DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 561 SP 038 684

AUTHOR Ashbaker, Betty; Morgan, Jill
TITLE The "S" in ASCD: Teachers Supervising Paraeducators for Professional Development.
PUB DATE 1999-03-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (54th, San Francisco, CA, March 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethics; *Paraprofessional School Personnel; Planning; Staff Development; *Supervision; Supervisors; *Supervisory Training; *Teacher Role; *Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS Teacher Leaders

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the emerging national issues surrounding supervision of paraeducators in the classroom and provides initial guidance on practical ways to supervise effectively. It begins by describing the current situation in the U.S., focusing on two important issues: the training of teachers as supervisors and training for paraeducators. This section also examines a federally funded Project of National Significance: Super-Vision: A Model for the Teacher's Role as Supervisor of Paraprofessionals," which addresses the lack of training for both teachers and paraeducators by providing training to teacher-paraeducator teams. Next, the paper addresses two critical areas of supervision: defining paraeducator roles and enhancing communication (ethics, time to plan, and differing work styles). The paper concludes that with nearly one million paraeducators in classrooms nationwide, and a projected 38 percent increase in that number by the year 2005, issues of training and supervision continue to emerge and must be addressed. Administrators and teachers must provide support to paraeducators that will define their roles and responsibilities, enhance communications, and develop effective teamwork. They must also seek out training for teachers to develop their supervision skills. Federally funded programs are available to support these efforts. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

THE 'S' IN ASCD:

TEACHERS SUPERVISING PARAEDUCATORS

FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

Betty Ashbaker, Ph.D.

Brigham Young University

(801) 378-8361

Betty_Ashbaker@byu.edu

Jill Morgan, Ph.D.

Utah State University

(435) 797-7001

jmorgan@cc.usu.edu

Paper presented at the 54th ASCD Annual Conference

San Francisco CA

March 1999

ABSTRACT

As more teachers' assistants, or paraeducators, enter classrooms to provide instruction, the role of the teacher necessarily expands to include supervision. This paper discusses the emerging national issues surrounding supervision in the classroom and provides initial guidance on practical ways to supervise effectively. National references and practical suggestions are provided to help teachers as they build dynamic relationships with paraeducators while providing supervision and support for the delivery of effective instruction in the classroom.

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This paper examines the issues surrounding the supervision of paraeducators (teacher's aides, classroom assistants, paraprofessionals) and offers practical advice to teachers and administrators who act in a supervisory capacity towards these paraprofessional staff. We will first describe the current situation in the United States, and the federally funded Project of National Significance which the authors are currently co-directing. We will then address two critical areas of supervision: defining roles and enhancing communication. Space does not permit an exhaustive treatment of any of the above areas, and readers who wish to pursue these topics will find them treated more extensively elsewhere (Ashbaker & Morgan, 1997; French, 1997; Morgan, Ashbaker & Forbush 1998; Pickett, 1996; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995).

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Historically, for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), the term 'supervision' has been associated with supervision of teachers or other professional staff by school building, school district and State Office of Education administrators. There has even been some discussion of late within the Association, as a result of increased autonomy of schools, of the relevance of the term 'supervision,' and the possibility of deleting it from the Association's title. The authors contend, however, that supervision has never been more relevant than it currently is for the teaching profession, as increasing numbers of paraeducators are being

employed, not only in the traditional areas of special education and Title I, but also in regular education classrooms across the nation. As authority has devolved from state to school building level, supervision within individual schools, and even more important to this discussion, within individual classrooms, has become a critical issue for all educators, not only for administrators. The most recent published estimate of the number of paraeducators in the US (Moskowitz & Warwick, 1996) is over 900,000, with an estimated increase of 38% by the year 2005. This increase far exceeds the estimated increase for teachers during that same time period. Pickett (1996) estimates that only 40% of paraeducators work in special education, the remainder being employed by Title I, bilingual education and regular education. This being so, and with the continuing push for inclusion, many more teachers find themselves in classrooms where they supervise not only students and curriculum, but also other adults who accompany students with IEPs, withdraw students for individual tuition in English and math, or provide support of a more general nature to the teacher and students.

THE ISSUES

Two critical issues emerge as we look at the supervision and training of paraeducators; (1) the training of teachers as supervisors, and (2) training for paraeducators.

The training of teachers as supervisors

Typically, teachers have not been prepared for the supervisory responsibilities associated with working with paraeducators (Salzberg & Morgan, 1995). Many teachers supervise student teachers and practicum students, but the training received for that role is also minimal and the

teachers' responsibilities toward practicum students differ significantly from those relating to paraeducators. Although the classroom teacher provides supervision to the student teacher on a daily basis, university faculty share the responsibility for supervising and evaluating pre-service teacher trainees. Further, university students are in the classroom for a limited time -- perhaps a semester or two -- while paraeducators are assigned to the classroom for the school year, with some remaining in the classroom for more than 20 years (Morgan, Ashbaker & Allred, under review).

Paraeducator training

The issues expand as we look at the training provided to assist paraeducators in the development of instructional skills. The student teacher receives training in curriculum, pedagogy and classroom management in university or college classes, according to well-defined guidelines for teacher competencies, and learns to apply that knowledge during practicum placements. Training for paraeducators across the US is sporadic at best, and varies widely within as well as between states (Morgan, Hofmeister & Ashbaker, 1995; Pickett, 1996). Guidelines for roles which can appropriately be assigned to paraeducators are local, or non-existent, many paraeducators not having any written form of job description. (Ashbaker & Morgan, 1998) Despite standards for paraeducator employment and training proposed by such organizations as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 1998), the only national legal mandates appear in the Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997): that paraprofessional staff be 'adequately trained and supervised,' and that paraprofessionals working in the area of early childhood acquire knowledge

and skills needed to properly serve infants and toddlers with disabilities. States are also required by the same law to develop and implement plans to ensure that all personnel who work with students with disabilities have the necessary skills, although paraprofessionals are included by implication rather than explicitly. Teachers and school building level administrators are therefore often left in sole charge of defining and supervising the work of paraeducators.

A FEDERALLY FUNDED PROJECT OF NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

In October 1998 the authors were awarded US Department of Education funding for a Project of National Significance: *Super-Vision: A model for the teacher's role as supervisor of paraprofessionals*. This three-year project addresses the lack of training for both teachers and paraeducators described above, by providing training to teacher-paraeducator teams in more effective teamwork, leading to self-evaluation, and thereby improvement of classroom practice. Teachers and paraeducators are taught to clearly define their individual roles and the expectations they have of each other; to communicate more often and more effectively; and to take observational data for each other, so that each can evaluate her own practice and identify areas for improvement. In accordance with principals of best practice, the teacher trains the paraeducator in her responsibilities and the associated skills by: first, modeling the skill as the paraeducator observes; second, giving the paraeducator precise instructions as to what to observe and record; and lastly, by discussing the observation and data with the paraeducator. The paraeducator is then observed by the teacher on the same aspect of teaching, followed by a discussion of the data collected and how improvements can be made. This incremental training by the supervising teacher in skills directly related to the paraeducator's classroom role ensures both relevance and

success.

In addition to providing this training (and developing the training materials), the project is developing a Trainer's manual and will train school district personnel to continue with the training beyond the funding period of the project, as well as preparing guidelines and training for administrators in the issues surrounding the employment, training and supervision of para-educators and their supervising teachers. Space does not permit a fuller explanation of project activities and objectives, or of the contents of the training materials. Further details can be obtained directly from the authors.

SUPERVISION: DEFINING ROLES

The question of What is an appropriate role for a paraeducator? is a complex one with no one simple answer. Consider the following situations:

- The classroom teacher goes home sick at lunchtime and the school Principal asks the paraeducator to take over the class for the afternoon
- Knowing that the paraeducator has considerable musical ability and experience, the teacher asks her to organize and prepare the students for the end of year concert.
- A paraeducator assigned to an individual student with an IEP is asked by the general education teacher to make copies of worksheets for the whole class to use
- Recognizing the paraeducator's organizational ability, the teacher asks the paraeducator to organize and take responsibility for keeping records and grade books up-to-date, and for tracking whether students complete assignments
- The teacher asks her paraeducator to attend parent-teacher conference.

Are these situations appropriate? And on what basis do we decide? Three factors influence these decisions: Legal constraints, ethics or professionalism, and personal preference.

As stated previously, federal legal mandate with regard to paraeducators is minimal and as yet largely undefined, and many of the details of paraeducator employment are assigned to state, Local Education Authority (LEA) or even school district level. What is more important here, however, is not who decides what a paraeducator should or should not do in the school system, but that everyone involved (administrators, teachers, parents, the paraeducators themselves) be aware of whatever guidelines exist so that no one is unnecessarily exposed to educational or legal vulnerability: student learning is not jeopardized and personal liability is not in question. Ethical considerations include such aspects as confidentiality. Professionalism dictates that paraeducators not be assigned tasks for which they are poorly qualified, untrained and possibly inadequately supervised. Once the legal and ethical requirements are taken into consideration, the precise roles assigned to a paraeducator may be determined by personal preference - that of the teacher and paraeducator, with agreement reached ideally through a discussion of the paraeducator's skills and abilities, the needs of the students, and the working preferences of both teacher and paraeducator.

SUPERVISION: ENHANCING COMMUNICATION

Three areas of communication are considered here: ethics, time to plan, and differing work styles.

Ethics

Although we have discussed ethics and professionalism in relation to defining paraeducator roles, there are of course ethical considerations relating to communication. Consider, for example, the paraeducator who feels that she has not been properly treated - by her teacher or administrator. Where does she go for assistance? To whom does she take her questions or complaints? Just as there are proper channels that teachers and administrators should use to resolve difficulties, there must be explicit procedures for paraeducators to follow when they need similar assistance. These procedures - along with all other policies and regulations - should be clearly explained to the paraeducator (preferably in writing) at commencement of employment. It must not be assumed that a paraeducator will know how to proceed in case of difficulty if no training has been offered, and many associated problems within the school can be avoided through attention to this type of detail. Similarly, the paraeducator should have clearly defined for her, her role in communicating to others information acquired in the execution of her duties - within or outside of the school - with clear examples provided. If she meets her neighbor at the supermarket and is asked how a child is doing in school, what should she say? And to what extent should she discuss issues related to the students with whom she works with other paraeducators in the school? What information should she share, and what should be kept as confidential? These questions should have explicit answers, and the school should therefore assign the responsibility of communicating these ethical and professional guidelines to the paraeducator when she is hired. Ideally this should be the supervising teacher.

Time to plan

When teachers and paraeducators share responsibility for students, they are in essence an instructional team. They may work in different physical spaces with no daily contact; they may work in the same space and be employed by different agencies (e.g., regular education and Title I personnel working together in an inclusion setting); or they may work together in the same classroom or resource room. Each of these possible scenarios represents an instructional team and presents its particular challenges to effective communication. And each requires that team members coordinate their efforts for the benefit of students. The inevitable question arises: Where do we find time to sit down and plan together? Experience suggests (Ashbaker & Morgan, 1997) that teachers find time for those things which they think are important, and that planning time can be squeezed into an already busy day when it is seen as a priority. It is of course the teacher's responsibility to facilitate such planning time and make the necessary adjustments so that the paraeducator can be available. But these arrangements should ideally also have administrative support within the school - a paraeducator's schedule should include planning time that coincides with that of the supervising teacher and/or other teachers with whom the paraeducator works. It is not logical to expect a paraeducator (who may be only minimally trained) to take sole charge of planning and preparing for her work, which is often with the students who need the most specialized help. Nor is it reasonable to expect her to coordinate her efforts with teachers in her own time. A small amount of time scheduled each week for the paraeducator to attend to these important aspects of her role is a wise educational investment. The allocated planning time should be spent discussing particular student needs and progress, allocating instructional and housekeeping tasks, and answering questions as they arise. It also provides an opportunity for the

teacher to provide training to her paraeducator, as they discuss instructional approaches and accommodations designed to enhance student learning.

Differing work styles

There is no standard personality or set of personal characteristics that represents the teaching profession. Indeed, the individuality that exists within the profession serves to enhance students' school experience and enrich our schools. However, differing approaches and preferences of teachers and paraeducators can communicate very different messages from those that are intended if teachers and paraeducators do not have the time (and some guidance) in getting to know each others' styles and preferences. Consider the paraeducator who is organized and punctual, assigned to work with a teacher whose teaching style is dominated by flexibility, instinctive response to students and situations, and for whom an orderly work environment is not a priority. The one sees clutter and neglect, and even discourtesy in the timetable not adhered to and the unfiled paperwork. The other may feel criticism in the paraeducator's constant reminders of scheduled events and organizing efforts. Potentially, their differing skills and styles are complementary, but this process may need facilitating. The process of identifying these differences, and the techniques that can turn them into strengths for the instructional team, can be facilitated by administrators who offer and support training. Again, the authors have documented (Ashbaker & Morgan, 1999) the critical role that administrators can play in facilitating and encouraging attendance at training sessions. Administrators who facilitate training in this way not only show that they value teachers and paraeducators, but show that they value well-prepared and appropriately trained staff.

SUMMARY

With nearly a million paraeducators in classrooms across the nation, and a projected 38% increase in that number by the year 2005, issues of training and supervision continue to emerge and must be addressed. Administrators and teachers are well advised to provide support to paraeducators that will define their roles and responsibilities, enhance communications, and develop effective teamwork. Likewise, administrators and teachers should seek out training for teachers to develop their supervision skills. Federally funded programs are available to support these efforts, and the primary beneficiaries will be the students we serve.

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