

More Inclusive Environments Create Changes in Roles of Paraprofessionals

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As special education law has been revised over the years, the roles of special educators, general educators, and paraprofessionals who work together have changed. In an inclusive educational environment, paraprofessionals are responsible for providing services to a variety of students in general education classes and facilitating natural peer supports in those settings. This may raise some questions for paraprofessionals as they must adapt to their changing role.

Why are students with disabilities included in the current accountability system?

An accurate picture of education must include this group of students. The current accountability system under which our schools operate has impacted how services are delivered to students with disabilities. The inclusive environments that most schools strive to create require that students with disabilities receive instruction in the general education classroom, with any pull-out services being temporary. All students are expected to participate in the general education curriculum and assessments, dismissing the opportunity for loopholes that previously removed some students from state testing. Historically, paraprofessionals have been assistants in self-contained special education classrooms or have been assigned to assist individual or small groups of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1997 ensured greater access to the general education curriculum; and in 2004, the focus became improving performance and aligning services with national efforts. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 identifies students with disabilities as a subgroup of all students and calls for adequate yearly progress on state assessments for this group. In order for students with disabilities to benefit from changes in educational policies and practices, their performance on assessments must be reported.

What is my role on a collaborative team?

When schools decide that paraprofessionals are needed to support students with IEPs, they must be clear about the expectations of the position. Some ways to communicate these expectations include:

- Develop clear job descriptions that provide guidelines for hiring, evaluating performance, and providing in-service training;
- Create a schedule and guidelines for supervision;
- Provide daily work schedules and guidelines in writing; and
- Support active involvement of paraprofessionals on collaborative teams.

(Adapted from Snell & Janney, 2005)

These practices will help schools meet the federal requirements of highly qualified paraprofessionals and provide clarification of their role. On the other hand, Gerlach (2003) outlined some suggestions for paraprofessionals when working with teachers and other supervisors.

- Recognize the role of the principal as the building leader,
- Recognize that your supervising teacher has the ultimate responsibility for instruction and classroom management,
- Follow the directions given to you by your principal and your supervising teacher,
- Ask questions whenever you feel the directions are not clear,
- Understand the distinctions in the roles of paraeducators and teachers, and
- Ask if there is a time set aside for meeting with your supervisors, including the principal (p. 16).

What is my part in co-teaching?

Friend (2007) described co-teaching as two or more licensed professionals sharing instructional responsibility for a single group of students. Sharing ownership,

resources, and accountability does not mean that either professional needs to give up her identity as a special or general educator. The paraprofessional also shares some responsibilities, but does not have sole responsibility for any aspect of a student's educational program. The paraprofessional provides support to curriculum and instruction. The following list specifies some ways this might be done.

1. Assist with implementation of lesson plans and instructional strategies that are teacher designed.
2. Assist in preparation of learning materials.
3. Understand the rationale, mission, philosophy, and goals that have been determined and how this influences curriculum and instruction.
4. Be aware of the different methods used by teachers to accommodate a learner's needs and assist with modifications and accommodations for students with disabilities.
5. Clarify your role in the use of technology in the classroom.
6. Learn educational jargon by asking questions if you are unfamiliar with terminology.
7. Be aware of individual learning styles of students.
8. Be aware of typical developmental patterns of children at different ages.
9. Understand the requirements of the accountability system.
10. Clarify your role in monitoring student performance and recording student progress.
(Adapted from Gerlach, 2003)

How can I be sure I'm doing the right thing for all students and not just doing things right?

One element that is vital to the change process is a shared vision. To change the way service is delivered to students with disabilities to a more effective model requires a shared vision of a school that embraces inclusive practices - a school that makes decisions to benefit all students. Administrators and teachers must spend time reflecting on their values and beliefs about teaching and learning and providing optimal opportunities for all students. Paraprofessionals must be part of that discussion to understand why things are done a certain way. Consider this list of beliefs that may be critical to the success of all students.

- All students can think and learn.
- All students have value and unique gifts to offer their school.
- Diversity within a school community should be embraced and celebrated.
- All students differ in the ways they most effectively learn and express their understandings.

- All students learn best when they are actively and collaboratively building knowledge with their classmates and their teacher.
- All students learn best when studying interesting and challenging topics that they find personally meaningful.
- Effective teaching for students with disabilities is substantively the same as effective teaching for all students (Castagnera, Fisher, Rodifer, & Sax, p. 15).

Educators who make decisions based on what's best for all students, individually and collectively, realize that the roles of the general educator, special educator, and paraprofessional must work in concert and be grounded in shared values and beliefs. After all, what we believe determines our actions; and the high level of accountability for educators and for students demands that our actions support student achievement.

References & Resources:

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