

● Innovations in Education

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Each month, as a feature of Educational Leadership we will note in this column significant innovations in education—new practices, new instructional techniques, new programs and/or facilities.*

Whether this feature succeeds depends greatly upon the interest of readers—and especially upon their cooperation in making available to us descriptions of innovations with which they are familiar. The invitation for such cooperation is both open and cordial.

THE TEACHER AIDE

FRANK C. EMMERLING and KANAWHA Z. CHAVIS

Assistant Directors, Comprehensive School Improvement Project, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh

FOR the 900 teachers and 25,000 primary school children engaged in North Carolina's Comprehensive School Improvement Project,¹ the use of teacher aides has been a highly successful and beneficial experience. Recent results obtained from interviews and responses to a questionnaire, indicate the existence of a strong favorable attitude by participating teachers, principals, supervisors and superintendents toward the involvement of teacher

aides as adjunct members of an instructional team. These positive responses attest the significant contributions of teacher aides operating within the framework of CSIP.

Why Aides Are Employed

One of the chief obstacles to improvement of the educational process frequently cited by teachers is the limited time afforded them for teaching and for the thinking and planning essential to developing more effective instructional activities. The teaching act, especially at the primary level, involves a complex process of interactions both between teacher and pupil and among pupils. It is most difficult for the teacher to devote sufficient time to individual attention when, as some surveys indicate, as much as one-fifth of the elementary school teacher's school day is consumed with clerical and other nonprofessional duties not directly related to instruction.

¹ A project of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction jointly sponsored by the North Carolina Board of Education and the Ford Foundation through the North Carolina Fund; the project is aimed at improving teaching and learning within the primary grades with special emphasis on language arts and arithmetic. The CSIP, which relies heavily on the initiative of local school personnel in planning and evaluating their programs in cooperation with college consultants and the state staff, encourages such innovations as nongraded organization, team teaching, the use of teacher aides and more extensive and effective utilization of diversified instructional materials and audiovisual media.

While there are perhaps no ready-made solutions to the problem of providing more time to teach, there are two obvious actions which, if taken, would probably facilitate better teaching. One is the more commonly recognized move of reducing the ratio of pupils per teacher unit; the other is providing clerical and monitorial assistance in addition to some instructional support for the teacher. Already much has been and is being done in North Carolina to reduce the teacher-pupil ratio, and the use of teacher aides is receiving a fair test in a great many classrooms throughout the state.²

How Aides Are Involved

Most of the school CSIP teams consist of three classroom teachers supported by one nonprofessional teacher aide. The team is assisted by a consultant from a North Carolina college or university. This planning and implementing team is aided by the principal of the participating school and by a coordinator from the school system's central office. Provided resources for travel to other experimental school settings and some funds for special instructional materials and equipment, this group carries responsibility for program planning, implementation, and evaluation in each participating school. It is in this "team" setting that the teacher aide functions.

We have categorized duties performed by the aide as: (a) *clerical*, such as collecting money, typing and preparing stencils; (b) *housekeeping*,

such as supervising pupils in certain housekeeping chores and preparing the room for the next day's instruction; (c) *instructional support*, such as tutoring the individual child, assisting during library period or conducting small group drill; (d) *technological*, such as operating various visual media, coordinating film and tape service; (e) *monitorial*, such as helping with wraps, supervising lunch periods and helping with playground activities; and (f) *general*, such as attending team meetings, checking daily on the health of pupils and making arrangements for parent-teacher conferences.

It is important to point out that the functions of providing instructional support were carried out under the direct supervision of a professional teacher. Most project teachers seem to feel that as long as the aide's participation results from mutual agreement by members of the teaching team and contributes in a positive way to the pupil's learning, such involvement in a helping role is both reasonable and desirable.

Some Tentative Conclusions

1. Teacher time is increasingly redirected toward the central goal of instructional improvement in that (a) more time is spent in giving pupils individual and small group attention, (b) more time is devoted to cooperative planning of learning opportunities for pupils, and (c) more attention is given to the pupils' personal-social needs.

With reference to item (a), according to participating teachers, the fact that the aide is present has encouraged more small group work. This in turn also has helped to facilitate four-way

² During the 1966-67 school year, in addition to aides involved in CSIP, there are over 5,000 aides employed in ESEA projects throughout the state.

communication: teacher-to-pupil, pupil-to-teacher, between and among pupils, and teacher-to-teacher. An illustration of some ways in which the aide might help the teacher would be through supervising study; conducting small group drill lessons; reading to children; listening to children read; telling stories; and assisting with such activities as art, music and physical education. Further, the aide serves as the "right hand" of the teacher, freeing him for more intensive work with small groups of children (particularly for reading) and providing the teacher more time for pupil diagnosis and for planning.

As a result of being released, by virtue of having an aide, from some of the more peripheral duties which tend to clutter up the teacher's day, the teacher has more time to study each pupil individually and a better chance to work with him on a more individual basis.

There seems to be a general feeling among participants that much of the success being achieved in working with young children is due in large measure to close personal support rather than any magical method. Further, many project participants feel that such support was made possible by the addition of the aide working within a team situation.

2. The duties of the teacher aide change with the passage of time and the development of a harmonious team working relationship.

A changing role was expected, since in many cases any special training the aide may have received was of an "in-service" type rather than formal aca-

demie instruction. For this reason it generally took some time for the aide to adjust to the group and for the group to learn how to make optimal use of this additional resource person. As planning and organization became more sophisticated, the role usually changed. For many, experience gained as an aide served as a motivation to return to college in order to prepare for teaching as a career.

3. The success of a teacher aide depends in large measure upon a mutually cooperative relationship between the aide and the teachers.

The addition of teacher aides to a cooperative team of three teachers requires closer and more intensive working relationships than are involved in most traditional classrooms. For groups engaged in the process of cooperative planning, "threat" often occurs as a result of the perception of an imposed force which requires a change in the individual's "way of doing things." The complex interpersonal relationship involved in working together cooperatively offers a real challenge to almost any group of people seeking to grow together professionally and to arrive at more creative and more adequate decisions in terms of both individually and cooperatively defined purposes. A productive decision-making effort by a teaching team requires a willingness on the part of group members to consider each idea with minimal bias to the extent that meaningful ideas may be given a fair and reasonable objective hearing. The aide working with the usual three-teacher team actually contributed to this successful communication.

4. The contribution made by many project teacher aides has helped to extend the use of audiovisual media and instructional materials.

Our experience has shown that it has been helpful to have some assistance for the teacher who seeks to make effective use of audiovisual media and to take advantage of the mechanized portion of independent and small group study.

For project aides, utilization of media involves at least three major functions: operation, storage and minor maintenance. At times, the use of this equipment requires the development of tapes, transparencies and filmstrips. Toward this end the teacher aide has performed a most worthwhile function by absorbing much of the responsibility for these time-consuming and somewhat specialized tasks. With the aide's assistance, instructional materials and equipment were used more extensively and more effectively than heretofore.

Thoughts About the Future

Because of developing interest in the utilization of teacher aides stimulated by increased federal support of educational programs, several recommendations concerning the selection, training and in-service education of aides are offered:

1. Further delineation of the role of the teacher aide on the basis of the experience gained would prove helpful and facilitate smooth team operation, particularly in the area of instructional support.

2. Consideration should be given to employing some male aides who relate well to children (possibly alert and

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WHAT QUALIFIES as an Innovation? For this competition, any new practice or action that is producing significant change qualifies. It must be taking place at the elementary level and can be related to curriculum, instruction, organization, evaluation, selection of materials and equipment, grouping, pupil relationships, teacher cooperation, or any other area of elementary education.

HOW RECENT is your Innovation? The innovation must have gone into effect any time after September 1963 and must be in operation during the school year 1966-67. It may be a program in its early stages of development, or it may be a fully developed innovation in operation.

THE IDEA'S the thing! The size, scope, finances, and population of the innovation are secondary to its major idea and interest to teachers throughout the country. Each innovation will be judged on its educational merit, its contribution to the school, relevance to the community, practicability, interest, and clarity of presentation.

WHERE is your Innovation? The innovation may be taking place in your own classroom, a group of classrooms, in your school only, or in several schools.

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capable men who retire early from industry or the armed services). Children, many authorities maintain, need masculine associations at school, since this block of time represents a large portion of their waking hours.

3. Some form of preservice orientation for aides and teachers who will be working together would help to insure a more productive working climate. Certainly such sessions would permit the cooperative examination and interpretation of any available criteria as suggested above in item 2.

4. A major portion of the aide's training should take the form of on-the-job training. There would be opportunities for in-service education programs, including time for aides to get together and exchange ideas. A program for each aide might be individualized on the basis of diagnosis of the special training needs by both the coordinator and the supervising teacher. Training for skills such as typing, when deemed desirable, might be contracted through a community college or local business college, or provided by some other workable arrangement.

Our experience has also indicated that it is desirable that aides be afforded an opportunity to observe the performances of other aides in neighboring schools. Many valuable ideas

are usually gleaned from this experience.

5. Any activities engaged in by the aide should be carried out with the approval and under the supervision of the teacher or teachers involved.

6. Consideration should be given to providing salary increments for aides commensurate with merit. Perhaps the question of merit should be given serious consideration and study. With a new program in the offing, certainly the time is ripe for introducing some new concepts which might offer encouragement for self-improvement and increased productivity.

7. The role of the teacher aide at the secondary level may vary considerably from that of his elementary school counterpart. Some variation in roles would be expected even within the elementary school—it is likely that differences would be noted between the primary and upper grades.

We have every reason to believe, on the basis of two years' experience, that the aides working within the framework of North Carolina's Comprehensive School Improvement Project have made a considerable contribution to the cause of school improvement.

Further exploration of the aide's role as an adjunct member of an instructional team seems to be called for. ❧

CURRICULUM MATERIALS 1967

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Dr. Donald McDonald, Department of Education
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