Supervision Of Paraeducators: Is This Really In My Job Description?

Marilyn Likins and Bob Morgan, Department of Special Education, Utah State University

Section 612. (15) (B) (iii) of IDEA 97 calls upon states to “allow paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised, in accordance with State law, regulations, or written policy . . . to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities . . .” Like other states, Utah relies on paraeducators to perform increasingly numerous and complex roles as instructional assistants. Therefore, a key issue facing state and local school districts relates to the implications that this legislation holds. What steps have we taken to address training and supervision issues in our state? What remains to be done?

The Status of Training and Supervision in Utah

Well before the reauthorization of IDEA, Utah was on its way to creating an infrastructure to support paraeducator development at a state and district level. Qualification standards for paraeducators in special education were approved by the State Board of Education in April 1995 (see Figure 1). These standards and accompanying guidelines emphasize the need for districts to clarify the job roles and responsibilities of paraeducators, and highlight the necessity for requisite training and supervision by qualified personnel.

In the early 1990s, significant efforts were in place to develop comprehensive, competency-based training programs for paraeducators (see Training Resources). Districts such as Jordan and Granite began systematic inservice training to prepare their paraeducators for increased demands in their changing job roles. In addition, a collaborative effort between the Utah State Office of Education, Utah school districts, Salt Lake Community College and Utah State University, produced an associates degree program designed specifically for paraeducators linking state-wide, comprehensive training to career development.

Training for paraeducators has come a long way in the last five years, but what of their supervisors? How well are teachers and other licensed or certified personnel being prepared to supervise paraeducators? Is there comprehensive training in place to prepare prospective or experienced professionals for this critical role?

Currently, districts and teacher education programs have limited training resources available. Within teacher education programs in Utah, issues related to paraeducator supervision are typically embedded in traditional course work. Given the increasing emphasis at a federal and state level, a course dedicated to supervision issues needs to be explored. What would this training look like? What are the critical topics that such a course might address?

Supervision Training Priorities

Teachers need numerous and wide-ranging skills to supervise paraeducators and guide classroom teams. According to a
Supervision Training Resources


Lasater, M., & Johnson, M. LR Consulting training resources to conduct school development for paraprofessionals and partner teachers. Kay, 77441-6049.


MARCH 1999

Figure 2 Sample Job Description for a Resource Room Paraprofessional (Morgan et al, 1998)

Qualifications:
- High school diploma
- Minimum of 21 years of age
- Completion of the district’s preservice training program for paraprofessionals

Time and Hours:
- August 25-25 May 29 (minimum scheduled hours)
- 7:45 a.m. to 2:45 p.m.
- One year with renewal based on personnel evaluation.

Location:
- East Elementary, assigned room resources and general education classrooms.

Supervisor:
- See specific responsibilities below.

Responsibilities:
- Assist in administering informal assessments for instructional purposes for which appropriate training has been provided, and for which competency has been demonstrated.
- Special Education Teacher (SE)
- Supervise student activities as assigned by SE or other licensed school personnel.
- Supervisors: SE and General Education Teacher (GE)
- Given appropriate training and demonstrated competence, assist and/or directly carry out instructional strategies as assigned by SE or other licensed/certified school personnel.
- Supervisors: SE and GE.
- Given appropriate training and demonstrated competence, assist and/or directly carry out instructional strategies related to students’ Individualized Education Plans (IEP) in special or general education settings.
- Supervisors: SE.
- Collaborate as a member of a classroom or instructional team. Supervisors: SE and GE.

Training Requirements and Evaluation:
- Completes a year academic calendar and participate in at least 40 hours of instructional activities in the classroom. (Other responsibilities above Participation must be approved by the administration prior to scheduled training. This paraprofessional will also be encouraged to enroll in university courses, community college courses, or other collaboration opportunities with the supervising teacher and administration.
- Within two weeks of starting employment, correctly answer factual questions regarding discipline policy, and state and federal laws regarding student assessment and instruction.
- Within one month of starting employment, demonstrate competency in administering informal assessments and in carrying out instructional strategies given training by licensed personnel.

national survey of 260 inservice-level teachers (Morgan, Mattson, & Salzberg, under review), the four most important supervision training priorities were:

- delineating roles and responsibilities,
- prevention of management problems,
- effective communication, and
- observation and feedback.

Priority 1: Delineating roles and responsibilities. As paraprofessionals become more active in the educational process, their roles and responsibilities begin to resemble those traditionally reserved for teachers. Yet, role distinctions are essential to ensure efficient and effective management and instruction. Teachers and other members of classroom teams should identify role distinctions and overlaps. For example, teachers may analyze results of diagnostic tests, prepare lesson plans, deliver large group instruction, grade subjective papers, and assign grades (French, 1994). In contrast, paraprofessionals may focus on objective tests, monitor supplemental or independent seatwork, and observe and record student behavior. Overlapping responsibilities require preparation and observation of the successful implementation of activities by the teacher, answers to questions about the limits of authority and responsibility by the paraprofessional, and communication from the teacher on the needs and concerns of all team members’ roles. Perhaps the starting point in delineating responsibilities is the detailed description of job duties (see Figure 2: Sample Job Description for a Resource Room Paraprofessional). Keep in mind that job descriptions must be geared specifically to the needs of the instructional environment, the strengths and needs of the team members, and district policy.

The job description in Figure 2 may not apply to some situations (e.g., job coach).

Priority 2: Prevention of management problems. The best way to avoid management conflicts is for the teacher to anticipate potential problems, generate possible solutions, brainstorm the relatively effectiveness of each solution, and discuss issues with team members (Friend & Cook, 1996). Teachers may wish to use a “situational assessment,” in which teams collectively decide how each member

would respond to hypothetical problem situations before they occur (Morgan, Gee, Merrill, Gerity, & Breancheley, 1998). However, these proactive strategies may seem laborious to carry out, yet management problems difficult to solve, when available for team meetings is minimal. Indirect methods of communication may be useful, such as a classroom log, a location for daily lesson plans and scheduled activities, a dictaphone to leave messages, or an email system.

Priority 3: Effective communication. Teachers are models of behavior not only for their students but also for the adults whom they supervise. Indeed, teachers are in a central position to demonstrate effective communication skills with team members (Morgan, 1998). The teacher’s model is an essential ingredient in the paraprofessional’s ability to determine whether team conflicts are resolved. Some supervision training programs now focus on enhancing communication skills of teachers and paraprofessionals (see Supervision Training Resources below).

Priority 4: Observation and feedback. Some educators avoid giving or receiving observation and feedback. They believe the feedback may be due to negative perceptions that educators develop toward paraprofessional evaluation. They may view evaluation as threatening, irrelevant to instructional effectiveness, or one-directional (McLaughlin & Pfeiffer, 1988). This perception is unfortunate because it dilutes the teacher’s abilities to strengthen skills of the classroom team. In our view, an open policy of ongoing observation and feedback has at least four advantages.

First, it increases the teacher’s skill as an observer. The teacher learns to identify what team members are doing well and what team members are making improvements. Second, frequent observation improves the teacher’s instruction when team members watch and attempt to imitate the teacher’s methods. Third, if feedback between members is largely positive and if corrective feedback is constructive and ongoing, it establishes a continuing, continuous evaluation of everyone’s instructional skills. Fourth, and most important, improved instructional skills link directly to improved student performance. Observation and feedback become the basic ingredients for improving the effectiveness of team members and students, thus allowing the classroom to become a social environment where excellence thrives.

Although the topics discussed above were identified as the most important by inservice teachers, the changing roles of paraprofessionals will require that teachers develop new and different supervision skills. For example, many paraprofessionals work in inclusive classrooms and take direction from one or more general education teachers in addition to the special education teacher. This raises issues about who is responsible for planning and supervision. Is it the general education teacher, the special education teacher, or both? Second, the demands in which job coaches work in community employment or paraprofessionals assist families with young children in home settings raise issues about monitoring and remote supervision. Third, the increasing sophistication of paraprofessionals’ skills and their multifaceted job roles will change the complexion of supervision for teachers.

What Does the Future Hold? Over the past five years, Utah has responded to the need to better define the work scope and responsibilities of paraprofessionals. Quality training options for paraprofessionals have multiplied as districts recognize the need to provide paraprofessionals with the training for their instructional staff. It is time to broaden the scope of our training efforts to include the unmet needs of those professionals who supervise paraprofessionals. This training will require concentration on the better delineation of roles and responsibilities, increased emphasis on supervision training by districts and higher education programs, and increased attention to critical supervision priorities. Potentially, the outcomes of these efforts will be better trained supervisors, better supervised paraprofessionals, and stronger classroom teams whose members deliver more effective and efficient instruction to students.

References available upon request from the URPC.