

Respect, Appreciation, and Acknowledgment of Paraprofessionals Who Support Students with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT: *This article describes the experiences of 103 school personnel, including classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, special educators, and administrators who worked in four schools, Grades K-12. Data were collected during 22 school visits and 56 individual interviews. Six themes were identified pertaining to how school personnel think about and act upon, issues of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals who work in general education classrooms supporting students with and without disabilities. The themes included (a) nonmonetary signs and symbols of appreciation, (b) compensation, (c) being entrusted with important responsibilities, (d) noninstructional responsibilities, (e) wanting to be listened to, and (f) orientation and support. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for how these data might be applied in schools.*

Stand-up comedian Rodney Dangerfield, is famous for his signature line, “I don’t get no respect!” [sic] He made a career building his humor on the notion that he was not respected and was underappreciated by virtually everyone—his wife, his kids, his boss, his friends, even total strangers. We cannot help but wonder, are paraprofessionals the Rodney Dangerfields of public education? We have been prompted to ask this question because we have heard a steady stream of comments from paraprofessionals over a period of several years regarding their perceptions

about receiving respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment. We decided it was time to study this issue more systematically.

There is no dispute that paraprofessionals are an integral part of the educational landscape. Nowhere is the critical role of paraprofessionals more evident than in general education classes where students with disabilities are being included with classmates who do not have disabilities (Doyle, 1997; Freschi, 1999; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996).

Over the past decade, the literature on paraprofessionals has been dominated by non-databased articles and books that primarily ad-

dressed topics such as role clarification, orientation and training, hiring and assigning, and supervision (Boomer, 1994; French & Pickett, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Jones & Bender, 1993; Palma, 1994; Parsons & Reid, 1999; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; Steckelberg & Vasa, 1998). A smaller subset of the nondatabased literature specifically addressed paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities within general education classrooms (Brown, Farrington, Ziegler, Knight, & Ross, 1999; Doyle, 1997; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999; Hammeken, 1996; Kotkin, 1995; Palladino, Cornoldi, Vianello, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1999) and other integrated settings such as community-based work sites (Rogan & Held, 1999). Except for somewhat standard statements about their importance, we identified a lone, three-page, nondatabased article that focused the issues of respect, appreciation, or acknowledgment of paraprofessionals (Palma).

Similarly, the databased literature does not substantially address the issues of respect, appreciation, or acknowledgment of paraprofessionals. This literature also has been dominated by topics such as role clarification (French & Chopra, 1999; Lamont & Hill, 1991; Welch, Richards, Okada, Richards, & Prescott, 1995), training (Hall, McClannahan, & Krantz, 1995), and paraprofessionals' interactions with students (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader & Levine, 1999; Shukla, Kennedy, & Cushing, 1999; Storey, Smith, & Strain, 1993).

In their study of three rural states, Passaro, Pickett, Latham, and HongBo (1994) reported paraprofessional shortages and attrition that were attributed to a variety of factors, one of which was perceived lack of respect. Other key factors identified could also be viewed as being related to lack of respect; these included low wages, limited opportunities for advancement, and lack of administrative support. In identifying them as critical members of educational teams, Hofmeister, Ashbaker, and Morgan (1996) reported low job satisfaction among paraprofessionals. A study by Prest (1993) explored the relationship between the job satisfaction of instructional assistants and the

leadership behaviors of the teachers with whom they worked. Prest found that the actions of the professional staff who directed the work of paraprofessionals had a significant impact on the job satisfaction of those paraprofessionals.

These studies highlight the importance of considering various aspects of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals as important factors in attracting and retaining them. These data also suggest that respect and acknowledgment extends beyond a "pat on the back," words or encouragement, or other symbolic gestures of appreciation. Rather, the extent of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals that contributes to job satisfaction is reflected in many other factors such as compensation, role clarification, training opportunities, supervision, and support.

Retaining a productive work force has long been linked with job satisfaction (Lashbrook, 1997). Meta-analyses of job satisfaction studies in educational organizations indicated the largest mean effect sizes for relationships between overall job satisfaction and both role ambiguity and role conflict (Thompson, McNamara, & Hoyle, 1997). This finding has relevance to paraprofessionals since their job satisfaction and perceptions of appreciation are inextricably linked with decades of literature that has highlighted their changing roles and continuing lack of role clarity (Jones & Bender, 1993).

Attracting and retaining paraprofessionals who experience productive levels of job satisfaction is an important part of building the continuity of a school's capacity to support students with disabilities within general education classrooms. Retaining paraprofessionals who are satisfied with their work (a) allows inservice training resources to be used more effectively; (b) creates opportunities for teachers, special educators, and paraprofessionals to develop con-

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structive working relationships; (c) allows school administrators to make strategic staffing decisions; and (d) provides continuity for students with disabilities and their families.

The data presented in this article helps fill the gap in the research literature pertaining to paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities in general education classrooms. It does this by describing how paraprofessionals serving students with a wide range of characteristics and disabilities across the Grades from K-12, think about the issues of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment. It explores these same issues from the perspectives of the teachers, special educators, and administrators who work with them. It is our hope that understanding these issues more fully will allow school personnel to create and improve working conditions for paraprofessionals that allow them to enhance their contributions to collaborative teams serving students with and without disabilities in general education classrooms and other inclusive environments.

METHOD

SETTING

This study was conducted in four schools in Vermont. These schools were selected because they (a) were part of the same K-12 system, (b) had a history of including a full range of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, and (c) employed paraprofessionals to provide educational supports for students with and without disabilities. Three of the schools (Grades K-2, 3-5, and 6-8) were part of a K-8 school district. The number of students in these schools ranged from 430 to 526. Older students from this district attended a union high school (Grades 9-12), which also received students from two other districts. This high school served 1,410 students. Across the schools, approximately 5% of the students were from culturally diverse backgrounds. Approximately 10% of the students in the schools received free or reduced lunch. Class size across all four schools averaged in the low 20s.

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STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Data were collected from 103 individuals, including 41 general education teachers, 38 paraprofessionals, 14 special educators (2 of whom were speech-language pathologists), and 10 school administrators (i.e., superintendent, special education administrators, principals, and assistant principals). There were approximately the same number of participants from each of the four schools.

DATA COLLECTION

Two sources of data were collected throughout the 1998-1999 school year, semistructured interviews and observations. Approximately 22% of the study participants ($n = 23$) were both interviewed and observed. Approximately 46% ($n = 47$) were observed only. The remaining 32% ($n = 33$) of the participants were interviewed only.

Semistructured Interviews. Fifty-six individual, semistructured interviews were conducted, ranging in length from 35 to 120 min; most lasted between 45 to 60 min. Participants interviewed included 17 teachers, 17 paraprofessionals, 12 special educators, and 10 school administrators. All interviews were audiotaped with written permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim. Six of the interview transcripts were incomplete because the recorder was inadvertently set to "voice activation," causing lapses in recording.

A topical interview guide was used as the basis for all interviews. The topics were identified through current professional literature pertaining to paraprofessionals in general education classrooms (Giangreco, CichoskiKelly et al., 1999; Giangreco, Edelman et al. 1997; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). Questions addressed the fol-

lowing paraprofessional topics: (a) acknowledging their work, (b) training, (c) hiring and assigning, (d) interactions with students and teachers, (e) roles and responsibilities, (f) supervision, and (g) impact of paraprofessional support.

Observations. A total of 51 hr of observation were conducted during 22 school visits. Seventy school personnel were directly observed in typical school settings (e.g., classrooms, labs, hallways, cafeteria, gymnasium, and school yard) and activities (e.g., large group lessons, small group lessons, independent work, transitions between classes, and meetings). Field notes were recorded for all observations. Interview transcripts and observation field notes consisted of approximately 2,000 pages of double-spaced text data.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first author analyzed the observational and interview data inductively using categorical coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Transcripts were read and marked by hand using 76 initial codes using words descriptive of text content. Particularly descriptive passages were highlighted and separate notes were maintained on emerging themes. Each transcript was imported from a word processing program into *HyperQual3* (Padilla, 1999), a computer application designed to assist in sorting qualitative data. Each transcript was reread and data were rearranged into 24 codes. *HyperQual3* was used to sort the data by code into 24 code-specific reports. Inductive analysis (Bogdan & Biklen) was applied to the code-specific reports to assist in the identification of themes.

During the spring of 2000, participants who had been interviewed were sent a draft version of the methods and findings of the study and asked to provide feedback on the accuracy of the data and whether individual anonymity was maintained. Responses were received from over 75% ($n = 42$) of the 56 interviewees. There were 7 to 12 respondents from each of the four role categories (i.e., paraprofessionals, $n = 12$; teachers, $n = 12$; special educators, $n = 11$; administrators, $n = 7$). Their feedback was used to edit the final version of the study.

FINDINGS

The desire to receive respect, feel appreciated, and have their contributions acknowledged was a significant issue for many of the paraprofessionals that affected their reported job satisfaction. Virtually all the professionals in this study recognized this aspect of job satisfaction. A special educator explained, "What I am hearing from them (paraprofessionals) saying more than anything, is that they want what they do to be validated and valued." School administrators and faculty were nearly unanimous in their praise of the paraprofessional staff. As a teacher explained, "I value her (the paraprofessional) immensely." An administrator concurred, "Each and every principal and assistant principal, I think, really appreciates what these folks do."

The following sections present six themes, each of which addresses a different aspect of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of the work of paraprofessionals. These six themes include (a) nonmonetary signs and symbols of appreciation, (b) compensation, (c) being entrusted with important responsibilities, (d) noninstructional responsibilities, (e) wanting to be listened to, and (f) orientation and support.

NONMONETARY SIGNS AND SYMBOLS OF APPRECIATION: "I SAY 'THANK YOU!' EVERY DAY."

Administrators and teachers reported most frequently acknowledging paraprofessionals by offering positive comments to them about their work. As one classroom teacher shared:

I know it seems kind of small, but I thank them every single solitary day. I thank them for supporting me and helping me. I tell them they are an important part of what we are doing in the classroom and that I couldn't do it without them.

One administrator described writing a memo to a paraprofessional after observing her work with students. "I wrote her a full-page memo and told her that she wasn't teaching, she was performing magic! That means a lot to people." The contributions of paraprofessionals also were acknowledged through other symbolic gestures such as appreciation luncheons, small gifts, or public recognition, such as an article in the

school paper, a nameplate on the classroom door along with the teacher's, or an award for outstanding service. Simultaneously, administrators and teachers, acknowledging the busy nature of schools, said, "We don't do it (acknowledge paraprofessionals) enough."

While paraprofessionals said they appreciated kind words and other signs of appreciation offered by school faculty, they qualified this by explaining it was most meaningful when it came from people whom they perceived to be very knowledgeable about their work. Generally this included teachers, special educators, the parents of the students with whom they worked most closely, and the students themselves: "I think the kids do a lot of that for us (help us feel valued)."

Straightforward statements of appreciation such as, "You're doing a great job!" could have widely differing meanings. Paraprofessionals explained that sometimes such statements from teachers meant that the paraprofessional was doing a good job carrying out a plan the teacher had developed (e.g., a small group language arts activity). At other times paraprofessionals explained that such statements meant that the teacher was thankful that the paraprofessional was handling a challenging situation that otherwise would be left to the teacher or special educator to address. As one paraprofessional shared,

The teachers see me in the hall when a kid is out of control. And I'll get him calmed down and back in the classroom. And they are happy, like "Nice job!" and just give me a little pat on the back or say, "Hey, you are doing a great job!"

Several of the teachers and special educators welcomed this assistance as a "relief" when they described their own workloads as "extremely busy" and at times "overwhelming."

Compliments coming from principals, central office administrators, and school board members reportedly were not as meaningful because those individuals, with a few exceptions, were perceived by paraprofessionals as not being as knowledgeable about their work. Paraprofessionals expressed hope that their contributions would be truly understood and valued by a wider range of people. As one paraprofessional explained,

This year my goal was to try to make people aware at the school board and in the administration about the physical and the emotional energy this job really entails. I really feel that it's not valued. It's not intentional, it's just the awareness is not there.

COMPENSATION: "I THINK WE ARE WORTH MORE THAN WE'RE BEING PAID."

Although most of the administrators acknowledged the limitations of the pay scale, they cited the comparability of pay to other schools in the region and a "good benefits package" (e.g., health insurance, and funds to take college courses) as signs of acknowledgment that paraprofessionals are valued. It was the general perception among administrators that "by and large I think paraeducators feel like they are supported and respected."

Paraprofessionals expressed perceptions about compensation as an indicator of their perceived value within the school and community that differed from those of administrators. Although the paraprofessionals spoke positively about their fringe benefits, virtually all of them expressed dissatisfaction with their wages and some perceived their wages as a sign of disrespect: "It (starting pay of \$7/hr) is an insult." Several said that low wages left them feeling "taken advantage of." Others spoke about the wage topic using apologetic language: "I almost feel guilty even saying it, but I think we are worth more than we are being paid." Although most of the paraprofessionals said that given their responsibilities, higher wages were warranted, most decided to stay on the job because of their positive relationships with students and school colleagues so long as they had other resources (e.g., spousal income) sufficient to support their families.

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BEING ENTRUSTED WITH IMPORTANT RESPONSIBILITIES: "THAT'S WHY I'M GETTING MORE RESPECT."

One of the main factors identified as contributing to many paraprofessionals' feeling that they were respected was being entrusted with important, high-level instructional responsibilities. As one paraprofessional explained,

I'm very confident right now because I know the trust we have (as a team) and that they (the teachers) can give me a group of students to work with and they know the job is going to get done, and there aren't going to be any problems.

Another paraprofessional offered, "I personally have more responsibility put on me, which may very well be the reason that I'm getting more respect and receiving more compliments and signs of respect than maybe some other paras would."

Administrators, teachers, and special educators said that the abilities of paraprofessionals to engage in higher level instructional tasks varied widely. After observing several paraprofessionals over a period of years, one teacher explained:

Sometimes I say, "Man, they are really good! They are teaching!" And then there are other ones who have trouble. The paras say, "I don't know how to do this. I'm supposed to help my student with math, but I don't know math. I don't know how to do this!"

In cases where those working in paraprofessional roles were college educated or certified teachers, the faculty expressed more confidence in giving them instructional responsibilities. While some administrators viewed this practice as economical and a good value to the school, it left some of the paraprofessionals feeling underpaid. They felt they were doing teacher-level work for paraprofessional pay and under the lower status of a paraprofessional, rather than job designation of a professional teacher.

Another set of paraprofessionals, particularly those assigned to classroom programs, who had received extensive on-the-job training over a period of several years, also were perceived by faculty as being capable of carrying out instructional tasks. While this tutelage was effective in

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some cases, one of the teachers thought, "By the time you train a para in the skills of a teacher, you might as well have hired a teacher."

Other paraprofessionals reportedly were given instructional responsibilities, but without adequate training or support. This occurred most frequently in situations where paraprofessionals were assigned to individual students with complex, low-incidence disabilities (e.g., severe emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, mental retardation, and autism). As a classroom teacher stated, "You are giving the unqualified or underprepared people a high needs child to work with. Does that seem like a paradox? Hello?!" Respondents considered the skillfulness of some paraprofessionals in carrying out instructional responsibilities questionable and the practice inadvisable.

Providing acknowledgment to paraprofessionals by having them engage in high-level instructional tasks can sometimes present challenges. The lines between the roles of professionals and paraprofessionals become blurred. As one respondent said, "It seems that as they do a better and better job, teachers tend to give them more and more responsibility, more and more latitude. So you see them becoming almost quasi-teachers rather than paraeducators." Other teachers, cognizant of the wages earned by paraprofessionals, hesitated to give them high-level responsibilities: "Given the (low) salary they get, I don't ever feel like I have the right to put that responsibility (high-level instructional tasks) on them." Another respondent illustrated a challenge by sharing the following situation:

There may be times that they (paraprofessionals) are doing planning, but that's not what we expect from them. So when that happens we try to intercede. There was an incident a couple of years ago where a paraeducator came here from another school and it got to the

point where it was pretty sticky. Because in her mind she was that student's primary teacher, even though she wasn't. It took four hard-nosed meetings to get the point across that she had to implement (what the professionals had planned). Because some things she was doing weren't right for the child.

*NONINSTRUCTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES:
"I DON'T WANT TO BE PUT IN THE SAME
CATEGORY AS SOMEONE WHO TAKES DOWN
BULLETIN BOARDS."*

While the paraprofessionals reported valuing their instructional responsibilities as an important and primary aspect of their job, the majority also expressed comfort with their other roles (e.g., clerical duties, general supervision of students in the cafeteria, preparing materials, and providing personal care supports to students). A smaller number discussed their roles as exclusively instructional and sought to distance themselves from tasks they perceived to be noninstructional.

A paraprofessional explained, "That's why value and acknowledgment (of my instructional role) is so important to me, because I don't want to be put in the same category as somebody who takes down bulletin boards and runs papers all day long." Some paraprofessionals in the K-8 system reported feeling "devalued" because as part of contract negotiations they were grouped with cafeteria workers and custodial staff: "Now to me that's no acknowledgment ... after working so hard to establish the fact that we are involved in education."

In the K-8 district there was a systemwide emphasis on increasing the instructional roles of paraprofessionals and minimizing their clerical roles. Having paraprofessionals engage in clerical roles "is very frowned upon in this district" (teacher). In part, minimizing their clerical roles was done to direct more human resources toward instruction, but it also was seen as a sign of respect for paraprofessionals. Some teachers abided by this approach closely: "My paraprofessional does not do my clerical work nor will she ever. I do it. That is my job. Some people don't agree with that."

Other teachers viewed noninstructional responsibilities such as clerical work differently, as

valued and important roles. As one respondent said:

What really bothers me is the negativism about doing clerical work. We have this stigma (about paraprofessionals doing clerical work) and having to work directly with students. Sometimes relieving a teacher of a lot of clerical stuff so that they can work with students is as valuable, if not more valuable than having the paraprofessional work with the student.

Several teachers concurred that having paraprofessionals do copying and other clerical work "would take a tremendous load off" and give the teachers "more quality time with children." In situations where teachers and paraprofessionals abided closely to the perceived directive not to have paraprofessionals engaged in clerical tasks, some teachers found the results ironic. Teachers explained that paraprofessionals who were less trained and less qualified were instructing students while:

We are paying teachers big bucks to stand in the copy room and run off copies. Teachers don't do this during their class time; it's during their prep time, as if they have nothing else to do. They are doing it before school, after school, on weekends. They are putting in extra time and doing it on their own time.

Although not reflected in differentiated job descriptions or wages in the K-8 schools, some paraprofessionals talked about how they perceived other paraprofessionals differently based on their noninstructional roles. Paraprofessionals, particularly those assigned one-to-one to provide personal care supports (e.g., changing diapers, dressing students, and feeding students) to students with severe disabilities, were perceived by a small subset of general classroom/program paraprofessionals as being engaged in roles that they considered undesirable and inconsistent with "what teachers do." Some of the paraprofessionals consistently used language to highlight the distinction: "She's a para (engaged in instruction), not a one-on-one (engaged in personal care support)." A general educator confirmed the perception: "They (program paraprofessionals) don't like changing diapers."

An administrator at the high school explained that paraprofessionals who provide personal care supports to students with disabilities have differentiated job descriptions and receive slightly higher wages than the entry-level paraprofessionals. This was an example of an overall approach to differentiated job roles and wage levels for paraprofessionals at the high school: "There's a job description for all the positions, each clearly defined with the competencies" (administrator).

WANTING TO BE LISTENED TO: "PARAEDUCATORS' VOICES ARE PRETTY WELL HEARD."

Paraprofessionals expressed a desire to have ongoing input about the educational programs for the students with whom they worked. They reported the extent to which their input was considered and acted upon by the educational teams as an indicator of how much or little they felt respected and valued. Paraprofessionals who worked with individual students reasoned that since they typically spent more time with a student with disabilities than any of the teachers or special educators, an assertion confirmed during our observations, they "know the student best" and therefore should have their input seriously considered. A comment from a middle school teacher captured a sentiment of several teachers by stating that paraprofessionals are "adults who have some common sense and also have some wisdom and knowledge to add to whatever goes on (in school)," regardless of their educational backgrounds.

Paraprofessionals and teaching faculty expressed a variety of perspectives on how and when paraprofessionals offer input. Most respondents indicated that the informal daily exchange among school personnel worked well. As

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a teacher commented, "I think paraeducators' voices are pretty well heard in terms of recommendations."

The major concern expressed by some paraprofessionals pertained to their opportunities to offer input during team meetings. When team meetings were scheduled during the school day, often the paraprofessional was not included because, as one paraprofessional explained, "We more or less end up watching the class while the team meets." This left some of the paraprofessionals feeling that they were not valued as full members of the team.

In the K-8 schools, when team meetings were scheduled after school hours, paraprofessionals typically were told that they were welcome to attend, but were not required to do so. Since these meetings were held at times that extended beyond the paraprofessionals' paid hours of employment they could attend, but without pay. This also left some paraprofessionals feeling devalued because they were not being offered compensation for participation in team meetings. The result of this practice, according to one principal, was that "occasionally the para will be there (at an after school team meeting); rarely are they. They are out the door at 2:30 because they are paid hourly."

For many paraprofessionals, not attending team meetings was a practice with which they felt comfortable: "For the most part, they (teachers and special educators) just tell me what happened and I feel comfortable with it." Some did not want to stay after school regardless of payment. As one paraprofessional stated, "It (staying after school hours) interferes with one of the main reasons some took the job." On occasion some paraprofessionals attended meetings without pay: "I was willing to stay after school because it was so important to me" (paraprofessional).

*ORIENTATION AND SUPPORT:
"PARAEDUCATORS ARE KIND OF
THROWN INTO THINGS."*

Paraprofessionals reported that the extent to which they were oriented to their job and provided with ongoing support were indicators to

them of value and respect. An administrator concurred: "We are not showing them respect if we are not equipping them with the training they need." When paraprofessionals experienced a thorough orientation and ongoing support, it helped them to feel valued because the implied message was that their job was important enough for a professional to take that time with them.

Planned orientation did occur for a small number of the paraprofessionals. In more cases the professional staff acknowledged: "Paraeducators are kind of thrown into things here. In terms of a really structured orientation process, it's not here." A high school faculty member agreed: "Orientation is on the run."

Lack of sufficient orientation resulted in questions and comments from paraprofessionals that ranged from, "Where's the bathroom?" and "How do I get a student out of a wheelchair without injuring my back?" to "I've got recess duty and I don't know what I am supposed to do!" Several paraprofessionals reported being unaware of a student's disability, how the disability affected learning, or a student's individualized education program (IEP) goals. As one paraprofessional who worked one-on-one with a student with disabilities explained, "There was a time I was not aware that I should be working on the IEP (goals and objectives); I had no clue. After I read the IEP and a letter from the parents I really understood the child so much better."

Some paraprofessionals reported being well-supported and spoke in glowing terms about the "excellent" ongoing support they received from either the classroom teachers or special educators. Most paraprofessionals who were assigned to a classroom rather than an individual student reported forming a "team" with the classroom teacher and having support. Paraprofessionals who did not feel they received this type of support were primarily those assigned to individual students with disabilities. Some of these paraprofessionals reported feeling "dumped on" when asked to work with students who had intensive needs (e.g., challenging behaviors, communication difficulties, and physical disabilities) with minimal support:

My first year was very hard because I didn't know anything at all about my student. I got on the phone with the special ed person: "What am I supposed to do?" "What is our next step?" I asked everybody because I was unsure.

There were two reasons that were most commonly mentioned to explain why some of the paraprofessionals working with the students with most severe disabilities received the least ongoing support. First, special educator caseload size and the number of paraprofessionals they were expected to supervise were identified as barriers to meet existing needs: "There aren't enough hours in the day" (special educator). Second, several respondents said it was their belief that both teachers and special educators were not well-trained in educating students with severe disabilities. Therefore, their ability to support paraprofessionals with these types of students was limited.

DISCUSSION

These data clearly demonstrate that issues pertaining to respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals run far deeper than the occasional pat-on-the-back or annual appreciation luncheon. They highlight the importance of this issue to paraprofessionals' job satisfaction and verify that the meaning that they, and the professionals with whom they work, attach to their experiences in schools varies widely. It should be noted that these data are limited to the four schools that were studied. Any generalization to other situations should be approached cautiously, especially given the local geographic scope of the sites and the similarity of the schools' demographic characteristics.

These data suggest that professional educators and administrators should not underestimate the importance of offering symbolic signs of appreciation to paraprofessionals. At the same time, it is vital to recognize that such gestures are only the most visible manifestation of a more complex set of interrelated issues. The impact of symbolic signs of appreciation on their job satisfaction may be reduced in situations where paraprofessionals believe that other aspects of their

employment experience (e.g., compensation, orientation, opportunities for training, and ongoing support) are inconsistent with the symbolic forms of appreciation they receive (Passaro et al., 1994; Prest, 1993).

Some paraprofessionals report feeling a lack of respect because they are not treated like a teacher by being given instructional responsibilities. One of our collective challenges is to communicate the value of *all of the roles* played by paraprofessionals, not just the instructional ones. Having paraprofessionals engage in clerical roles can create time for teacher assessment, planning, or teamwork. We especially need to affirm the value of providing personal care supports (e.g., bathroom, dressing, positioning, mobility, and eating supports) for students with the most severe and multiple disabilities as a valued role. Unless we establish and communicate the importance of engaging in such roles (e.g., access, health, personal dignity, and readiness for learning), we risk the danger that the devaluing of the roles inadvertently may result in the devaluing of the students for whom those supports are provided.

The issue of compensation continues to be tricky for school administrators and paraprofessionals alike. This extends beyond the obvious issues such as the need for paraprofessionals to earn a livable wage and the needs of school administrators to maintain and improve educational quality while responding to community pressures to keep escalating costs in check, especially as they pertain to special education.

We think there is little doubt that there is a substantial subset of paraprofessionals who provide work output that far surpasses their current compensation. At the same time, the compensation dilemma raises related questions that cut to the core of strategic educational planning and budgeting: Does it make sense to continue to hire more paraprofessional staff to provide instruction and engage in other teacher-level duties? When paraprofessionals are hired, are schools investing the time and resources to train and support them? How is special educators' work impacted when they are asked to supervise increasing numbers of paraprofessionals while spending correspondingly less time with students? And if schools make the investment to re-

ally train and support paraprofessionals to the level that would allow them to provide quality instruction, would a school have been better off hiring a certified teacher or special educator from the outset? These are not easy questions to answer and are further complicated by the data presented in this study that indicates that many paraprofessionals feel more respected when they are entrusted with important responsibilities, such as instruction of students.

These questions bring us back to the central issue that has been discussed in the literature for decades and now has an added twist with the advent of inclusive schooling for students with disabilities. What *are* the appropriate roles of paraprofessionals supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms? Based on these data, and our own experiences, we suspect there is a substantial gap between the roles that are consistently set forth in the professional literature as exemplary practices (Demchak & Morgan, 1998; Doyle, 1997; Pickett, 1999; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997) and the realities of what they actually do.

There seems to be general agreement in the field that paraprofessionals should be trained for the tasks they perform, oriented to their roles, carry out plans that have been developed by qualified professionals, and receive support and supervision on an ongoing basis (Doyle, 1997; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). Yet, some are doing the core planning for students with disabilities, conducting formal and informal assessments, making adaptations for students, and making many instructional decisions (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999; Marks et al., 1999). They do this not out of their own desire for control, but because too often professionals have failed to provide the plans, training, and support that is needed. This raises other questions. Should we train and compensate paraprofessionals for

The issue of compensation continues to be tricky for school administrators and paraprofessionals alike.

What are the appropriate roles of paraprofessionals supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms?

doing these teacher-level responsibilities? Or, as suggested by Brown et al. (1999), should we identify the conditions that led to these roles being assumed by untrained paraprofessionals in the first place, and ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, have full access to qualified teachers and special educators?

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

A major implication affecting paraprofessionals' perceptions about respect and appreciation is the extent to which professional and paraprofessional staff share expectations about paraprofessional roles and work activities. For example, when a paraprofessional values engaging in instructional roles such as implementing a small group reading lesson, and the teacher assigns such a role, there is a match of expectations. When a paraprofessional feels reluctant to implement certain types of instruction, such as math, and the teacher concurs, reasoning that the paraprofessional is not trained or paid for such a role, their expectations match. When the expectations of team members match, there is a greater likelihood that paraprofessionals will feel appreciated, respected, and not taken advantage of since there is individually agreed upon role clarity.

Conversely, when team members do not share the same role expectations, there is a greater likelihood that these mismatches will adversely affect a paraprofessional's job satisfaction (Thompson et al., 1997). For example, some teachers expect paraprofessionals to function in an instructional capacity. Some paraprofessionals do not want that responsibility and feel taken advantage of because they are being asked to engage in teacher-level work, yet are paid so much less than teachers. Others may feel a lack of respect if they were not offered sufficient training or ongoing support for an instructional role. An-

other type of mismatch occurs when the teacher, cognizant of the paraprofessionals' low pay, purposefully puts minimal instructional responsibilities on the paraprofessional, when the paraprofessional actually wants that responsibility regardless of his or her compensation.

The implication for school personnel is that it is important to establish three different, interrelated types of matches among team members. The first match is that all team members should share the same understanding and expectations about the roles of the paraprofessional. These roles likely will vary across individual paraprofessional assignments and from teacher to teacher—therefore, they must be individually determined. Further, identified roles should be consistent with the distinction between the roles of teachers, special educators, and paraprofessionals. For example, paraprofessionals appropriately could be asked to implement specialized instruction for a student with disabilities that has been designed and supervised by the special educator and classroom teacher. Conversely, it would be inappropriate to ask a paraprofessional to independently design specialized instructional programs for students with disabilities.

Second, there should be a match between the agreed upon paraprofessionals' roles and the skills, training, and support they have to engage in those roles. For example, if a paraprofessional is asked to support a student in algebra, he or she should be competent in algebra. If a paraprofessional is asked to implement specialized instruction, he or she should receive specific training and ongoing support in how to implement such instruction. Providing training and support that match an appropriate paraprofessional role tangibly demonstrates respect and value for paraprofessionals. It sends the message that the individual's work is important enough to warrant such attention, training, and support because it is vital to the operation of the educational program.

Assuming appropriate roles and corresponding skills, training, and support have been agreed to and acted upon, the third area of matching pertains to compensation. Theoretically, most paraprofessionals will not have the skills, training, or role expectations of more highly trained professional staff, and therefore,

will not be paid at the same level as teachers, special educators, and related services providers. At the same time, if schools expect to attract and retain a qualified work force of paraprofessionals, they must expect to establish better alignment between the work of trained paraprofessionals and their compensation.

Regardless of which direction the field or individual schools head, it is clear that paraprofessionals do important work in classrooms supporting students with and without disabilities. They deserve respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment in tangible ways, such as appropriate role clarification, training, support, compensation, and opportunities for input in schools. It is in our collective best interest, particularly the interests of students, parents, and teachers, to ensure that paraprofessionals are not allowed to be, or become, the Rodney Dangerfields of public education.

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Support for the preparation of this article was provided by the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services under the funding category, Model Demonstration Projects for Children and

Youth with Disabilities, CFDA 84.324M (H324M80229), awarded to the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion at the University of Vermont. The contents of this article reflect the ideas and positions of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the ideas or positions of the U.S. Department of Education; therefore, no official endorsement should be inferred.

Manuscript received June 2000; accepted November 2000.

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