EXAMINING ROLE ISSUES IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT
This participatory action research study engaged classroom teachers, special education teachers, teacher assistants, and a principal in examining and resolving role issues within inclusive classrooms. Analysis of data from multiple sources revealed three predominant findings: (a) when teachers were confronted with role problems, they identified an underlying issue of instruction; (b) when tasked with transforming instruction, there was a tendency for participants to add supplementary programs and supports; and (c) role issues were resolved through action planning and equipping classroom teachers with instructional strategies, materials, and support to teach all students within their classrooms. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Current literature on inclusive education suggests that two cornerstones for effective practice may be identified: (a) curricula and instruction that are accessible and beneficial to all students and (b) a continuum of supports and services for students and teachers (Hutchinson, 2010; Idol, 2006; Jordan & Stanovich, 2004). Studies report that, when a foundation of appropriate instruction and support are in place, inclusive education can benefit all students; those with disabilities as well as their nondisabled peers (Cole, Waldron & Majd, 2004; Demeris, Childs & Jordan, 2007). However, researchers also report (a) that teachers continue to identify concerns about their ability to provide instruction for the range of learners within their classrooms (Burstein, et al., 2004; Dybdahl & Ryan, 2009; Horne & Timmons, 2007) and (b) issues related to the roles and responsibilities of teachers and paraprofessionals within inclusive classrooms (Billingsley, 2004a; French & Chopra,
The study reported in this article used participatory action research methodology to examine and confront issues related to the roles of general education classroom teachers, special education teachers, and educational assistants within an inclusive inner city elementary school in a Western Canadian school division.

The general education classroom teacher has been regarded as the “key to successful inclusion” (Jordan & Stanovich, 2004, p. 170) as they optimally assume responsibility for teaching and creating opportunities to learn for all students within their classrooms. Yet, results from numerous studies indicate that, in many situations, classroom teachers do not assume the leadership role in educating students with disabilities in their classrooms; conversely, some findings suggest minimal direct involvement (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; Hemmingsson, Borell, & Gustavsson, 2003; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Studies report that, although classroom teacher attitudes toward inclusive education are increasingly positive, they feel ill-equipped to provide instruction tailored to the expanding range of needs within their classrooms (Burstein et al., 2004; Dybdahl & Ryan, 2009; Horne & Timmons, 2007) and responsibility for students with disabilities is often passed on to support personnel (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Giangreco, Smith, & Pinckney, 2006; Hemmingsson, Borell, & Gustavsson, 2003). Two common supports for inclusive classroom teachers are special education teacher(s) who assist with designing and implementing instruction (Phillippo & Stone, 2006), and paraprofessionals (referred to as teacher assistants in this study) who support students’ participation in general education instruction and curricula (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007).

The movement toward educating all children within inclusive settings has led to a radical shift in the role of the special educator (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). Models of service delivery have evolved from traditional congregated programs and the provision of separate pull-out instruction for individuals and small groups, to a combination of service delivery models that involve multiple roles and responsibilities, and require multiple areas of expertise (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002; Idol, 2006; Phillippo & Stone, 2006; Wasburn-Moses, 2005). Studies report increasing expectations and competing demands resulting in situations in which special educators are spending less time teaching and excessive amounts of time completing paperwork and attending meetings (Kaff, 2004). In some situations, special educators report that they cannot meet student needs within the current structure and recruitment and retention is a growing concern as many special educators are choosing to leave the field (Billingsley, 2004b; Kaff, 2004).

While special education teachers are spending less time with students, and classroom teachers are struggling to teach students with diverse needs, reliance on paraprofessionals to instruct students with disabilities has become a critical issue (Giangreco, 2010; Webster et al., 2010). There is growing concern that the assignment of a paraprofessional has become the default option for supporting students with exceptional needs, and that the role is evolving to involve primarily instruction and behavioral support (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007). Yet there is limited outcome data to suggest that provision of paraprofessional
support is actually in the best interests of students with disabilities (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). On the contrary, excessive assistance and proximity of paraprofessionals has been associated with inadvertent detrimental effects including interference with ownership and responsibility by the classroom teacher (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Hemmingsson et al., 2003).

Arguably, instruction and support are interconnected areas and unresolved issues of instruction may be directly linked to teacher role ambiguity and overload and inappropriate utilization of paraprofessionals. Although there has been some research on resolution of role issues (Billingsley, 2004b; Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; Giangreco & Broer, 2007), there is limited information on methods that consolidate advancement in instructional approaches for diverse learners with efforts to address role issues in inclusive classrooms. This participatory action research (PAR) investigation involved school personnel in concomitantly examining role issues and engaging in actions to improve literacy instruction within four classrooms (Grades 4, 5, 6, and 7). The study was guided by the initial question: How can PAR be applied to examine and resolve role issues in inclusive classrooms? Through the initial stage of PAR, underlying concerns were revealed, participants placed instructional concerns at the core of the research problem, and a second research question was added: How do we teach to the range of different levels and needs within our classrooms? Participants implemented Guided Reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) as one approach within a balanced literacy program to explore the instructional question. Findings on the implementation and outcomes of Guided Reading are reported by Lyons and Thompson (2011). This article focuses on findings related to resolution of role issues.

**METHOD**

Prior to the study, the school division superintendent contacted the researcher to conduct a review of the roles and responsibilities of the special educator role within inclusive schools. Division personnel described an expanding special educator role that was sometimes ill-defined and not well understood by general classroom teachers, administrators, teacher assistants, and the special educators themselves (Lyons, 2008). Further discussion revealed that concerns related to the role of special education teachers intersected with issues related to roles and responsibilities of classroom teachers and teacher assistants. The Division Superintendent requested the researcher's assistance to facilitate a collaborative problem solving and planning process with personnel in one or more schools with the hope that the knowledge generated could be applied within similar contexts. This subsequently led to the current study. School principals were informed and invited to participate in a PAR study and were asked to discuss the opportunity with their staffs. Personnel from a K to 8 inner city school subsequently asked to participate in the study. The study began in September 2008 and continued over a period of seven months.

*Design.* The study was initiated to examine and resolve role issues within inclusive classrooms. From the outset, there was a shared belief among co-participants that school-based personnel needed to be actively involved in planning and decision-making that would directly impact them, and that the study should take place within the school context.
Thus, PAR emerged as the methodology of choice: a collective process that engages co-participants in addressing important concerns in a local context, solving problems, deepening shared understanding, and learning together in the act of creating change and generating knowledge (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Eikeland, 2006).

Setting and Participants. The study took place within an urban K to 8 inner city school in western Canada. The student population was described as “transient” and enrollment fluctuated between 160 and 200 students. During the initial phase of the study, all school personnel (n = 28) participated in the interviews, data interpretation, and problem clarification. The principal and four classroom teams comprised of classroom teacher, special education teacher, and teacher assistant(s) (n = 10) subsequently decided to proceed with the study.

It was difficult to acquire a stable summary of student characteristics within the four participating classrooms as the student population was continually changing with admissions and withdrawals throughout the seven months. Data from initial interviews, teacher journals, and researcher observations revealed a wide range of student characteristics in each of the classrooms including (a) average academic achievement, (b) academic and behavioural difficulties, (c) identified disabilities, (d) disadvantaged backgrounds, and (e) English language learners.

Position of the researcher. My central role was that of a research facilitator; in addition I was also a co-participant in data collection, reflection, and decision making; and an instrument for gathering data. Within the facilitator, or second person role (Reason & Bradbury, 2006), the researcher is not considered an expert; rather s/he is a resource person who assists co-participants to define problems clearly, to advance reflexivity among participants, and to work toward solutions (Stringer, 2007; Wadsworth, 2006). Throughout the process, there was an emphasis on collaborative planning and ongoing evaluation of methods used. This was achieved through doing member checks, documenting feedback and discussing and adjusting methods as needed as we moved through the cyclical process.

Procedures. The PAR framework applied within this study (see Figure 1) was adapted from Stringer (2007) and Heron and Reason (2006). During Phase 1, the Look and Think phase, participants describe and analyze their current situation and identify the problem(s) to be addressed. In this study, the initial problem was identified by Division personnel; thus, the first step was to gather information from the participants themselves (i.e., school personnel). Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all school personnel in September 2008. This was followed by two meetings to collectively interpret data, clarify the research problem, and establish priorities for action. During Phase 2, the Plan phase, the four teams developed action plans that clearly outlined actions, responsibilities, timelines, and data collection procedures.

During Phase 3, the Act and Observe phase, plans were implemented in the Grade 4, 5, and 6 classrooms. Classroom teachers attended the first in a series of three division workshops on implementing guided reading in Grades 4 to 8. Teachers were provided with
instructional strategies and a resource kit of books that were coded according to reading levels.

During implementation, classroom and special education teachers conducted guided reading with groups of three to five students while a teacher assistant supervised and assisted students with independent work. Students were grouped according to reading levels, and groups were reconfigured based on changing needs and changes in enrollment. Implementation in cycle one continued through December 2008.

In the fourth phase, participants collaboratively reflected upon their experiences. The reflection and evaluation of their experiences provided the basis for action planning for the second cycle of the study. Schedules were adjusted, groups were reconfigured as necessary, the Grade 7 team joined the study, and participants decided to continue until the next reporting period (March 2009).

![Figure 1. Participatory action research cycle.](image)

**DATA COLLECTION**
Several types of data were generated and collected throughout the study. First, descriptive data on the school and personnel perspectives were collected through individual semi-structured interviews and two large group meetings at the beginning of the study. Second, during the *Plan* phase of each cycle, the researcher met with each classroom team to develop an action plan. Action plans clearly specified the actions to be taken, responsibilities of each participant, and timelines. Within each team there was mutual agreement that teachers would conduct the guided reading groups and provide instruction while teacher assistants supervised independent activities. Third, data were collected from multiple sources in each of the four participating classrooms throughout the *Act and Observe* and *Reflect and Evaluate* phases. These included (a) teacher reflective notes and notes on student progress, (b) researcher field notes, (c) notes from two participant meetings held in December 2008 and February 2009, (d) student benchmark assessments, and (e) momentary time sampling of student on-task behavior. (Findings from observations and student assessments are reported in Lyons & Thompson, 2011). Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the conclusion of the study.
DATA ANALYSIS

Data from the initial interviews were analyzed to provide the basis for reflection and planning. First, data was coded and imported into categorical matrices (Richards, 2005) for further interpretation by co-participants. Matrices include descriptive categories (e.g., student characteristics, current supports) as well as themes reflecting personnel perspectives on changes that were needed within the school (e.g., programming, training, role clarification). Second, over the course of two group meetings (September and October 2008) co-participants verified data and themes, generated additional data on issues and concerns, and established a priority for the study.

At the conclusion of the study, all qualitative data (interview transcripts, minutes from group reflection meetings, participant journals, observation field notes, and researcher log) were again analyzed inductively using categorical coding. This study was conducted as part of the author’s doctoral research, thus supervision of data analysis and peer review was provided by the doctoral supervisor and committee. In addition, findings were presented to, and verified by co-participants in June 2009.

Member checking was conducted at two levels throughout the study (Brantlinger, Jiminez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). First, interviewees verified verbatim interview transcripts and meeting participants checked and verified meetings’ notes following each meeting. Second, co-participants collectively (a) interpreted data from initial interviews, and (b) reviewed and validated analyses and interpretations of data generated throughout the remainder of the study.

FINDINGS

Findings specific to the implementation and outcomes of guided reading are reported in Lyons & Thompson (2011). The following findings respond to the question: How can participatory action research be applied to examine role issues in inclusive classrooms? The findings are reported in the following categories: (a) examining the current situation, (b) problem clarification, (c) identification of actions (d) role clarification, and (e) perspectives on PAR.

Examining the current situation. Staff commented on several perceived assets within their school and also identified issues related to student and family characteristics, roles, and programming and supports.

Student and family characteristics. Personnel viewed student characteristics, family backgrounds, socioeconomic context, and educational experience as interrelated and complex. Staff described a wide range in student levels of achievement, learning characteristics, and academic needs. Approximately 10% of students had identified disabilities and staff reported that many students had suspected but unidentified learning disabilities and “academic gaps.” Most personnel also commented on what they perceived to be relatively a high number of students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties and “lots of angry kids.” Interviewees also described conditions of family poverty, transience, substance abuse within student homes, child apprehensions, family illiteracy,
and families “in crisis.” As one teacher summarized “There’s things that kind of weigh heavy on your heart, too – that you kind of carry around a long time.”

Role issues. Participants expressed appreciation for the amount of special education teacher time allocated to the school, and commented on the competence of personnel within these roles. For example, one teacher stated, “I have a lot of faith in [special educator]. She’s an amazing individual. She knows kids.” Participants also described an extensive special educator role with multiple, and sometimes, competing demands. Responsibilities included assessment, individual program planning, instruction (in/out of class; individual/small group), information sharing, accessing materials and supports, organizing and scheduling supports (e.g., teacher assistants), supporting curriculum implementation, maintaining student records, and taking students to appointments.

Participants identified the teacher assistants as an asset to the school. Many staff members also highlighted concerns regarding the allocation and responsibilities of teacher assistants. Several teachers commented that allocation of teacher assistant support seemed to be automatic for some students who were identified for individual supplementary funding. As one teacher stated: “It’s just something that’s always been done.” Another teacher commented:

> From my experience here, but also from listening to everyone, it seems to me it’s kind of an automatic; when you get a student who’s designated, that they [the division] will allocate TA time, and how much time is kind of up for discussion. But that’s kind of an automatic . . . I don’t think it should be automatic. I think with kids nothing should necessarily be automatic. (teacher)

Teachers indicated that automatic allocation of teacher assistant time did not always “make sense” to them. Teachers related the viewpoint that sometimes teacher assistant support is the most appropriate alternative; at other times, additional teacher time would be preferred.

They made it clear, however, that they did not pursue additional teacher time as they feared they would not receive approval from the school division and may subsequently “miss out” on allocation of teacher assistant support.

Teacher assistants described a range of responsibilities in terms of who they worked with and whether their responsibilities were to provide support or instruction. Most reported that they were assigned to individual student(s) for at least a portion of the day. For some, this meant providing individual support within the classroom; in other situations, the teacher assistant provided instruction to an individual student outside of the classroom. In some situations, instruction was planned by the teacher; at other times, it was not. Personnel from various roles reported teacher assistants are sometimes expected to do work that may be beyond their role and voiced concern about situations in which the teacher assistant was required to provide instruction.
Sometimes we used them more than we should for things... Some more than others; ones that you know can handle it. I think you tend to put them in situations because you know they can handle it or because it's just the way it is here. (teacher)

How do we change the fact that we're having our teacher assistants, who are least trained – not necessarily least experienced, but least trained – working with our most complex kids. Often with... limited supervision, and that's no fault of anyone. That's just the way the reality plays out. (teacher)

Programming and supports. Findings revealed that multiple programs and personnel supports were provided by the school, school division, and community. The school was staffed with nine full-time classroom teacher positions, principal, part-time assistant principal, and numerous paraprofessional and professional support personnel. Students, families, and teachers were also supported by various division and community supports. Staff commented on the strength of the personnel and supports within their school and most commented on the collegiality and mutual support among staff members.

I think we have a great staff because we just have so many people and everybody's so willing to help. Everyone's door is always open. Like I've never, ever felt that I couldn't get the help or couldn't get what I needed. It's amazing. (teacher)

Similarly, a teacher assistant commented:

It's just very inclusive. I don't know how else to say it. Nobody is more important... I've been on staffs where sometimes the TAs are just, you know, lower... and here I don't feel that at all. I feel valued as a staff member.

Participants also identified multiple areas in which they felt there was a need for change. This included: (a) multiple suggestions related to programming and instruction including a focus on literacy in the middle years, multi-age grouping, differentiated instruction, co-teaching, specialized programs, social skills, and improved transition planning; (b) further training for teachers and teacher assistants; (c) examination of roles and responsibilities and how effectively current supports are being used; (d) increased parent involvement; and (e) increases in personnel, resources, and multi-disciplinary supports. Given the number of complex problems and suggestions for change that were identified, participants were challenged to establish a priority that would serve as the focus for the study.

Problem clarification. Co-participants engaged in small group discussions to identify the focus of the current study. Each group identified a priority which was then shared with the large group. All participants agreed relatively quickly and without debate that their primary concern was “How do we teach to the range of different levels and needs within our classrooms?” Thus, the problem had evolved from a role issue (as identified by Division
personnel) to an instructional issue as identified by school personnel. All teachers agreed that instruction was their primary concern within the inclusive approach.

*Identifying actions.* When co-participants were tasked with identifying actions that would potentially increase their capacity to teach students with diverse needs within the classroom context, an interesting pattern emerged; comments reflected a tendency to add programs rather than transform instruction. Although some co-participants identified practices that would change the way teachers taught and planned for instruction (e.g., co-teaching, differentiated instruction), most suggested additional programs and supports that were extraneous to the classroom. Some suggested that options would essentially remove or reduce the diversity within the classroom by providing separate programs. Thus, there appeared to be a fundamental discrepancy between the research problem generated by the co-participants and the suggested actions. Teachers were asked to reflect on the following comment:

You are telling me that, within all the challenges you face in the school, the core challenge . . . is an issue of how to provide instruction. Yet many of the ideas that you are considering implementing are located outside the classroom. If you continue to add supports, will that address the core challenge [instruction] that you identified?

Teachers commented that they “never thought about it that way before” and that creating and adding programs and supports for students with disabilities was an “automatic response.”

As teachers continued to explore options for transforming instruction, they decided to implement guided reading. When asked why they chose guided reading from a range of options that had been discussed, the teachers identified several reasons. First, they indicated that literacy was a priority and it was difficult to provide instruction appropriate for the range of reading levels within their classrooms. Second, teachers commented on practical aspects of implementing guided reading. The school division was providing workshops, materials, and supports for classroom teachers to implement guided reading (Lyons & Thompson, 2012) and, as one teacher commented “we were planning on doing guided reading anyway so it was the logical choice.” Third, teachers appreciated being provided with a range of reading materials within their classrooms. As one teacher commented, “Make sure that the resources are available. . . . that’s 90% of the battle. It’s just so easy when you sit down and you have material at the kids’ level.”

*Role clarification.* Analysis of teacher/assistant comments and researcher observations revealed that roles were clearly defined through the development of action plans as part of the PAR process and within the implementation of guided reading. From the outset, the implementation of guided reading was presented by the school division as a classroom teacher responsibility; they were equipped with the training and resources and took the lead in guided reading instruction within the classroom. When teachers developed action plans as part of the PAR process, responsibilities for each team member were agreed upon.
and documented as part of the plans. Data from 17 classroom observations revealed that teachers (classroom and special educator) conducted the guided reading groups while the teacher assistants supervised independent work. In one situation, a teacher assistant also provided support to a student within the guided reading group.

Teachers and teacher assistants also reflected on roles and responsibilities beyond guided reading instruction. One classroom teacher commented:

Well, [the Principal] just made me think about the things we’re doing. And she said, “you know, we always have the TAs working with the kids that have the highest needs.” And it just struck me that, yeah, I’m the teacher. Maybe these kids that have more obvious needs, maybe I need to spend more time with them.

Another teacher spoke of a change in thinking that extended to multiple subject areas. The teacher related how, in the past, the students with the most difficulty were often assigned to the teacher assistant. Over the course of the study, the teacher began to question past practice and began assisting students who were experiencing the most difficulty while the teacher assistant supervised or assisted the more capable students. “I don't know why I didn’t think of that before; it seems so obvious now. It was just the way it had always been done.”

Teacher assistants commented on the clarity of their responsibilities and their increased level of satisfaction.

I was able to help the kids . . . I could feel needed and wanted and like actually accomplish something in the classroom. I knew exactly what [the teacher] wanted me to do, and the kids also knew what my job was.

It makes my job easier and it makes it more enjoyable knowing what I should be doing and I have a specific task. And I think it makes the teachers more aware that they need to do something about it and they’re doing it. And then that makes my job easier. When they do their job then my job becomes very easy.

Classroom teachers also commented on past practices of having the special education teacher work with the students with the most difficulty. Upon reflection, the classroom teachers wanted to be more involved in assessment and instruction for students who were struggling. As one teacher stated, “Well, my role, I guess, would be to identify where they’re at [the students], what level they’re working at and find the appropriate resources, organize groups.” Teachers discussed other approaches for teaching their students and talked about the combination of large and small group instruction and various co-teaching arrangements. For example, one teacher commented:
That's my job [teaching]. For me, that's what I was hired for. It's not the traditional stand in front of the classroom and just blurt out stuff and then those who get it, get it, and those who don't, don't, and that's it. Now, for me, the way I was thinking is small groups, you know. I'll teach in the front of the class, and then take the little groups into the back and, you know, and continue the work to make sure they understand.

In summary, data from observations, teacher reflections, and final interviews revealed that participants did not identify role problems within the actions implemented within the study. All roles were clearly defined and mutually agreed upon. Teachers taught, teacher assistants assisted, and all co-participants understood and agreed with their responsibilities and the responsibilities of their co-workers.

During the final interviews, participants were asked to describe what they viewed as appropriate responsibilities for classroom teacher, teacher assistant, and special educator in an inclusive approach. All co-participants indicated that teaching is the responsibility of teachers and agreed that classroom teachers should be the instructional leaders in inclusive classrooms. There was consensus that the role of the classroom teacher is to provide assessment, planning and instruction.

Participants defined the teacher assistant role as “supportive” and outlined responsibilities such as supervising students, helping with independent seat work, keeping students on task, and assisting with personal care needs. Teachers stated that teacher assistants should not be required to plan programs, conduct assessments, or complete report cards. However, there were varying viewpoints regarding the teacher assistant role in instruction. Most teachers clearly stated that teaching is the teacher’s job. One teacher felt that teacher assistants “should be able to do a little bit of teaching in the small group setting... as long as the expectations are clear and the materials are clear and you can sit down and have a little meeting with your TA and just make sure everything is on the table, and they know what their responsibilities are.”

Participants reported that the special educator role is to provide support and serve as a resource for classroom teachers. Support was further described as assessment, assisting the classroom teacher in setting up programming, locating material resources, providing instruction through a co-teaching model or through individual or small-group instruction within/outside of the classroom, assisting in accessing Division and community supports, and liaising with outside agencies.

*Perspectives on PAR.* The initial stage of PAR was clearly the most challenging for all involved. Some participants appreciated being involved in the problem identification, clarification, and planning. Others commented on the frustration and “messiness” involved in clarifying the problem and setting priorities. In the end, participants felt that it was a necessary part of the process.
Well, to be honest in the beginning I was kinda, hmm, I'm not really sure. But having gone, you know, when we were in the library and we were brainstorming and writing things out and trying to get it down to one. I really liked the process of doing that. I remember that one day that I thought, “Wow. That was really good. We really kind of narrowed it down. (teacher assistant)

At the beginning the number of meetings were frustrating, but now I see the need for them. (teacher)

Participants also indicated that their involvement in decision making increased ownership and commitment.

I think it was good doing it as a group and coming up with our own idea and work towards a solution together. Because everyone’s on board then and everyone’s kinda focusing on the same ideas and working towards the same goal of seeing what makes these kids tick. (teacher assistant)

Although guided reading was introduced by the school division, teachers commented on the value of being involved in the decision making at the school level:

The action research has made us, I guess, as a group of teachers, take ownership for it. And I think if you just come in and say, “Well we’re going to do this,” then I think people, too, are more apt to find fault with something that someone else suggests, so if it’s not working it’s like, “Well we told her it didn’t work.” So this way nobody said “you have to do this” or nobody said “this is the way it’s gonna be done”, it just kinda fell into place. And I think the results too – and maybe guided reading was the best way to go because you get those results and you see them and you realize you’re making a difference. (special educator)

The division did say they are taking initiative to implement more guided reading in the upper grades. So that sort of initiative was already there, but we decided to implement it together. (teacher)

Participants also attributed their commitment and motivation to student progress (Lyons & Thompson, 2011). During the initial interviews, teachers spoke of the frustration of trying to meet the needs of such a diverse group of students, and feeling like they were “not getting anywhere” with some students. As students started to display progress in reading skills and motivation to read, teachers’ comments reflected increase satisfaction.

My first month and a half here I felt like, oh, totally a chicken with his head cut off, and just running around trying to do this, trying to do that. And nothing was working. The students were – everything was going over their heads. It was incredible. . . . I felt really bad. I didn’t know what to do. . . . Now
I can see a lot of these kids and I think, you’re gonna make it. You’re gonna make it if you continue to do this. You’re gonna make it. You’re gonna do so many wonderful things with your life.

The increased motivation was also noted by the Principal:

What I didn't say back then and I could have said, is the frustrations of teachers feeling like they’re not getting anywhere with kids. And now . . . what’s really neat to see is the teachers feeling really good because they’re, you know, seeing the growth, its’ visible . . . they’re celebrating the students’ success and I think they’re celebrating their own success.

Teacher assistants also spoke enthusiastically about student progress and their role within the guided reading lessons:

If you could see what they're doing this year compared to what they were doing last year, it’d blow you out of the water. Like, they’re actually, you know, focused. They’re doing work; they're learning; they’re getting better, you know. Their reading’s getting better, their comprehension's getting better. They're actually doing what they should be doing in there.

Finally, participants also valued the opportunity to meet and discuss instructional approaches with colleagues as part of the Act and Observe and Reflect and Evaluate phases. Teachers commented that it was important to be able to speak with others who were implementing the same instructional approach; to share stories; and to talk about problems and solutions. As one teacher commented:

I think I found it so beneficial to be able to meet together as a group to discuss. Lots of the stuff I read, but just that opportunity to meet and dialogue professionally is so huge and we just don’t have enough time for it. So this has really offered that; it really has . . . One of the things that we’ve talked about here is how do we keep those team meetings going? . . . How can we just dialogue together professionally more often? (special educator)

Teachers also reported that the experience led to reflection on other areas of instruction and on how they organize supports and instruction for students who are experiencing difficulties.

So I think it’s really helped, you know, all of us look at what we’re doing in the classroom. And I think that we are really excited about how this is going to spin off into some of the other subject areas.
DISCUSSION
This study began with the purpose of applying participatory action research to examine and resolve issues related to the roles of classroom teacher, special education teacher, and teacher assistant(s) in inclusive classrooms. Through the PAR process, participants transformed a role-related problem to an issue of instruction. Despite the multiple supports that were in place, classroom teachers reported that they did not feel well-equipped to tailor instruction to the wide range of needs within their classrooms. This finding has been reported in research spanning two decades (Bunch, Lupart, & Brown, 1997; Horne & Timmons, 2009; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). A significant finding in this study is that role issues were subsequently resolved through concomitantly building classroom teacher capacity to teach all students, providing resources appropriate to the range of achievement levels within each classroom, and explicitly addressing teacher and teacher assistant responsibilities within the context of instructional planning.

Although the study does not establish a causal link between instruction and role issues, findings raise a fundamental question: to what extent are role problems related to teachers’ perceived capacity to teach the range of students within their classrooms? When classroom teachers do not feel that they can provide appropriate instruction within the classroom, is there a tendency to assign responsibility to the teacher assistant or special educator? Further exploration of this question may help to illuminate factors that contribute to the expanding role of the special educator, the increase in the number of teacher assistants, and the evolution of the teacher assistant role from support to instruction.

A second unique finding from the study was the tendency among teachers, teacher assistants, and administrators to continue to add specialized programs, services, and supports when confronted with issues of instruction. Data revealed that an expansive continuum of supports was available in the school and there was a strong sense of collegiality, collaboration, and support among personnel. Yet, as co-participants generated ideas for actions to address their instructional concern, there was a tendency to continue to add programs and supports rather than addressing the fundamental issues of instruction. This finding may lead us to question whether efforts to promote inclusive education have disproportionately emphasized placement and supports over transforming regular classroom instruction, and highlights the need to build teacher capacity for inclusive pedagogy.

A third finding of the study was that teachers chose an instructional approach that was initiated and supported by the school division. Teachers identified literacy instruction as a primary area of concern. The school division initiative to implement guided reading at the middle years level proved to be very timely for these teachers and they clearly stated that the opportunity and feasibility of the approach was an important consideration in their decision. However, they also valued the opportunity to be involved in the decision making. The impetus for the change implemented in this study was concomitantly top-down (Fullan, 2007) through the school division initiation as well as bottom-up through teacher decision making and ongoing dialogue facilitated through PAR methodology. As Fullan theorizes, teachers are motivated to change when they are provided with the opportunity to “deepen engagement with other colleagues and with mentors in exploring, refining, and
improving their practices as well as setting up an environment in which this not only can happen but is encouraged, rewarded, and pressed to happen” (p. 55).

The issues in this school were multiple and complex and extended well beyond job descriptions. However, role issues were resolved through the actions in this study. Findings demonstrated that (a) when classroom teachers were equipped with instructional strategies to teach all students in their classroom, (b) when they had materials that were appropriate for each student available within their classrooms, and (c) when they outlined responsibilities within the context of instructional planning – role issues dissipated. Students received instruction from the classroom and special education teachers and teacher assistants provided assistance. Classroom teachers took the lead and all agreed that this was the way it should be. Role issues were resolved through the process of addressing instructional concerns and providing opportunity for professional dialogue. Further research exploring instruction as a catalyst for resolving role issues may contribute to the research and literature on inclusive education.

Research on the changing role of teacher assistants, the expanding role of special education teachers, and instructional concerns of classroom teachers suggests an urgent need to examine and transform practice to ensure that (a) all students receive appropriate instruction from qualified teachers and (b) personnel roles and responsibilities are clearly articulated and feasible. Given the gravity of concerns outlined in the literature, there is potential risk of seeking expedient solutions through simply changing role descriptions, policy, or funding criteria. Such top-down approaches may conceivably neglect underlying problems. It is doubtful that the role issues initially identified within this study would have been resolved simply through a reconfiguration of role descriptions and personnel assignments. Rather, findings point to the importance of engaging teachers and teacher assistants in clarifying problems and establishing priorities, and the need for comprehensive initiatives to prepare and equip classroom teachers for inclusive instruction. As demonstrated in this study, PAR methodology may be particularly well suited to resolving issues of inclusive education and advancing inclusive pedagogy. Participatory action research methodology facilitated joint problem analysis and problem solving, change in practice, professional growth, and co-creation of knowledge. Perhaps most significantly, PAR reaffirmed the profound need to engage and support general classroom teachers in efforts to transform instruction.

REFERENCES


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