

The Teacher Aide: A National Study of Confusion



LAUREL N. TANNER *
DANIEL TANNER

THE utilization of paraprofessionals in the schools is developing rapidly into a significant movement in education. Yet few educators have expressed concern over the need to identify criteria for distinguishing between tasks that are professional and paraprofessional.^{1,2}

Recent federal legislation (the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the Education Professions Development Act of 1967) has provided the financial means for employing "teacher aides," "paraprofessionals," or "auxiliary personnel" in schools throughout the United States.

The result has been a rapid escalation in the number of teacher aides in our classrooms. Forty percent of all teacher aide programs got their start in the 1965-66 school year and almost one-half of the programs operating in large public schools are not more than three years old.³ Many aides have

received 100 percent of their salary from federal funds. Some of the cities which in the year 1965-66 financed their aide programs totally from ESEA or OEO funds, or a combination of both, are Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Oakland, Providence, San Antonio, San Diego, Syracuse, Trenton, Washington, D.C., and Wilmington.⁴

Despite the almost phenomenal rise in the number of teacher aides, there is still no theoretical basis for determining the kinds of tasks they should or should not perform. While the function of such personnel is, ostensibly, to relieve teachers of *nonteaching* duties, the literature indicates growing confusion as to (a) their legal role in the school and classroom, and (b) what constitutes an act of *teaching* or *instruction* as contrasted with a *nonteaching* act.

One means for assessing the coherence and legitimacy of a field is to examine its taxonomy. If there is general agreement among the professionals about the organiza-

¹ Robert H. Anderson, "Organizational Character of Education: Staff Utilization and Deployment," *Review of Educational Research* 34: 445-67; October 1964.

² Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, "Teacher Aide—A Job for Anyone in Our Ghetto Schools," *Teachers College Record* 69: 743-51; May 1968.

³ National Education Association, *Teacher Aides in Large School Systems*, Washington, D.C.: the Association, Educational Research Service, April 1967, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-40.

* Laurel N. Tanner, Assistant Professor, Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Hunter College of the City University of New York, New York; Daniel Tanner, Professor of Education, Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey

tion and the classification or labeling of the field, there are meaningful referents for study and discussion. Yet if there is a lack of agreement about the structure and interrelationships of tasks and personnel, and if there are a large number of labels that mean different things to different people, the field is without meaningful referents, and considerable confusion and conflict can be anticipated.

Almost as many labels have been attached to the position of teacher aide as there are flavors of a well-known brand of ice cream. Yet an even greater source of confusion is the lack of agreement as to the role and functions which are to be performed by such personnel. For example, teacher aide may or may not be synonymous with auxiliary aide. Some of the terms commonly used to label this position are paraprofessional, subprofessional, nonprofessional, education aide, teacher aide, instructional aide, auxiliary aide, school aide, technical aide, administrative aide, clerical aide, general aide, administrative assistant, teacher assistant, and instructional assistant.

Survey of State Policies

The purpose of this study was to determine, by means of a national survey of state education departments, the status and trends concerning the role and function of teacher aides. A further objective was to analyze the legally-stated functions of aides in contrast to the functions generally regarded as being in the domain of teaching.

The chief state school officer of each of the 50 states was asked to respond to a mail questionnaire concerning (a) the legal status of "teacher aides" in terms of state statutes and regulations governing their duties; (b) the development of policy statements or guidelines by state education departments defining and delimiting the duties of "teacher aides"; and (c) the role and function of "teacher aides" as perceived by state departments of education, whether or not laws or guidelines are in existence.

All 50 states responded to the questionnaire. Although "teacher aides" are em-

ployed in virtually all of the states, laws pertaining to their employment and functions were in effect in only ten states. Eleven states had developed policies or guidelines. Twenty-nine states reported having no statutory provisions and no policies or guidelines for "teacher aides," although seven states reported that statutes or guidelines are in the process of being developed. These data are presented in Table 1. It must be noted that a few states, such as Maryland, have granted

Laws regarding duties of aides	California, Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont
Policy statements or guidelines regarding duties of aides	Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Washington, Wisconsin, Wyoming
No laws, policy statements, or guidelines regarding duties of aides	Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas,* Colorado,* Connecticut, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana,* Nebraska,* New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota,* Tennessee, Texas, Utah,* Virginia, West Virginia.*

* States reporting efforts to develop laws or policy guidelines.

Table 1. States With and Without Laws, Policy Statements, and Guidelines Governing the Duties of Teacher Aides, 1968-69

home rule to major cities, including the power to control their public schools. Thus it was the opinion of the Attorney General of Maryland that a bylaw which would require local boards of education to employ nonprofessionals for lunchroom supervision could not be binding on the Baltimore Board of Education.

Some state regulations concerning aides do little to clarify the difference between instructional and noninstructional tasks. Indeed they may serve to increase the variety of interpretations from district to district within the state. Nevada is an example. A

Nevada statute grants local boards the power to employ nonprofessional personnel. Such persons must be supervised by certificated personnel when performing instructional tasks but need not be supervised when not involved in instruction. This statute requires that each local board employing aides establish its own policies regarding the duties of such personnel.

Instructional vs. Noninstructional

Problems in connection with the functions of aides were reported by 23 states. These problems were primarily concerned with the differentiation between *teaching* and *nonteaching* functions. An analysis of these functions reveals a lack of agreement among the states as to what constitutes *teaching* and *nonteaching* functions in the classroom and school. The policy guidelines for one state identified no less than 107 functions to be performed by aides; many of these functions would be controversial or illegal if performed in other states.

Whereas aides in Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, South Dakota, and Virginia are not permitted to supervise study halls, in Connecticut and Montana aides may perform this function. In Oregon and Maine aides may supervise study halls in which "independent study" is taking place, but they may not be placed in charge of study halls involving "supervised study."

One reason why aides are not permitted to be placed in charge of study halls in many states is that this would conflict with regulations of the regional accrediting associations. For example, the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, the largest of the regional accrediting associations, requires that the study-hall supervisor be a regularly certificated secondary-school teacher.

Teacher aides employed through the auspices of poverty agencies work in inner-city classrooms where there exists a chronic shortage of qualified elementary school teachers. Are they looked upon as a means of alleviating the teacher shortage? Although

this was not asked in the survey, some states indicated that aides could conceivably be used for this purpose.

For example, the response from Delaware stated that "With the terrific shortage of teachers throughout this part of the country . . . this is going to be one of the best ways to help alleviate some of the problems in our present classrooms." And, not incidentally, teacher aides in Delaware are required to have permits which are categorized as a substandard certificate for those who are unable to meet the requirements for teacher certification. To qualify for such a permit an applicant must have either a high school diploma or "evaluated experience." California and Oregon, on the other hand, have regulations specifying that aides shall not be used to increase class size in relation to the number of classroom teachers.

Although Florida statutes prohibit aides from serving in an instructional capacity unless they possess a valid teaching certificate, and although the guidelines developed by the Florida Department of Education state that aides are not to be used as substitute teachers, the guidelines contain this contradictory clause: "However, where a teacher aide is used as an emergency substitute teacher, he should be reported on the payroll as a substitute teacher and paid as a substitute teacher, as provided under the duly adopted salary schedule."

In 1967 the Illinois legislature passed a bill permitting school boards to employ non-certificated personnel to assist in the instruction of pupils under the immediate supervision of a certificated teacher. The law states that besides being aware of the aide's activities the teacher "shall be able to control or modify them."

As discussed earlier, 23 states reported that they were encountering problems in differentiating between *teaching* and *nonteaching* functions. The Colorado Department of Education made this statement concerning conflicts between teachers and aides: "We have several cases where teachers welcomed aides when given the opportunity to have them—only to complain bitterly a bit later when the aide began to 'take over,' thereby



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threatening the teacher's position." This outcome is not in the least surprising. If the professionals in the field have not been able to distinguish between professional and nonprofessional responsibilities, it seems altogether unreasonable to expect this of the aides themselves.

In 1966 the California legislature made provision for the employment of noncertified aides for compensatory education programs. This paved the way for the Instructional Aide Act of 1968 which authorizes the employment of aides to be used in instruction in regular education programs. Who judges which instructional tasks are appropriate for an individual aide to perform? Not the California State Department of Education, not the local school district, not the school administrator, but the teacher with whom the aide has been placed. This law decrees that aides may perform instructional tasks "which, in the judgment of the certified personnel to whom the instructional aide is assigned, may be performed by a person not licensed as a classroom teacher."

Since teachers tend to differ markedly in how they view their teaching and professional roles, the possibility of the evolution of a cohesive school policy (much less a district, a state, or a professional policy) regarding the duties of aides in California seems remote. Because of the lack of a cohesive set of definitions for nonprofessional and professional tasks, problems of the nature of the one reported by Colorado seem inevitable in California. Some classroom teachers are bound to treat their aides as full partners. Yet in addition to being unequal by virtue of being less qualified, instructional aides are to be paid "at a rate not less than the minimum hourly rate prescribed by federal law." Being treated as partners when they are not equals in terms of salary and qualifications is bound to create problems for all concerned, not to mention the effects of such problems on pupils.

The looseness of California's broad statute can be compared with Wyoming's tight policy statement which declares that "Under no circumstances will these individuals be involved in the instructional process." Whereas state regulations in Oregon, New Jersey, Michigan, and Massachusetts indicate that aides are to perform only noninstructional duties, there are vast differences as to what is regarded as "noninstructional." In New Jersey the correction of students' written work is recognized as the role of the teacher, but in Vermont and Oregon this is considered an appropriate task for aides. Michigan, Massachusetts, and Delaware do not mention this task. Nevertheless, the Delaware regulation states that aides may participate in nonteaching activities which "support the teaching process." The Delaware regulation permits aides to engage in "reading stories, locating reference materials, etc." The "etc." obviously leaves much to local interpretation.

California, Illinois, and Nevada have neatly avoided the knotty problem of separating instructional from noninstructional functions by authorizing the hiring of aides for instructional purposes. But here too there are some very significant differences. The California law states that teachers need not

be physically present when instructional aides are in action. In Illinois, on the other hand, aides are to assist in the instruction of pupils under the immediate supervision of a certified teacher who is directly engaged in an instructional activity.

Differences in Qualifications

Qualifications for aides also differ markedly. Some guidelines and statutes simply ignore the matter. An Iowa regulation requires that applicants for nonteaching positions with supervisory duties have completed 60 semester hours of college preparation. Aides in Oregon and Maine need only be high school graduates, have reached the age of 18, be citizens of the United States, and match the standard of moral character required of teachers.

It is also instructive to look at some of the qualifications for aides in communities where there are no state regulations or guidelines. In New York City, for instance, the educational requirement for school aides is "graduation from an elementary school or a satisfactory equivalent."⁵ In a survey of 217 school systems using teacher aides in 1965-66, the NEA Educational Research Service found that more than one-third reported either no requirements at all or less than a high school education.⁶

Future legislation at the state level concerning the role and functions of teacher aides will depend, to a considerable extent, on whether federal funds for aides continue to flow unabated. The Nixon administration has extended the life of the Office of Economic Opportunity one year beyond its ex-

piration date of June 30, 1970. Other sources of federal funding are ESEA (Title I) and the Education Professions Development Act of 1967.

The findings of this study point to there being no direction or trend in policies, regulations, and legislation regarding the role and functions of teacher aides in the 50 states. Widely diverse legislation and guidelines have not led to the clarification of educational roles and their interrelationships. Rather, they have further muddied some already muddy educational waters. For example, the California Instructional Aide Act does not indicate what, if anything, is different in the nature of the instructional roles of the teacher and the aide.

Nearly half the states report problems concerned with the differentiation between teaching and nonteaching duties. Where there are statutory provisions and guidelines it is clear by their nature that they have been, at best, based on wishful thinking rather than on a rationale recognizing critical differences between professional and nonprofessional functions. The study also reveals that aides in many states are permitted to perform tasks in the domain of teaching.

Perhaps a more fruitful way to approach the problem might be to view it from a professional—nonprofessional perspective. The *teaching—nonteaching* approach has proven decidedly unproductive. Perhaps this is simply because everyone thinks he can teach, whether or not he is a classroom teacher. Yet not everyone is a professional. As in any field, the determination of appropriate tasks for nonprofessionals in education can only be made by the professionals. The confusion with regard to this problem is growing and may well lead to conflict. □

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.



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