

Considering Paraeducator Training, Roles, and Responsibilities

Diane Carroll

Most paraeducators receive on-the-job training—often limited to the following:

- Receiving a brief introduction to special education just before going to general education classes or off campus with a student.
- Receiving a few handouts.
- Shadowing another paraeducator with the hope of more specific training in the future.

Of course, this is not enough. We need to—indeed, we must—provide better training for the paraeducators that more of us are employing to help our students (see box, “What Does the Literature Say?”). This article addresses ways that teachers can provide training so that paraeducators are qualified to perform services, as well as delineating the diverse roles and responsibilities that paraeducators hold. Let’s look first at some suggested training procedures.

Training Procedures

The Interview

Initial training can start with the interview. When interviewing potential new paraeducators, in addition to the general interview questions, ask situational questions like these:

On-the-job training for paraeducators is still the norm in most states.

- What would you do if someone were teasing a student?
- How would you handle inappropriate behavior in a general education classroom?
- What would you do in the community if a student lost his or her bus money?

Potential employees may not have the “right” answers to these questions according to program philosophy, but this is a good way to begin to determine their comfort level with the different situations they will encounter and to decide what training needs to take place immediately to keep the program running smoothly. The prospective paraeducator can get some idea of what the job entails, what problems may occur, and how a disability may influence a student’s school day.

Orientation

Orientation before entering the classroom will help set the tone for the work environment (Ann G. Haggert Associates, Inc., 1993). Rogan and Held (1999) recommended an orientation process that includes philosophy, mission statement, culture and values, and clear roles and responsibilities, as well as expectations for performance. When a paraeducator begins working, provide a packet of practical information about the school, such as the following:

- Start and end times.
- Bell schedules.
- Parking permits.

- A map of the building.
- Emergency procedures.
- Attendance policies.
- Confidentiality policies (Boomer, 1980).
- A schedule of students and staff in the department with his or her schedule highlighted.

Take the paraeducator on a tour of the building and introduce him or her to the secretaries, custodians, cooks, and others.

Given their increasing responsibility for providing instruction, all paraeducators should be familiar with the individualized education program (IEP) goals and objectives. A packet containing an IEP summary sheet, with brief statements about goals, objectives, data collection, and notes of other pertinent information, is a quick way to provide this information. This ensures that the paraeducator has a written copy of goals and objectives for each of the students he or she will be working with, and has written information about safety concerns, medical concerns, communication styles, or behavior plans for each student. Remember to allow time for the paraeducator to read the material in the packet.

Sharing Information

With the frantic schedules in special education, teachers and paraeducators often share the most pertinent information just before students enter the classroom or as they pass in the hallways

during the day. Sharing information about students is critical to a smoothly operating program, and there is rarely time to do this.

Plan to spend a few moments before class starts talking with the paraeducator about possible schedule changes for the day. This is a good time to discuss what went well (or what didn't go well) the previous day, and to determine what changes are needed to accommodate a student's educational needs on a regular basis. Being at school 10-15 minutes before students arrive can allow for a few moments of training and support for a paraeducator, as well as allow for some personal time with special education team members. These few minutes not only build rapport, but also establish a venue for regular informal communication about students.

Meetings

Paraeducators report that they want to understand how to interact with students in a productive manner and to understand and follow team plans for instruction (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000). The packets they receive during their first-day orientation provide some basic information, but weekly or monthly training meetings can be much more effective for ongoing professional development and assurances that the paraeducator can appropriately meet the educational needs of students.

When time is allotted to paraeducators for meetings, it is, unfortunately, usually taken away from direct student contact time. Scheduling a weekly or monthly meeting without students is a luxury that does not seem possible to many educators. Based on the mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), that paraeducators be appropriately trained, and based on what paraeducators have expressed about their need to understand and follow instructional plans, it is imperative.

You can schedule meetings in a variety of ways. Sometimes you can adjust paraeducator schedules to allow for a half-hour of training every few weeks. Sometimes meetings can be scheduled before or after school, or during lunch. If all members of the team are unable to meet, the meeting can be videotaped so

others can glean information later. Using an agenda board allows team members the opportunity throughout the week to jot a note of what he or she may need to discuss. An agenda helps to keep meetings on track and ensures that all topics of concern are covered.

Meeting times may reduce direct contact hours with students, but the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. There is more continuity with programming for individual students, people can air difficulties and concerns, and everyone can agree on solutions. Downing et al. (2000) recommended that videotaping students to demonstrate effective means of instruction and support could be a time-efficient way of sharing information that could quickly prepare paraeducators for their expected roles. You should always look for opportunities

throughout the school year for paraeducators to receive inservice training in addition to that provided on the job, such as district-level inservice programs, community college classes, or training provided by other community service organizations.

Team Skills

Depending on school schedules, paraeducators may work with one or more stu-

What Does the Literature Say About Paraeducators?

What Do Paraeducators Do? Schools have employed paraeducators for more than 40 years. During that time, the tasks that they perform have evolved from clerical duties and general monitoring (Gartner, 1971; Hofmeister, 1993) to their current assignments, which include many of the instructional tasks that a teacher does (Sands, Kozleski, & French, 2000, p. 145). Teachers retain the responsibility of planning for and managing the instructional environment and service delivery, planning curriculum adaptations, participating in the staffing process, and collaborating with appropriate building and district personnel, but paraeducators have become a critical component to the team process of educating students with disabilities. Paraeducator responsibility for providing instruction to students has continued to increase (French, 1998; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Miramontes, 1990; Pickett, 1996; Stahl & Lorenz, 1995). Teachers often find themselves responsible for providing appropriate supervision and training for paraeducators that work with their students, and they must consider the ethical and legal issues associated with that obligation (Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Lanford, 2000).

IDEA and Training. The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) specify, "Paraprofessionals who are adequately trained and supervised may assist in the delivery of special education and related services" (Part B, Sec. 612 [a][15]). IDEA also charges states to develop comprehensive systems of personnel development that include the training of paraeducators (Part B, Sec.1412 [a][14]).

What Are the States Doing? States differ substantially in the requirements for training. A few states have mandated training, while others have suggested core competencies. The majority of states have no hiring requirements other than an entry level of a high school diploma or equivalent, so paraeducators still lack sufficient preservice or inservice training. In addition, states are unable to keep up with the ever-changing evolution of the roles and duties of paraeducators (French & Pickett, 1997). On-the-job training is still the norm in most states, leaving the responsibility of paraeducator training to the teacher or individual district (Rogan & Held, 1999).

Provide practical information to new paraeducators, including the school's start and end times, bell schedules, and parking permits.

dents throughout the day. Paraeducators need good communication skills in interacting with co-workers, teachers, and employers, when sharing information about students. Paraeducators need the ability to ask questions, state concerns, and ask for clarification. Paraeducators need team and communication skills in many interactions:

- With their supervising teacher, students, and other paraeducators in their class.
- With parents.
- With general education teachers, librarians, secretaries, principals, and other staff members in the school.
- With bus drivers, store clerks, waiters and waitresses, and employers in the community.
- It is critical that team members have or learn the skills to interact professionally, use good communication skills, and use conflict management skills with each other. The strengths of each team member are used for student success.

Responsibilities When Working with Students

Paraeducators have a high level of responsibility and numerous roles. They provide support for students in general classrooms. They provide instruction in community setting. They support students in more specialized settings. In addition, they provide support on job sites. This section discusses some of those responsibilities and roles and offers suggestions for training.

Inclusion Skills

Daily instructional tasks of a paraeducator in an inclusive setting include modifying materials and curriculum as instructed by the teacher, taking and recording data, and monitoring behavior. Teachers rely on paraeducators to relay information about assignments, concerns of the general educator, behavior of the student, and suggestions for changes.

All paraeducators should be familiar with IEP goals and objectives.

In general education classrooms, paraeducators are responsible for many tasks:

- Making sure that the student learns the curriculum.
- Facilitating social interactions between students.
- Managing small and large groups.
- Teaching appropriate behavior and communication skills.

Paraeducators frequently interact with general educators, discussing class activities, how to best incorporate activities with IEP goals, and how to address behavior or communication with the student.

These interactions sometimes put paraeducators in the difficult position of explaining why a particular student acts out, why a student is in this class rather than the special education class, or listening to the teacher complain about how difficult it is to have “one of those students” in their class. Paraeducators need, but rarely receive, specific training for handling situations such as these. Training needs for paraeducators in inclusive programs might also include instructional strategies, interpersonal skills, behavioral support, and methods of facilitating student interactions with peers.

Facilitating Interpersonal/Social Skills

Paraeducators must constantly model appropriate social skills. Facilitating friendships for students with disabilities can be one of the most difficult tasks. Often students are unable to read social cues that most of us take for granted, and they need considerable prompting and instruction in this area. Paraeducators coach students to use effective communication skills including the following:

- Entering a conversation.
- Changing topics.
- Solving problems.
- Ending a conversation.

The supervising teacher may give instruction and suggestions, but paraeducators working independently with students will undoubtedly encounter situations for which they are not prepared, and will have to use their best judgment and skills to assist the stu-

Paraeducators should have training in the skills of interacting professionally, using good communication skills, and using conflict management skills.

dents in these situations. For example, to go back to a question we presented earlier: What should the paraeducator do when a student is teasing one of the students in special education? Paraeducators may have to make on-the-spot decisions about the situation, keeping the best interest of the student in mind, but should be instructed to seek guidance from the teacher on how to handle future teasing situations or any situations where they feel unsure.

Daily Living Skills

Daily living skills are a significant part of the day for students with multiple needs. Paraeducators begin by assisting students off the bus; teaching students to hang up coats, put away boots, hats and mittens; and teaching appropriate greeting skills as students start their day. They spend a few minutes gathering and reading back-and-forth notebooks, then convey important information to others on the team.

Throughout the rest of the day, they are responsible for assisting students with custodial tasks, changing diapers, teaching self-feeding skills, and proper positioning of students in various devices. As students grow physically, this task can become daunting, requiring two or more paraeducators to move or lift a student safely.

Paraeducators are also asked to perform tasks such as tube feeding, dispensing medications, suctioning of tracheotomy tubes, and other specific health needs, as delegated and trained by the school nurse. These duties can be quite scary for someone new to special education with no medical background. It is sometimes difficult to remember, when providing all of this care, that

paraeducators are responsible for teaching students to assist with these activities as much as possible.

Community Skills

Often one of the more fun parts of a paraeducator's day is working with students in the community. Paraeducators may accompany a student to a community college class, monitoring for appropriate behavior, taking notes, and assisting with tests. They become expert at local public transportation systems as the students learn to access their communities. Assisting with shopping skills requires that they familiarize themselves with local stores and restaurants.

These activities place paraeducators in the position of community liaisons, as well as educators advocating for their students with community members. As they stand in a checkout line with students, slowly reminding them of the next dollar strategy, helping them with appropriate social interaction, they not

only need a great deal of patience, but must also be mindful of the effect this activity has on others in the store. It is an opportune time to indirectly educate community members about the abilities of each student. Figure 1 shows important questions to ask before sending paraeducators out into the community with students.

Before the community trip or event, discuss these questions and any other concerns with the paraeducator. A paraeducator should never do something with which he or she is uncomfortable, nor should a teacher expect it, so clear communication is necessary. When an outing is set up where students are supposed to be entirely responsible for getting on and off the bus at the appropriate stops, the teacher must be sure the supervising paraeducator is prepared for and comfortable with whatever might happen, including getting off the bus at the wrong stop. They also need to know what interventions the teacher expects them to use in case of errors.

Though fun, community activities also place the paraeducator in the most vulnerable situations without the nearby support from the teacher. Paraeducators need to know school and district safety policies and procedures and exercise prudent judgment at all times without the safety net of the school environment, and often without immediate backup from certified personnel. They must be keenly aware of each student and his or her abilities or disabilities in the community and must be constantly aware of potential dangers. They are in the community to assist, but close proximity often encourages students to rely on their prompts; so they must use discretion with each student, affording opportunities to learn while ensuring safety.

Domestic Skills

In teaching domestic skills, paraeducators need to have instruction and training about appropriate teaching techniques related to cooking, laundry, cleaning, and other household tasks. There is a fine line between teaching students to accomplish these skills and making sure the product is reasonable.

Teachers rely on paraeducators to relay information about assignments, concerns of the general educator, behavior of the student, and suggestions for changes.

Teachers need to explain tasks to paraeducators so that they understand individual goals for students. For example, food needs to be prepared safely, and dishes need to be clean; but paraeducators are not responsible for doing the task. Their role is to use appropriate prompting, questioning, and teaching techniques to make sure students learn to do the tasks correctly.

Implications for Practice

Teachers may retain responsibility for staffings, service delivery, and interpreting student data; but paraeducators are providing increasing amounts of instruction for students. Paraeducators spend their entire day with students, teaching appropriate skills in all areas, interacting with adults in each different situation, and regularly reporting all activity to the special education teacher. They must be adept at a variety of teaching techniques that work with all types of students. They must be able to communicate effectively, work with all

Paraeducators are often asked to perform custodial tasks such as tube feeding, dispensing medications, changing diapers, proper positioning of students in various devices, and other challenging daily living tasks.

Figure 1. Questions to Consider Before Sending a Paraeducator into the Community with a Student

1. Is the paraeducator familiar with the student and the goals and objectives to be addressed in the community?
2. Is the planned bus route accurate?
3. Does the student have appropriate items, such as money, bus card, ID card, clothing appropriate for the weather?
4. What should the paraeducator do if the student loses his or her bus money or other personal items?
5. What should the paraeducator do if the student gets lost?
6. Does the paraeducator have a backup plan in case of emergencies?
7. Does the paraeducator have necessary phone numbers and a cell phone?
8. Should the student be allowed to make mistakes or should the paraeducator prompt the student to do everything correctly?

types of personalities, and advocate for their students in all situations both in school and in the community. In fact, paraeducators need to have many of the same kinds of instructional skills that a teacher does.

As difficult as it may be, a program will run more smoothly if you make time for specific training with paraeducators, set up regular meetings, and provide timely feedback and evaluations. The quality of the instructional services that paraeducators provide is directly related to the training they receive, and the responsibility for that training is frequently left to the teacher. Until states and districts develop certification systems and establish training systems for paraeducators, we as teachers are faced with the additional responsibility of ensuring that paraeducators are qualified to provide services to students with disabilities.

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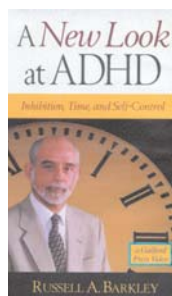
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