



VPI Information Brief 3 Roles of the Paraeducator in Inclusive Classrooms

CLASSROOM SCENARIO

After 20 years teaching at the same school, Mrs. Katz, a general educator, is making a change. She recently started a new career as a first grade teacher in an inclusive classroom at Tiger Den Elementary School. Mrs. Katz is excited about the diversity in the students she will teach, but apprehensive about working with the paraeducator who will be assigned to her class. Ms. Fleur-de-lis is the paraeducator. She has been working at Tiger Den Elementary School for 25 years. Ms. Fleur-de-lis is working toward becoming highly qualified and is very traditional in her approach to instruction and discipline. How might Mrs. Katz prepare for this situation?

Mrs. Katz is faced with a common situation for educators. Professional collaboration has become a key component in effective schools and a necessity for successful inclusion (Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2004). Paraeducators play a role in the success of inclusive classrooms that demonstrate improved student outcomes. But such success is planned and coordinated. It is important to define the role of a paraeducator, provide necessary professional development, and establish effective collaboration practices. Where can Mrs. Katz begin in defining roles?

Initially, Mrs. Katz might familiarize herself with the requirements of a highly qualified Louisiana paraeducator (<http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/tsac/1788.html>). In addition, conversations with Ms. Fleur-de-lis will provide her with a better understanding of Ms. Fleur-de-lis' educational background and aspirations. Such knowledge might help Mrs. Katz shape the most appropriate role or roles for her paraeducator. Salend (2001) provides a list of paraeducator roles that may be beneficial for Mrs. Katz to consider. They include the following:

- Reading to students;
- Serving as a translator;
- Preparing individualized learning materials and modifying materials;

- Providing individualized and small group instruction to reinforce concepts previously taught;
- Administering teacher-made tests;
- Helping students with motor and mobility problems, health and physical needs, and / or providing emotional support;
- Supervising students during activities outside the classroom;
- Observing and recording behavior and helping manage student behavior.

Wood (2002) states that many paraeducators get mixed messages, such as, "I need help, but watch your boundaries." One effective collaboration technique is to make the roles and responsibilities explicit by writing them down for all to see. As part of this process, Wood (2002) also suggests that the lead teacher find out about the paraeducator's interest and ability levels. In this approach, the strengths and interests of the paraeducator are identified and built upon. Also, the teacher demonstrates respect for a colleague.

Once roles are determined, then appropriate training should be provided to enable the paraeducator to be prepared to successfully implement the identified roles (Giangreco, Edelman,

Broer, & Doyle, 2001). These roles can be discussed during an initial orientation. According to Downing, Rynadak, and Clark (2000), 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. Preparation for paraeducators in inclusive programs might include instructional and behavioral support strategies, methods of facilitating student interactions with peers, interacting professionally, using good communication skills, and using conflict management skills (Carroll, 2001). Providing these training opportunities will increase the paraeducator's confidence in supporting students with disabilities and also allow the paraeducator to be utilized to his or her full potential.

To ensure effective collaboration, it is important for Mrs. Katz and Ms. Fleur-de-lis to meet frequently. Short meetings can be held before school, during lunch, or Ms. Fleur-de-lis's schedule could be adjusted to allow a half-hour meeting every few weeks for more in-depth collaboration. Carroll (2001) indicates that these few minutes not only build rapport, but also establish a venue for regular informal communication about students.

Also, with respect to collaboration, Mrs. Katz and Ms. Fleur-de-lis might consider working together to define class goals and develop objectives to meet these goals. This would allow Ms. Fleur-de-lis to have some instructional input. Her partnership in developing the goals will increase her knowledge about the class direction and hopefully allow her to feel like a valued member of the team. Ownership and commitment often go hand-in-hand.

Improvement of student outcomes is at the core of the collaborative efforts of both the teacher and paraeducator. Carroll (2001) believes that given the paraeducator's increasing responsibility

for providing instruction, he or she should be familiar with the students' individualized education program (IEP) goals and objectives. A packet containing IEP summary sheets, with brief statements about goals, objectives, data collection, and notes of other pertinent information can be an effective way to provide important information.

Focusing on defining roles, providing necessary professional development and support, and building a strong relationship are the steps we suggest that Mrs. Katz take to ensure she and Ms. Fleur-de-lis are an effective team.

Questions for Reflection

1. What trainings are provided to paraeducators in your district?
2. How do you handle personality conflicts with paraeducators?
3. What steps can you take to ensure the paraeducator is a valued member of the team?
4. How can you provide effective feedback to your paraeducator on his / her role in supporting students with diverse needs?

Link to discussion board log-in

<http://www.validatedpractices.com/flxiforums/login.cfm?fid=0>

References:

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