

# Tips for Effectively Utilizing Paraprofessionals in Physical Education

Seo Hee Lee

Justin A. Haegele

*Mr. David is a physical education (PE) teacher at Lincoln High School in a suburban school district outside of a large metropolitan area. He has been teaching PE classes and coaching several after-school sports at this school for 10 years. Recently, Mr. David has noticed a large increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolled in his school district. Further, many of these students are being taught in inclusive classes. Although Mr. David has limited training teaching kids with disabilities, he is eager to include these students in his classes.*

*In addition to including students with disabilities in his classes, Mr. David is also interacting with paraprofessionals for the first time. One such paraprofessional, Sam, works with a child with autism spectrum disorder throughout the day and is enthusiastic about providing a meaningful PE experience for his student. Each day when he comes to the gymnasium, Sam listens to instructions from Mr. David and works hard to ensure that his student is actively engaged. However, other paraprofessionals are less enthusiastic about PE and do not put forth the same effort as Sam. For example, some paraprofessionals refuse to participate in activities, disagree with Mr. David's instruction, or just leave the classroom and abandon the child they are assigned to.*

*While Mr. David wants to provide a sound PE experience for his students with disabilities, he is at a loss for how to manage the adults in the gymnasium in addition to his large (sometimes up to 50 students) classes. He is fearful that he is unable to provide the best educational experiences to students with disabilities in his classes because of his inability to effectively work with the paraprofessionals.*

This scenario is not uncommon among PE teachers who have limited experience teaching children with

disabilities. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), PE is required for all students who qualify for special education. Mr. David, as do other PE teachers, provides PE services to children with varying degrees of need, and paraeducator supports are assigned to those children during individualized education program (IEP) meetings (Haegele & Kozub, 2010).

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However, PE teachers who include children with disabilities for the first time may be unfamiliar with the responsibilities of paraprofessionals and how to appropriately utilize them to maximize the educational experience for students. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide background information on paraprofessionals in PE and describe tips for effectively utilizing them.

## What Is a Paraprofessional?

Paraprofessionals work alongside professionals (e.g., teachers) who educate children with disabilities who are in need of support (Haegele & Kozub, 2010). They are noncertified teacher assistants whose responsibilities are defined based on the students' needs, placement and IEP goals. Paraprofessionals are considered a related service under IDEA for all students with disabilities in the school system. Responsibilities of paraprofessionals can include duties prior to, during and after each class, such as (1) assisting students' movement as needed, (2) keeping students on-task to listen to instructions, (3) repeating instructions if needed, (4) prompting students for safe transitions, (5) assisting teachers with assessment procedures, and (6) participating in activities with students (Davis, Oliver, & Piletic, 2007). These responsibilities often change based on students' needs and educational placement.

Paraprofessionals tend to have a wealth of knowledge pertaining to each student because they spend more time with their students than anyone else in the school system (Haegele & Kozub, 2010). When utilized appropriately, they can contribute their knowledge about the students to the PE teachers, thus helping to ensure a quality PE experience for children with disabilities (Lieberman, 2007). Physical educators should therefore be proactive in finding appropriate ways of building relationships with paraprofessionals for their students with disabilities to succeed in PE classes.

Unfortunately, there tends to be confusion as to what the responsibilities of paraprofessionals are in PE, and their role in the educational process remains somewhat ambiguous (Bryan,

McCubbin, & van der Mars, 2013; French, 1999). According to Bryan and colleagues (2013), PE teachers are unaware of how to appropriately utilize paraprofessionals in the gymnasium. This may be due to a lack of training and experience working with children with disabilities and paraprofessionals. Untrained or inexperienced PE teachers tend to confuse and frustrate paraprofessionals, who describe their main role in PE class as only keeping students safe. They often identify PE teachers as not being ready to include students with disabilities in their classes (Bryan et al., 2013).

Most students with disabilities are educated in general education classes. While some school districts provide training for paraprofessionals in the classroom context, few include PE. In addition, PE teachers, like Mr. David,

continue to be unaware of how to appropriately utilize paraprofessionals in the gymnasium.

### Tips to Utilize Paraprofessionals in PE

The following subsections and Table 1 describe tips for physical educators to effectively utilize paraprofessionals. Physical educators should be encouraged to use several of these strategies concurrently. Further, they should discuss these and other strategies with classroom teachers, special education teachers and other school personnel to ensure appropriateness and develop collaboration with paraprofessionals.

*Active and Reciprocal Communication.* Creating a productive work relationship with paraprofessionals starts with active and reciprocal communication. The active component of this tip suggests

that PE teachers should plan to speak with paraprofessionals regularly about PE class. With active communication, the paraprofessional is constantly aware of what is happening in PE and should not be surprised by any intentional or unintentional dynamics of the class ecology. The reciprocal component of this tip suggests that the PE teachers should also welcome the paraprofessionals' professional opinion. Allowing paraprofessionals to have input into planning can allow them to develop a sense of ownership in the PE class, which may motivate them to be more collaborative.

*Share Lesson Plans.* One specific element that should be shared with paraprofessionals prior to class is the lesson plan. Table 1 shows several important elements when doing so. By sharing plans ahead of time, the paraprofessional is informed about the purpose of each class

**Table 1.**  
**Tips for Utilizing Paraprofessionals**

#### Active and Reciprocal Communication

1. Share activity ideas prior to class.
2. Discuss expectations for professional behavior.
3. Discuss the role of the paraprofessional for each class.
4. Share students' IEP goals, focusing on PE.
5. Ask paraprofessionals to share their opinions and feedback.
6. Ask paraprofessionals about students' abilities.
7. Ask paraprofessionals about students' preferred teaching style.
8. Schedule regular meetings with paraprofessionals to discuss feedback and student progress.
9. Establish communication plans at the beginning of the school year and regularly communicate throughout the year.

#### Share Lesson Plans

1. Provide time for paraprofessionals to read and understand their responsibilities on paper.
2. Allow paraprofessionals to ask questions and provide feedback on planned activities.
3. Allow paraprofessionals to consider how to modify activities for their students.
4. Provide paraprofessionals with small sections of the lesson plan as teaching assignments.

#### Develop a Collegial Relationship

1. Thank paraprofessionals after each class.
2. Write personalized thank-you notes during holidays or at the end of the school year.
3. Include a section thanking paraprofessionals in the PE newsletter.
4. Set up small work areas for paraprofessionals in the gymnasium.
5. Give paraprofessionals space in the gym or PE office to leave personal athletic gear like sneakers.

#### Provide Physical Activity Opportunities for Paraprofessionals

1. Open the gymnasium to paraprofessionals prior to or after school, or during lunch periods, to allow them to participate in activities (e.g., aerobics classes with popular videos, morning jogs using cardio equipment).
2. Participate in physical activities with paraprofessionals during breaks as a bonding activity that can lead to better teamwork during classes.

Sources: Haegele, 2011; Haegele & Kozub, 2010; Lieberman, 2007.

session and can feel prepared to take on additional responsibilities.

*Develop a Collegial Relationship.*

When working as part of a team, people should develop collegial relationships with one another. Paraprofessionals, like PE teachers, are hardworking individuals who deserve respect. Physical educators should let paraprofessionals know they are important members of a collaborative team and demonstrate appreciation for their teamwork. When they feel appreciated, most paraprofessionals are willing to work hard to provide the best services for their students. There are many different ways that PE teachers can show appreciation and respect for paraprofessionals (see Table 1). These simple actions take little time and effort by teachers like Mr. David, but they can make paraprofessionals feel more connected to the PE program.

*Provide Physical Activity Opportunities for Paraprofessionals.* In addition to being the best place for students with disabilities to learn about physical activity, schools also provide a great opportunity for PE teachers to teach paraprofessionals about the benefits of being active. Participating in regular physical activity can have several benefits for the PE teachers and paraprofessionals. First, paraprofessionals can acquire more knowledge of motor skills and sports. Second, when paraprofessionals believe in the importance of being physically active, there is a higher likelihood of them transferring that value to the students with disabilities. When paraprofessionals have positive experiences while exercising and value physical activity, they are more likely to promote these activities to their students. Lastly, participating in physical activities together during breaks can be a bonding activity for teachers and paraprofessionals, which can lead to better teamwork during classes.

### Closing

Paraprofessionals can be great assets to PE teachers when working with children with disabilities. When effectively utilized, paraprofessionals can develop strong relationships with children, communicate with parents and classroom teachers about PE activities, and

demonstrate and teach activities for the students they work with. Considering all these positive aspects of working with paraprofessionals, PE teachers should make the strides necessary to effectively utilize these individuals. While finding ways to properly utilize paraprofessionals in PE classes can be challenging for PE teachers at first, they should be proactive in finding the strategies that work best for them. The tips suggested here can be helpful for PE teachers to start building positive work relationships with paraprofessionals.

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*Seo Hee Lee (lee.5730@osu.edu) is a doctoral student, and Justin A. Haegele is a doctoral candidate, in the College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University in Columbus, OH.*

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