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## Improving working relationships between special education teachers and paraprofessionals : development of a quick-reference guide for beginning special educators

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**Improving Working Relationships between Special Education Teachers and  
Paraprofessionals: Development of a Quick-reference Guide for Beginning  
Special Educators**

Saramae Cutts

An Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of  
Master's of Arts in Education

College of Professional Studies  
School of Education

California State University, Monterey Bay

May 2010

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Signature Page of Thesis Project

**IMPROVING WORKING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SPECIAL EDUCATION  
TEACHERS AND PARAPROFESSIONALS: DEVELOPMENT OF A QUICK-  
REFERENCE GUIDE FOR BEGINNING SPECIAL EDUCATORS**

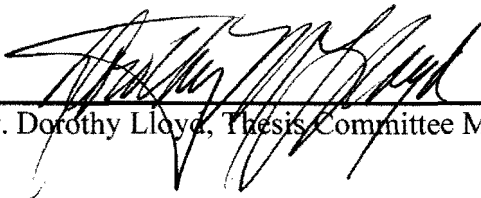


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Dr. Josh Harrower, Thesis Advisor

5/11/10

Date



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Dr. Dorothy Lloyd, Thesis Committee Member

5/11/10

Date

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## Table of Contents

Signature Page of Thesis Project.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Abstract.....	6
Chapter 1: Statement of Purpose.....	7
Introduction.....	8
Background.....	8
Personal Experience.....	9
Statement of Problem.....	10
Purpose of Study.....	11
Thesis Project Questions.....	11
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	12
Introduction.....	13
Search Criteria.....	14
Criteria for Selection.....	15
Requirements for Teachers Working with Paraprofessionals.....	15
Understanding Paraprofessionals Views.....	16
Teacher Preparation Prior to Working with Paraprofessionals.....	17
Suggestions for Teachers When Working with Paraprofessionals.....	18
Conclusion.....	19
Chapter 3: Methods.....	21
Literature Review.....	22

Expert Panel Review.....22

Field Review by Beginning Special Education Teachers.....24

Chapter 4: Results.....25

    Results of the Literature Review.....26

    Results of the Expert Panel Review.....26

    Results of the Field Review by Beginning Special Education Teachers .....32

Chapter 5: Discussion.....34

    Summary.....35

    Limitations .....37

    Implications.....38

    Conclusion.....38

References.....40

Appendices.....43

Appendix A - Panel Member Questionnaire.....44

Appendix B - Field Review Survey.....46

Appendix C - Quick-Reference Guide.....47

**Abstract**

The purpose of this project was to create a resource for beginning special education teachers outlining and describing practical strategies for working effectively with paraprofessionals. A quick-reference guide was designed according to feedback from an expert panel drawn from professionals within the education field as well as from a field review conducted with beginning special education teachers. Feedback from both the expert panel and the field review indicated that the developed quick-reference guide was a useful resource and addressed an important need for local beginning special educators. Implications relating to the use of this document in supporting beginning special educators in working effectively with paraprofessionals are discussed.

**Chapter 1: Statement of Purpose**



## **Introduction**

Special educators today are asked to fulfill a number of responsibilities (Mastropieri, 2001). These responsibilities include lesson planning and preparation, assessment, instruction, behavior support, transition planning, and preparation of Individual Education Plans (Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, & Sorenson, 2009). Teacher preparation programs are designed to train prospective teachers on how to carry out these tasks. However teacher preparation programs historically have not been designed to train prospective teachers how to manage other adults in their classroom (Wallace et al., 2001; & French, 2001). In special education environments there is often a higher adult to student ratio, and thus a number of other adults working together to support students, especially those with severe disabilities. One important group of adults working in special education are the classroom assistants, or paraprofessionals. These paraprofessionals are adults who are placed in the special education class to assist the teacher in their many activities designed to support students with disabilities. Some researchers have argued that teacher preparation programs in special education may not adequately prepare and/or train new special education teachers to create positive working relationships with their paraprofessionals (French, 1998; Payne, 2005; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; & Wallace et al., 2001). Creating this relationship can be difficult for new special education teachers who have not received this formal training. Numerous problems can arise when teachers are not educated on how to manage these adults in their educational settings (Carnahan, et al., 2009).

## **Background**

In 1975 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) changed education in the United States. It stated that public schools receiving federal funding must provide access to students with disabilities. Special education as we know it was formed, and education began to

integrate into the public school setting students with physical and mental disabilities. In 1990, EHA was amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which was most recently reauthorized in 2004. Paraprofessionals then began being used to assist special educators in supporting students with disabilities. Many districts today offer professional development to their teachers regarding curriculum and school procedures, along with professional development for paraprofessionals regarding procedures, how to work with students, and in some instances, how to best assist their teachers. However, teachers may not be offered professional development on how to best utilize their paraprofessionals.

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) has developed standards for the teaching profession, which teacher preparation programs and school districts must abide by. However, these standards for education specialist credentials do not include significant emphasis on a teacher's ability to manage the paraprofessional within the classroom (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2008). While CCTC has developed standards which reference the utilization of paraprofessionals within the educational setting (see standard #s 2 and 6b), there is no specific standard exclusively related to this topic

### **Personal experience**

Special Education has been an area of interest of mine for many years. As a small child, I was in a severe car accident which left me in a coma after suffering a traumatic brain injury (TBI) and many broken bones. During the recovery process I received speech, occupational, and physical therapy. Essentially, I had to learn to walk and talk all over again. I would later use this experience to relate to students with disabilities.

My first experience in the Special Education field was as a paraprofessional in a moderate to severe special education class. My classroom teacher had been a special educator

for 30 years. She had much experience in managing the paraprofessionals. She was insightful and tactful in managing the paraprofessionals in the classroom. I did not realize at the time that her experience in the field was what accounted for her ability to manage the students and paraprofessionals with ease. After becoming a teacher, I realized that doing this was not as easy as it looked.

My first year teaching was the most difficult. I had two paraprofessionals and six students in my classroom. Learning the attitudes and behaviors of my students was simple and did not take long. However, learning how to effectively collaborate with and manage my paraprofessionals took more time and was much more challenging. I did not know how to take charge. I did not know how to manage time and resources amongst my paraprofessionals. I did not know how to adequately engage my paraprofessionals in a way that would be successful and productive for all. In my experience, teacher preparation programs and school-site professional development activities do not adequately prepare beginning special education teachers for their role in overseeing the paraprofessionals in their classrooms. A quick-reference guide describing all of these issues and the best practices for handling the issues that commonly arise when working with paraprofessionals would have benefited me greatly.

### **Statement of Problem**

Research suggests that teachers are not being trained adequately to manage, evaluate, supervise, or work with paraprofessionals (Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; French & Pickett, 1997). According to French (1998) educators state that they have not been prepared for working with paraprofessionals. French (1998) further stated that educators find it awkward to instruct other adults. For beginning special education teachers, learning how to manage the adults in their classrooms can be more challenging than teaching itself. There is an urgent need to educate our

beginning teachers to effectively work with their paraprofessionals (Salzberg & Morgan 1995). While research acknowledges this need, it does not suggest that this type of preparation is common place within teacher preparation programs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Beginning special educators can be overwhelmed by the demands of being a new teacher. Many new special educators are not prepared for the role of managing paraprofessionals in the classroom. A quick-reference guide outlining and describing practical strategies for working effectively with paraprofessionals would be a valuable resource for beginning special education teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis project was to 1) determine best practices for utilizing paraprofessionals in the classroom, 2) identify how to best prepare new special education teachers to work with their paraprofessionals effectively, and 3) design a quick-reference guide for beginning special education teachers to help them utilize their paraprofessionals to their full potential.

### **Thesis Project Questions**

Through this project the following questions were investigated and addressed.

1. Are new special education teachers being prepared for utilizing their instructional assistants?
2. What are known best practices for utilizing instructional assistants in the classroom?
3. How can new special education teachers be better prepared in utilizing instructional assistants?

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

## Introduction

With the introduction of such mandates as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), teachers are inundated with more responsibilities, often just to simply meet new requirements (Wallace et al., 2001). With this increase in responsibilities, paraprofessionals have become increasingly invaluable to special education (Keller, Bucholz, & Brady, 2007). Under the guidance of the special education teacher, they perform many tasks within the classroom (Streckelberg et al., 2007). Before IDEA and NCLB, paraprofessionals' responsibilities often consisted of clerical duties and supervision (Keller, Bucholz, & Brady, 2007). However, as times change so do the expectations for paraprofessionals in the classroom. Whereas paraprofessionals' duties were once mainly clerical, today paraprofessionals can be expected to perform a multitude of instructional duties (French, 1998). According to French (1998), these new expectations for paraprofessionals can include group or individual instruction, student supervision, behavior interventions, the tracking of student performance, and IEP meeting attendance, in addition to the traditional clerical duties of making copies and filing. One of the biggest issues related to this shift in expectations is the lack of clarity of these new expectations. Research suggests that some teachers give minimal guidelines and instruction on these roles and expect paraprofessionals to catch on with time (French, 1998). Teachers are not trained adequately to effectively use paraprofessionals in their classrooms, nor are they given the expertise to train paraprofessionals on these new, more instructionally based job expectations (Streckelberg et al., 2007).

Research suggests that investigation of the training offered to teachers regarding working with paraprofessionals is a relatively new area of investigation (Wallace et al., 2001). Recently researchers have started to look at how the formal education system has failed to prepare new

teachers to effectively utilize paraprofessionals in their classrooms (Drecktrah, 2000; Streckelberg et al., 2007; Wallace et al., 2001). Also relatively new research has begun to look at ways to better prepare teachers, as well as paraprofessionals, for the special education environment. For example, technology has become increasingly utilized in creating training programs for teachers as well as for paraprofessionals (Morgan, Forbush, & Nelson, 2004; Streckelberg et al., 2007).

Paraprofessionals can be responsible for many different tasks within the classroom and they can have many different roles (Giangreco et al, 2005). To be successful in these roles, expectations of their job duties must be understood. However, these expectations continue to change (Keller, Bucholz, & Brady, 2007). Research related to the roles of both the teacher and the paraprofessional has identified some crucial elements of this relationship. One important component in the relationship between classroom personnel is learning how the roles, responsibilities, and unique contributions of each can enhance the professional relationship (Carnahan, Williamson, Clarke, & Sorenson, 2009). Teachers need to know how to effectively convey their expectations regarding the roles of their paraprofessionals (Carnahan C., et al., 2009).

### **Search Criteria**

Two databases were used to review research material. The databases were Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Google Scholar. The keywords used during the search were (a) paraprofessional, (b) paraeducator, (c) classroom assistant, (d) instructional aide, (e) collaboration, (f) training, (g) supervision, (h) special education, (i) teacher, (j) working together, (k) preparation, (l) partnership, (m) administrator, and (n) perspectives. These terms were used together and separately to conduct searches in the ERIC database. Google Scholar

was used to further investigate research or articles identified but not made available through those data bases as full-text documents. In addition, references for each article obtained were reviewed and cross-referenced.

### **Criteria for Selection**

Studies within this review were chosen based on whether: (a) the article or research study was published between 2000 and 2007, (b) the study included either special education teachers or paraprofessionals, and (c) the purpose was related to paraprofessionals and teachers working together for the benefit of students. Studies were not used because: (a) the results had no direct connection with the working relationship of paraprofessionals and teachers within the classroom, (b) the data was personal opinion rather than research-based.

### **Requirements for Teachers in Working with Paraprofessionals**

Researchers have sought to identify the skills required by teachers to develop effective working relationships with paraprofessionals. Wallace et al. (2001) completed a study examining the significance of insight and expertise for teachers in the area of supervision, as related to paraprofessionals and their responsibilities within the classroom. The study examined at what level this expertise was exhibited in the classroom. The findings indicated that special educators were provided with little to no formal training on how to work effectively with paraprofessionals (Wallace et al., 2001). Paraprofessionals are being given greater responsibilities within the classroom, including direct instruction, data collection, and personal support for students, and management of student behaviors (Carnahan C., et al., 2009). Also indicated by the research are competencies which may be used to develop educational trainings for educators and others who supervise paraprofessionals. These competencies include trainings designed specifically for those that supervise paraprofessionals, strategies for training paraprofessionals within the



classroom, and strategies for problem-solving when there are communication breakdowns between supervising teacher and the paraprofessional (Carnahan C., et al., 2009). Further, these competencies may be utilized as a basis for the evaluation of teachers who direct the work of paraprofessionals.

### **Understanding Paraprofessionals' Views**

Researchers have also investigated professionals' views on effective working relationships with teachers. For example, Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer (2001) conducted a study seeking to identify issues related to paraprofessionals' views on topics such as respect, appreciation, and acknowledgement as they relate to effective, amicable work environments. One hundred and three professionals, including general education and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators, identified topics of importance. Acknowledgement by colleagues, rate of pay, being given significant duties, including duties not related to instruction, having their opinions valued by others, and receiving training and assistance were each reported as the top factors in determining occupational contentment among paraprofessionals (Giangreco et al., 2001). Giangreco et al. (2001) suggested that the extent to which teachers and paraprofessionals have similar expectations about work-related responsibilities greatly impacts how paraprofessionals view whether they are acknowledged and valued by colleagues. When all the personnel involved have the same expectations regarding classroom responsibilities, the paraprofessionals generally expressed a greater level of occupational contentment (Giangreco et al., 2001). Teachers should be prepared to relay their expectations to paraprofessionals in a way that creates positive working relationships. However, few current teacher training programs train teachers to do this (Carnahan, et al., 2009).

### **Teacher Preparation Prior to Working with Paraprofessionals**

Studies conducted have examined the current training processes and procedures in preparing teachers for working with paraprofessionals. Drecktrah (2000) conducted a study to determine the preparation of special education teachers to work with, supervise, and evaluate paraprofessionals. Three hundred surveys were mailed to certificated special education teachers in the state of Wisconsin. Of the 212 special education teachers who responded, 14% reported receiving training in their education programs only on how to work with paraprofessionals, 19% stated they had received training only on how to supervise paraprofessionals, and 13% had received training only on how to evaluate paraprofessionals. Less than 10% of respondents said that they had received training in how to interact with paraprofessionals throughout their educational training program. The other 44% of respondents reported that they had received no training at all (Drecktrah, 2000).

Furthermore, the respondents in the Drecktrah (2000) study noted that the most important skills needed to work with paraprofessionals were classroom configuration, how to resolve conflicts, ways to supervise effectively, how to evaluate, and ways to guide and coach paraprofessionals. Ninety percent of these respondents reported that they felt that teacher-education-institutions should include courses regarding how to effectively work with paraprofessionals. The results of this study support the conclusion that teacher education programs need to better prepare their teachers to work with paraprofessionals. The results also implied that paraprofessionals require a greater level of training by education programs and/or districts. Drecktrah (2000) also stated that districts should create standards for the supervision and evaluation of paraprofessionals.

Dover (2002) conducted a survey of 369 general and special education teachers which identified suggested techniques for districts to increase the effectiveness of paraprofessional staff. Suggestions included district development of strategies for teachers' utilization of paraprofessional and greater chances for collaboration among teachers regarding paraprofessional performance in the classroom. Overall, survey respondents indicated that the leadership of paraprofessionals should be a priority.

### **Suggestions for Teachers When Working with Paraprofessionals**

Giangreco and Doyle (2004) suggest four critical areas that teachers should attend to when working with paraprofessional. First, teachers need to ensure that their paraprofessionals feel at ease and wanted within the classroom setting. If the paraprofessional feels welcomed and valued then their performance potentially will be positively affected. The authors specifically recommended that in this area, teachers should 1) be sure to offer frequent thanks for the paraprofessionals' assistance, 2) try to incorporate the paraprofessional into the daily routine, and 3) let the paraprofessionals know that their ideas and input are welcomed and encouraged. According to the authors, the act of kindness here seems small but can go a long way.

Second, teachers should help their paraprofessionals familiarize themselves with the setting in which they are expected to perform their duties, as well as with the students with whom they will be working. This will allow the paraprofessionals to feel more comfortable in their setting. Specific recommendations in this area include that the teacher 1) introduce him or her to the surroundings, 2) create a space where they will put their belongings, 3) provide a designated area where they will be working, and 4) identify with whom they will be working. Teachers should create a sense of preparedness for their paraprofessionals. The authors suggest

that this will reinforce their sense of belonging in the classroom. They further note that communication of this type should continue throughout the year.

Also, if teachers provide specific plans for their paraprofessionals, expectations can be clarified. Plans that specify what a teacher wants to see will help the paraprofessional to exhibit instruction that mirrors that of their teacher. Giangreco and Doyle (2004) suggest that having an understanding of the paraprofessionals' previous experience will afford the teacher the means to know how specific the plans should be. Plans given to the paraprofessional should include directives for activities and lessons, but also for times when they are not instructing. Although this may seem like a lot of work in the beginning, the authors note that it will be beneficial for both the teacher and paraprofessionals.

Lastly, Giangreco and Doyle (2004) suggest that clear and precise communication between teachers and paraprofessionals should be emphasized. While teachers are often not trained for this component, it is important that since the teacher serves as the direct supervisor of the work done by paraprofessionals they be able to give prompt, constructive feedback that will benefit the instruction of students. The authors suggest having a communication system that works for everyone in the team. This system should be regularly scheduled and honored by all members of that team. This will afford a level of accountability and professionalism that can be respected and be more likely to hold the team to a high level of integrity.

### **Conclusion**

Paraprofessionals are responsible for many tasks within the classroom. Through the latest legislation, many of the traditional roles of paraprofessionals, as well as teachers, have become increasingly challenging. In consideration of changing roles, both paraprofessionals and teachers are in need of training programs that can successfully prepare them for these new

demands. Paraprofessional training in different academic areas has occurred for many years (Carnahan, et al., 2009). However, looking at how teachers are prepared to work with paraprofessionals is a relatively new perspective. There is limited literature related to current teaching programs that effectively prepare teachers for creating positive working relationships with paraprofessionals. What the research does suggest, however, is that training in this area should focus on communication, clearly stated expectations, and planning. According to Carnahan and colleagues (2009), a “systematic approach” outlining strategies and procedures regarding creating positive working relationships with their paraprofessionals will decrease the challenges faced by special education teachers.

**Chapter 3: Methods**

The purpose of this thesis project was to create a comprehensive quick-reference guide detailing practical strategies for supporting beginning special education teachers in working with and effectively utilizing their paraprofessionals. To do this, a multi-level review process was developed to ensure the guide would be accurate, useful, and user-friendly.

### **Literature Review**

In designing this quick-reference guide, a review of the literature was conducted to identify current strategies and procedures for the training of special education teachers on how to create effective working relationships with paraprofessionals. Two databases were used in the review process. The databases were Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Google Scholar. The keywords used during the search were (a) paraprofessional, (b) paraeducators, (c) classroom assistant, (d) instructional aide, (e) collaboration, (f) training, (g) supervision, (h) special education, (i) teacher, (j) working together, (k) preparation, (l) partnership, (m) administrator, and (n) perspectives. These terms were used together and separately to conduct searches in the ERIC database. Google Scholar was used to further investigate research or articles identified but not made available through those data bases as full-text documents. In addition, references for each article obtained were reviewed and cross-referenced.

### **Expert Panel Review**

Following the literature review an outline of the quick-reference guide was developed for review by a panel of experts in the field. Thus, an expert panel was assembled consisting of: 1) two program specialists within the Monterey County Special Education Local Planning Area (SELPA), 2) three experienced special education teachers, defined as special educators who have

been teaching for 4 years or more, 3) one special education site principal, and 4) one paraprofessional. The members of the expert panel were given two weeks to review an early draft version of the quick-reference guide. The expert panel then analyzed the clarity and comprehensiveness of the topics related to new special education teachers creating positive working relationships with their paraprofessionals. Following the review process, the panel members were asked to respond to a questionnaire (see Appendix A) designed to gain their insight and feedback about the content of the quick-reference guide and its implications for the classroom. Items on the questionnaire focused on whether the content in the quick-reference guide: 1) would be helpful in preparing new special education teachers for utilizing their paraprofessionals; 2) would give a comprehensive overview of known best practices for utilizing paraprofessionals in the classroom; and 3) could be improved to better prepare new special education teachers in utilizing their paraprofessionals effectively. In addition to completing the questionnaire, the two SELPA program specialists were interviewed about their professional responsibilities in training and supporting teachers in working effectively with their paraprofessionals. This interview consisted of reviewing the quick-reference guide along with the initial feedback provided, and probing for more detailed feedback and suggestions.

After incorporating the information gained through the literature review and the feedback obtained through the interviews and questionnaires with the expert panel of professionals, an updated draft of the quick-reference guide was created. This version of the quick-reference guide included the content and format derived from the previous levels of review, and was designed specifically for use by special education teachers new to the profession.



**Field Review by Beginning Special Education Teachers**

Three beginning special education teachers, defined as special educators who had been teaching for less than two years, were selected to review the information given in the quick-reference guide. They were then asked to evaluate the usefulness and applicability of the quick-reference guide as a resource for working with paraprofessionals.

Following a review of the guide, the new special education teachers were asked to complete a survey (see Appendix B). The survey was designed to evaluate the applicability and usefulness of the quick-reference guide. The survey consisted of questions focused on the following issues: 1) whether or not the teachers had received training in their teacher preparation programs regarding the topics outlined in the quick-reference guide, 2) whether or not they felt the information contained in the guide would have been useful on their first day of teaching, 3) whether or not the guide comprehensively addressed the issues confronting new special education teachers working with paraprofessionals, 4) what they felt were the most valuable portions of the guide, and 5) what suggestions they had for changes to the guide. Based on the results of the field review and survey, a final version of the quick-reference guide was created.

**Chapter 4: Results**

In order to develop a quick-reference guide detailing the practical strategies for supporting beginning special education teachers in working with and effectively utilizing their paraprofessionals, a multi-level review process was implemented. Results from the various levels of review are presented below.

### **Results of the Literature Review**

The review of existing literature resulted in the identification of a number of topics that should be addressed by special educators. These areas included: 1) clarification of roles and responsibilities of the paraprofessional and teacher, 2) maintaining open and effective communication with paraprofessionals, 3) discussing instructional expectations for paraprofessionals, and 4) maintaining effective behavior management supported by the paraprofessional. The research further provided insight on current, research-based best practices in areas such as the organization and creation of effective communication practices. However, through the literature review it was also noted that new special education teachers typically did not have extensive training in these areas. Thus, the research also indicated a significant need for resources on this topic for beginning special education teachers.

### **Results of the Expert Panel Review**

The consensus from the expert panel was that the quick-reference guide was a relevant and needed resource. The panel offered feedback on each section as well as on the document as a whole. The common theme was that the focus of the guide should be on the importance of regular communication between paraprofessionals and teachers as being essential in forming and maintaining an effective working relationship. The expert panel unanimously agreed that a flip-chart format presented as a quick-reference guide would be preferable to a handbook as a more user-friendly format. It was suggested by two members of the expert panel, however, to include

charts and examples of communication logs, student information sheets, lesson plans, and other forms to make the guide even more user-friendly. It was suggested by the paraprofessional on the panel that the topics of the quick-reference guide be color-coded. Her suggestion was that the text of each section be in a different color, having the guide printed on white paper, so that the different sections would be easy to locate by the classroom teacher.

All of the panel members agreed that it was important to include information for classroom teachers regarding the importance of providing a written description of the duties of the position to their paraprofessionals. Several members of the panel indicated that this information should include strategies for checking for understanding and for clarifying discrepancies regarding duties and expectations with paraprofessionals when reviewing the job descriptions. Two panel members made suggestions to include information pointing out the fact that it is easier to clear up misunderstandings early in the creation of the working relationship between classroom teacher and paraprofessional. The paraprofessional on the panel recommended including information for the beginning special educators on distinguishing with the paraprofessional what responsibilities he or she would not be expected to be responsible for (i.e. assigning grades or testing students). Several members of the panel suggested including information indicating that teachers should inquire about the paraprofessional's previous experience. Those same panel members indicated that strategies for reviewing professional expectations should also be included. The review of expectations regarding breaks, talking on the phone, eating in class, and texting in class were additional issues that the members of the panel noted for inclusion in the guide. Members also suggested that information pertaining to strategies for sharing specific information about students to the paraprofessional should be

included. The panel's paraprofessional further suggested including strategies to better familiarize the paraprofessionals with the students.

Many members of the expert panel mentioned that one of the biggest challenges in communication with paraprofessionals is the inequitable roles between them and the teacher. As members indicated, the teacher is ultimately responsible for student achievement and the level of integrity of instruction. Therefore, it was suggested by several members of the expert panel to include information that would aid teachers in maintaining that delineation of roles, while creating an environment where the paraprofessional would be comfortable enough to communicate openly about professional concerns. Panel members suggested including information on strategies for achieving this outcome in the guide. The panel members also suggested that information be included to convey the importance of remembering that the classroom team depends on the teacher not portraying a level of superiority.

The topic of student confidentiality was also noted as being important by panel members. They maintained that teachers must enforce a high level of confidentiality in terms of student information. Several panel members recommended including strategies on how to inform paraprofessionals that they cannot converse about student behaviors, disability, or other information related to the student, with anyone but the classroom teacher and/or specialists working directly with the student. According to the panel members' suggestions, information regarding strategies on how paraprofessionals communicate student progress to the classroom teacher should also be included. Panel members agreed that having documentation available for reporting progress would also be important to include. Two panel members stated that information pertaining to student confidentiality should be included in the guide, along with sample forms for reporting student progress.

Panel members expressed that strategies should be included pertaining to how teachers could discuss their preferred teaching styles with their paraprofessionals. Members indicated that including information about modeling what a lesson should look like to a paraprofessional would be beneficial. Also, members agreed that the guide should include information on strategies for sharing the various accommodations and modifications for different students with the paraprofessional. Additionally, it was recommended that this should include modeling how to deliver different curriculums to assist paraprofessionals in delivering better instruction overall.

Members indicated that the guide should have information on how to ensure that paraprofessionals become familiar with expected student outcomes. Members agreed that information in the guide should include ideas for providing paraprofessionals with access to students' IEP goals, as well as other pertinent information related to the student (i.e. behavior plans, seizure protocols). One panel member indicated that information should be included in the guide that emphasizes the importance of paraprofessionals being informed when there are changes to students' IEP goals and/or behavior plans, particularly in the case of students with behavior plans. This member suggested that strategies on how to communicate the daily schedule to the paraprofessional be included as well.

While the entire panel concurred that it is important to have a classroom behavior plan in place, many panel members indicated that new teachers often struggle with preparing classroom behavior plans. Therefore, several members suggested including information regarding a simplistic classroom behavior plan for the new teachers (see Appendix C) in the guide. Panel members expressed the opinion that information related to strategies of establishing rules, routines, rewards, and consequences for individual students, as well as for the class as a whole

should be included in the guide. Members of the panel suggested including information in the guide that emphasizes the need for flexibility within the classroom structure.

Effectively involving paraprofessionals during transitions between activities was also identified as a potential challenge for new teachers. Panel members suggested including information regarding strategies to help ensure that all participants are prepared for these transitions. Members further suggested including information indicating the importance of having a routine and enforcing it in order to decrease the challenges related to transitioning.

In addition to the feedback provided by the expert panel as a whole, the two panel members from the local SELPA offered specific suggestions for the guide that were not indicated by other panel members. These suggestions along with how they were incorporated in the guide are listed below:

1. Having a plan for “out of the ordinary” situations with individual students and having this plan incorporated into the student’s information sheet (i.e. behavior issues, student gets sick in class). In response a form was created to identify these behaviors, and was formatted in such a way that the observer could record the antecedent and consequence of such behaviors. This form was included in the guide.
2. Including a communication log for teacher to paraprofessional communication. Thus a sample communication log was created and included in the guide.
3. Having a log for weekly communication with paraprofessionals. In response a sample of a communication log for weekly communication with paraprofessionals was created and included in the guide.

4. Giving definitions of what different teaching styles look like. A sample document for definitions of teaching styles was created and included in the guide.
5. Giving paraprofessionals access to teacher guides when available.
6. Including information on designing a folder to be made available to the paraprofessional, for each student that includes all essential data collection forms. Samples of various data collection forms were created and included in the guide.
7. Including sample behavior expectations and a chart to log whether or not those expectations were met. Sample forms were created and included in the guide.
8. Including information and examples regarding charting student behaviors. Samples of documents for charting student behaviors were created and included in the guide.
9. Including information and examples regarding checklists for students and paraprofessionals to self-monitor their preparedness for each activity, in order to ensure smooth transitions. Sample checklists for students and paraprofessionals were created and included in the guide.
10. Including information and examples regarding the use of charts/forms for the mentioned methods of communication. These samples were created and included in the guide.

The above mentioned suggestions lead to the revision of the guide. A new draft was then developed and given to beginning special education teachers in order to conduct a field review of the guide.



### **Results of the Field Review by Beginning Special Education Teachers**

The updated draft of the guide was emailed to five beginning special education teachers. The document also included a survey (see Appendix B) for the teachers to fill out after completing their review of the second draft of the quick-reference guide. Three of the five surveys were returned. All three teachers who responded to the survey had less than two years of experience as teachers. One of the respondents had worked as a paraprofessional for 25 years before becoming a classroom teacher.

After reviewing the draft of the guide, all three of the beginning special educators reported that they viewed the guide as a valuable resource. One of the three respondents indicated that she had received training on how to manage paraprofessionals during her teacher preparation program, while the other two respondents indicated that they had not. All three special education teachers concurred that the guide could have helped them to better manage their paraprofessionals on their first day of teaching. Furthermore, all three agreed that the guide comprehensively addressed issues facing new special education teachers in regards to paraprofessionals in the classroom.

The beginning special education teachers who reviewed the guide did, however, offer some suggestions. While one of the teachers indicated that the information offered in the guide properly addressed those areas most in need of being addressed, another teacher indicated that specific information should be included regarding instructional styles, such as technical definitions. This respondent also suggested that strategies for defining variations of those technical definitions be included. The third beginning special education teacher indicated that information related to strategies for situations when a paraprofessional is not willing to work together with the classroom teacher should be included. The suggestions of the beginning

special education teachers were incorporated and a final draft of the quick-reference guide was created (see Appendix C).

**Chapter 5: Discussion**

As the responsibilities of special education teachers continue to change, so does their role within the classroom (Wallace et al., 2001). As research suggests (Giangreco & Doyle, 2004; French, 1999; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995), teacher preparation programs may not be properly preparing special education teachers for their supervisory role of paraprofessionals in the classroom. Research further suggests that there is a need for resources designed to help beginning special education teachers assume this role (Wallace et al., 2001).

### **Summary**

The problem addressed through this project was the lack of preparation of beginning special education teachers to work with their paraprofessionals. Personal experience with this topic prompted the notion that a hand book including best practices related to research-based strategies would be useful to a beginning special education teacher. This idea led to the review of current literature related to strategies and best practices for utilizing paraprofessionals in the classroom. This review provided an insight into current practices and suggestions for what needed to be done to further prepare beginning special education teachers to better manage and supervise the paraprofessionals in their classrooms. An early draft of the handbook was revised at the suggestion of an expert panel to become a quick-reference guide. Consistent with the research, and based upon recommendations of the panel, a resource that was simple and user-friendly was determined to be a better resource for beginning special education teachers than a complex manual. Before creating the guide book, methods were established. First the draft outline of the guide was created which incorporated best practices and research-based strategies. The draft included the topics of 1) roles and responsibilities, 2) communication, 3) expectations for instructional delivery, 4) expected student outcomes, 5) behavior management, and 6)

transitions. These topics were elaborated by including specific strategies and suggestions related to each area, such as providing a written job description, keeping communication professional and pleasant, discussing and modeling preferred teaching styles, and sharing student expectations, behavior management techniques, and classroom management plans. After the outline was developed, the draft was then given to a panel of experts to recruit their feedback regarding the topics presented and suggestions based on their expertise.

The feedback of the expert panel was infused into the outline to create a revised draft of the guide. Based on the feedback from the expert panel changes and additions were made in developing the subsequent draft. Panel members suggested including information to teachers on giving the paraprofessional a copy of the official job description from the district. They further suggested discussing the differences between the roles of the teacher and the paraprofessional, the expectation for the paraprofessional's presence in other areas on campus (i.e. other classrooms). Noted by the expert panel and incorporated into the revised draft was information pertaining to the importance of gaining information about the paraprofessional's background and experiences. The expert panel stressed communication as the biggest issue faced by beginning special education teachers. Therefore the communication section was expanded to include the expert panel members' specific suggestions regarding establishing a regular weekly meeting with the paraprofessional to discuss issues in the classroom and the importance of respecting that weekly meeting time to ensure the maintenance of an effective relationship with the paraprofessional. The panel strenuously suggested incorporating information related to confidentiality. Therefore, strategies related to how to converse with the paraprofessional were noted as well. The expert panel recommended charting communication to keep an account of what had been discussed. That suggestion was included, along with a sample chart in the

appendix of the guide (see Appendix C). For the topic of instructional delivery, the updated draft included a section on the importance of giving or showing paraprofessionals examples of how instruction is to be modified and/or adapted for specific students based on feedback from the expert panel.

Following the review by the expert panel, and the incorporation of their suggestions, the updated draft of the guide was submitted to the beginning special education teachers who then reviewed the guide and answered a short survey. Specific suggestions offered by the beginning special education teachers included providing technical definitions of various teaching styles and strategies for dealing with paraprofessionals who will not work as a team. Overall, all three respondents indicated that the quick-reference guide would have been a useful resource on their first day in the classroom.

### **Limitations**

One limitation to this project is that the interview with the two members of the panel from the local SELPA was conducted at the same time. Furthermore, the interview was not audio recorded. Thus while the two members agreed on many issues, it is possible that some of the comments and/or suggestions were not fully incorporated into the final version of the guide. Additionally, these two panel members worked in the same office which may have impacted their responses in some way.

All but one of the panel members were either previously or currently a professional associate of the author. This may have impacted not only their decision to participate, but also their tendency to provide critical feedback on the guide. Also all of the professionals that offered suggestions on the guide worked with in Monterey County. Thus the feedback offered may not be representative of issues outside of the Monterey County area. The feedback offered from the

beginning special education teachers was limited in that they did not have the opportunity to perform a field test in which they put the strategies offered in the guide into action. Thus, a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies outlined in the guide was not conducted.

### **Implications**

The findings herein suggest that resources similar to the quick-reference guide are useful aids for beginning special education teachers, as they may or may not have previously received official training on how to manage paraprofessionals within their classroom. The local SELPA has requested that a copy of the guide be placed in the SELPA library as a resource for beginning special education teachers. It is also intended that this guide be placed in the California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB) library thus making it accessible to former, current, and future special education credential students at CSUMB. The local school districts could potentially be provided with a copy to use as a resource for their beginning special education teachers. Furthermore, these districts could potentially place a copy at each school site as a resource for site-specific beginning special education teachers.

### **Conclusion**

The scope of this project was, in essence, to create a quick fix for a major problem. This quick-reference guide contains only a small amount of information and is designed to offer teachers a starting-point on this important topic. The hope is for teachers to have a successful beginning with their paraprofessionals.

As research supports (Jensen, Parsons, & Reid, 1998), and as was mentioned by members of the expert panel, beginning special education teachers are often unprepared to create positive working relationships with their paraprofessionals. This issue is often not sufficiently addressed

in teacher preparation programs, and some teachers are unaware of the issue until they get into the classroom (Salzberg & Morgan, 1995). A quick-reference guide for beginning special education teachers, describing key issues in developing effective working relationships with paraprofessionals, was developed. This guide was viewed as a useful resource by both the expert panel members and the beginning special educators who reviewed the guide. Further research is needed in order to create training program components that firmly address this issue so that teachers on a larger scale can be better prepared to create positive working relationships with paraprofessionals.



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**Appendices**

APPENDIX A

Panel Member Questionnaire

For each of the sections above, please answer the following questions.

1. Roles & Responsibilities

Do you think that the topics mentioned in this section are comprehensive?

Do you think that I should add more?

Would you add anything to this section?

2. Communication

Do you think that the topics mentioned in this section are comprehensive?

Do you think that I should add more?

Would you add anything to this section?

3. Expectations of Instructional Delivery

Do you think that the topics mentioned in this section are comprehensive?

Do you think that I should add more?

Would you add anything to this section?

4. Expected Student Outcomes

Do you think that the topics mentioned in this section are comprehensive?

Do you think that I should add more?

Would you add anything to this section?

5. Behavior Management

Do you think that the topics mentioned in this section are comprehensive?

Do you think that I should add more?

Would you add anything to this section?

6. Transitions

Do you think that the topics mentioned in this section are comprehensive?

Do you think that I should add more?

Would you add anything to this section?

**OVERALL**

What do you like most about my idea to create a handbook for beginning special education teachers on how to best utilize their paraprofessionals?

Do you like the format and order of topics?

Do you have any suggestions for making the handbook as user-friendly as possible?

Do you think there will be enough information covered in this handbook?

Give any more suggestions you may have for making this handbook as useful as possible.

APPENDIX B

New Special Education Teacher Survey

1. Did you receive training in your teacher preparation program regarding the management of paraprofessionals?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_\_\_ No

2. Do you feel this quick-reference guide could have helped you better manage your paraprofessionals on your first day of teaching?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_\_\_ No

3. Do you think this quick-reference guide comprehensively addresses issues facing new special education teacher in regards to paraprofessionals in the classroom?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_\_\_ No

4. What was the most important information you gained from this quick-reference guide ?

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5. Is there anything you would change about this quick-reference guide regarding the utilization of paraprofessionals?

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APPENDIX C

Quick-reference Guide for New Special Education Teachers:  
How to Create a Positive Working Relationship with your Paraprofessionals



Quick-reference Guide for New  
Special Education Teachers:  
How to Create a Positive  
Working Relationship with your  
Paraprofessionals

By Saramae Cutts

### Intent of this Guide

The purpose of this guide is to give beginning special education teachers techniques and strategies to work with their paraprofessionals. Techniques and strategies are offered for establishing a positive working relationship, keeping communication open, and guiding the instruction of Paras with students, as well as many other topics.

This guide is a good starting point for teachers but is by no means a comprehensive training manual. It is intended that the information presented here will be useful to special education teachers and will hopefully make their job a little bit easier!

## Table of Contents

Roles & Responsibilities.....	3
Communication.....	4
Expectations of Instructional Delivery.....	5
Expected Student Outcomes.....	6
Behavior Management.....	7
Transitions.....	8
Emergency Plans.....	9
Appendix-FORMS.....	10
Student Information Sheet.....	11
Communication Log of Student Behavior.....	12
Communication Log of Weekly Conference .....	13
Teaching Styles: Technical Definitions.....	14
Instructional Style Descriptions .....	15
Student Performance Progress Monitoring.....	16
Basic Behavior Plan.....	17
Student Transition Checklist.....	18
Para Materials Checklist.....	19
Example Sub Plan for Teacher/Para.....	20

## Roles & Responsibilities

- Obtain and review a written job description of paraprofessionals' (Paras') job duties from your district in advance. Review this document with your Para prior to the students starting school, if possible. Clarify any questions that the Para may have related to the official job description. Discuss with the Para any expectations you may have that are included in the official job description.
- Discuss differences in role expectations: teacher vs. Para, i.e. a Para does not assign grades and should not be used as substitute teachers. However, it is ideal if your Para is aware of how your behavior plan (see Basic Behavior Plan in the Appendix) works and is an equal enforcer of that plan.
- Discuss professional expectations regarding cell phones, food and/or drinks inside the classroom, arriving on time, attire/clothing, etiquette, tact, and confidentiality.
- If the Para will be used in inclusion settings it will be important to discuss conduct expectations in other settings and to provide a list of names with pictures (if available) for the students they will be supervising.
- Provide information to Para regarding each student's specific disability, i.e. disability label, seizures, autistic-like tendencies, etc. Provide information sheet to Para and general education teachers where applicable (see Student Information Sheet in the Appendix).
- Learn about your Para. Ask him or her about past experience, including behavioral techniques previously learned. Find out what they know. Ask them if they like their placement at your site. Build on their strengths.
- Any verbal agreements made regarding job description or duties should be put in writing. As professionals in education we have a lot to remember.
- **REMEMBER:** While you are the teacher and are the ultimate responsible party, you and your Para are a team. All team members need to feel valued.

## Communication

- Communication with your Para may be the most important issue which plagues special education teachers. It is imperative that you set a time, at least weekly, when you can have open communication with your Para regarding student behavior and progress. This communication should also include what is going well in class and/or what needs to be changed.
- Set a time for communication and stick with it. All members of the team should be expected to respect the scheduled time.
- Discuss with your Para their preferred means of communication. Some Paras may be comfortable having open discussions. While others may prefer a different way of communication. If you have more than one Para they may prefer to meet with you individually rather than as a whole group, especially if there are personality conflicts within your group of Paras. Be respectful of personal requests when possible.
- Discuss professional vs. nonprofessional communication, i.e. not talking down to anyone. Understanding each other's viewpoints does not mean you have to agree.
- Discuss standards for confidentiality. All student information should be kept confidential. DO NOT talk about students in front of other adults or students. Also clarify that all communication between team members should remain confidential. In addition, if your Para has personal issues that he or she chooses to share with you as it relates to his/her job it shall remain confidential.
- Create a communication chart. Paras can write specific communication about student performance or behavior on the Communication Log of Student Behavior (see Appendix). The Paras can note any unusual behavior that occurs while you are not present. Communication that occurs between you and your Para can be charted on the Communication Log of Weekly Conference (see form of the same name in the Appendix).
- Encourage and incorporate Para feedback when possible. Remember you are a team!

### Expectations for Instructional Delivery

- Ask the Para how he/she learns best: being told in writing, seeing an example, or by being told orally. Then address expectations using that mode of communication.
- Give the Para examples of how instruction can be adapted or modified for different students. Review different strategies of working with different students (see Teaching Styles: Technical Definitions in the Appendix) and model what those strategies look like.
- Check for understanding. Ask the Para to repeat to you, in their own words, the instructions they were given.
- Provide feedback to Paras when they use strategies (praise, suggestions, etc.)

### Expected Student Outcomes

- Give Paras a chart to collect data on student performance (see Student Performance Progress Monitoring in the Appendix). This can be used towards IEP goals. It can also be a point of discussion during weekly communications with the Para or performance indicators for parents and administrators.
- Create a folder for each student; include copies of the students' IEP goals and all behavior and communication charts. (Provide a copy of IEP goals to the general education teacher if applicable). Make room in the folder for collection of student work samples. Be sure all student work samples are dated.
- Talk to Paras about students' social goals, and how to ensure that their presence does not unintentionally hinder peer to peer interactions. Remind Paras to be aware of their distance between students and peers. Remind them to circulate the room as not to draw attention to the students and to allow the students to be as independent as possible.

## Behavior Management

- Establish rules, routines, consequences, and rewards for both individual students and the class as a whole. Ask your Para for input. They may have valuable experience in this area. See Basic Behavior Plan in the Appendix for an example.
- Discuss how to address unforeseen issues that may arise out of your classroom. Brainstorm with your Para to devise a plan that can be modified in time if needed.
- Remind your Para that it is important to “catch” the students being good, following directions, doing their work quietly without distracting others, etc. By discussing the behavior plan with your Para, they can enforce the behavior plan too, both rewards and consequences.
- Always review the daily schedule with your Para and provide a written lesson plan to your Para.
- If you cannot review the schedule with your Para, have it written on the board so they know what to expect that day.



## Transitions

- Discuss classroom management and behavior expectations of students transitioning from activity to activity, lesson to lesson.
- Make chart for students to track their own behavior during transitions (see Student Transition Checklist in the Appendix for an example) and have a chart for your Para (see Para Materials Checklist in the Appendix for an example) to ensure they are prepared for each lesson. If your Para is organized it will help your students to be organized.
- You can create a materials box or bag for each activity which is easily accessible by your Para.
- Different students may require different materials or specific items for the same lesson or activity. Be sure to let your Para know what materials each student requires.
- Be specific. Remember that modeling what transitions should look like is a good way for the Para to know exactly what you are looking for.

## Emergency Plans

- Have emergency sub plans available. You should have sub plans for yourself and for your Para. Make sure that those plans include enough information that the daily routine will be affected as minimally as possible.
  - Explain to your Para what your expectations are when you are out. It is not a “free day.” You expect the Para to “step up” and help the daily routine be followed as closely as possible.
  - Find out if your district provides subs for Paras when they are out.
  - FIRE DRILLS. You and your Para should know the procedure for Fire Drills: where your class should go, how they should line up, etc. Find out as soon as possible if there are special circumstances related to your students (i.e. will students with Autism need earplugs as soon as the alarm sounds, etc?). Your Para should be aware of any special circumstances and be able to relay it to a substitute or general education teacher if needed.
  - EVACUATIONS/LOCK DOWNS. If there are evacuations or lock downs, you and your Para should know the procedures. Review these with each Para, and then check with them to ensure that they understand and can carry out the procedures by themselves. If you are absent, the Para should be able to enforce the procedures as if you were there.
  - EARTHQUAKES: You and your Para should know the procedures in case of an earthquake. Review earthquake procedures with each Para, and then check with them to ensure that they understand and can carry out the procedures by themselves. Find out as soon as possible if there are special circumstances related to your students.
  - SEIZURES or MEDICAL EMERGENCIES: Find out as soon as possible if any of your students has a Seizure Protocol in place. Familiarize yourself and the Para on the procedures in case of a seizure (i.e. length of time to wait before calling the doctor/ambulance, if the student takes medication after going into a seizure, etc.) Also create a plan in case there is a medical emergency with the students or teaching staff.
- ❖ If after using suggestions mentioned within this guide and being consistent, the Para may not perform their duties according to the expectations discussed. In the event that this occurs, confer with your administration to become familiar with the procedures for situations where a Para does not adequately perform their job duties.

Appendix-FORMS





Communication Log of Weekly Conference

Date & Persons Present	What issues were discussed? What were the possible solutions? What was decided?

## Teaching Styles: Definitions

Learner Centered: Teacher acts as facilitator in student learning. Students should be responsible for their own learning, enjoy working as a team with peers. Students need minimal instruction or direction from the teacher. Focus or emphasis is on independent work or working in groups with others.

Teacher Centered: Works well with students who are frustrated easily by tasks that challenge them, also with students who must compete with other students for attention from the teacher. Focus is on more direct instruction.

## Instructional Style Descriptions (Develop as a Team)

- Classroom Based

Definition:

How students can be as independent as possible:

- Center Based

Definition:

How students can be as independent as possible:

- Whole Group

Definition:

How students can be as independent as possible:

- Small Group

Definition:

How students can be as independent as possible:

- Individual

Definition:

How students can be as independent as possible:



Student Performance Progress Monitoring

Date	IEP Goal or Other Task Performed	Student Outcome/Performance

## Basic Behavior Plan

### Rules

1. Always listen to the teacher.
2. Be polite to all adults and students.
3. Transition quietly between groups, stations, or when leaving or returning to class.

### Expectations

1. Students do their work without distracting others.
2. Students comply with requests of teacher and Para, as well as other adults.
3. Students speak respectfully in class.

### Consequences

1. Time away from group.
2. Conference with teacher.
3. Phone call home.

### Rewards

1. Verbal Praise
2. Free Time
3. Edible Treat

The above are only examples, a starting point. You may want to create other rules and expectations for your particular class. Remain flexible and allow for changes to your behavior plan over time. Your Para can give you feedback on what they think is or is not working during weekly communications.

Student Transition Checklist

Name:	Date:	
	Yes	No
Did I transition quickly and quietly?		
Did I bring all the required materials for the lesson?		
Did I get right to work? Was I ready for instruction?		
Did the teacher have to remind me to get started?		

Student Transition Checklist

Name:	Date:	
	Yes	No
Did I transition quickly and quietly?		
Did I bring all the required materials for the lesson?		
Did I get right to work? Was I ready for instruction?		
Did the teacher have to remind me to get started?		

Para Materials Checklist

Lesson	Objective	
What materials are required for this lesson? (Example) * 7 pair scissors * 7 boxes crayons * 7 pieces of paper		
Do I have:	Yes	No
7 pair of scissors	x	
7 boxes of crayons	x	
7 pieces of paper	x	

## Example Sub Plan for Teacher/Para

### Daily Schedule

**Homeroom**-Students enter classroom, go directly to their desk. Students take out Panther Planner and begin to write the Daily Agenda from the board. When students are done, they can have free time until the bell rings.

Susie and Billy walk to school and will arrive shortly after the first bell rings. Mark and Thomas ride the bus and will arrive at approximately at 8:30. Billy requires a piece of plastic tubing, which is located in his bucket under his desk, so that he does not chew on his hand.

**Period 1**-Students finish writing their agenda. When you notice most of the students are finished, go over the agenda. After reviewing the daily agenda, review today's date, including day, month, and year. Then begin morning stations. Station 1: Reading Comprehension. Station 2: Schedules. Station 3: Personal Information. Station 4: Cloze Activity (handouts for the Cloze Activity can be found on the printer next to my desk). The Para, Mr. G, can assist you.

\*This is just an example of the beginning of a possible schedule for a middle school or high school. Your Para should be able to answer any questions the Sub may have\*

\*\*Your Paras Sub Plan should look similar to yours in that it should go through the day by period or activity. The plan for the Para should include what the Para would be doing during each activity or lesson.\*\*