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Paraeducators' Tools for Supporting the Instructional Process Considerations Packet

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Paraeducators' Tools for Supporting the Instructional Process

This *Considerations Packet* focuses on tools that paraeducators need in order to offer instructional support to classroom teachers. These tools will help paraeducators understand basic knowledge about programming for students with disabilities, effective communication, and collaboration skills. Practical suggestions and application tips to strengthen paraeducators' ability to effectively support classroom instruction are offered.

"Paraeducators" is the most recent term being applied to persons also known as aides, teaching assistants, instructional assistants, and a variety of other titles (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001a; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). The prefix "para" is defined as "at the side of, beside, alongside of." It is quite fitting, given that paraeducators work alongside of teachers, specialists, and administrators in a school.

The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasizes that students with special needs should be included in general education classrooms as well as in the general curriculum (Doyle, 1997). As schools become more inclusive and integrate special education students into general education classrooms, the role of paraeducators in both general and special education classrooms has increasingly evolved into assisting students with disabilities. Thus, for the first time in special education law, the most recent reauthorization of IDEA stipulates that paraprofessionals may assist in the delivery of services to children with disabilities.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) serves as the central federal law in precollegiate education (PL 107 110, Title I, Part A, § 1119a.2). At the core of NCLB are a number of measures designed to ensure broad gains in student achievement and to hold state departments of education and schools more accountable for student progress. With regard to paraeducators, the NCLB act defines a highly qualified paraeducator as one who has completed two years of study at an institution of higher education, an associate degree or higher degree, or has met a rigorous standard of quality and can demonstrate, through a local or formal state academic assessment, knowledge of and the ability to assist in the instruction of reading, writing, and mathematics.

The teacher has the ultimate responsibility for all that happens in the classroom and is obligated to correct serious misunderstandings about the extent of a paraeducator's responsibility and authority.

Individualized Education Program

The individualized education program (IEP) is a written plan for students identified with special needs. IEPs are developed by teams that, according to the 1997 IDEA reauthorization, must include the child's parents or guardians. The IEP must be reviewed annually. In addition, any member of an IEP team can request a review or the writing of a new IEP prior to the annual review. Components of the IEP are listed below.

IEP Components

- Student's current level of educational functioning, including how the disability influences involvement and progress in the general education curriculum.
- Statement of annual goals.
- Short-term objectives or benchmarks related to meeting disability needs to enable the student to participate in the general education curriculum.
- Related service objectives (if needed).
- Program modifications and supports.
- Extent to which the student participates with nondisabled peers (academic & nonacademic).
- Extent to which the student will not participate with nondisabled peers and rationale.
- Modifications to state or districtwide assessment procedures or alternative assessment measures.
- Transition and interagency services (beginning at age 14).
- Initiation dates, duration, and frequency of services.

A list of frequently used abbreviations in special education appears on page 9.

Ethical Responsibilities

As for all educators, integrity should be an identifying characteristic of paraeducators. The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals lists several ethical responsibilities specifically for paraeducators, including:

- Maintain confidentiality about all personal information and educational records concerning children, youth, and their families.
- Respect the legal and human rights of children, youth, and their families.
- Follow district or agency policies for protecting the health, safety, and well-being of children and youth.
- Demonstrate an understanding of distinctions in the roles of various education personnel.
- Follow the directions of teachers and other supervisors.
- Maintain a record of regular attendance, arrive and depart at specified times, and notify appropriate personnel when absent.
- Demonstrate loyalty, dependability, integrity, and other standards of ethical conduct.
- Demonstrate respect for the cultural diversity and individuality of the children and youth.
- Follow the chain of command for various administrative procedures.
- Demonstrate a willingness to participate in opportunities for continuing education.

(Adapted from Pickett, 1993)

Flexibility and Positive Attitude

Two of the most important characteristics of a successful paraeducator are flexibility and a positive attitude. Paraeducators must be prepared to handle a variety of tasks and changes with a positive attitude. And while most supervisors do not expect paraeducators to know things that have not been taught, they will look for an attitude that indicates readiness to do whatever is needed to improve instruction for students with special needs.

The following worksheet can be used by paraeducators to document challenging classroom situations that occur during the day or week when there is not an immediate opportunity to problem solve with the teacher. Later this form can be reviewed by the teacher and paraeducator to discuss how the situation was handled and plan appropriate action should similar situations arise in the future (Doyle, 1997).

Spontaneous-Incident Documentation Form

- I. Describe the situation from a *before*, *during*, and *after* perspective.
- Before:* What do you remember happening to the student or in the environment just prior to when the incident occurred?
- During:* What did the student say or do?
- After:* What happened immediately following the incident? How did you respond?

Before	
During	
After	

- II. What was the outcome of the situation? (Describe in specific terms).

Did this incident bring to mind any specific area of professional development that you would like to receive?

Did this situation make you think that your team needs to agree on a proactive plan to avoid a recurrence?

Adapted from Doyle, (1997)

Paraeducator Roles and Responsibilities

As mentioned, paraeducators serve in a variety of roles. Their responsibilities may include collecting student data and charting the frequency of student behaviors, which the teacher then uses to make educational decisions (French, 1999). Paraeducators may also suggest or carry out lesson plans, and modify instructional materials based on directions provided by the general or special education teacher. Typically, paraeducators fulfill a variety of student-specific needs; therefore, the first and most important responsibilities are almost always related to supporting students with disabilities. The following table lists examples of both instructional and noninstructional responsibilities that paraeducators commonly carry out.

Noninstructional Responsibilities	Instructional Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Perform clerical and organizational tasks (e.g., attendance records, lunch count). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Observe, record, and chart students' behavioral responses to teacher demonstration/direction.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitor students in the hallway, on the playground, and at the bus stop. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assist with individualized instruction.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assist with supervision during meals and snacks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tutor individuals and/or small groups of students.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Operate audiovisual equipment in the classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement and reinforce teacher-developed instruction.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide specific personal care for students (e.g., restroom use, repositioning). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contribute ideas and suggestions related to general instruction.
(Doyle, 1997, p. 91)	

A sample of the form *Paraprofessional's Daily Schedule* on page 10 may be used by you and your teacher when assigning specific responsibilities.

Communication

Effective communication is a critical and often complicated skill that involves both active listening and objective reporting (Sprick, Garrison & Howard, 2000). Communication is not just saying something. It is saying something in a way that someone else can understand. It also includes the way we choose to act and approach our work. One of the many challenges facing paraeducators in working with their teachers is ineffective communication. This is particularly true in schools where inclusion is practiced due to the variety and number of individuals with whom educators must communicate. Roadblocks to effective communication include ordering, commanding, criticizing, blaming, and being sarcastic. Roadblocks (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001b; Virginia Department of Education, 2002) are "red flags" to interaction, halting the development of effective collaborative relationships. Roadblocks may be verbal behaviors or nonverbal behaviors that send out messages such as, "I'm not listening," or "It doesn't matter what you think," or "Your ideas and feelings are silly and unimportant" (Dettmer, Dyck & Thurston, 1996, p.#153).

An effective way to prevent roadblocks is to practice active listening. Active listening involves avoiding interrupting the person speaking, seeking clarification of what was said, and affirming that the person was listened to. Results of active listening can lead to more descriptive information and more complete understanding. Further, communicating about what is important may

prevent future work relationship problems. The *Communication/Collaboration Self-Evaluation Checklist* on page 5 helps to pinpoint some areas of focus for continued improvement. Making an effort to use effective communication strategies is a demonstration of professionalism.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a process among partners who share mutual goals and who work together to make decisions. As such, it is both interactive and dynamic (Picket & Gerlach, 1997). When teachers and paraeducators collaborate to provide quality instruction for students with disabilities, their working relationship should be characterized by cooperation, congeniality, camaraderie, and professionalism. Benefits of working with other adults include sharing ideas and sharing the workload. It is important that paraeducators understand their roles and have opportunities to discuss concerns with teachers.

Communication/Collaboration Self-Evaluation Checklist		
Key:		
1 = No problem. This is done regularly.		
2 = Minor problem. This may be improved.		
3 = Major problem. This definitely needs attention!		
Activity	Rating 1-3	How can improvements be made in this area?
The teacher has a clearly defined role for me.		
The teacher has checked that I understand my role.		
I know the school district and state guidelines regarding paraeducator roles.		
The teacher has established clear priorities for student learning.		
The teacher has communicated these priorities to me.		
The teacher understands my preferred work style.		
Regular time is set aside to meet and plan with my teacher.		
I encourage respectful and beneficial relationships between families and professionals.		
I encourage and assist individual students and their families to become active participants on the educational team.		
Adapted from Virginia Department of Education, (2002)		

Effective Instruction

There are numerous ways to deliver instruction. However, in order to be effective, instruction should include certain elements. To be effective instructors, paraeducators must:

- Check for prerequisite skills
- Present new content in small steps, integrated with fun introductory activities
- Give appropriate guided practice
- Allow sufficient independent practice
- Conduct reviews and give feedback

The following chart reiterates these components along with suggestions for how to implement them.

THE TEACHING AND LEARNING CYCLE		
Phase	Method of Delivery	Student Learning
Checking for prerequisite skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quizzes • Summaries of previous lessons • Generation of as many facts on the topic as possible 	<p>Students need a context for new material.</p> <p>Students must feel secure when approaching new material without fear of criticism or failure.</p>
Teaching new material in small steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstration • Direct instruction • Lecture 	<p>Students often lack confidence in new material. They may not have a clear picture of concepts. They need to know that they can express their lack of confidence in a safe environment.</p>
Guided practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choral responses • Individual responses • Peer tutoring • Physical guidance 	<p>Students may be hesitant. They need lots of encouragement. While they may be able to repeat facts, they may be limited in their ability to apply new knowledge. They need to know if their responses are correct.</p>
Independent practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework • Drills • Games • Enrichment activities • Application tasks 	<p>Student responses become more fluent and spontaneous. Students acquire a greater depth of understanding. Their confidence grows as they demonstrate greater expertise.</p>
Reviews and Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student demonstrations • Quizzes • Assignments • Reports 	<p>Students may still have a better grasp of facts than application of those facts. They should be able to show a reasonable level of mastery at this stage.</p>

Adapted from Ashbaker & Morgan, (1999)

Instructional Prompts

Doyle (1997) identifies what is meant by instructional prompts as a specific cue telling a student to participate in an activity. Frequently used instructional prompts include natural, gestural, indirect verbal, direct verbal, model, partial physical, and full physical prompts. These prompts are described with examples in the following table and appear again in the Instructional Support Lesson Plan on page 11. The use of prompts should be individually determined by the learning styles and needs of each student (Doyle, 1997). It is important to vary the use of instructional prompts. For example, some students may wait for a verbal cue before starting most activities. When this happens, a point or nudge may be more effective and efficient.

INSTRUCTIONAL PROMPTS		
Prompt	Definition	Example
Natural	Cue to get started that naturally exists in the environment	Bell rings for class.
Gestural	Physical movement to communicate or accentuate a cue	Teacher points to the chalkboard.
Indirect Verbal	Verbal statement or reminder that prompts the student to attend to another cue or to think about and recognize what is expected	“I’m glad to see that so many children are in a straight line.” “Where are the other children right now?”
Direct Verbal	Specific verbal direction	“Joe, please get in line.”
Model	Demonstration of what the student is supposed to do	The teacher, paraeducator, or another student demonstrates how to write the letter “A” for a student to imitate.
Partial Physical	Physical assistance for a portion of the activity or a part of the total movement required for the activity	One student places the pen in another student’s hand. The receiving student then grasps the pen.
Full Physical	Direct physical assistance to complete an activity	Teacher places and maintains hands over the student’s hands.

(Doyle, 1997, p. 55)

Conclusion

While teachers retain ultimate responsibility for service delivery and interpreting student data, paraeducators are providing increasing amounts of instruction for students. In particular, paraeducators are recognized today as a major means of support to programs for students with special needs. Undoubtedly, students benefit when teachers and paraeducators work effectively together as a team. Students will sense a oneness of purpose between teacher and paraeducator, which will assure them that the team’s first priority is their learning and well-being.

References

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- Virginia Department of Education, (2002). *Get on the team! Improving the working relationship between teachers & paraprofessionals*. Richmond, VA: Author.

Additional Resources

Resources are available for loan through the T/TAC W& M library. Visit our website at <http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/index.php> for a complete listing of materials. Select the Library link off the home page and enter "paraeducator" as the subject of your search.

Websites

Technical and Training Assistance Center, The College of William & Mary
<http://education.wm.edu/centers/ttac/index.php>

Council for Exceptional Children Professional Standards
<http://www.cec.sped.org/Standards>

Project PARA
<http://para.unl.edu/index.lasso>

American Federation of Teachers, Paraprofessional and School Related Personnel Division
<http://www.aft.org/yourwork/psrp/>

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services
<http://www.NRCpara.org>

Abbreviations

Many abbreviations are used among professionals who care for and educate children with special needs. Common abbreviations include the following:

ADA - Americans with Disabilities Act	IEP - Individualized Education Program
ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	IFSP - Individualized Family Service Plan
BIP - Behavioral Intervention Plan	IHE - Institution of Higher Education
CSC - Child Study Committee	IQ - Intelligence Quotient
DD - Developmental Delay	ISS - In-school Suspension
ESL - English as a Second Language	LEA - Local Education Agency
FAPE - Free Appropriate Public Education	LD - Learning Disability
FAS - Fetal Alcohol Syndrome	SED - Seriously Emotionally Disordered
FBA - Functional Behavioral Assessment	SEA - State Education Agency

Effective paraeducators:

- 1. Listen carefully to directions***
- 2. Write down lengthy or complex directions***
- 3. Ask questions to ensure understanding***

This *Considerations Packet* was prepared by Loury Floyd, December 2003. Updated by Tina Spencer 2015.

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT LESSON PLAN

Student _____ Course _____ Unit _____ Date/s _____

Instructional Objective/s for Most Students	Instructional Prompts		Modifications
	<u>Type of Prompt</u> <input type="checkbox"/> natural <input type="checkbox"/> gestural <input type="checkbox"/> indirect verbal <input type="checkbox"/> direct verbal <input type="checkbox"/> model <input type="checkbox"/> partial physical <input type="checkbox"/> full physical	<u>Who Provides Support?</u> <input type="checkbox"/> peer <input type="checkbox"/> general educator <input type="checkbox"/> special educator <input type="checkbox"/> paraeducator <input type="checkbox"/> related services personnel	Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facts • concepts • skills • materials Process Product

Adapted from Doyle, (1997)

Additional IEP Objective/s for this Lesson:
