Challenges in Paraeducator Supervision

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ms. Moreno, a fifth-grade special education teacher, needs to shift service delivery schedules because a new student has been added to her caseload midyear. The new student has extensive behavioral support needs. Ms. Moreno supports his behavior intervention plan to get to know the student and ease the significant transition. She has a paraeducator, Mrs. Salamanca, providing writing support for another student whom Ms. Moreno has been directly servicing. Ms. Moreno provides relevant instructional materials to the paraeducator so she can support the student academically to make progress toward meeting his goals. Unfortunately, Mrs. Salamanca's support has not been as effective as hoped, and the student is now beginning to struggle with his writing.

INTRODUCTION

Paraeducators play a crucial role in providing services to students with disabilities. In 2018, 469,251 full-time equivalent special education paraeducators (also known as paraprofessionals) were employed to provide special education support for students

with disabilities between the ages of 6 and 21 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Recognizing the importance of their role, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) established minimum preparation standards for paraeducators and also outlined how federal funds can be allocated for their continual professional development.

While paraeducators and special educators are expected to collaborate to meet the needs of their students, they do encounter challenges in their respective roles and the way they function as a team. Issues related to training, communication, scheduling, and managing caseloads often must be addressed to ensure a successful professional relationship between both parties.

Unfortunately, paraeducators often receive inadequate training, particularly concerning the delivery of specialized instruction and support for students with disabilities (Fluhler et al., 2022; Walker & Smith, 2015). According to a comprehensive literature review by Walker & Smith (2015), it was discovered that 83% of paraeducators have completed some college coursework. The main topics of their training were focused on the following two areas: acquiring diverse teaching skills and enhancing communication and social skills for students with disabilities. Research has shown that despite the ineffectiveness of their prior training, many paraeducators are still eager to receive additional training and feedback to improve their practice (Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

Typically, special education teachers supervise and provide feedback to paraeducators. Communication between paraeducators and their supervising teachers is an essential element of paraeducator success. Unfortunately, many special education teachers are not trained to provide supervisory support (Giangreco et al., 2010; Riggs & Mueller, 2001) and often have limited time to provide support (Giangreco et al., 2010). This is problematic given that the Council for Exceptional Children (2020) identified the supervision of paraeducators as a vital skill that all special educators should possess.

However, with proper professional development in instructional supervision, special education teachers are positioned to provide systematic training for paraeducators to improve their practice (Walker et al., 2020). Fluhler et al. (2022) found that an effective strategy for training is to use an instructional coaching model, where the paraeducator is provided continuous feedback and emotional support. Fluhler et al. (2022) created a template for paraeducator coaching sessions that included sections for (a) positive feedback; (b) intervention implementation and student data; and (c) priority goals and action items, all while emphasizing the importance of starting and ending the session on a positive note. School administrators can help address special educators' supervisory skills and time constraints by modeling effective supervision practices and providing additional supervisory support. Specifically, school leaders can show teachers how to deliver job-related information to paraeducators by leading formal and informal evaluations (Steward, 2019). By using tools such as rubrics and

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