

## "Whaddaya Mean It's in My Job Description"? Identifying and Teaching Skills to Paraeducators

Robert L. Morgan, Gregory W. Gassman, Charles L. Salzberg,  
Jan W. Jardine, *Utah State University.*

At times, some paraeducators may be inclined to ask "what, if anything, is *not* my job description?" Indeed, many paraeducators perform a multitude of clerical, organizational, and instructional tasks (Pickett, 1990). Another question may be "when do I receive training for performing this multitude of tasks?" Although paraeducators are generally receptive - even eager - to participate in training (Passaaro, Pickett, Latham, & Hongbo, 1991), it seems their direct involvement with students is so critical that, paradoxically, little time remains for developing their own skills. It is a reality that, in many districts, training of paraeducators is severely limited because of scheduling problems, competing job assignments, and budgetary constraints. Yet,



Tennessee generally agreed on these rankings, although the Tennessee sample ranked legal and ethical foundations and classroom organization lower than behavior management and higher than instructional strategies. Overall, lower priorities were given to areas such as interpersonal communications, characteristics of students with disabilities, assessment, and human development.

In the behavior management area, the highest ranked topics were understanding behavioral principles, identifying positive reinforcers, and applying differential reinforcement procedures. In instructional strategies, highest-ranked topics were using motivational procedures, applying modeling techniques (demonstrating tasks), and prompting/questioning procedures.

Although some differences existed within and across groups, respondents to this survey generally agreed on the most important training priorities for paraeducators. The findings are similar to those obtained in a survey of teachers, administrators, and para-professionals in rural districts of the intermountain region by Passaro and colleagues (1991). The priorities identified in the current survey reflect a substantial shift from clerical to instructional responsibilities of the paraeducator (Hofmeister, 1991). These priorities will guide our project in the development of the paraeducator curriculum. Specific content and formats of the curriculum are described in another article (page 7) of this edition.

The questions raised at the outset of this article remain unanswered. However it is our hope that through a program targeting highest priority skills and focusing on efficient delivery of training, paraeducators can learn the critical skills they need to function as competent members of special education teams.

List of references available by contacting ULRC.

*"Results from over 250 survey respondents were analyzed. Overall findings indicated that teachers and paraeducators were nearly identical in their rankings of general competencies."*

if competencies are carefully identified and efficiently taught during what little time is available, the value of a paraeducator to their students and other educators may increase dramatically.

Beginning in September of 1991, the Paraeducator Curriculum Project at Utah State University began developing a comprehensive, competency-based, video-assisted training program for paraeducators (Gassman, 1992). Our project goal is to develop an easy-to-use program to teach practical skills to paraeducators in special education classrooms. To achieve this goal, we first reviewed the professional literature on paraeducators to identify the tasks they perform in the classroom and the skills they need to carry out those tasks. Second, we collected training programs and materials from several state departments, districts, and universities. Third, we developed a survey seeking input from educational personnel on the relevance of various skills identified in the literature and training programs. These activities served to guide the development of a paraeducator curriculum.

The survey results, which represented the primary source of information for developing our training program, are described below.

In order to identify specific skills, we sought the advice of teachers and paraeducators from across the U. S. by surveying personnel from the Jordan School District in Utah, the Wyandotte County District in Kansas, and the Knoxville District in Tennessee. These districts represented a diversity of levels of inservice training to paraeducators.

Results from over 250 survey respondents were analyzed. Overall findings indicated that teachers and paraeducators were nearly identical in their rankings of general competencies. Both groups identified instructional strategies and behavior management skills as the two most important competencies for paraeducators. Teachers ranked classroom organization skills third, while paraeducators ranked classroom organization and assessment skills of equal importance.

Respondents from Utah, Kansas, and