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Teachers as Executives

The roles and responsibilities of special educators have shifted as schools move to provide inclusive services for students with disabilities. The inclusive special educator is responsible for coordinating a complex system of adults and students—often including paraeducators, related service specialists, classroom teachers, and peer assistants. This contemporary role is analogous to that of an executive in business settings and requires comparable leadership, collaboration, and communication skills. Teachers who demonstrate skills in 5 key functioning areas may see more successful inclusion of their students. Of importance, teachers who are adjusting to the shift in role require certain administrative supports as they acquire this new identity of executive.

THE ANALOGY OF TEACHER as executive was first introduced by David Berliner over 20 years ago. Berliner (1983a, 1983b) compared teacher roles to those of midlevel executives in businesses. He likened the responsibilities of directing and managing the work of students and of classroom assistants and volunteers to that of directing, organizing, and monitoring workers' accomplishments. He compared the curriculum planning of teachers to the visioning of executives in businesses and lesson plans to the strategic planning necessary to achieve the mission.

Berliner, however, could not have foreseen how accurate his analogy would become in only 2 decades. In special education, a fast-growing knowledge base led to increased emphasis on community-based instruction (Falvey, 1986), neighborhood school placement (Brown et al., 1989), access for students with disabilities to core curriculum (e.g., Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, [IDEA] of 1990), and achievement of high academic standards for all students (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997; Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). With the changes in programmatic emphasis for students with disabilities, the need for differentiated staffing patterns became apparent. More personnel were required to provide state-of-the-art services to students with disabilities, and hiring patterns rapidly shifted toward greater proportions of lesser-trained person-

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nel, known as paraeducators or instructional assistants (French & Pickett, 1997). Evidence of this shift lies in the numbers. Although the student population in U.S. public schools increased by about 13% during the 1990s, the number of teachers increased by about 18%. At the same time, the employment of paraeducators increased at a national average of 48% (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005).

The Corresponding Shift in Teacher Role

Fisher, Frey, & Thousand (2003) aptly pointed out that "The environments, activities, and expectations for students with disabilities are changing" (p. 43). They called for a dramatic departure from the traditional categorical preparation of teachers because today's special educators perform different roles than their counterparts of the 1980s and, therefore, need different kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Their research revealed five essential roles of contemporary special educators in inclusive schools: instruction, assessment, communication, leadership, and record keeping (Fisher et al., 2003). Similarly, French (2003) has characterized the special education teacher in the role of an executive that includes five main areas of responsibility: planning, assessment, instruction, collaboration, and paraeducator supervision. However, the executive that French alludes to cannot be likened to the manager who performs routine or perfunctory administrative tasks. French's description of the teacher's role as an executive is more comparable to modern leadership theorists' notions of shared expertise and distributed or balanced leadership (McNulty & Bailey, 2004; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Data Sources

This article is based on three experiences and corresponding information sources. First, we have taught a course in paraeducator supervision over 60 times in 32 different states (French, 1999, 2000). The course content was originally based on teacher supervision concepts described by numerous researchers and theorists (e.g., Fullan, 1990; Garman, 1986; Garmston, 1987, 1988; Glatthorn, 1997). During the course, we employ a structured activity in which teachers describe their experiences in working with paraeducators. We have recorded their responses and found that the themes include problems and promising practices.

Second, in 1996–1997 we conducted a study about the paraeducator role in inclusion in which we conducted focus group interviews with four participant groups: parents of students with disabilities, special educators, general educators, and paraeducators (French & Chopra, 1999). Although the original focus of the study was on paraeducators, the findings also illuminated the role of teacher as the leader or program executive. Moreover, the findings emphasized the importance of collaborating with other adults, supervising paraeducators, planning for modifications, ensuring appropriate instruction and appropriate supports, and assessing student and programmatic outcomes.

Third, in 2002 we conducted a study of the relationships among the adults in inclusive programs. The interview data from special educators, paraeducators, general educators, and the parents of elementary students with significant support needs led to the conclusion that the teacher is the central figure and the determining factor in the success of inclusion (Chopra, 2002; Chopra & French, 2004).

In this article, we feature two stories that illustrate the differences in the roles that teachers play. In the first, the teacher saw herself as a leader and employed executive-like behaviors and the inclusion of students with significant needs was deemed a success by all accounts. In the second, the teacher had good intentions but was not able to hold meetings or establish other important communication supports among team members and the respondents believed that inclusion was not working very well.

Jamie's Story

Jamie, a veteran teacher of students requiring significant instructional support, has been at

Mount Evans Elementary for only a year. She believes in full inclusion. In her words,

> Successful inclusion is when children with special needs in a regular education classroom are getting the same opportunities as everybody else, where they have a learning outcome for every single part of their day. It may be the same learning outcome as the other kids. It may be a modified learning outcome. It may be a totally different learning outcome. But that is identified and that is being worked on.

Jamie refuses to pull students out of general education classrooms; she sees it as her role to integrate her services into the classroom. She plans curricular modifications and adaptations according to each student's individualized education program (IEP) so that students may fully participate in the classroom. She says, "What I try to really do is immerse myself into the classroom from the time they get here to the time they leave."

Teamwork is more than just a philosophy. She stresses this to paraeducators, teachers, and other service providers. Her motto is "We think as a team. We make decisions as a team and we all implement as a team." She insists

> Inclusion would not be possible without teamwork. It is not one person's job even if the person is doing their best. One teacher could not do all the accommodations that need to happen for that child. It would be so much work for that regular ed. teacher to have to do everything that would need to be done for that child.

Helga, a paraeducator who works with Jamie, concurs, "It's really, truly, a team that Jamie has created … everything is a team effort. Everybody is included and even the principal is involved."

Jamie's actions demonstrate her belief that communication is vital to teamwork—ongoing communication builds trust for teamwork. Every week, Jamie's schedule includes formal, sit-down, or telephone meetings with school professionals, paraeducators, and parents.

During her meeting with the classroom teachers, she shares the curriculum modifications and adaptations she has planned for the students. She also spends time clarifying teachers' and paraeducators' roles in implementing the modified curriculum. According to Jamie, "I just want to make sure that they feel supported and they have guidance and kind of know where to go or what the next steps are." The meetings also provide a forum for addressing other issues or concerns about students or families.

She holds similar meetings with other service providers, including the occupational therapists, physical therapist, school nurse, and speech language pathologist. Jamie uses these meetings as platforms to make sure that everyone is on the same page.

In her meetings with paraeducators, Jamie conveys information from other meetings with teachers and parents to paraeducators. In these meetings the paraeducators give feedback about the effectiveness of what they implement in the classroom in terms of what works and what does not work in a particular situation with a child. When in the classroom, the paraeducators use data sheets on which they record how the child is progressing with reference to his or her IEP goals. Jamie values the feedback because it helps her to decide what needs to be changed or tightened or continued in the program for each child.

In addition to the weekly scheduled meeting before school, Jamie and the paraeducators touch base with each other during the day and at the end of each day to address any problems or issues that need immediate attention. Under Jamie's supervision paraeducators know the boundaries of their role. One mother says, "Jamie definitely sets the tone and they [paraeducators] know where the boundaries are. … I like that because I feel like she's the boss and they know that. And so if there's a problem, they seem to go through her." According to the paraeducators and classroom teachers, Jamie is always accessible, available, and willing to talk.

As a weekly practice, Jamie has a regular half-hour scheduled appointment with one or both parents of each student on her caseload. These appointments are either face to face or by telephone, depending on the parent's wishes. During the meetings she apprises the parents of the child's all-around progress and addresses questions and concerns. She helps the parents connect activities

and strategies at home with those followed at school. Jamie gives the following example: "We talk about what big academic units are coming, what is the child's learning going to look like for those activities, and what's homework going to look like so parents are linked in with the homework piece."

Jamie recognizes that time is a rare commodity, but everyone in the team realizes the importance and usefulness of the meetings. Everyone involved makes time for the weekly meeting because working and planning together makes each individual's job easier and more efficient. As Jamie explains:

> It's driven by all of us. But I think the key is that it has to be a priority. This is something we have to do. We have to meet. We have to talk. We have to communicate. Once you prioritize it as a team, people will make time to do it. … You have to get flexible with your scheduling.

Everyone attributes the success of the program to Jamie's leadership and her executive-like demeanor. One parent put it this way: "She's just on top of everything. … Jamie is very effective, and if you did not have as effective a leader in the team, then things would be different." Stacey, a classroom teacher agrees, "Jamie is an amazing leader. She is so involved. … I've had other situations with kids with special education needs where it hasn't been very effective because of the special education teacher."

Judy, another parent, who works as a dietician, is convinced that under Jamie's leadership every member of the team has a clear understanding of their roles. Judy compares the existing team to a well run team in the medical field:

> In the medical field, you have the doctor and the physical therapist and the occupational therapist and the nurse and everybody's in sync. You talk about a patient and every discipline gives their input, and when you have a well run team like that there's nothing better. When every piece of the puzzle is doing what they're supposed to … the patient is getting the best possible care. I feel like that's what we've got right here right now. Everybody's doing what they're supposed to do in their role.

Dan's Story

At Fox Trail Elementary, Dan, the special education teacher divides his time among nine students with significant support needs. As a second-year teacher, Dan realizes the importance of collaboration among school professionals to make it possible for all children to participate to the best of their abilities. In his words:

> Successful inclusion would be having the student included in the culture of the school, to the maximum what they're capable of, having them in their classroom as much as possible, participating in social and academic activities. … Having the teacher, the paraeducator, and myself in a joint collaboration, so that all three of those people are involved in planning and implementing the goals for the student.

Dan also believes that for inclusion to be successful, it is important to recognize "parents as partners" and give them "a feeling that the school is on their side or is their partner and that we're not working against them." Dan stresses the importance of being "open to input and willing to hear the other person to come to a mutual agreement."

Philosophically, the parents, paraeducators, and classroom teachers who work with Dan all agree that successful inclusion is a result of a collaborative team effort and open communication. However, in practice, the program is riddled with miscommunication and it lacks leadership. Communications among team members are primarily informal. The only formal meeting is the annual IEP meeting.

One parent, Barbara, is frustrated with the lack of feedback and follow-through after decisions are made at IEP meetings. She elaborates, "It's almost like you have too many people involved. Everyone has their piece and some people don't do their piece." She laments, "I wish people were more proactive." She attributes the problem to miscommunication resulting from conflicting expectations of team members. Barbara stressed the need for one person to coordinate the work of the team so everyone does their part and everything gets done.

Dan's schedule includes no time during the day to meet with people. He explains, "I try to catch them when I can and let them know what I see for that day or if there's something going on." Clare, one of the paraeducators, confirms that Dan often seeks her input, not in scheduled meetings but in passing and casual interactions. Although Clare expresses no particular dissatisfaction with the impromptu guidance she receives, she is wistful about the need for team meetings, "In the ideal world it would be nice to have more time and more team meetings." On the other hand, the other paraeducator, Jessica, worries because she does not receive clear directions and that she does her own planning for students. She believes that it is not part of her job to plan:

> I'm here to work with the kids, not plan for the kids. I would like things to do with Sarah [the student] but it's hard to think of things, it is not my job. … I mean we're not paid enough to think of things.

Jessica takes Sarah out of the classroom when she disturbs other students and when she does not know how to involve Sarah in the classroom activities.

The classroom teachers and related service providers have no scheduled planning meetings with Dan either. Sarah's classroom teacher, Julie, does not particularly see the need to meet with Dan because it is her belief that planning for Sarah is either Dan's or the paraeducator's job. Moreover, Julie notes that Sarah does not spend much time in her class due to Sarah's limitations.

Rebecca, another classroom teacher, also names time constraints as the primary problem with scheduling regular meetings but she says, "We definitely do it in a more reactive than proactive way, and I would like to see that changed." She is sympathetic toward Dan's heavy caseload and appreciates that he is trying to do his best to communicate with everyone. Dan does have one formal strategy for communicating with paraeducators about student progress. The paraeducators use a clipboard with a summary of the IEP goals and objectives on which they jot down notes regarding successes or failures in accomplishing goals. However, they do not have specific directions regarding the unit of measurement to use or what kinds of behaviors or performances would be evidence of success or failure.

Keeping with his philosophy of being a partner with parents, Dan tries hard to be there for them. Dan reports that he is always available to the parents and speaks to them whenever there is a reason to talk in person. He maintains a back-and-forth book between school and parents. Dan and the paraeducators write about the students' days at school and send them home with students. The books come back in the morning with parents' notations and comments. Parents consider Dan as the contact or point person regarding questions, concerns, and issues relating to their children. However, one parent bemoans that she often has to call Dan to remind him to get things done.

Analysis of Two Teachers and Five Executive Functions

1. Planning

For a special educator, planning and consultation with other school professionals are equally critical to ensure successful inclusion for students (Friend & Cook, 2003). Although Jamie recognizes that she cannot be well versed in all curricula, she is absolutely clear about the purposes of including students in the classroom. She gathers information from classroom teachers and considers her students' IEP goals in light of the curriculum and instructional style of the teacher. She then prescribes appropriate adaptations and provides written direction and guidance to paraeducators, who carry out the adaptations.

Dan, however, has found no time to meet with teachers to obtain similar information. As a result, he cannot plan adaptations that are specific to the classroom. This results in paraeducators designing instruction or making on-the-spot adaptations, functions that remain outside their legitimate scope of responsibility. The reason that Dan's students are spending more time out of the classroom is that there are no specific instructional and or behavioral plans in place that the classroom teachers

and paraeducators can follow to keep the students engaged.

2. Assessment

Dynamic instruction is founded on good planning and good planning is founded on the right assessment information, the basis of planning curricular and instructional adaptations for students with special education needs. Although Jamie and Dan have paper-and-pencil based data collection systems designed to collect information about student experiences and performance in classrooms, there is one critical difference in the two systems. Jamie's system defines exactly what data she requires to determine whether a student is making progress toward an IEP goal. The paraeducators in Jamie's program do not determine the types of data to collect, but are charged with collecting the prescribed data and giving them to her daily. Jamie uses the data to compare to the IEP goals and objectives for the student and to plan adaptations for upcoming classroom activities. The data also provide the basis for parent communications—helping parents stay up to date on their children's progress.

Dan's system is looser, allowing for more individuality in the type of information written by the paraeducators. Because he does not prescribe specific types of data that he wants them to collect, at the end of a week he has little evidence of progress toward IEP goals and little understanding of how special education students are performing in general education classrooms. He has little to use for planning purposes, little to keep him on track with next steps, and few specifics to share with parents.

3. Instruction

Jamie describes herself as being immersed in the classroom, and the general education teachers agree with that characterization. The reality is that she takes time to meet with teachers, related services providers, and paraeducators during the school day. She makes the most of the time she spends in the classroom by working directly with students and assessing how they are doing. She conducts *environmental scans* and evaluates the demands of the classroom so she can devise appropriate adaptations for her students. She also uses her classroom time to observe the work of paraeducators, noting where they need skill development and where they need to be commended for their work.

Dan, in contrast, uses no instructional time for meetings. He spends the majority of his time either in general education classrooms, teaching and assessing students there, or working with individual students in the special education room when they are pulled out. His students are frequently pulled out of classrooms because of disruptions or due to the lack of a plan for their participation in particular activities. His focus tends to remain on the individual child he is working with at the moment. Because he often schedules the paraeducators into different classrooms during this time, he loses the opportunity to observe them so that he can later provide feedback.

4. Collaboration

Experts have emphasized that school reform is evidenced when all stakeholders come together to collaboratively create inclusive classrooms and schools that meet the unique and diverse needs of students (Jackson, Ryndak, & Billingsley, 2000; Rainforth & York-Barr, 1997; Stainback, Stainback, & Forest, 1989). Collaboration with families and across disciplines is not an option but a necessity that is entrenched within the education mandate of the IDEA (Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Malgeri, 1996). The importance of leadership in establishing collaborative practices has been underscored in the literature (Sarason, 1991; Villa et al., 1996). According to Fisher et al. (2003), "Special educators streamline information, problem solving, accessing materials, strategies and services. Successful special educators are masters of collaboration and skillful negotiators" (p. 46). Jamie models exactly this kind of leadership role in her coordination of collaborative efforts toward inclusion. She ensures that everyone has sufficient information about individualized plans and provides adapted and modified materials and techniques to address IEP goals. She provides accurate and timely information to parents and exchanges

ideas with them about how they can collaboratively support their children's education.

Jamie's success as a leader relies on her ability to keep everyone on the same page through formal communication systems and processes that she has established. Her students are successfully included because she communicates, consults, and plans with parents, general education teachers, special education teachers, paraeducators, and related-service providers in an organized manner.

The impromptu, on-the-fly, and often disjointed hallway conversations Dan uses are a less effective and efficient means of communication, problem solving, and conflict management. The best communication systems allow for two-way communication based on student needs, IEPs, and classroom lesson or activity plans (French, 2003).

However, no matter how good a team is at communicating via written plans or other asynchronous means, face-to-face communications in regularly scheduled meetings are absolutely necessary. Jamie uses her school hours to meet with each of the groups of people vitally engaged in the inclusion effort. She facilitates meetings, makes them as brief as possible, and assures that the right topics are addressed and that decisions are documented. Dan, in contrast, believes that collaboration is important, but without specific meetings and communication systems, he cannot make it happen.

5. Supervision of paraeducators

Like Jamie, all special education teachers should assign specific tasks, deliver on-the-job training, hold planning meetings, design instructional plans, and direct and monitor the day-to-day activities of the paraeducators (French, 2003; French & Pickett, 1997). As the supervisor, a special educator must clarify roles and assign tasks based on legal, ethical, and liability considerations, and provide written plans. A good written adaptation plan should include the purpose of the student's participation; IEP goals and objectives to be addressed; student strengths and needs; adapted materials or directions for creating them; and use of cues, prompts, and a data structure for documenting student performance (French, 2003). Effective supervisors do not let paraeducators work on their own. They not only provide written plans, but they also monitor task performance through frequent observations and provide timely, specific feedback. They either provide coaching and on-the-job training or seek outside professional development opportunities for paraeducators to enhance their skills.

Teachers, like Dan, who cannot find the time to write plans for paraeducators are not providing effective supervision. If a teacher is never available to observe and coach a paraeducator in the general education classroom, then he or she is not providing appropriate supervision. If a teacher fails to set up a system by which paraeducators collect student data, he or she cannot effectively evaluate the effects of paraeducator work with students.

The Contrast

We picked these two cases to illustrate the importance of the role of the special education teacher as executive because the two teachers are alike in many ways but differ on one important element. Both are kind, committed teachers of students with similar needs, and both have a genuine commitment to inclusion. Both are energetic, articulate, and creative people who are respected by their colleagues and liked by students' parents. They work in the same school district, and have similar supports available.

Dan, as an early-career teacher, does not yet see himself as an executive—nor does he act like one. He has had no preparation to perform in a leadership capacity. He does not know how to prioritize time for meetings and does not fundamentally understand the importance of doing so. Although everyone at Fox Trail mentions the importance of teamwork and communication, Dan maintains no formalized structures. Dan does not obtain weekly information on curricular activities or units to assist in planning appropriate adaptations for paraeducators. Dan, therefore, fails to guide their work, observe them, or provide them with coaching. In essence, Dan fails to exercise his executive

status, resulting in a disjointed approach to inclusion in which well meaning people inadvertently maintain a culture of isolation. The net result is that Dan's students spend more time out of the regular classroom than in.

In contrast, Jamie, a mature teacher, embraces her executive status and her program exemplifies distributed leadership (McNulty & Bailey, 2004). Under her leadership, teamwork is organized—relying on an established schedule of meetings with all stakeholders as well as an established paper-based system for data collection, reporting, and feedback. Jamie honors the skills and knowledge of her team members, builds trust and enthusiasm, and maintains a culture of collaboration. The paraeducators have specific plans from which to work. They receive guidance, feedback, and coaching because Jamie makes the time to observe their work, thus demonstrating skills learned in the course on paraeducator supervision (French, 1999, 2000).

Although differences in Jamie and Dan's career stage and preparation for leadership functions exist, their relative successes with inclusion are predicated on a single factor—the executive role. Perhaps it is not possible for an early-career teacher to perform the executive or leadership functions with the finesse or grace of a mature teacher, but French (2004) suggests

> Acting like a leader is a tall order for a novice teacher. But, as you continue in the profession and grow with it, you will gradually be able to assume the qualities of a leader by learning to perform leadership functions. (p.42)

The shift toward an executive role signifies a corresponding shift to a more professional status. There has been much discussion about whether teaching is a profession and how teacher qualities compare to the qualities of other professionals, but there is agreement that professionals work in situations with a high degree of uncertainty that requires judgment. "Judgment," says Shulman, "is the hallmark of what it is to be a professional" (1998, p. 15). Jamie's story provides strong evidence of professionalism and a powerful illustration of her work as an executive.

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