusted Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the Items Within Each Factor Category for the Three Groups

Category	General education teachers		Special education teachers		Teacher assistants	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Instructional role	5.08	(1.77)	5.83	(1.43)	5.65	(1.43)
School support role ^a	3.07	(1.77)	3.83	(2.18)	4.27	(2.15)
Liaison role ^b	4.37	(2.01)	4.83	(1.60)	5.30	(1.45)
Personal support role	5.13	(1.89)	5.33	(1.62)	5.13	(1.93)
One-to-one role	5.8	(1.59)	6.0	(1.74)	5.8	(1.59)

^a Between group differences are significant, $F(2,91) = 4.05, p < .05$.

^b Between group differences are significant, $F(2,91) = 5.28, p < .05$.

job profiles as criteria for hiring decisions and for ongoing staff development. A more empirically based job profile such as this could also be useful for educational teams striving to reach clearer understandings about TA responsibilities and roles across the team (Fletcher-Campbell, 1992; Giangreco et al., 1999).

The three survey items that were rated as less than appropriate by at least one group—carrying out "gopher" type errands, community based instruction, and family liaison responsibilities—highlight issues requiring further research. All three groups rated the family liaison item at slightly below the "appropriate" midpoint. This item was part of the liaison role category that revealed significant differences in ratings between the general education teachers and TAs, with the teachers' ratings as appropriate overall but significantly lower than TA ratings. The item also included reference to serving as translator when the first language of

the family was not English. In our technical assistance work with more than 40 diverse school districts throughout New York State that were establishing quality inclusive schooling for students with severe disabilities, we found that selection criteria for TAs in multi-cultural schools included shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds with the families of the students. This was deemed essential as the professional staff tended to be monocultural and the team otherwise lacked various essential services such as translation capacities when needed (Guillory, 2000).

We used a participatory approach to involve practitioners in the interpretation of these results (Meyer, Park, Grenot-Scheyer, Schwartz, & Harry, 1998). We discussed the findings with a group of nearly 50 TAs in an urban district during subsequent training. TAs reported that they were instructed not to communicate directly with families except in special circumstances. In

informal conversations, teachers also told us that the role of family liaison was the purview of the professional despite agreement that the TA communicated often with the family (e.g., writing daily log entries into a home-school notebook). French and Chopra (1999) found that, according to parents, TAs were the primary communicators between home and school; further "... these connections were greatly important to parents" (p. 263). With appropriate training and supervision for TAs, professionals might be more supportive of recognition of a formal family liaison role for TAs.

The liaison role also included materials adaptation and peer facilitator items. Elementary level teachers are reputed to be more sympathetic to students' interpersonal needs than secondary level teachers, but there was ambiguity in our elementary to middle school teachers' ratings on the peer facilitator item. If the TAs are well connected to the school community, they might be in an excellent position to support positive peer interactions (French & Chopra, 1999; Grenot-Scheyer, Staub, Peck, & Schwartz, 1998; Meyer, Minondo, et al., 1998; Park, Gonsier-Gerdin, Hoffman, Whaley, & Mount, 1998). TA ratings were high for peer facilitator responsibilities, whereas the teachers were more focused on academic support. All three groups believed that performing gopher type classroom support activities was inappropriate, with the general education teachers rating this item lowest of all.

This study has limitations. Our sample was a regional one (New York and Pennsylvania) and may not be representative of perspectives of team members in other regions and countries. Our study focused solely on roles and responsibilities rated through self-report. We do not know the extent to which these roles were actually carried out. Although our respondents were experienced educators working in inclusive educational programs, their self-report data should be evaluated further through direct observation. Interview research with various team members might provide a richer source of information on actual and perceived roles and responsibilities, particularly where there are discrepancies. For example, interviews with parents, teachers, and TAs working on the same educational teams might clarify conflicting appropriateness ratings by teachers versus TAs for the home-school liaison item. Similarly, empirical observation research is needed to examine the extent to which team members carry out these reported roles and responsibilities (Marks et al., 1999). In Italy, inclusion has been educational policy for 20 years. Palladino, Cornoldi, Vianello, Scruggs, and Mastropieri (1999) reported a clearer definition of the role and responsibilities of TAs. In Italy, "mild disabilities" is not a recognized category of special education and individualized education plans (IEPs) are developed only for students with higher learning needs. The educational context for inclusion also differs, with class sizes kept small when students with disabilities are included. Fur-

ther, more special education teachers serve smaller numbers of included students and are also expected to meet the learning needs of children without disabilities in the classroom.

If the differences of opinion regarding the appropriateness of various responsibilities for the TA are real and reflect inconsistent practices, these different perspectives can impede critical shared understandings within the educational team (D'Aquanni, 1997; Fletcher-Campbell, 1992; Giangreco et al., 1999). The TA Role and Responsibilities listing can provide a useful discussion starting point for review by school district administrators, educators, TAs, and parents. Self-review can assist in prioritization of tasks to be performed by the TA and the development of shared understandings among all team members regarding their roles and responsibilities. As Brown et al. (1999) emphasized, critical examination of the roles and responsibilities being carried out by TAs and other paraprofessionals might also provoke reconsideration of possible drift in special education services. Serious questions should be asked regarding the appropriate responsibilities for TAs, professional educators, and therapists.

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