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INCREASING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE READING AIDE: A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

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Having another adult in the classroom to assist in the reading program can be a mixed blessing. While most teachers welcome help in meeting the individual learning needs of students in the classroom, this help can sometimes turn into a hindrance if the assistant is not supervised properly. Herein lies the problem in many teacher and aide teams: teacher training programs do not train teachers how to supervise another adult in the classroom. All of the teacher's education and experience is directed to working with children. This problem is further compounded by the dearth of inservice training by school districts in working with adult assistants.

A study conducted in New Jersey found that teachers in that state were not well informed and/or trained about the appropriate use of instructional aides ("Are Instructional Aides Being Misused?" 1980). A follow-up study disclosed that only 27% of the districts employing aides in that state indicated that training in the use of aides was provided for teachers ("Instructional Aides," 1982). This problem is common in other states as well.

It is the purpose of this article to share ideas on supervisory techniques that teachers can implement to increase the effectiveness of another adult assisting them in the classroom. While this article focuses on the reading aide, these techniques are equally applicable when working with student teachers, parent volunteers, or any other adult whom the teacher might have in the classroom to provide help with the instructional program.

Communicating

Many teachers who are working with an aide for the

very first time feel as if a stranger were trespassing on their private terrain--their classrooms. Acceptance and trust need to develop for the two to function as an effective team. But "mutual trust cannot be decreed. It can only develop through free and open communication" (Bowman & Klopff, 1969, p. 3).

For the teacher and aide to function as a team, effective communication is necessary (Anderson, 1987; Brubaker & Sloan, 1981; Nielsen, 1977). Communication for the teacher/aide team starts with planning for instruction. The first planning session should take place at the beginning of the year before the students arrive, or--if aides begin work after the school year has begun--before they assume instructional duties in the classroom. In the beginning, much time will be needed for preplanning. The planning time can be decreased as the team increases the efficiency of their operation and they begin to stockpile plans and ideas that can be used in the future. As the team members begin to develop a routine, a weekly planning session of thirty minutes, or a few minutes at the beginning or end of each school day will be sufficient. The key to success is that planning is done on a regular basis.

During the initial planning session, it is important to discuss the division of responsibilities between the teacher and aide. Teachers must remain the instructional decision makers in the classroom, because it is they who have the education and certification to perform this role. As such, they must bear the responsibility for diagnosing students' learning needs and problems (although the aide can provide valuable input), and they must present and teach all new content, reserving the aide's role for reinforcement. Because of this division, there will be some responsibilities that are restricted to the teacher, such as determining the content of the curriculum, preparing and evaluating tests, entering information in cumulative folders, and conducting parent-teacher conferences. But there will be many responsibilities that both members of the team can share, such as keeping students on task, checking worksheets, reinforcing previously taught vocabulary, and listening to students read orally.

Another crucial aspect of communication that needs to be developed is some type of nonverbal communication system that will allow the teacher and aide to communicate without disrupting the students who are working on task. For example, if the teacher is working with a reading group at the back of the room and wants the aide to quiet a couple of students who are being disruptive at their desks, the teacher might point to the students and put a finger to her/his lips as a signal to get the students back on task.

It is important during this first planning session to select a designated space for the aide to work with students and to store instructional materials and personal belongings. An additional teacher's desk might be used, or a large table if there is not a second teacher's desk available. Giving aides students' desks to work from is not appropriate, as it could demean the aides' role as authority figures in the classroom, thereby reducing their effectiveness as instructional assistants.

Organizing for Instruction

A high school diploma or its equivalent is frequently the only educational requirement for aides to be hired in most school districts. Therefore, unless aides have had experience in the classroom or prior inservice training, they probably will have no knowledge of instructional strategies. It is essential, therefore, for teachers to model the proper procedures in the management and delivery of instruction. It is not enough for teachers to simply tell aides what to do; they must first let them observe teachers demonstrating what to do. Modeling allows aides to learn the proper procedures firsthand, eliminating the frustration of trial-and-error methods.

For example, if the teacher wants the aide to work with a small group of students who are reading below grade level to regularly reinforce vocabulary words that were introduced the previous lesson, then the teacher should have the aide sit and observe her/him while conducting this review with the group. Afterwards, have a discussion with the aide and explain why each step in this strategy is important. One should note, for instance, that you mix up the order of the word cards each time you ask a different student to read them because students

sometimes memorize the order of the words, but they are not able to actually recognize the words in print. To insure that the procedure is fully understood, ask the aide to describe what was observed. Once the procedure is mastered, the aide would only have to look at the written lesson plans to know what should be done with that group on any given day.

As the instructional leader in the classroom, the teacher is responsible for selecting and providing the instructional materials that the aide is to use. However, the teacher should remain receptive to suggestions from the aide for activities and materials, as most school districts provide staff development sessions for their aides. It is possible that the aide may have learned useful instructional techniques and even have prepared instructional materials at recent sessions. In either case, it is important to assess the effectiveness of the chosen instructional materials and activities on a regular basis to determine if alternate materials and activities need to be used by the aide.

When aides are asked to reinforce a complex lesson, such as phonics, it is necessary to first insure that aides understand the content of the lesson as well as the process or directions for the follow-up activity. Teachers' editions of basal readers use a specialized vocabulary (such as diphthong and r-controlled vowel) which may be unfamiliar to aides. Simply asking aides if they understand the content is not sufficient, as they may be embarrassed to admit that they do not, or they may be misinterpreting the information and say that they understand when, in fact, they do not. Asking aides to paraphrase the directions or explain the content should give insight in whether the material is truly understood.

In organizing for instruction, teachers need to inform aides of the learning needs of individual students with whom they will be working. This may mean disclosing sensitive information, such as names of students who have been diagnosed as learning disabled; so, the necessity of confidentiality must be stressed.

Not only will aides observe and model teachers' instructional techniques, they will also often reflect the teachers' attitudes. For this reason it is critical that

teachers convey and model positive attitudes in working with low achieving students, because it is with these students that aides are most frequently assigned to work.

In the beginning of the relationship for a teacher/aide team, on-the-job training for the aide will increase the teacher's work load. But the time that the teacher spends educating the aide in instructional methodology and skills development will be an investment in achievement gains for individual students as well as an investment in working toward an eventual shared work load for the team.

Establishing Management Procedures

Without good classroom management procedures, even the best planned and organized instruction will be ineffective. It is the teacher's responsibility to determine and post appropriate classroom rules. It is then necessary for the teacher to insure that the aide understands the classroom rules and procedures. Some aides work with more than one teacher each day, and interpretation of rules and classroom procedures often vary from teacher to teacher. For example, "Be prepared when it is time to start the lesson" may mean for the students to clear their desks and wait quietly for directions in one classroom. In another classroom, this same rule might mean for the students to have their work-books and pencils on their desks and have the book open to the next story.

Reserving the enforcement of classroom rules for the teacher alone can be compared to the mother who tells her misbehaving children that they "are really going to get it when father comes home!" To most children, this means they can continue to misbehave until the father comes home because they are going to "get it" anyway. For aides to be effective assistants in the classroom, they must be able to enforce the classroom rules. To be successful in this, the students must recognize the aide as an authority figure along with the teacher, and this point should be stated when the classroom rules and procedures are first covered or when the students are first introduced to the aide.

Teachers should take care to treat aides as authority figures in the presence of students and parents. Calling aides by their first names or referring to them as "the

aide" or "my assistant" will often imply that this person does not have the same authority to maintain discipline in the classroom.

If the aide uses a behavior management technique that is inappropriate or ineffective, such as telling a student who is talking to "shut up," discuss in private the use of the inappropriate technique and follow up with an alternative method. In this case, suggest making eye contact with the disruptive student and placing a finger to the lips with a stern look on ones' face, as a more effective technique.

Giving Constructive Feedback

In a study by Barnard (1972), feedback was found to be a powerful source of control on the performance of aides working as reading tutors. It was concluded that the mere presence of feedback seemed equally as crucial as the amount or degree of complexity of feedback.

For aides to continue to grow in skills and knowledge, it is necessary to give them constructive feedback. It is important to continually monitor the effectiveness of aides' instructional reinforcement and occasionally to observe them while working with students. Feedback should include three components: (1) telling what was done right, (2) telling what needs to be improved, and (3) giving specific ideas on what to do to improve.

For example, if the teacher observed the aide giving a vocabulary reinforcement lesson prior to having the students read the story orally, she/he might say, "You did a good job with this lesson today. I especially liked the way you had each student read each word on the board. And your handwriting is so nice. It's a good model for the students to follow.

"I noticed that some of the students were flipping through their books and playing with their pencils at the beginning of the lesson while you were pronouncing the words for them. Some of them were not looking at the words at all.

"Next time you do this kind of lesson, collect their pencils when they come back to the group, and wait to pass out the books until it is time for the students to read. That way, there will be nothing to distract them

while they are supposed to be listening and looking at the vocabulary words."

The aide should always be informed promptly and discreetly when something has been done incorrectly. Browne (1972) relates that "criticism should be infrequent and in private. It should be directly at the activity rather than the person, and it should be constructive" (p. 14). Therefore, it is essential to follow up with ideas for alternate methods.

The aide should also be given positive reinforcement for a job well done. Teachers should "praise good work and good ideas as often as possible, at the moment it is deserved. Praise enhances self-esteem if it is given before other people. Sometimes it can be put in writing so the paraprofessional can take it home to show family and friends" (Browne, 1972, p. 14). The use of positive reinforcement will create a feeling of confidence for the aide and helps to insure that the praised behaviors will be repeated in the future.

Often, when two adults work in close proximity, problems arise. Browley (1981) identified six areas that can be the cause of conflicts between members of a team:

1. Philosophical differences
2. Personality conflicts
3. Communication breakdown
4. Lack of planning time
5. Disagreement over assignments
6. Student behavior problems

When conflicts such as these do arise, it is necessary to sit down and identify the problem and work together to resolve it. Often, just stating the problem openly is enough to dissipate it. At other times it is simply a matter of making sure the aide knows what is expected. Frequently, solutions can be worked out without going to the school administrator.

If an aide works with more than one teacher, then all of these teachers need to meet to provide feedback for administrative consideration on the performance of the aide when it is time for the annual evaluation.

Providing Staff Development

York (1971) identified a key issue when she said, "It is

a rare teacher, indeed, who possesses naturally the knowledge and skills required to make team teaching goals a reality" (p. iii). Therefore, staff development needs to be provided for teachers on effective methods to utilize aides in the classroom. Whenever possible, it is best for both members of the team to attend the staff development sessions so cooperative behaviors can be learned.

Staff development for both teachers and aides that stresses a team approach to instruction would serve to enhance the effectiveness of the reading aide and provide a more positive learning environment for the students. With time, effort, open communication, and appropriate staff development, two adults in the classroom can form an emotional support base for each other as well as for the students. And it is the students who benefit most from an effective teacher/aide team.

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