

Motivating Paraeducators to Be Actively Involved in Physical Education Programs

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Paraeducators offer invaluable help in the inclusive class, but gaining the full benefit of their services requires proper supervision.

Marian was a part-time paraeducator for Sara. Marian hated it when it was time to take Sara to physical education during third period. The smell of the locker room brought back bad memories of her physical education experience as a child. She never felt comfortable in the gym; there was nowhere to sit, and she did not want to sit on the cold gym floor in her dress and heels. When the class was held outdoors, she hated tromping through the wet grass in her good shoes. She enjoyed her job in the classroom working on reading and academics with Sara: this was her comfort zone. She disliked the dynamic environment and seeming chaos of physical education, where she never knew what to expect. The special education teacher was not familiar with physical education and often said, "Just make sure that Sara participates." But what did that mean? The general physical education teacher seemed to be doing a good job: she was enthusiastic and kept the students engaged. However, the physical education teacher had a large class to attend to and very rarely spoke with Marian or Sara. They seemed to slip in and out with little notice.

Paraeducators have been used to assist with special education since mandates of special education services began under public law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Since that time, the provision of services to children has increasingly involved the placement of children with disabilities in the general education environment. As students with disabilities have moved out of special education classrooms and into the general education environment, so too have the paraeducators who work with these children. Many paraeducators work with individual children and follow them throughout their day to their various classes, as described in the above scenario. In such cases, the paraeducator may be asked to attend physical education with the child with a disability. However, when paraeducators leave the special education classroom, who will supervise them in their duties and help them with appropriate assistance to the child?

Paraeducators can be extremely helpful for such duties as clerical support, personal care, assistance of peer tutors, additional supervision of a group setting, follow-up practice of skills, extra helping hands, and observation (Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Fialka, 2005; Piletic, Davis, & Aschemeier, 2005). However, the role of the paraeducator often expands to duties for which they are not trained and for which they have little supervision (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). In addition, paraeducators can have a detrimental effect if not adequately trained to assist a child appropriately. If fact, paraeducators can actually interfere with effective inclu-

Table 1. Do's and Don'ts: Helpful Paraeducator vs. Babysitter

Do's: Helpful Paraeducator	Don'ts: Babysitter
Assists only when the student needs it. Makes modifications so students can do the task independently or with minimal assistance	Babysits or watches without assisting when needed, does not know how to assist, or is overly helpful
Assists other students in the class who need help	Sits in the environment where the student is and watches him or her
Gradually moves away from the student to encourage independence	Always sits or stands right next to the student
Finds ways to encourage social interactions between students with and without disabilities	Serves as a physical presence and barrier for communication with other students or the general education teacher
Allows and encourages the general education teacher to interact with the student within the context of physical education, including instruction and feedback when appropriate	Gives all the instruction and feedback to the student without encouraging teacher or peer interaction
Allows and encourages the student to talk for himself or herself	Talks for the student
Provides appropriate, positive, specific feedback or corrective feedback as needed.	Allows student to continue to practice incorrectly
Values the student's interests and desires and uses this information in interactions and modifications for instruction.	Assists student based on own ideas about what the student needs without regard for the student's interests

Source: Lytle & Glidewell (in press)

sion and prevent interactions with peers or teacher-student interactions by hovering over the student with a disability (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997). See table 1 for a description of a paraeducator's role. Broer, Douyle, and Giangreco (2005), after interviewing students with disabilities following graduation, found that their perceptions of paraeducators included mother, friend, protector, and primary teacher. They also found that students were often prevented from interacting with peers because of the presence of their paraeducator and that the general education teacher did not interact with the children with disabilities because of the paraeducator's presence. However, it is important to remember that the paraeducator, student(s), and physical education teacher must facilitate instruction through a team approach. Guidelines need to be established early in the school year for the successful inclusion and participation of all students. Direct instruction of a student cannot be the responsibility of the paraeducator alone.

The role of the paraeducator is complex. Paraeducators are often asked to work with the most challenging children and to do tasks they are not trained for (Giangreco et al., 2005). For these reasons there is an increasing need to provide training and support for paraeducators (French, 2003). First and foremost, paraeducators should be supervised by an individual from special education who has training in the area for which the paraeducator is providing support. Yet, special educators are not typically trained to work with paraeducators or to provide them with direct instruction (French, 2001).

In the physical education environment, training for paraeducators should be provided by either the special education teacher who has training in physical education or the general or adapted physical education teacher. On-the-job training could include setting up a teaching situation with a student in which the paraprofessional can observe and take notes. Teachers who "lead by example" pass on to paraeducators a wealth of knowledge about the various instructional strategies that can be put into practice to teach students. These individuals are ultimately responsible for helping the child to meet the goals and objectives of his or her individualized education program (IEP), and they have the knowledge of the physical education curriculum and standards, activity modifications, and behavioral guidelines for the child. This is why special education teachers (e.g. APE, special day class teacher) need to provide ongoing training and support to paraeducators for daily interactions with students with disabilities in the general physical education environment. The purpose of this article is to provide specific ideas of how this can be accomplished.

Teachers who work with paraeducators should clearly state their expectations and give appropriate direction and guidance (Vogler, French, & Bishop, 1989). According to Mach (2000), it would be beneficial to train support personnel in emergency procedures in addition to their orientation session for the physical education program in which they will be working. Failure to make expectations clear can lead to frustration for the teacher and the paraprofessional. Until



A paraeducator supervises students in the exercise room.

recently, there was no clarity on who would train paraeducators for physical education and how they would be trained. Thanks to the support of the Adapted Physical Activity Council (APAC) of the American Association of Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR), there is now a training manual for paraeducators who work with students in physical education (Lytle & Glidewell, in press). The following is a summary of possible guidelines for a workshop or inservice for paraeducators. Workshops could be held before the school year, as a half-day training session, a monthly meeting, or weekly 15-minute reviews of guidelines.

Training Guidelines

Physical Education. This part of the training should review the purpose and definition of physical education, including the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) standards. Common terminology should be clarified as well as teaching styles, lesson plan format, and the teacher's teaching philosophy.

Roles. The various roles of the paraeducator before, during, and after physical education should be presented. For example, students may need help opening their locker or changing clothes; during physical education, students may need assistance with a specific skill or activity; and after class they may need assistance transitioning to their next class. Such roles may vary as units change, as other paraeducators enter the classroom, or as the student is being assessed.

Disabilities. Although the paraeducator usually knows the student better than the physical educator does (if they work with the student all day), it is important to reserve a part of the training to review the disability of each student in the class. It is important for the paraeducator to learn about the cause and characteristics of the disability, the student's possible behaviors and functional abilities, the IEP objectives for physical education, and any activities to avoid. For example, some children with spina bifida have severe latex allergies,

and latex is in many types of physical education equipment. It is imperative that both the physical educator and the paraeducator know this. Learning about and understanding the medical aspects of a disability is something both professionals can work on together to ensure safety. The parents, school nurse, and other special education faculty (e.g. school psychologists, special education teacher, speech-language pathologist) may also be helpful in learning about specific needs of students.

Inclusion Strategies. Teachers use a variety of inclusion strategies that the paraeducator needs to know. These include the use of peer tutors, activity modification, and instructional strategies such as physical assistance, various teaching styles, and feedback techniques. It is helpful for the paraeducator to know their role in each of these strategies. For example, what is the paraeducator's role with the student when a teacher is using task sheets? Should the paraeducator do the documentation, assist with the activity as needed, or just supervise? The paraeducator needs clear instructions about what they should do to assist appropriately in order to avoid over-assisting or taking over when a student is capable of completing a task or learning a new skill (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005).

Assessment. When working with students with disabilities, as with all students, assessment is imperative. The instructor will need assistance in setting up the classroom for assessment, collecting assessment data, documenting performance, and even entering data into the computer. The communication of specific expectations regarding assessment will ensure an accurate, smooth, and enjoyable assessment experience for everyone.

Behavior Management. Every student has individual strengths and weaknesses regarding behavior in physical education. It is important that both the teacher and the paraeducator have the same high expectations for the behavior of every student in the class. In some cases when behavior is a problem, a behavior program may need to be developed by the multidisciplinary team and implemented throughout the student's school day. In all cases it is imperative that the management plan be discussed and clarified with all individuals who will interact with the student before its implementation.

Conflict Resolution. Even the most talented and skilled teachers and paraeducators occasionally possess differing ideas on how to handle certain situations. Conflicts arise among the most well-intentioned staff, sometimes due to confusion about who is in charge. A complete training program should define the hierarchy of command, as well as the protocol to follow when conflicts arise. If professionals are giving the paraeducators mixed messages about how to assist, it can be confusing and challenging for both the paraeducator and the student. This is another reason why a regular meeting time can be helpful to address any questions or concerns, or to give kudos. The authors of this article suggest that the teachers and paraeducators set an "open door" policy related to issues in physical education. In other words, each party



A paraeducator works with a student in the gymnasium.

should feel comfortable sharing their opinions, issues, or problems with each other in an unbiased, safe space. In this way, conflicts are resolved quickly, honestly, and positively, creating a win-win situation for everyone, especially for the student involved. Should individuals not be able to solve their concerns, it is important for all parties to know who to go to for assistance (e.g., principal, program specialist, or director of special education).

Resources. The last part of the training can include resources the paraeducator can consult for answers to questions that may arise. These resources may include books, CDs, web sites, specialists, or journals. For more training tips, see table 2.

When possible, this training program should be presented at the beginning of the school year so all parties begin with the same information and expectations. The training may be a one-day workshop, a half-day workshop, or an ongoing program once a week. Ongoing training can also take place through a school web site, where paraeducators can receive weekly assignments, collaborate with other paraeducators, and communicate with physical education or adapted physical education teachers. As circumstances change during the school year, communication between the physical educator and paraeducator becomes imperative. In a study by Maurer (2002), communication was seen as one of the biggest barriers to the success of the paraeducator in physical education. In this study, when asked the best way to communicate new information to each other, paraeducators and physical educators suggested using email, holding short meetings (before or after class or school, during lunch, etc.), and leaving messages on a blackboard or whiteboard in the gymnasium.

It is also important to recognize the vital role that paraeducators play in the success of the student's learning experience. Individuals who feel valued and a part of a program will work more successfully and harmoniously. The next section offers some suggestions on how to make sure the paraeducators feel like a part of the physical education program.

A Feeling of Ownership

The most well-trained, dedicated paraeducators can often be overheard saying of themselves, "I am only a para." This feeling of inadequacy or lack of importance can lead to apathy, absenteeism, or inappropriate instruction. Paraedu-

Table 2. Training Ideas

1. Provide a clear job description.
2. Review goals and objectives for the student in physical education.
3. Provide a documentation log for the paraeducator to write daily notes in.
4. Provide rubrics or observation tools.
5. Provide appropriate modifications to equipment, rules, or activities to support student learning.
6. Provide guidelines for interactions with the student.
7. Provide guidelines for proximity to the student.
8. Provide guidelines for social interactions with peers.
9. Provide a description of the protocol for taking the student to physical education, supervising during physical education, and returning from physical education.
10. Encourage the paraeducator to assist all students in the class.
11. Hold inservice days.

cators must feel like the dedicated, committed, invaluable professionals they are if they are to offer the best instruction and feedback for students with disabilities. Many physical educators have found the following ideas useful in developing the feeling of ownership in the paraeducators that work with them. A convenient summary of these ideas appears in table 3.

Get to Know Them. At the beginning of the year, physical educators should take the time to get to know the paraeducators that work within the physical education program and find common interests. This will increase the comfort level in the gymnasium and open up lines of communication.

Name on the Door. The door to the gymnasium often has the name of the physical educators. Adding the name of the paraeducators to the door will give them a better sense of identity and belonging in the gymnasium and in physical education. It may be appropriate to add a schedule of times or periods when they are assisting in physical education.

Introduce Them. During introductions at the beginning of the school year, the teacher can introduce the paraeducator as an assistant teacher and make him or her feel important to the success of the class. It is helpful for all students in the classroom to know who the paraeducator is and also to feel comfortable asking for their assistance, when appropriate. In addition, the teacher should address the paraeducator as Mr., Ms., or Mrs., to add to the respect for them as teachers.

Whiteboard. The instructor can have a whiteboard or chalkboard on the wall with specific instructions for the paraeducator during class. Such information may include cues for the skills of that day, ways to assist, locker room needs, or other information that will help the paraeducator to know how best to assist during class. The whiteboard or chalkboard may also serve as a place for the paraeducator to share successes or issues with the instructor.

Table 3. Support Ideas

In the Physical Education Class or Locker Room

- Hang a bulletin board with student and paraeducator success stories.
- Provide a locker for the paraeducator to keep shoes and water.
- Provide energy bars.
- Have both the teacher and paraeducator's information on the gym door.
- Welcome the paraeducators to the class and make sure all students know who they are.

Outside of the Physical Education Class

- Acknowledge them at staff meetings.
- Allow the paraeducator to assist with the selection and purchase of equipment for the physical education classes.
- Create a staff appreciation day.
- Send semiannual or monthly thank-you notes to the paraeducator.
- Get to know the paraeducator's interests.
- Hold a "brag day" with pictures, certificates, video, snacks.
- Include them in back-to-school night.
- Find perks or funds to support activities that paraeducators do outside of their daily job.
- Invite paraeducators to the IEP if and when appropriate and supported by parents.

Advocacy for Paraeducators

- Encourage conferences to offer a reduced rate for paraeducators.
- Encourage paraeducators to get further training.
- Nominate them for awards.

Equipment Assistance. As mentioned earlier, often the paraeducators may know the students with disabilities better than the teacher. When ordering equipment, teachers should take time to get input from the paraeducator, who may have a more accurate idea of what to order. Doing this may help paraeducators understand the important role they play in the program.

Modifications. Paraeducators can also help with equipment, rule, instruction, or environmental modifications at the start of each unit. However, paraeducators should not be expected to automatically know what and how to make modifications for a particular student. Their role is to carry out the teacher's guidelines and assist with input from their experience in the process. It is important to make sure that paraeducators feel supported in assisting students and not like they "have to do everything."

Locker. To assist appropriately in physical education, paraeducators need to be dressed appropriately. Providing them with a locker will allow them to prepare for physical education and be more effective helpers. They will have a place to keep an extra pair of tennis shoes and a change of clothes.

Support Their Efforts. Supplying paraeducators with water, energy bars, or sports drinks while they work hard in physical education will ensure that they continue to help in class. Individuals who support students with disabilities in physical education may exercise as much or more than the student.

Recognition. Many students with and without disabilities who participate in physical education require a lot of energy and effort to teach. Their success in physical education cannot

be accomplished without the dedication and commitment of paraeducators. Physical educators can recognize the successes of individual students and also thank the paraeducator as the primary instructor at IEP meetings and staff meetings, during physical education class, or in school newsletters. Using physical education bulletin boards to display pictures of paraeducators working with a student is a great way to acknowledge and show appreciation for their work.

Thank You. Physical educators should thank the paraeducator daily for assisting in each class. A genuine "thank you" can also be expressed through homemade cookies, a plant, a card, or a balloon. A small gesture can go a long way in ensuring that paraeducators never feel like they are "only a para" in physical education.

Further Education. There are always paraeducators who truly shine in the physical education class. A bit of encouragement from the teacher may move them to pursue further education and become a physical education teacher or an adapted physical education teacher. Some of the best teachers started as paraeducators.

Professional Development. One possible way to encourage paraeducators to continue to learn is to find funding for professional conferences, invite them to conferences, and encourage conference organizers to reduce rates for paraeducators. Some organizations may be willing to let them come for free when they attend with their teacher. A letter from the principal on school letterhead can be used to verify employment of the accompanying paraeducator.

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Special Days. Teachers and paraeducators should share the success of students with disabilities in a staff meeting, a parent day, or an administrative meeting. It may be possible to have a special day where the teacher and the paraeducator trade roles for a day to experience what it is like to be in the other's shoes. This would help the physical education teacher to learn what the student experiences in the classroom and the teaching techniques that work in that setting. Visiting the classroom occasionally can be very helpful for the physical educator. It will help the physical educator to understand the student's needs in the classroom, but will also let the paraeducator and special education teacher know that the physical education teacher cares about the student and wants to work collaboratively with the team. Just stopping in to say hello or chatting in the lunchroom would achieve this as well.

Offer Special Classes. Paraeducators may want to improve their level of fitness so they can perform better in physical education. Show your appreciation by opening up your gymnasium a few days a week after school or even offer an exercise class such as Pilates, yoga, or aerobics to faculty and staff.

Summary

Physical educators have struggled for many years to successfully include children with disabilities in their classes. The availability of paraeducators has great potential to alleviate many of the struggles that teachers face. However, this is not a simple task. Most teachers have not been trained to use other professionals within their classrooms or gymnasiums. Effective use of paraeducators takes time, planning, and communication. With careful training, collaboration, and support, paraeducators can be used effectively and everyone will benefit—most of all the students in the physical education program.

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Gone

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~~policy and leadership, tells us that teaching must be based on the premise that teachers should hold a deep respect for their students and the knowledge and abilities they bring to the learning experience. This learning experience becomes a dialogue in which the teacher is also a student and the student is also a teacher. Reciprocity in the exchange of knowledge is maximized and teacher imposition is minimized. Teaching and learning are neither fixed nor finite, but~~