

Vol 9 | Special Issue 19 | Oct - Dec 2019

ISSN : 2349 - 8978

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL of Innovative Practice & Applied Research

A Peer-Reviewed, Refereed Scholarly Quarterly Journal



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**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
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## THE ROLE OF THE PARA EDUCATOR IN THE GENERAL PHYSICAL EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT- AN OVERVIEW

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### Abstract

*Para educators are a natural source of support for the physical educator and can provide strong, multidimensional support for students' success in the physical education classroom settings, i.e. gymnasium, locker room, outdoor environment. Physical education teachers should expect the Para educator to come to physical education class with the student with a disability. IDEA 2004 states that Para educators should assist in the provision of special education services to students with disabilities. Since physical education is defined as part of special education in the IDEA 2004 law, the expectation should be to have the Para educator in the physical education class when students with disabilities are participating. The physical educator should work closely with the Para educator to develop and implement the student's IEP goals and help students with disabilities participate fully in the activities of the physical education lesson.*

**Keywords:** Para educators, inclusion, students with disabilities, physical education, phenomenology.

### Introduction

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. 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 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. 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

Physical education teachers should collaborate with the Para educator to ensure that the following occurs:

- ❖ Knowledge/ understanding of physical education terminology and equipment. The terminology and equipment used in physical education classes are often very different from what Para educators hear, know, and understand when working with students with disabilities in the regular classroom setting, i.e. dynamic vs static balance, muscular strength, cardiovascular endurance. The physical educator should train and work with paraeducators to ensure they have a working knowledge and understanding of physical education terms and equipment.
- ❖ Open and two-way communication between the paraeducator and the physical educator. The paraeducator should inform the physical educator about any "special considerations" regarding the student with disability. The paraeducator works closely with the student for most, if not all, of the day and thus probably has a better knowledge and understanding of the student and his abilities. Open communication between the paraeducator and the physical educator will help to ensure successful participation by the student with a disability in the various physical activities.
- ❖ Appropriate dress for physical activity. The physical educator should expect the paraeducator to be dressed appropriately for activity in the physical education class. To help with this the physical educator may offer to keep a change of clothes and/or shoes in the gymnasium office so the paraeducator can change into active clothes when needed.
- ❖ Safety considerations are of foremost concern. The physical educator should work with the paraeducator to identify those areas of safety concern so the paraeducator can monitor and actively intervene when necessary. For example, throwing activities, crowded playing conditions, working on uneven surfaces, and inappropriate use of equipment, could all have implications for safe participation in the physical education class. Paraeducators should be trained to look for safety considerations, actively intervene, and communicate with the physical educator about them.
- ❖ Determining the paraeducator's responsibilities and roles in the physical education class. The physical education environment and lesson activities are quite different from the typical classroom, of which the paraeducator is most familiar. These differences include a noisier teaching/ learning environment, a larger teaching area, bigger equipment, more and frequent transitions, and more movement. The physical educator should collaborate and communicate with the paraeducator on his/her expectations when working with students with disabilities in the gymnasium or other physical education environments. Physical educators are encouraged to develop a list of specific roles and responsibilities for the paraeducator so everyone knows exactly what is expected. The physical educator might list the day's activities and general expectations of the paraeducator to facilitate that activity such as:

Warm-up activities - the paraeducator will stay beside the student with a disability to ensure warm up activities are done correctly. The paraeducator will give assistance only when necessary to successfully complete the activity.



### Training Guidelines

**(i). 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.

**(ii). 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.

**(iii). Disabilities:** 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 spinabifi da 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.

**(iv). 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.

**(v). 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.

**(vi). 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.

**(vii). 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.

### Training Ideas

- Provide a clear job description.
- Review goals and objectives for the student in physical education.
- Provide a documentation log for the paraeducator to write daily notes in.
- Provide rubrics or observation tools.
- Provide appropriate modifications to equipment, rules, or activities to support student learning.
- Provide guidelines for interactions with the student.
- Provide guidelines for proximity to the student.
- 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.
- Encourage the paraeducator to assist all students in the class.
- Hold inservice days.

### Essential Duties and Responsibilities

Under the supervision of the Principal, assists a certificated teacher in reinforcing instruction to individual or small groups of students in a physical education classroom or outdoor environment; assists in the preparation of instructional materials and implementation of lesson plans; performs routine clerical and supportive tasks for instructional personnel; set-ups equipment for physical education classes and sports activities include the following:

- a. Assists a certificated teacher in reinforcing physical education instruction to individual or small groups of students in a physical education classroom or outdoor environment; assists in the preparation of instructional materials and implementation of lesson plans.
- b. Leads, monitors and oversees student drills, warm-up stretches, practices and exercises; coordinates teams and activities for physical education classes; organizes sports activities during lunch and recess.
- c. Performs a variety of clerical duties in support of physical education activities such as preparing, duplicating and filing instructional materials; types and inputs data into an assigned computer system; maintains student records and files including student attendance records, grades and related information.
- d. Provides support to the teacher by setting up equipment for physical education classes, sports activities; assists in set-up, distributing, collecting and storing physical education and sports equipment.
- e. Assists students in completing physical education assignments, exercises and drills; assures student understanding of assignments, rules and procedures; assist students by answering questions, providing proper examples, emotional support, friendly attitude and general guidance.
- f. Assists in grading assignments; prepares reports and documentation as required.
- g. Observes, supervises and controls behavior of students on the playground, in the gym and outdoor learning environments according to approved procedures; reports progress regarding student performance and behavior.
- h. Assists in shaping student's behavior through positive reinforcement and other strategies.



- i. Operates and maintains a variety of classroom, office and physical education equipment including athletic equipment, printer, a computer and assigned software as assigned.

### **Qualification Guide**

#### **Knowledge of:**

- Basic Physical Education instructional methods and techniques.
- Safe practices in classroom and physical education activities.
- Basic concepts of child growth and development and developmental behavior characteristics.
- Student behavior management strategies and techniques.
- Correct English grammar, spelling, punctuation and vocabulary.
- Oral and written communication skills.
- Interpersonal skills using tact, patience and courtesy.
- Operation of standard office, classroom and physical education equipment.

#### **Ability to:**

- Assist with instruction and related activities in a classroom or outdoor learning environment.
- Reinforce instruction to individual or small groups of students as directed by the teacher.
- Assist in the preparation of instructional materials and implementation of lesson plans.
- Assist with physical education activities as assigned.
- Understand and follow oral and written directions.
- Establish and maintain cooperative and effective working relationships with others.
- Communicate effectively both orally and in writing.
- Observe and control student behavior according to approved policies and procedures.
- Operate standard office, classroom and physical education equipment.
- Observe health and safety regulations.
- Explain and interpret assignment directions to students.

#### **Education or Experience**

Any combination equivalent to: graduation from high school and some experience working with children in an educational or organized learning environment. Some college level course work in the area of physical education, child development, and recreation is preferred.

#### **Physical Demands**

The physical demands described here are representative of those that must be met by an employee to successfully perform the essential functions of this job. Reasonable accommodations may be made to enable individuals with disabilities to perform the essential functions.

- Dexterity of hands and fingers to operate athletic equipment.
- Sitting or standing for extended periods of time.
- Bending at the waist, kneeling or crouching to assist students.
- Seeing to monitor student activities.
- Hearing and speaking to exchange information.
- Reaching overhead, above the shoulders and horizontally.
- Lifting, carrying, pushing or pulling objects up to 25 pounds.



### Work Environment

Outdoor/Physical Education classroom environment. The work environment characteristics described here are representative of those an employee encounters while performing the essential functions of this job. Reasonable accommodations may be made to enable individuals with disabilities to perform the essential functions. The noise level in the work environment is usually moderate.

- a. Hazards include: Seasonal heat and cold or adverse weather conditions.
- b. Regularly exposed to fumes, airborne particles, grasses and seasonal exposure to pollens.

### Conclusion

Building and maintaining a team is not easy. It helps to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each team member at the beginning of the year. When there is confusion about who is to do something, it is important for the team to discuss the answer together. For this process to be effective, however, it requires commitment by each team member to on-going problem solving rather than giving up when things get tough. This commitment is what helps the team get through difficult times as well. It works in life outside the school, and in building teams for successful students as well. In conclusion, it was evident that the role of the paraeducator in general physical education was unclear.

The teachers did not know what they should expect of the paraeducators or the students they are asked to integrate within their classrooms. Although students with disabilities were being integrated in the general education environment, the acceptance of those students and the struggles with "inclusion" were very much the same as 25 years ago. Teachers remain unprepared to work with students with disabilities and are even less prepared to work with other adults that provide support for students with disabilities. The districts may have vaguely described the roles of paraeducators, but they were not disseminated to all the staff, and there were no accountability measures in place to ensure appropriate utilization of the paraeducators nor was there adequate training in place.

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