

Paraeducator Training Materials Initial Evaluation: Initial Field-Test Data

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Abstract

This study presents initial field-test evaluation feedback on training materials designed to help prepare paraeducators to assist in the provision of special education in inclusive schools. Feedback was collected from 213 paraeducators who participated in the course, 105 who participated in the course,

(d) developing adaptations, (e) modeling constructive interactions with students, (f) developing data collection systems, (g) monitoring paraprofessional performance, (h) providing feedback, and (i) making ongoing programmatic adjustments.

The inclusion of students with an ever-increasing range of disabilities and support needs in the regular education classroom, including those with severe and multiple disabilities, means that special educators often are dispersed across several classrooms. Therefore, they are not physically present as much as in the past to provide the on-the-job training and mentoring that has historically been the bedrock of informal paraeducator personnel preparation. This changing landscape is reflected in an increasing and recent body

Table 1

Course	Course Description
Ca	Emphasizes the role of the paraeducator as a valued member of a collaborative team and practices that are family-centered and culturally sensitive in inclusive settings.
C a ac	Focuses on the initial and most essential entry-level knowledge and skills necessary for paraeducators. Includes six, 3-hour units: (1) Collaborative Teamwork, (2) Inclusive Education, (3) Families and Cultural Sensitivity, (4) Characteristics of Children and Youth with Various Disabilities, (5) Roles and Responsibilities of Paraeducators and Other Team Members, (6) Paraeducators Implementing

rural northeastern and southwestern parts of the State. It was co-taught by two of the University's professors.

Eleven of the courses were offered for college credit through a cooperative arrangement with the local Community College. The six-unit entry-level course, plus practicum, was offered for 2 credits. The four-unit course on supporting students with challenging behaviors, which also included a practicum component, was offered for 1 credit. The remaining nine sections of these courses were noncredit bearing and offered as inservice training in the schools, though

the delivery and requirements were the same as sections offered for credit.

Sites for training were identified through regional networking that included mailings to school administrators, web posting, and an email distribution list. Sites that volunteered to participate had the cost of instructors and course materials paid for through grant funding in exchange for hosting the courses and collecting evaluative data.

The ... course was taken by 213 paraeducators (regular class format=114; alternate format=99). The vast majority of the

paraeducators were female and their level of experience ranged from newly hired to several years of experience; more detailed demographic information about the participants is unavailable. Class size ranged from 6 to 34, with all but four sections including 10 to 25 participants. A subset of 105 paraeducators also took the entry-level course. Completion of the entry-level course or obtaining instructor permission was a prerequisite for taking the advanced course.

A total of 25 instructors participated in teaching the courses. The discrepancy between the number of course sections (n=20) and the number of instructors is accounted for by the fact that three schools relied on team teaching or co-teaching across course units. Although two state University faculty co-taught two of the entry-level classes (one in each format), no data from them are included since they were co-authors of the training materials. Therefore data are reported from 23 instructors.

Course instructors were provided with pre-publication versions of an instructor manual for the course they were teaching and a sufficient number of manuals for each paraeducator. These manuals included all the basic information and materials needed to teach the course (e.g., objectives, out-

months, and (d) units taught once per month.

It was also up to the instructors to take care of all logistical aspects of course (e.g., scheduling, space, materials preparation). Although all the instructors used the materials and activities included in the manual, all the instructors used the materials and activities included in the manual.

Table 3

Participant Posttest Mean Scores		N	M	SD
Unit 1	Total	191	9.10	1.06
	Alternate Format	89	9.31	1.06
	Regular Format	102	8.92	1.04
Unit 2	Total	183	8.68	1.49
	Alternate Format	80	9.21	1.20
	Regular Format	103	8.26	1.56
Unit 3	Total	189	8.86	1.38
	Alternate Format	89	9.02	1.28
	Regular Format	100	8.71	1.45
Unit 4	Total	192	8.93	1.30
	Alternate Format	89	9.19	1.06
	Regular Format	103	8.71	1.44
Unit 5	Total	177	9.18	1.18
	Alternate Format	89	9.30	1.22
	Regular Format	88	9.06	1.13
Unit 6	Total	176	9.39	0.89
	Alternate Format	86	9.58	0.73
	Regular Format	90	9.20	1.00
Unit 1	Total	102	9.15	0.91
	Alternate Format	33	9.61	0.83
	Regular Format	69	8.94	0.87
Unit 2	Total	99	8.95	1.29
	Alternate Format	33	9.61	0.97
	Regular Format	66	8.62	1.31
Unit 3	Total	96	9.07	1.11
	Alternate Format	31	9.55	0.62
	Regular Format	65	8.85	1.21
Unit 4	Total	80	9.65	0.62
	Alternate Format	32	9.75	0.57
	Regular Format	48	9.58	0.65

Overall feedback from paraeducators indicated that they favorably viewed the objectives, readings, activities, materials, and practicum requirements included in the two courses. Complete unit-by-unit results for all evaluation questions are available to the reader online at www.uvm.edu/~cdci/paraprep/fieldtestdata.html under the heading labeled, "Supple-

mental Data." Results indicated that the objectives of the course were most favorably perceived. Across the ten units, 95% to 99% of the paraeducators rated the course as "important" or "very important." This was followed by the materials and in-class activities. Across the ten units, 91% to 98% of the paraeducators rated the course as "relevant" or "very relevant", while 86% to 97% rated the

as “understandable” or “very understandable”. A few paraeducators found some of the readings “a little too long” and expressed concern about the reading level of the articles; “The language of this program is at a college level.” Narrative responses suggest that the slightly lower ratings for the understandability of the readings may be attributable to the wide variation in reading skills of the paraeducators. Also, a small set of paraeducators indicated that they found the readings within some units repetitious. Ratings of the *collaboration* followed a similar pattern (see online data). Narrative responses suggested that the extent to which activities were perceived favorably by paraeducators was variable and individualized, though the majority of comments were positive (e.g., “All the activities were interesting and raised consciousness.”)

Although still in the positive range, with 77% to 95% of all responses in the top two rating categories, *collaboration* and *inclusion* were rated less favorably. A review of the narrative comments suggests that the slightly lower ratings with regard to the *collaboration* were primarily attributable to the use of pre-publication materials which included some page misnumbering, typographical errors, problems with photocopy quality, small print size on some readings, and other technical errors.

Slightly lower ratings of the *collaboration* appear to be attributable to the wide range of variations of students and situations encountered by paraeducators. Paraeducators sought practicum requirements that more closely matched their individual circumstances. For some paraeducators, the practicum activities provided new and basic opportunities. For example, one paraeducator wrote, “This is the first time I have requested and seen an IEP.” The course materials included a provision that encourages paraeducators and instructors to substitute and individualize practicum requirements if those included in the manuals were not the most appropriate.

A chi-square comparison of the participant feedback data, by format (alternate and regular), indicated that 90% of the variables (n=72) were not statistically different at the $p < .01$ level. Ten percent of the variables (n=8) had statistically significant differences; all were in the *collaboration* course (i.e., Collaboration unit, questions 2, 3, 4, 7; Inclusion Unit, question 3; Families Unit, questions 6, 7; Characteristics Unit, question 6). The chi-square values ranged from Inclusion Unit/Question 3, $\chi^2 (2, N=177) = 9.28, p < .01$ to Collaboration Unit/Question 7, χ^2

(3, N=167) = 24.40, $p < .01$. In all cases the paraeducators’ ratings were slightly higher in the *collaboration* format. These differences are of questionable importance since the overall ratings across both formats were predominantly in the top two rating categories. Additionally, such comparisons do not provide any confidence that the few identified differences were actually attributable to the format of the classes. Other variables co-occurring with format, such as instructor characteristics (e.g., experience, content knowledge, teaching style), could be the reasons for the differences.

In response to the *collaboration* course, paraeducators responses consistently fell in six categories: (a) affirmation, (b) student-family perspective, (c) importance of topics, (d) reference points, (e) strategies, and (f) energized to act. First, several paraeducators commented that the courses were “affirming” of their value and contributions to the education of children with and without disabilities; “I learned that as a paraeducator I’m on the right track.”

Secondly, paraeducators reported that the course helped them to consider the perspectives of students and families by “being aware of students’ feelings” and to “look at the person before the disability.” As one paraeducator wrote, “This opened my eyes to my own prejudices toward families who are economically disadvantaged.” Third, paraeducators consistently commented that they gained new information and perspectives on the importance of each of the topics presented in the units (e.g., “teamwork,” “how best to help a student without hovering,” “confidentiality”).

the activities. They provided “hands-on” activities, helpful to break barriers and get people talking. The paraeducators had a lot of fun and they learned a lot. They are definitely better educated and more knowledgeable than before.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the two field-tested sets of materials used to teach the courses described in this study represent content objectives that are considered

to consider alternative ways for paraeducators to demonstrate newly gained knowledge.

The literacy skills of paraeducators are widely divergent, ranging from those with a high school di-

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