



Who are the Interventionists? Guidelines for Paraeducators in RTI

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Abstract

As a Response to Intervention approach begins to be utilized in our schools, there is growing confusion regarding the role of teacher assistants/paraeducators in this problem solving approach. In this article, the authors share survey and interview data from their experiences working with Rhode Island teacher assistants – both in leading teacher assistant training on RTI and in researching implementation of RTI in RI elementary schools. Both challenges and guidelines for the use of teacher assistants in a RTI model are presented. Recommendations for the effective use of teacher assistants in general education and special education classrooms include: teacher assistants as members of school-wide intervention teams; a greater focus on the use of teacher assistants during the assessment process; better professional development; and increased common planning time for enhanced communication about student learning.

Keywords

response to intervention, paraeducators, professional development

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Reflections a few minutes before school starts:

Teacher: *So much new stuff to do today! I must get to those interventions, progress monitoring assessments, and collaborate with the special educator and TA about reading this week. How can I do it all myself? What is a poor teacher to do?*

Paraeducator: *Wow! What a fun training session we had yesterday – now I understand the link between assessment and instruction! I could look back on all those running records and try to determine what might work with a student, or maybe the teacher and I could look at some data together. Then we could make a plan of specifics to teach. I am going to ask Mrs. Jones what she did with the weekly running records I gave her.*

In today's schools educators are challenged to meet the unique needs of each student, while at the same time they must consider multiple national and local policies and initiatives. Response to Intervention (RTI) is one of these competing initiatives that Rhode Island schools are addressing. RTI, however, does not have to compete with other best practices; it is a systematic problem solving process to provide services and interventions in a preventative manner that can be integrated with other initiatives: assessment and accountability, personalization, and implementation of evidence-based instruction in literacy and math and positive school culture.

What is Response to Intervention?

Response to Intervention is the practice of providing high quality instruction matched to students' needs and the use of rate

of learning over time to make important educational decisions (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2005). While RTI is incorporated into IDEA 2004 as part of Early Intervening Services and the special education referral process, Response to Intervention incorporates several school-wide best practices (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Haagar, Klinger, & Vaughn, 2007). Effective implementation of RTI includes the following practices:

- 1) a systematic problem-solving process in which data-based decisions are implemented and documented;
- 2) use of on-going assessments that monitor student progress;
- 3) interventions of varying intensity to meet the academic and behavioral needs of *all* students; and
- 4) shared responsibility amongst classroom teachers, specialists, administrators and parents.

Paraeducators will need specific professional development regarding assessment, intervention and collaboration skills.

While all of the components are important, successful implementation of RTI rests on a shared responsibility for student learning. Collaboration amongst all school staff ensures that student needs are identified early, appropriate instruction/interventions are implemented, and student progress is monitored (Burns, Vanderwood, & Ruby, 2005; Hauerwas & Woolman, 2006). Questions often arise as to who is going to be able to do all of this: teach a class of twenty-five students, implement interventions and assess students on a weekly or monthly basis. No wonder teachers are overwhelmed. In consulting with schools as part of the state-wide RTI initiative, the authors began to ask

the questions: Who is responsible for the planning and implementation of RTI? What is the role of the reading specialist? The special educator? The school psychologist? What about the teacher assistants?

Guidance from multiple professional organizations has recognized the need for professionals to change their roles in order for RTI to be successful (New Roles in Response to Intervention: Creating Success for Schools and Children, 2006). However, very little literature has addressed the changing role of the teacher assistant in the RTI process. How can teacher assistants contribute to the RTI proc-

ess, and what are their professional development needs?

During the 2006/2007 school year, the authors' work with the Rhode Island teacher assistant network has provided multiple sources of data to answer these questions. One hundred and sixty six TAs were surveyed to determine their current roles and responsibilities. During regional training sessions, TA participants' reflections and responses to RTI were gathered. Follow-up interviews were conducted with teacher assistants and principals of schools that have implemented RTI for at least two years.

Figure 1: Who are the TAs in Rhode Island?

Rhode Island TAs:

- 3000 total TAs in Rhode Island (general and special education, ages 3-21)
- 89% primarily provide instructional support
- 77% serve students with disabilities funded through special education

Eligibility Requirements to work as a TA in a RI public school:

- Be of good character
- High school degree or equivalent
- 30-40 hour competency training required before employment
- Successful score on the Para-Pro Test OR 48 credit hours of higher education

The Rhode Island Department of Education provides ongoing professional development and support (e.g. quarterly newsletters) through regional Teacher Assistant Networks. The Rhode Island Department of Education is committed to qualified teacher assistants, and through their annual LEA survey they monitor school district compliance in relation to the above requirements as well as oversee the documentation of required teacher assistant professional development. Although 100% of all school districts require professional development, mandated hours for teacher assistants vary by district. (Rhode Island Department of Education, 2007)

The Teacher Assistant Networks offer a series of specially designed workshops for teacher assistants. For the 2006-2007 school year the topics were: Autism, Response to Intervention, and Reading Instruction. Data for this article was drawn from the participants in the Teacher Assistant Network training sessions this year.

Survey results from participants in this year's network training indicate that the majority of TAs are between 43 and 55 years old and have more than 5 years experience. Half of the TAs surveyed qualified for their TA position by passing the Para-Pro Test, while the other half completed at least two years of higher education. The data from the survey document the varied assignment which TAs have: one quarter are one-on-one assistants, while the rest are assigned to multiple students – often by class or grade-level (See Figure Two). The survey also provided information about the professional development in which the TAs had been involved, providing a picture of the multiple areas of training that schools are addressing. (See Figure Three.)

Are Teacher Assistants interventionists?

Currently, multiple descriptions of RTI models are available (eg: Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Haagar, Klinger, & Vaughn, 2007; Marston, 2005). Within these descriptions of RTI, individuals in multiple roles have been identified as the interventionists: classroom teachers, reading specialists, student teachers, parent volunteers, special educators, graduate students, and “tutors” (Granger & Grek, 2005). TAs themselves report that they are more involved in small group instruction and classroom support (Hauerwas & Goessling, 2007).

Traditionally, teacher assistants were employed to assist with students with severe and multiple disabilities that needed support with daily living activities and other care issues in the school (Pickett & Gerlach, 2003). As inclusion propelled more and more students with significant disabilities into the general education classroom, more teacher assistants supported students with disabilities in the mainstream. Many schools began to move away from using teacher assistants for an individual student and began to assign teacher assistants to general education classrooms with several students with disabilities, who needed various levels of support (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2002). In addition, many elementary schools had a tradition of providing literacy assistants to kindergarten, first, and second grade to assist with instruction (Vadasy, Sanders & Peyton, 2006). IDEA 2004 and NCLB 2000 require teacher assistants to work under the direction of a certified teacher to assist with instruction. It is implied that teacher assistants legally should not be designing instruction nor developing and interpreting assessments (Etscheidt, 2005). What then should the role of teacher assistants be in the RTI process?

Data from the authors’ work provided more information about TAs and their changing roles. Specifically, two themes emerged from the survey regarding TAs’ primary responsibilities: (1) keeping students safe and (2) assisting students with staying on-task. While these are traditional roles, after the training session on the key components of RTI, TA participants recognized that in fact (1) they were involved in assessment and (2) they needed to be involved more – particularly as members of problem-solving intervention teams. Written reflections after the RTI workshop included: “I learned to record not only behaviors, but progress in learning” (75E) and “I observe more than I was aware of and can use these observations to help with my student’s learning plan” (137E).

While most of the time TAs spend in the classroom involves supporting instruction, reviewing class content, focusing students and providing encouragement, it must be noted that some have been involved with assessment. Examples of this include grading spelling tests, monitoring High Stakes test administration, charting on-task or acting out behavior, administering make-up quizzes, and completing running records with their reading group. In the above examples TAs did not design nor interpret assessments, but their help is valuable.

The use of assessments to inform instruction and monitor student progress is a key component of RTI and one that TAs can assist with. TAs can administer reading or math Curriculum Based Measurements (CBMs); they can enter the data weekly and print graphs. In each of these cases training, encouragement, and communication is necessary for these assessment practices to be effective. As one TA shared, she now realizes why her teacher was asking her to regularly

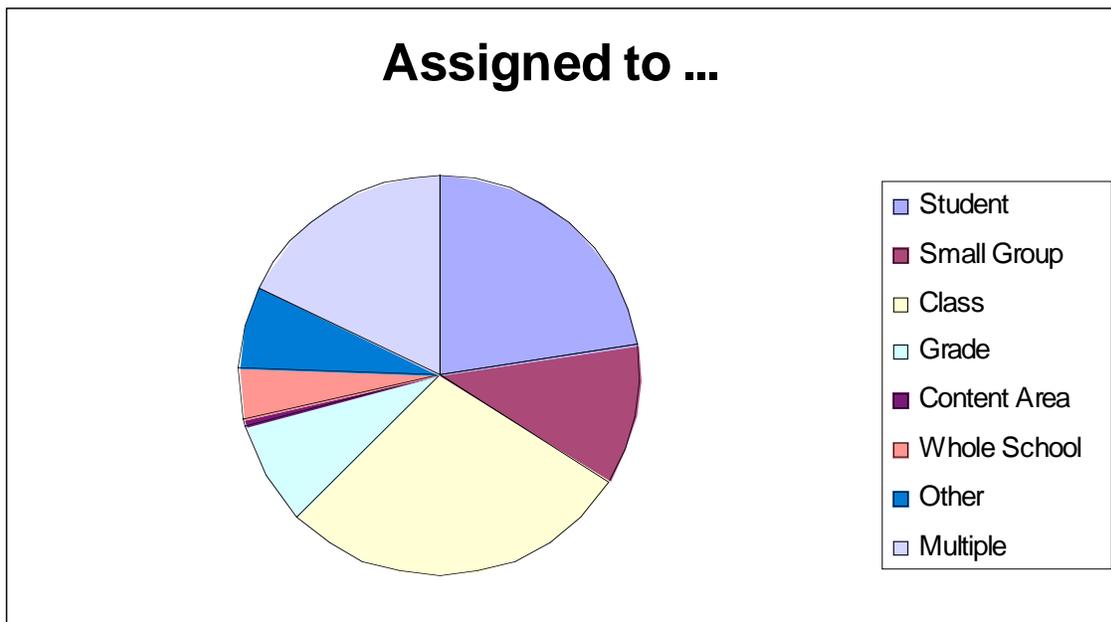
complete math calculation probes with the third graders; the teacher was using them to monitor the students' progress and help her determine both who had mastered the skill and who needed additional practice. Assessment has purpose.

"I feel that in most cases TAs are not involved to their potential (Written Reflection 62E)." "TAs need to collaborate as a team (Written Reflection 141E)." Teacher assistants should be considered as valuable members of instructional teams. Their direct support of student learning often has significant impact on student success in the classroom. As such they need to be informed as well as have their voices heard regarding student progress. Teacher assistants need to have in-

formation about effective instructional strategies, curriculum expectations, and ways to communicate with classroom teachers and special educators about specific characteristics of students. Teacher assistants' unique relationships with students can often provide them with specific information about each student's day to day successes and challenges, student preferences and interests and a student's frustration level. Teacher assistants (as well as all professional staff) need to recognize the shared responsibility for student learning. Collaboration leads to success.

Further support of the role of the Teacher Assistant in RTI is evident at Ocean View* Elementary school, where the RTI process has been implemented for three years.

Figure 2: Survey responses to the question: Are you assigned to...



One School's Story

As the staff and administration at Ocean View school began implementing Response to Intervention in 2003 many questions and concerns were raised. "It sounds great, but how? We don't have time. We don't

have expertise!' The principal and district special education liaison worked together, starting with developing a more effective intervention team -- a team that involved a variety of school staff -- which followed a specific process and used data to make decisions

about student learning. See Figure 4. This enabled them to expand the capacity of the school staff to work together; this was not just about special education nor just about classroom teachers – but all the school staff.

By the end of the first year, the principal realized the importance of teacher assistants to this process. Often the team would identify the TA as one of the interventionists who could provide instruction for struggling students – either in reviewing instruction presented in class, monitoring the students’ progress on math calculations or reading, or implementing a particular instructional approach to build underdeveloped spelling or phonemic awareness skills. While the TA was not the case manager for a student’s intervention plan, she often became the integral person who made the intervention possible. The case manager (e.g. the classroom teacher, reading specialist or special educator) would be responsible with sharing the intervention team’s plan for the student or students – training the TA on the instructional approach if necessary, explaining how to collect data to monitor the intervention, and monitoring the fidelity with which the intervention and monitoring assessments occurred. That is, the TA would be provided with all the information they would need to be effective in working with the student and implementing the intervention.

The principal acknowledged that not all interventions are appropriate for TAs, nor would all TAs be able to take on this new role. However, for those who could, the next decision that he made was the key to success: TAs were asked to participate on the school-wide problem-solving intervention team. Not only did it lessen the amount of training and sharing of information that the case manager needed to do, participation on the team was also wonderful job-embedded professional development. In the words of the principal in

talking about RTI implementation, “this was the best professional development” for them. Now two years later, two TAs have intervention time and intervention team time as part of their weekly schedule. This change in TA scheduling and responsibility enables students who need short-term targeted interventions to access such support, and the TAs are able to share student progress data with the intervention team to help determine if the interventions were effective. While TAs are not the only interventionists in Ocean View school’s RTI model -- they along with the classroom teachers, reading specialists and special educators -- are an integral part of the shared responsibility to ensure all students respond to instruction.

Implementation Challenges and Guidelines

RTI makes me nervous around the edges... I’m afraid that teacher assistants will be the ones who are going to be scurrying here, there, and everywhere to be filling in these gaps and to take these notes, and to mark these charts, and to instruct these kids while the teachers are trying to do everything. It’s overwhelming. (RI TA JB 2/26/07)

Like everything, when change happens, there are challenges. These challenges seem to fall in three areas: professional development, scheduling/planning and communicating (Lock, Hauge, & Babkie, 2006).

Professional Development

Like all teachers beginning a new educational practice, TAs need professional development. It is important to include TAs in all school-wide training, with additional follow-up just for them. Such training should specifically address how a TA's role may change and what RTI means for them personally. In order to better meet the training needs of teacher assistants, these three questions should be asked prior to training:

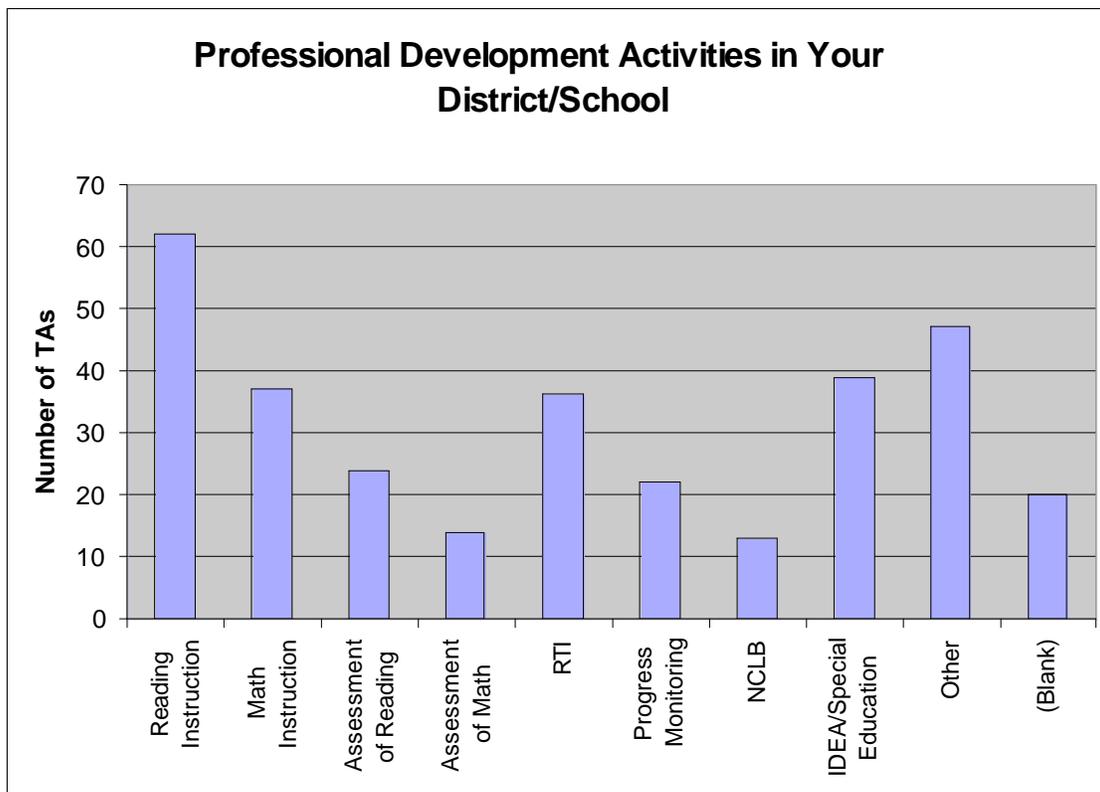
1. Describe an example of how you improved a student's perform-

ance –who was the student and what did you do?

2. Who do you collaborate with for instructional planning?
3. How are you involved in assessment and data management?

The answers to these questions will provide you important information about the TAs' current roles and the degree of change that might be necessary for a TA to be an effective member of an intervention team.

Figure 3: Survey responses to: In the last two years, have you been involved in professional development activities provided for staff in your school/district on...(circle all that apply)



In our trainings we asked the TAs to think of a student who struggled and was difficult to teach, but eventually learned the new skill. What did the TA do to make this learning happen? Then when sharing these experiences with one another, we asked them to de-

scribe what they did, if they collaborated with anyone and how they knew they were successful. We then linked their answers to these questions to components of Response to Intervention: (1) problem solving, (2) effective instruction, (3) shared responsibility of staff

and (4) data to monitor progress. Setting up the training in this way served two purposes – linking RTI to what they already do and know and introducing a framework so that they could discuss RTI with their colleagues.

Effective training can also be provided by the professional with whom the TA works and is job-embedded (French, 2001). As one TA said:

We don't even go like to the staff meetings, you know...If you want us to do part of what you're doing during the day, why not invite us, you know, if you're going to be bringing in something newer...it's like keep us informed, instead of us hearing it through the grapevine (RI TA JD 3/5/2007).

It is important that teacher assistants are frequently asked about their training needs both for school-wide and grade level professional development.

In addition to the general why and what is RTI training, para-professionals will need specific professional development regarding assessment, intervention and collaboration skills.

Progress monitoring assessment

Techniques for making charts and graphs

Learning to use software to download CBM assessments

Administration of various assessment probes and benchmarks

Importance of assessment fidelity

Instruction and Intervention

One or two grade level curricula issues

Instructional pedagogy for specific intervention approaches

Shared responsibility

Problem solving process

Collaboration strategies

Communication skills

Planning and Scheduling

“I would be welcomed at common planning time but I can't because I have to be elsewhere. It takes a lot away from the effectiveness, I think, in the role” (RI TA JB 2/26/07). Scheduling and planning continue to be a major challenge for certified educators who direct the work of teacher assistants. They must insure teacher assistants know which students they are working with, where they are providing supports, when the support is to take place and why they are using a particular approach with the students -- and this occurs *throughout* the school day. In order to guide teacher assistants, teachers must be provided common planning time with teacher assistants. Principals must help schedule and encourage this common planning time.

Strategies for common planning time observed in local schools:

1. Careful scheduling of unified arts
2. Maximize time when scheduling prep times and lunch breaks
3. Efficient scheduling of therapy time with related services and prep times
4. Floating substitute to provide release time for teachers and TA
5. Late arrival (30 minutes) by TA, allows TA to stay thirty minutes after school

6. After school meeting biweekly for thirty minutes; compensated by school district.

With careful scheduling more opportunities for teaming can often happen. Creativity is important here, as funds are limited for planning time. The lack of planning time often sabotages the best commitments to RTI.

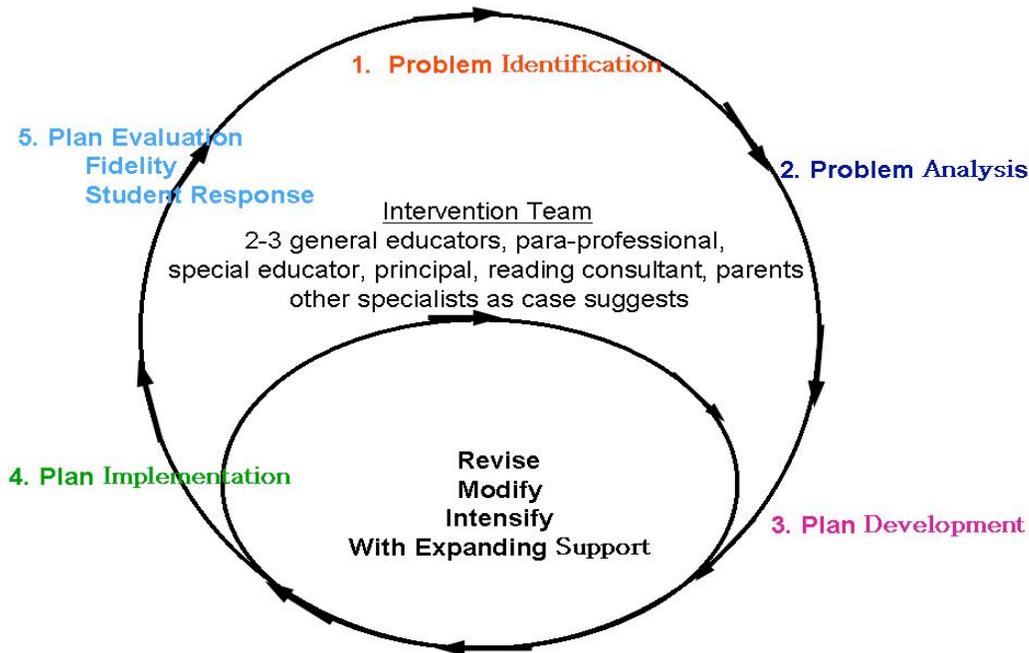
Communication

Communication is key for successful RTI to happen. When many individuals are working with various students, it is important that interventions are clearly defined with models provided, assessment criteria well understood and written down where it can be useful, and charts and graphs are continually updated. Communication is the lubricant that makes RTI operate effectively, and it must be

done verbally, in writing, and through the use of graphics. Failure to communicate among team members, including the teacher assistant, will deprive the student of the true power of an RTI approach. One teacher assistant commented:

You have to have open communication. Every day, every hour is different... you have to be able to be flexible; that's the whole thing... and you need to have a sense of humor... You can't be afraid to speak up as a teacher assistant because you have a lot of [information]... Oh, yeah it cannot just be me, absolutely not. No it has to be good teachers that are willing to take you on board; we're a team. We really are like a team; it doesn't work if we're not working all together (RI TA CR 3/30/07).

Figure 4: Problem Solving Process Used by Intervention Team



Assessment data creates important and necessary opportunities for communication and collaboration regarding student learning

and instructional pedagogy. Lack of planning time is no longer an acceptable excuse for poorly delivered interventions. Schools must

help its members find time to meet so that appropriate, quality instruction can be provided for students who have the potential to fail. In summary, effective implementation of RTI requires teacher assistants to receive professional development, participate in creative scheduling and planning time opportunities, and communicate well with teachers and administrators. All these components are vital for RTI to be successful. As one teacher assistant stated, “I just do think that if we have the opportunity to be involved to see their progress and to see the evaluations that the teachers do, we should do it! If we’re not aware of that, how do we do our jobs?” (RI TA CR 3/30/07).

Conclusion

The issue of how to effectively implement Response to Intervention is everywhere and questions remain as districts and states bring RTI to scale (Fuchs & Deschler, 2007; Hollenbeck, 2007; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). The authors’ work with the teacher assistants in Rhode Island provided some important guidelines about their changing roles as part of a school-wide shared responsibility to help all children learn. Teacher assistants are not *the* interventionists, but rather should be viewed as an integral part of the intervention team.

I always thought the role of the teacher assistant was to assist the classroom teacher. Now as a full-time TA [involved in RTI] I see my role is more than that. I am assessing the children daily, observing learning and behavioral plans in many ways, reporting back to my Special Education teacher, discussing what works and what does not and what we should try next. (TA written reflection 50E)

New and Expanded Role for Teacher Assistants

TAs can be a valuable part of Response to Intervention Teams by:

- assisting classroom teachers and special educators with screening
- assisting teachers with benchmarking and progress monitoring assessments
- recording observations of behavior and learning strategies
- entering assessment data into management system
- serving as member of intervention team
- collaborating with teachers to provide support for students
- helping implement interventions
- participating in school-wide professional development

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