

Why is Planning for Paraeducators Important?

Dynamic instruction is founded on good planning and good planning is founded on assessment information. While most teachers have stopped using the planning forms their education professors gave them, effective teachers are absolutely clear about the purposes of their lessons and they create classroom experiences that target those purposes. They decide ahead of time what activities they'll engage students in, how they'll provide directions to students, and what materials they'll need at their fingertips. They know what homework will be assigned and they know beforehand how they'll prepare students to engage with the concepts.

When experienced school professionals fail to plan, they may be able to wing it or make it through a class or two without disastrous results. However, when no one plans for the instruction delivered by paraeducators, it means that paraeducators who are unprepared to plan lessons, are on their own to design the instruction. It is legally and ethically unacceptable for a paraeducator to work with students who have complex learning needs, or with social, emotional, or health issues, with no written plan provided by a supervisor. Yet, it is commonly done.

Paraeducators, unfortunately, are frequently allowed to make decisions that should be rightfully made by fully qualified professionals. Interviews with paraeducators have revealed intuitive or "home grown" attitudes about their roles in supporting students, in the absence of written plans. Some paraeducators believe it is their job to keep students with disabilities from "bothering the classroom teacher." They believe that they are responsible for all aspects of the child's education, that they have to create all adaptations for the child, and that they are responsible totally for the child. And, sadly, they have been allowed to deliver services with little guidance.

Paraeducators who are placed in such positions realize that they are poorly equipped to do the job. Some paraeducators have reported that, "I make my own plans." Others reports, "No one plans, I just follow along trying to do what I'm supposed to," and still others reported that they "write lesson plans for the reading group." Paraeducators in many locations have reported that they held full responsibility for students, including planning lessons and activities, creating curricular and instructional adaptations and modification even though state policies do not advocate such responsibilities for paraeducators.

When teachers were asked if they planned for paraeducators, they often admitted that they did not. Some teachers justified their lack of planning for paraeducators, "I don't need to plan – she just knows what to do". Some said, "She doesn't need a written plan, I just tell her what to do on the "fly" (French, 1998)." While these responses may reflect the current state of affairs, none of them exemplify a legal or ethical position.

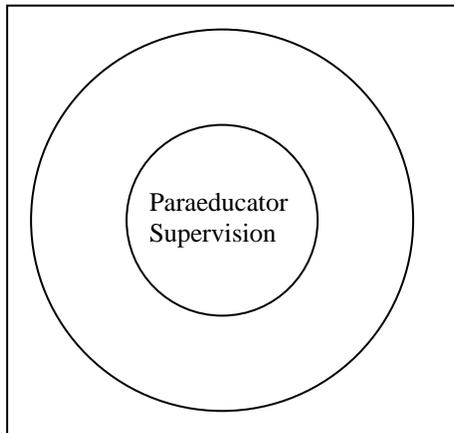
Should we expect something different from paraeducators than we expect from teachers? In a word, yes. Paraeducators are not teachers. They are valuable school employees who hold a legitimate role in the teaching process, but they work in a different capacity than teachers. For example, paraeducators assist teachers of students who are learning English but they do not have the skills to conduct language assessments or to plan lessons that focus on language acquisition.

We expect nurses and doctors to have different roles. We recognize that a nurse may give injection to a patient, but we understand that the doctor prescribed it. Nurses do not prescribe medications or courses or treatment - they deliver them. They provide daily care to patients; ensure the delivery of prescribed medications and treatments, and record data so that the doctor can make informed decisions about further treatment. Similarly, we do not want paraeducators prescribing instructional sequences, units, lessons, or adaptations. We do want paraeducators delivering instruction and interventions, carrying out the curricular adaptation plans made by the professional.

Designing instructional environments and making decisions about the goals, objectives, activities, and evaluations of instructional episodes are tasks that are well outside the paraeducator's scope of responsibility. We should not let it slide when a paraeducator, who works on an hourly basis, with little preparation, and no professional credential, is allowed to plan or, worse, is forced into planning for students because the professional has neglected to do so. Paraeducators should not be asked to do the teacher's job. There is an important instructional role for paraeducators, but that does not include usurping the teacher's role.

Time Management

Two important time management concepts that affect the lives of all school professionals are Circle of Influence and Self-Management.



The first of the two concepts is that of circle of influence. A teacher has to determine those things that are within his or her circle of influence and those that are outside it. Worrying about things that are not within his or her sphere of influence just wastes a teacher's time and energy. To plan for, organize, and work on those things that are within the circle of influence enhances productivity. Knowing the difference is the most difficult part.

Too often, teachers believe that the work of the paraeducator is outside their circle of influence. It certainly does not have to be outside teachers' spheres of influence, and, in fact, it should be well within it. It is important for teachers to understand that being proactively engaged in orienting, training, planning for, directing and guiding the work of paraeducators keeps them working within their legitimate sphere of influence.

The second concept is self-management. Self-management differs from time management. An effective teacher is a good self-manager. She considers the value or worth of doing or not doing certain tasks before including those tasks on a list. Teachers are notorious for assuming that they have to do all the tasks associated with teaching, and they suffer significant amounts of stress when they are unable to meet their own expectations.

Self-management also is characterized by a teacher's ability to think ahead to the goals or outcomes she wants and is followed closely by being proactive in planning and organizing to achieve the goal. Goal setting and proactive organization can enhance teachers' effectiveness while improving their use of paraeducator skills and time.

Work Smarter – Not Harder!

Teachers and other school professionals cannot continue to do all the same things and still add more to the list. Those who try to do everything find themselves working under undue and self-imposed stress and they start thinking about leaving special education. Working harder is not a feasible solution for most professionals. Working smarter is. Teachers must give up some tasks in order to perform others.

Think of it this way. If 200% of the instructional time of a teacher is available because of the paraeducator, then why can't some of that time become joint meeting time to conduct the training, coaching, feedback, and communication functions or supervision? Students could still get 180% of what they would have gotten with only a teacher and the team uses school hours to perform necessary functions. Conceptually, it makes sense. Of course, in practice, it means that the teacher's schedule has to be constructed with common meeting time in mind.

What do plans for paraeducators contain?

Good plans are brief, easy to read at a glance, and relatively easy to write. They also contain six key components.

Components of plans

A good plan specifies how to do the task, the purposes of the task or lesson, the specific student needs to be addressed or strengths on which to capitalize, the materials to use, and the type of data needed to determine whether the student achievement is satisfactory, moving in the right direction or unsatisfactory.

It is also important for the paraeducator to understand how the task fits into the broader goals and outcomes for the student. For example, James, a student with severe and multiple disabilities, has been learning to raise and lower his left arm. If Lu, the paraeducator who works with him, understands that James is preparing for a communication device that depends on this skill, she will ensure that he practices many times a day and that he practices correctly. So, the plan may tell Lu that the goal is for James to raise and lower his left arm deliberately. It should also tell her that the long-range goal is that he will be able to use a button or switch that controls an assistive speaking device. The plan also needs to have a place to document the number of opportunities he had to practice the skill, the amount of cueing or prompting he required to perform the skill, and the number of times he successfully performed the skill, with or without cueing or prompting.

Components of Plans

1. Purpose of task, lesson or adaptation
2. Long term student goals, short term objectives
3. Specific student needs and strengths
4. Materials & Research
5. Sequence of actions, use of cues or prompts, permissible adaptations
6. Data structure for documenting student performance