

“That Was Then, This Is Now!” Paraprofessional Supports for Students With Disabilities in General Education Classrooms

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Increasingly, paraprofessionals are being employed to support a wide array of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. This descriptive study, based on quantitative and qualitative data from 215 school personnel in 4 schools, provides a portrait of issues and concerns about paraprofessional supports that have implications for other schools. In addition to demographic and quantitative information about paraprofessionals' roles, the study presents 7 themes based on interviews and observations in the schools. Each of the themes addresses a different aspect of the evolution of paraprofessionals services in these 4 schools. The 7 themes address (a) increases in paraprofessional services, (b) hiring challenges, (c) turnover, (d) paraprofessional role shift to instruction, (e) paraprofessional assignments, (f) insufficient training, and (g) academic skillfulness concerns. The study concludes with practical implications for schools and suggestions for future research, which focus on student outcomes.

It was not so long ago that you knew what to expect if you were to look through the doorway into a general education classroom. You would see a group of students, all or most of whom spoke English and did not have disability labels. There were a few students who did have learning disabilities or some other category of disability. A casual observer would have been hard pressed to pick those few students with disabilities out of the group. The other constant in each classroom was the teacher—a solitary adult charged with meeting the educational needs of all of the students in the classroom. That was then, this is now.

In today's more inclusive schools, a glance into a general education classroom often presents a different image. The student population is more diverse. Students who historically had been educated in special education classes increasingly are being taught in gen-

eral education classes, including students with low-incidence disabilities (e.g., autism, deafblindness, multiple disabilities; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998).

As a wider array of students with different and more severe disabilities have been included in general education classes, it is increasingly common to find that the teacher is no longer alone in the classroom (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). In addition to parent volunteers, cross-age peer tutors, and itinerant involvement of special educators and related services personnel (e.g., speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists), it has become increasingly common to find paraprofessionals assigned to support students with and without disabilities in general education classrooms.

Over the past few years a relatively small, but growing, set of nondata-based literature has emerged that specifically addresses 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; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996). The modest set of data-based literature has addressed topics such as roles and responsibilities (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; 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).

Of the nine research studies identified, three were single-subject experimental designs, each of which dealt with between three and eight preschool-age or elementary-age students with disabilities and highly specific dependent and independent variables (Hall et al., 1995; Shukla et al., 1999; Storey et al., 1993). One of the research studies employed a quasiexperimental design that relied on multiple data sources to compare the use and nonuse of a specific paraprofessional service delivery model across two elementary schools (Welch et al., 1995).

Five of the nine research studies were descriptive designs, either qualitative or quantitative, all of which had a more broad content focus (e.g., roles, responsibilities, interactions with students). Among them, three of the studies reported interview data only that were collected from a single type of respondent group, namely paraprofessionals (Downing et al., 2000; Marks et al., 1999) or parents (French & Chopra, 1999). These studies included between 16 and 22 respondents. The other qualitative study reported data from 134 educational team members in 11 schools across four states. This included 40 interviews of teachers, special educators, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, parents, and administrators, as well as 110 school and classroom observations conducted over a 2-year period (Giangreco et al., 1997). The remaining descriptive study was quantitative in design (Lamont & Hill, 1991). It was based on data from a 50-item questionnaire about roles of paraprofessionals responded to by 110 pairs of paraprofessionals and teachers across five school districts in British Columbia, Canada.

Five of the nine studies addressed students with low-incidence disabilities such as those identified with moderate, severe, or profound developmental disabilities (Downing et al., 2000; Hall et al., 1995; Shukla et al., 1999), challenging behaviors (Marks et al., 1999), or deafblindness and multiple disabilities (Giangreco et al., 1997). The remaining

studies addressed students across disability categories or did not describe the student population with sufficient specificity to make a determination about it. In addition, a relatively small amount of the data addressed middle and high school students and none of the existing studies described the topic of paraprofessionals across schools within a school district.

The purpose of this study was to describe some of the major issues and concerns identified by school personnel about the expanded use of paraprofessionals in general education classrooms. This study fills a gap in the research literature pertaining to paraprofessional support of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. It does so by exploring data using multiple methodologies and from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders who work together serving the same students, namely general educators, special educators, administrators, and paraprofessionals. Furthermore, it addresses paraprofessional support of students with a wide range of characteristics and disabilities, across the grades from K–12, rather than a specific age group, disability category, or level of severity. In addition, by reporting data collected from over 200 school personnel, this study represents one of the largest sets of data collected thus far on the topic of paraprofessionals supporting students with disabilities in general education classes. By exploring these data across schools within the same district, we can begin to establish a portrait of how paraprofessional supports have evolved over time. This can assist school personnel in understanding current issues more fully in ways that can inform and assist them in designing paraprofessional supports for students with and without disabilities in general education classrooms.

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, 6–8) were part of a K–8 school district. Older students from this district attended a union high school (Grades 9–12), which also received students from two other districts.

Study Participants

Data were collected from 215 individuals, including 122 general education teachers, 66 paraprofessionals, 17 special educators (2 of whom were speech–language pathologists), and 10 school administrators (i.e., superintendent, special education administrators, principals, assistant principals). Twenty percent of the respondents ($n = 43$) were from the primary school, 25% from the elementary school ($n = 54$), 20% from the middle school ($n =$

43), and 33% from the high school ($n = 72$). Three additional study participants (1%) were from the district's central office ($n = 3$).

Design and Data Collection

The design of this descriptive study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analyses. Three sources of data were collected throughout the 1998 through 1999 school year: (a) questionnaires completed by school personnel, (b) semistructured interviews, and (c) observations. Michael F. Giangreco collected all data at the elementary and middle school. Stephen M. Broer and Susan W. Edelman collected data at the high school and primary school, respectively.

Ten percent of the study participants ($n = 21$) provided data from all three sources. Twenty-one percent of participants provided data from two of the three sources ($n = 45$; 25 questionnaire and interview, 18 questionnaire and observation, 2 interview and observation). The remaining 69% ($n = 149$) of the participants provided data from one of the three sources (112 questionnaires, 29 observation, 8 interview).

Questionnaires. Two types of questionnaires were distributed in the fall of 1998. A school questionnaire was completed by a principal or assistant principal in each of the four schools to gather demographic information about the school's student population (e.g., number of students, class size, racial diversity, number of students with disabilities and "at risk" designations). The school questionnaire also was used to collect information about the employment of paraprofessionals in the schools, such as the numbers of paraprofessionals assigned to support students with disabilities and at-risk designations, as well the numbers of paraprofessionals assigned to support individual students with disabilities.

An individual questionnaire was distributed to 302 individuals (i.e., 179 general education teachers, 27 special educators, 96 paraprofessionals). It was used to collect demographic information about the participants (e.g., gender, education, experience), and their involvement with school staff (e.g., the number of paraprofessionals, teachers, special educators who worked with each other; hours per day; number of students with disabilities supported; roles of paraprofessionals). Respondents also were asked to list a maximum of the top five roles or tasks engaged by paraprofessionals in the general education classroom. The individual questionnaire also was used to identify individuals willing to be interviewed.

Semistructured interviews. We conducted 56 individual, semistructured, interviews ranging in length from 35 to 120 min; most lasted between 45 and 60 min. Participants interviewed included 17 teachers, 17 paraprofessionals, 12 special educators, and 10 school administrators who had indicated a willingness to be interviewed on the individual questionnaires distributed to all school faculty. All interviews were audiotaped with written permission of 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 et al., 1997; Marks et al., 1998; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). Questions addressed the following 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 We conducted a total of 51 hr of observation during 22 school visits. Seventy school personnel, including 33 general education teachers, 31 paraprofessionals, 4 special educators, and 2 administrators, were directly observed in typical school settings (e.g., classrooms, labs, hallways, cafeteria, gymnasium, school yard) and activities (e.g., large group lessons, small group lessons, independent work, transitions between classes). The investigators attempted to observe as many situations as possible where paraprofessionals were used to support students with disabilities, including settings where some faculty had not been interviewed. The observations focused on the students with disabilities in classrooms and their activities and interactions with paraprofessionals, teachers, and classmates. Fieldnotes were recorded for all observations.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using the SAS System (SAS Institute, 1996) to calculate descriptive statistics (e.g., means and standard deviations). All responses to listings of roles or tasks that paraprofessionals engaged in were given one of six codes (i.e., instruction, behavior, clerical, planning, supervision, other–personal care) by Giangreco. These categories are similar, although not identical, to those identified by Lamont & Hill (1991). Broer independently coded all role–task responses. Interrater reliability was calculated at 99% based on an item-by-item basis by dividing the number of agreements ($n = 593$) by the number of agreements plus disagreements ($n = 596$) and multiplying by 100.

Giangreco 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, 1992) 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 given the opportunity to review a draft version of the methods and findings of the study and provide feedback using a short questionnaire and written comments regarding the accu-

racy of the findings and whether individual anonymity was maintained. Responses were received from 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, $n = 11$; and administrators, $n = 7$). All respondents indicated that the major findings were accurate. Two individuals were concerned about anonymity and 2 others provided minor accuracy corrections. Their feedback was used to edit the final version of the study.

FINDINGS

School Questionnaire Findings

Each school provided some type of specialized instructional supports to between 20% and 26% of the student population in one of three ways (see Table 1). These options included (a) Individual Education Programs (IEPs), under the auspices of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Amendments of 1997; (b) 504 Plans under the auspices Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; or (c) VT Act 157 Plans under the auspices of a Vermont Act 157 that require each school to maintain a building-based instructional support team to provide educational supports to at risk students, prior to considering referral for special education.

Each of the schools employed paraprofessionals to work with students with disabilities or those who were considered at risk. Although the amount paid to paraprofessionals ranged from \$7.00 to \$16.00 per hour, the vast majority received compensation in the \$7.00 and \$8.00 per hour range. Among the 223 students with IEPs across the four schools, approximately 26% ($n = 58$) were supported by individually assigned paraprofessionals. These students included those who were classified under several disability categories (e.g., autism, deafness, emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, and other health impaired).

Individual Questionnaire Findings

As shown in Table 2, 176 school personnel completed the individual questionnaire, representing over 58% of those surveyed. Table 3 presents demographic information about the participants (i.e., sex, education, years of experience) and reported caseload sizes for special educators and paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals reported working with an average of three to four general education teachers ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 2.50$) and an average of one to two special educators ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.01$).

Nearly 66% of the classroom teachers reported working with paraprofessionals during the 1998 through 1999 school year. Teachers least likely to have some level of paraprofessional support were those teaching high school subjects such as math, English, history, and foreign language, because students requiring paraprofessional supports were less frequently placed in those classes. Among those general education teachers who did work with paraprofessionals during the study period, the average number of

TABLE 1
Site Demographics (From School Questionnaire)

<i>Student Population</i>				
<i>School</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Average Class Size</i>	<i>Percent Minority</i>	<i>Percent Free–Reduced Lunch</i>
Primary (K–2)	430	21	5	10
Elementary (3–5)	531	22	5	11
Middle school (6–8)	526	23	5	10
High school (9–12)	1,410	23	5	5
<i>Percentage of Students Provided With Instructional Support By Options</i>				
<i>School</i>	<i>Percent IEP</i>	<i>504</i>	<i>Percent Act 157</i>	<i>Total Percent</i>
Primary (K–2)	4	2	15	21
Elementary (3–5)	10	7	9	26
Middle school (6–8)	10	6	7	23
High school (9–12)	7	7	6	20
<i>Paraprofessionals Hired to Support Students With Disabilities, 1998–1999</i>				
<i>School</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Lowest Pay</i>	<i>Highest Pay</i>	<i>Fringe Benefits^a</i>
Primary (K–2)	18	\$7.00/hr	9.06/hr	yes
Elementary (3–5)	22	\$7.00/hr	11.82/hr	yes
Middle school (6–8)	17	\$7.00/hr	11.82/hr	yes
High school (9–12) ^b	25	\$8.00/hr	16.00/hr	yes

^aBenefits included health insurance, sick days, and professional development. ^bThe high school is administered separately from the K–8 schools.

TABLE 2
Response Rates (From Individual Questionnaires)

<i>School</i>	<i>n Distributed</i>	<i>n Returned</i>	<i>Percent Returned</i>
Overall response rate			
Total	302	176	58.27
Response rates by school			
Primary (K–2)	68	41	60.29
Elementary (3–5)	49	34	69.38
Middle school (6–8)	44	34	77.27
High school (9–12)	141	67	47.51
Response rates by roles			
Paraprofessional	96	57	59.38
Special educator	27	17	63.00
General educator	179	102	56.98

paraprofessionals with whom they worked was two ($SD = 1.28$) for an average of slightly over 3 hr ($SD = 2.13$) per day. Teachers in grades K–4 typically had paraprofessional sup-

TABLE 3
Participant Demographics

<i>Participants</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Sex</i>		<i>Highest Diploma Earned</i>			<i>Years of Experience</i>		
		<i>Percent Women</i>	<i>Percent Men</i>	<i>Percent Master's or Above</i>	<i>Percent Bachelor's</i>	<i>Percent High School</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Paraprofessionals	57	93.0	7.0	3.5	33.3	63.2	7.14	5.58	
Special educators	17	100.0	0.0	93.1	5.9	NA	14.23	6.81	
General educators	102	71.6	28.4	60.8	39.2	NA	18.82	9.02	
<i>Caseloads (average number of students supported by special needs designation)</i>									
<i>Roles</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>IEP</i>		<i>Section 504</i>		<i>VT Act 157</i>		<i>No Special Needs Designation</i>	
		<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Paraprofessional	3.45	4.24	2.73	2.82	3.40	5.91	12.73	12.84	
Special educator	12.41	6.96	5.29	4.07	9.87	8.60	11.20	11.56	

port for longer periods of the day compared to those at the middle school and high school, where students changed classes and encountered a greater number of teachers.

As shown in Table 4, there was a high level of agreement among classroom teachers, special educators, and paraprofessionals that instruction was the most common role engaged in by paraprofessionals, accounting for an average of nearly 68% of responses across the three participant groups. Table 5 provides examples associated with each of the six role–task categories.

TABLE 4
Roles and Tasks of Paraprofessionals in General Education Classrooms

<i>Roles</i>	<i>Overall</i>		<i>Paraprofessionals</i>		<i>Special Educators</i>		<i>General Educators</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent of Responses</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent of Responses</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent of Responses</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent of Responses</i>
Instruction	403	67.62	145	62.50	41	56.94	217	74.32
Behavior	53	8.89	26	11.21	9	12.50	18	6.16
Supervision	40	6.71	25	10.78	4	5.56	11	3.77
Planning	34	5.72	11	4.74	10	13.89	13	4.45
Clerical	33	5.53	14	6.03	5	6.94	14	4.79
Other–Personal Care	33	5.53	11	4.74	3	4.17	19	6.51
Totals	596	100.00	232	100.00	72	100.00	292	100.00

TABLE 5
Examples of Paraprofessional Roles Reported in Individual Questionnaires by Teachers, Special Educators, and Paraprofessionals

Instructional	Teaches individual or small group lessons on a wide variety of academic and functional skills, tutors students, provides reminders for students to stay on task, provides additional prompting and cueing, provides feedback and encouragement to students, assists students with homework, takes class notes for the student, reads to student, encourages student to participate in class activities, administers tests and quizzes.
Behavior Support	Monitors student behavior, ensures safety of student and others, removes student if behavior interferes with instruction of others, implements student’s behavior plan, deals with inappropriate behavior.
Clerical	Makes copies, organizes materials, makes materials, cleans up, serves as a “go-fer.”
Supervision of Students	Supervises students in school (e.g., cafeteria, recess, bus arrival and dismissal, transitions between classes, in the classroom when teacher has to leave the room), brings student to and from classes.
Planning	Develops individual or small group lessons and units, modifies curriculum, modifies activities and assignments, develops behavior plans.
Other–Personal Care	Assists with bowel and bladder needs, catheterization, transfers in and out of wheelchairs and other adaptive equipment, feeds students, advocates for the student, serves as liaison between school personnel, provides communication support, implements related services recommendations.

Interview and Observational Findings: "It's Not Anybody's Fault. It Is Just the Way Things Have Evolved"

Interview respondents and observation participants who had been in the school system for many years consistently recounted a shift in paraprofessional services that began in the early 1990s and continued through 1999. The reported change has been both in the increasing numbers of paraprofessionals hired to work in the schools and their roles. Observations confirmed the roles of paraprofessionals reported in the individual questionnaires, specifically that instruction was a primary role. The following sections present seven themes, each of which addresses a different aspect of the evolution of paraprofessionals services in these four schools leading up to the current status. The seven themes address (a) increases in paraprofessional services, (b) hiring challenges, (c) turnover, (d) paraprofessional role shift to instruction, (e) paraprofessional assignments, (f) insufficient training, and (g) academic skillfulness concerns.

Increasing paraprofessional services: "It's been an explosion!" Principals in each of the four schools noted a steady increase in the number of paraprofessionals hired over the past several years. One principal described the increases as "very alarming"; another said, "It's been an explosion!" A principal offered corroboration by sharing data compiled by the school business manager of the K–8 district. The data indicated an increase from 219 hr of paraprofessional service per day in 1994 to 401 hr of paraprofessional service per day in 1999, representing an 83% increase.

Administrators reported that most of the increase was in the hiring of paraprofessionals assigned to individual students, although "child count hasn't increased a lot." Identification of more students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, inheriting recommendations for paraprofessional supports developed by personnel from sending schools, and parental advocacy were all mentioned as reasons for the increase. At the high school, the special education administrator said unforeseen circumstances also were a contributing factor. "I had twelve intensive needs kids move in one year between May and August; it was like being an air traffic controller getting those kids in."

Hiring challenges: "Do they have a pulse?" *Lucky* was a word used frequently by administrators when they spoke about the people historically they hired as paraprofessionals. Employing talented people to work as paraprofessionals is something the administrators and teachers reported with great pride and as necessary for their schools to be effective. "We can't include the kids (with disabilities) to the level we do without the paraeducators. I mean they are the foundation upon which this is based ... " (special educator). The teaching faculty used the following terms or phrases to describe the majority of paraprofessionals who worked in the schools: creative, dedicated, energetic, flexible, genuine caring about kids, good interpersonal skills, hard working, intuitive, instinctive, knowledgeable, and skilled.

According to several of the administrators, their luck has begun to run out in terms of hiring people with preferred educational backgrounds (e.g., 2–4 years of college educa-

tion) and experience. The pool of candidates reportedly is less qualified. “We are not getting candidates that have these [desired educational and experiential] qualifications. They aren’t out there. There is a significant shortage.” When one administrator was asked, “What do you look for when hiring a paraprofessional?” the response was, “Do they have a pulse? Are they breathing?”

Administrators pointed out that prospective paraprofessionals could earn more money working at fast-food restaurants or entry-level factory jobs, “... at \$9.50 per hour working on the [assembly] line.” Because the wage scale for paraprofessionals was comparable to other local schools, historically the district relied on “good benefits” and its reputation as “a good place to work” to attract paraprofessionals. Administrators indicated that the power of this method to attract qualified applicants has been eroded by a strong economy with low unemployment.

Turnover: “That didn’t happen before.” The schools’ ability to hire new paraprofessionals has resulted in other challenges. Turnover has become an increasing problem, both in terms of frequency and timing. Paraprofessionals who were assigned to work primarily with one student generally were considered to be subject to a higher rate of job turnover than paraprofessionals assigned more broadly to a classroom or program. “There is a lot of burnout among the one-on-ones” (paraprofessional). As one paraprofessional explained, “The job is really, really hard. I mean I go home and I’m exhausted at the end of every day.”

An administrator explained, “We have people leaving mid-year. Normally, we wouldn’t have had that happening before.” When college graduates, including some certified teachers who have been unable to find teaching positions, are hired as paraprofessionals they tend to “... stay with us for one or two years, and leave.”

Ironically, the schools’ efforts to pay individuals higher wages inadvertently has contributed to turnover. “A major issue among the paraeducators is that new people have been hired at hourly rates that are above the people who have been here for a while” (special educator). This was verified by paraprofessionals who reported their intentions to leave their jobs because they were dissatisfied that newly hired paraprofessionals were being paid more than those with many years of experience.

Given that paraprofessional positions do not offer a “living wage,” individuals who continued working as paraprofessionals tended to be part of families where, “... their financial situation is solid; they have a husband or wife who has another [primary] source of income.” They tended to “live in the community” and may “have kids in the school.” They “like the school calendar” and “daily schedule.”

Paraprofessional role shift to instruction: “The teacher couldn’t do it herself!”

Although it was reported that historically paraprofessionals had some roles working directly with students, one paraprofessional summed up the consistent reports of respondents when she stated, “When I first started here ten years ago, we didn’t have as many one-on-one paraeducators.”

As increasing numbers of students with a wider array of special educational needs were included in the general education classrooms, there was a collective recognition that, “All of the sudden we had a lot of kids who needed support. We needed adults there to be able to function in the classroom. The teacher couldn’t do it herself” (paraprofessional). The result was that, “... we had a shift from clerical support [by paraprofessionals] more to instruction, where everybody had instructional responsibilities” (administrator); this was confirmed through the observations. Most often the paraprofessionals were observed situated in very close proximity to students with disabilities supporting them in instructional activities (e.g., providing support during large group lessons, tutoring, assisting with homework).

In changing the roles of paraprofessionals to be primarily instructional, several administrators explained that this would allow them to better use an existing pool of “talented people” to help support students with and without disabilities. Although many of the paraprofessionals reported welcoming this shift and indicated their desire to work with students instructionally, many also reported discontent that they were required to assume more and higher level responsibilities without pay increases commensurate with their new roles.

The shift toward increasing utilization of paraprofessionals to provide instruction has resulted in paraprofessionals being perceived as essential by the faculty. In addition, this shift has resulted in some tensions among various constituencies within the school district as reflected in the following statement of a special educator: “Right now the school board in this school district thinks special education costs too much money. At the same time we are feeling like we can’t do it [educate all children appropriately] with what we have.”

Paraprofessional assignments: “Program paras and one-to-ones.” As the shift of paraprofessional roles evolved, a distinction developed between individual paraprofessionals and program paraprofessionals, both types were observed. Individual paraprofessionals were observed supporting the educational needs of individual students with disabilities, either part time or full time. Interview respondents indicated that they were generally expected to provide support to other students in the classrooms, individual paraprofessionals were rarely observed interacting with other students in other than casual ways. Individual paraprofessionals were referred to in a variety of ways: one-to-ones, individual assistants, paraeducators, aides, and paras.

Program paraprofessionals were observed supporting the educational needs of groups of students in a classroom, resource room, or other setting (e.g., community vocational sites for high school students). Although all of these program paraprofessionals worked with at least some students who had a special needs plan (i.e., IEP, 504, VT Act157), some were assigned primarily to general education classrooms, either part time or full time, under the direction of a classroom teacher. Program paraprofessionals based in the general education classrooms were referred to using some of the same terms as individual paraprofessionals and also were referred to as *classroom assistant*, *pod assistant*, or *wing assistant*, referring to configurations of general education classes.

A smaller number of program paraprofessionals were assigned to special education resource room settings under the direction of a special educator or speech–language pa-

thologist. In these situations they served students who had some type of special needs plan (i.e., IEP, 504, VT Act157) who came to the resource room for instruction, tutoring, or other types of specialized supports (e.g., assessment, homework) for short periods during the day. These three major types of paraprofessional assignment (i.e., individual paraprofessional, general classroom–program paraprofessional, special education–program paraprofessional) were observed in the four schools in a variety of combinations.

Insufficient training: “OK, now do it!” Teachers and special educators reported that the training backgrounds of people being hired to work as paraprofessionals varied widely on entry into their jobs. Regardless of their varying assignments (e.g., individual or program paraprofessional), several respondents said that the shift to expanded instructional roles occurred without sufficient training. Although the district has professional development requirements for paraprofessionals in their job description and funds for this training, the extent to which they were trained varied.

Virtually none of the paraprofessionals received any initial training before being asked to work with students. A principal explained, “Most don’t receive any formal training.” Teachers concurred, “They don’t get enough training in the beginning,” and expressed their concern, “I feel bad for them [paraprofessionals].” As a special educator recalled the lack of training when paraprofessionals were asked to assume more instructional role, “We just sort of threw them into another job and said, ‘OK, now do it!’ There was on-the-job training, but you know how that goes, there is never enough time.”

Concerns about training were echoed by several respondents. “I just think, on the whole, paraeducators need a lot more training than what they are getting” (teacher). A principal suggested, “Give them [paraprofessionals] time to get the training before starting the job, because they are not getting that now. They are thrown in.” Paraprofessionals confirmed the nature of their experiences with training: “There wasn’t any training whatsoever for my position.” Another paraprofessional stated, “About five years ago ... we were just assigned a student and asked to teach reading and other academics. Here’s the book, now take your student for a half-hour.”

Once on the job, most paraprofessionals were involved in various types of training offered by school personnel or through other workshops and courses. As an administrator stated, “In our particular district there is a requirement that the paras go through professional development. There are a set number of hours they are supposed to complete They don’t have to have particular classes or areas of development.” It was reported that some of the paraprofessionals were very self-directed in their professional development as evidenced by their initiative in taking college courses and attending workshops and conferences.

Despite the availability of in-service training opportunities and the resources to fund them, respondents often judged training of paraprofessionals to be insufficient to do the tasks they were assigned such as skills in teaching reading, language arts, math, communication, social behavior, and daily living. A paraprofessional explained, “There are a number of different seminars and things that come up that we can go to. But to tell you the truth, I don’t know how close they come to really helping us in our jobs.”

Although continuing to value their opportunities to take classes and attend workshops and conferences, several paraprofessionals indicated that their on-the-job training and experiences being mentored by a teacher or special educator were their primary forms of professional development. “They [teachers and special educators] are always willing to talk and answer questions. They give me feedback, input, and help. So I learn a great deal just from sharing and talking together” (paraprofessional). Ongoing on-the-job training and mentoring relationships between professionals and paraprofessionals occurred for some paraprofessionals and were reportedly nonexistent for others.

A principal explained that some of the training opportunities designed for teachers do not always match the training needs of paraprofessionals: “To be perfectly honest with you, I think that inservice training for paras is a real weakness in our program. We invite them to attend training with the teachers, but a lot of times it’s not relevant to them.” Although paraprofessionals attend teacher training, typically these workshops and courses do not provide differentiation between the roles of professionals and paraprofessionals.

Although there was virtually universal recognition among the respondents that more relevant and ongoing training of paraprofessionals was desirable and appropriate, barriers to achieving this goal were identified. As a special educator stated, “The day hasn’t gotten any longer. I don’t see anyone willing to pay the paraeducators to stay extra time so that we can train them. I don’t have any time in the day to train them because I have so many kids on my caseload.”

Providing paraprofessionals with orientation and training was also interrelated with difficulty in hiring paraprofessionals. Administrators reported that it was not uncommon to be filling positions immediately prior to the beginning of the school year. As one principal shared, “It [training] depends on how soon we hire them before school starts. Unfortunately, we don’t do as good a job as we would like to do in that area.” Paraprofessionals confirmed this situation: “There really wasn’t any [orientation or training]. I think I was hired two days before school started, so that was a bit of a crunch right there.”

Academic skillfulness concerns: “I don’t do algebra.” From an administrator’s perspective, asking paraprofessionals to assume instructional responsibilities previously reserved for teachers

Created a training problem for us because the people that we [originally] hired to come in were [hired] to make posters and run copies. Fortunately, they were pretty talented people. We have been able to work them through the process, but they [paraprofessionals] were not as qualified academically for some of the stuff we are asking them to do.

Although not a concern in most cases, teachers across the grades identified it as problematic when a paraprofessional’s command and modeling of written and oral language was deemed less than acceptable (e.g., errors in spelling and grammar). Respondents reported that a paraprofessional’s level of academic skillfulness was of increasing concern at the middle and high school. When paraprofessionals were not academically qualified for their roles, some teachers questioned whether it was of support to them or more work.

“Sometimes it’s really hard when someone [a paraprofessional] does not have an academic background. Am I supposed to be their teacher as well?”

In addition to a portion of paraprofessional workforce reportedly being less academically qualified than in the past, there were also challenges with matching personnel skills with the support needs of students and general education teachers. Sometimes paraprofessionals were asked to support students in subject areas that were unfamiliar to them or where some of them struggled when they were students. A high school teacher explained, “Since the paraeducators go to classes with the kids we assume that they are able to grasp the content of the class and then review it with the student. Now that may or may not be a valid assumption.” Using a joking tone, another high school teacher recounted a conversation with a paraprofessional who had worked in the same class the previous year: “Are you going to get it [understand course content] this year?” Academic mismatches were illustrated further by situations such as a student in need of support in Spanish class being assigned a paraprofessional who did not speak Spanish, or paraprofessionals assigned to students in math class who “... don’t do algebra.”

Despite the challenges associated with the shift toward instructional roles for paraprofessionals, the majority of respondents across all role categories reported that the paraprofessionals’ shift to instructional roles worked reasonably well because of the dedication, attributes, and efforts of the entire staff. The comment of a special educator summarized the sentiments expressed by many respondents across all four schools, “Overall, it’s a good school. There are a lot of good people working really hard.” One the principals summarized the statements of many respondents about the historical shift to more extensive use of paraprofessional supports, “It’s not anybody’s fault. It is just the way things have evolved.”

DISCUSSION

These data establish that in the four schools studied, there has been a substantial increase in the utilization of paraprofessionals to support students with and without disabilities in general education classes and that the role expectations for paraprofessionals have become increasingly instructional. Respondents indicated that although the shift toward increasing instructional responsibilities was deliberate, the overall expansion of paraprofessional supports was something that evolved over time, rather than as a preplanned service delivery strategy. Furthermore, the orientation and training of the paraprofessionals was generally considered to be insufficient to match the identified instructional roles.

Maintaining an effective model of support service provision that relies heavily on paraprofessionals was further complicated by challenges associated with hiring and retaining qualified paraprofessionals to support instruction. These findings suggest that school leaders would be well advised to consider the proactive management of the changing support service delivery landscape that has become increasingly reliant on paraprofessional services.

The reader is reminded that generalization of findings beyond the specific schools studied should be approached cautiously because the programmatic, geographic, cultural, and demographic variables unique to these schools may not necessarily be present

in other schools. Furthermore, the lack of interview and questionnaire data from parents of students with and without disabilities presents an absence of an important subset of stakeholder perspectives.

Like many descriptive studies, this one raises more questions than it provides answers. However, potentially, there is great value in reflecting on the questions that it raises about the expansion and changing roles in paraprofessional services. School leaders and communities might use the findings from this study to assess their own schools' paraprofessional supports by answering some of the following questions. The locally relevant responses to these questions, from a broad array of stakeholders, can assist schools in developing a proactive, strategic plan for support service provision:

- How have our schools' paraprofessional supports changed over the past several years? Have we experienced any of the same challenges identified by the respondents in this study (e.g., burgeoning numbers, role confusion, difficulty hiring and retaining qualified personnel, insufficient training)?
- Does it make sense for our school district to continue to use, or expand the use of, a support service model that is highly reliant on paraprofessionals to deliver instruction?
- How can school personnel, families, and community members be assured that the use of paraprofessionals is consistent with the overall mission of the school, IDEA requirements to give students with disabilities access to general education curriculum, and the national movement toward higher standards and accountability?
- How can our school ensure that we are not inadvertently developing or perpetuating a double standard whereby students without disabilities receive instruction primarily or exclusively from certified educators, whereas some students with disabilities receive their instruction primarily or exclusively from paraprofessionals? How can this be done in a way that does not interfere with the least restrictive environment provisions of IDEA?
- What aspects of that support service provision should involve the use of paraprofessionals?
- How will our school hire and retain paraprofessionals with the qualifications that match their roles and responsibilities?
- What orientation and training is needed for paraprofessionals to match their job roles? How will this training be provided?

Ultimately, responding to these types of questions can help schools proactively manage their support service provision for students with and without disabilities, including the use of paraprofessionals, in ways that are both educationally sound and fiscally responsible. Such an approach provides a framework for school personnel to consider descriptive research data and use it in practical ways to address specific issues in their own schools. Materials are available to assist schools in addressing some of these issues.

Recently, a school-based planning process has been developed to assist school teams in answering some of the aforementioned types of questions. In reference to paraprofessional supports, the process provides content and procedures to assist schools in assessing their own needs, identifying their priorities, and developing action plans to address identified needs (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 1999). In addition, over the last few years several training resources have been developed specifically for paraprofessionals who support stu-

dents with disabilities in schools (CichoskiKelly, Backus, Giangreco, & Sherman-Tucker, 2000; French, 1998; Institute on Community Integration, 1999; Pickett & Lee, 1995; Salzberg, Morgan, Gassman, Pickett, & Merrill, 1993; Steckelberg & Vasa, 1997).

As research and school-based practice continue to intersect, the need for research to purposely explore the direct and indirect impact on students remains vital. With the exception of the three single-subject studies and one quasiexperimental study reported in the introduction of this article (Hall et al., 1995; Shukla et al., 1999; Storey et al., 1993; Welch et al., 1995), evaluation of impact on student outcomes remains conspicuously sparse in the literature on paraprofessional supports. As a field, we need to know if providing paraprofessional supports to students with disabilities is having intended and positive outcomes, both academically and socially. This is particularly important in light of existing descriptive data suggesting that sometimes the well-intentioned assignment of paraprofessionals, particularly those who assigned to support individual students, may have unintended detrimental effects (Giangreco et al., 1997; Marks et al., 1999).

Future research should be pursued to help us understand the conditions that call for the appropriate utilization of paraprofessionals, the characteristics of effective paraprofessionals, the types of training and support that allow paraprofessionals to be effective, and the impact on students. Research questions will need to be considered within a context that clarifies agreed-on roles for paraprofessionals to assist, rather than replace, the work of qualified teachers, special educators, and related services personnel.

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