Roles, Responsibilities, and Concerns of Paraeducators: Findings From a Statewide Survey

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Abstract
The purpose of this survey study was to obtain descriptive information about job situations of special education paraeducators from paraeducators across one state and determine their perceptions regarding roles, current issues identified in the literature, and other issues of concern. Of particular interest was whether perceptions varied based on (a) paraeducator assignment (one-to-one or group) or (b) time in general education settings. More than 1,800 paraeducators responded. Findings supported previous studies based on smaller samples. Problematic issues previously associated with one-to-one paraeducators in general education settings were reported as concerns by both one-to-one and group paraeducators who spent all or most of their day in self-contained settings. Discussion centers on the importance of “paraeducator voice” in efforts to address broader issues of inclusive schooling, clarification of paraeducators as instructional team members, and better understandings situated in practice of the paraeducator role as an effective intervention alternative sometimes for students with individualized education programs.

Keywords
inclusive practices, inclusion, paraprofessionals, teacher preparation

Across the United States more than 412,498 “paraprofessionals” are providing support for children and youth with disabilities in public schools settings (Data Accountability Center [DAC], 2010). Depending on the school district where these instructional staff members are employed, they are referred to as paraprofessionals, teacher aides, teacher assistants, instructional assistants, or paraeducators. Irrespective of title, these public school personnel have become critical players in the provision of educational programs for students with disabilities. Paraeducators (as we refer to these instructional staff throughout this article) are a primary support for students with disabilities in K–12 settings (French, 2003a; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Pickett, Gerlach, Morgan, Likens, & Wallace, 2007). Often, they are given—particularly in the case of students who have high support needs and receive services in general education settings—responsibility for the implementation of student programs (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997). The success of students with disabilities can depend in many ways on the supports provided by paraeducators.

Despite the increased significance of this role, the ways in which paraeducators are prepared, supported, and invited to participate as members of educational teams received relatively little attention in the literature until the late 1990s and early 2000s (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010). In the past decade, studies have explored the perceived appropriateness of new roles and responsibilities as well as examined whether and what kind of supports had been provided to prepare paraeducators for these new roles (cf. Carter, O’Rourke, Sisco, & Pelsue, 2009; Downing et al., 2000; Minondo, Meyer, & Xin, 2001). In general, researchers have found that paraeducators were trained on the job rather than prepared “in advance,” that the level of independence paraeducators exerted on the job (in at least some reports) exceeded the intent of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), and that supervising teachers were reluctant to supervise and/or evaluate the paraeducators assigned to provide support for students in their classes or on their caseload. In the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) amendments of 1997, Congress specified as a condition for state eligibility the states have personnel standards such that paraeducators who are “appropriately trained and supervised . . . be used...
to assist” in the delivery of special education and related services (IDEA, 2008, Part B, Section 612 (a)15(B) iii).

Recent investigations have explored the impact of the presence of a paraeducator on student interactions as well as their effectiveness in providing instructional support. In a series of studies, Giangreco and colleagues documented problems and concerns regarding adult proximity to the students whom the adults (i.e., paraeducators) are assigned to support. These researchers noted that a lack of clarity in planning led to an environment in which the paraeducators maintained excessive proximity to students that was detrimental to peer interactions, general education teacher–student interactions, and student learning (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001; Giangreco et al., 1997). Other investigators have found that when specific training was provided to these staff, their proximal support facilitated academic or social learning (cf. Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005; Werts, Zigmond, & Leeper, 2001) and enhanced students’ relationships with their teacher (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003).

Although providing services through paraeducators is presumed to and has been reported by some to benefit students, especially students who receive services in general education settings (cf. Lane, Fletcher, Carter, Dejud, & Delorenzo, 2007; Vadasy, Sanders, & Peyton, 2006), the role of paraeducators has also been identified as problematic for the following reasons: (a) the least qualified staff are teaching students with the most complex learning characteristics and in some cases with little oversight or direction, overstepping the boundaries identified in IDEA; (b) individual (or one-to-one) paraeducator supports are linked in some cases to lower levels of teacher involvement; and (c) current training for paraeducators is limited, and teachers are not prepared to provide ongoing training and supports. Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010) suggested these issues may be symptomatic of broader, more endemic problems related to the current delivery of services to students with disabilities.

Researchers have also turned their attention toward the topic of paraeducator job satisfaction. Given the low status of a paraeducator’s position within school districts as reflected by pay schedules and political hierarchies, experts have emphasized the need for school personnel to be forthright and explicit in welcoming and supporting paraeducators as valued members of the educational team (Doyle, 2008; French, 2003a; Pickett et al., 2007). Although turnover and retention are often alluded to as problematic issues relative to paraeducator employment, only a limited number of recent studies have addressed this topic (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Giangreco et al., 2001; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2008; Tillery, Werts, Roark, & Harris, 2003). Although low salary is a significant concern, it was not the only or even most substantial concern for many paraeducators. Rather, the salient factors in paraeducator job satisfaction were respect from colleagues, acknowledgment of their opinions about students, active team membership, and the existence of a collaborative team culture within a school. Participants in these studies reported that satisfaction depended on the ways in which appreciation and acknowledgment were expressed, by whom, and whether paraeducators had opportunities to be active members of instructional teams. Rate of turnover was addressed specifically in two of these studies and varied across the schools and districts who participated. Each of these studies was small in scale, drawing participants from just one to three school systems. Tillery et al. (2003), in particular, called for further study related to the actual incidence of turnover. We were not able to locate a report more recent than a 1996 national survey conducted by Wolery et al. (1996) that reported turnover rates at either a national or state level. Pickett, Likens, and Wallace (2003) have highlighted the gap in up-to-date and reliable national and state numbers necessary for planning and supporting paraeducators with their cooperating teachers in their joint work.

The criticism relative to the actual roles engaged in by paraeducators and general acknowledgment of related issues in their preparation and ongoing support as well as unreliable turnover data have not led to a reluctance to use paraeducators in special education. State and federal reports demonstrate that the number of paraeducators is growing across the United States. Since 1992, the number of paraeducators has increased 131%, whereas for the same period the number of special education teachers has decreased (DAC, 2010).

State education agencies (SEAs) are in need of data from local districts relative to current issues and concerns in the field. Most studies thus far are limited to single districts or regional reports and represent small groups of paraeducators and teachers and administrators. The purpose of this survey was to obtain descriptive information from a broad statewide audience. We targeted paraeducators working in either general education or special education settings. The survey addressed paraeducators’ perceptions about (a) their roles and responsibilities, (b) current issues identified in the literature relative to their role, and (c) any other areas of concern. We explored the following questions:

1. Given a list of 12 roles that have been noted in the literature, which of these roles are primary roles for paraeducators in this state?
2. Do paraeducators view these roles as primary roles for paraeducators?
3. What are the concerns of paraeducators?
4. Do views differ based on assignment as either a “one-to-one” or “group” paraeducator?
5. Do views differ based on the amount of time paraeducators spent each day in general education settings?
This report contributes to the existing literature in at least three ways. First, it provides statewide data that include paraeducators working in both general and special education settings. Second, it expands on previous work by Giangreco and Broer (2005) examining whether paraeducators’ perspectives varied based on time spent in general education. Third, it is a vehicle to present a paraeducators’ point of view from one state and thus expands the representation of a paraeducator voice in this national conversation about their role in schools.

Method
This survey was conducted in districts across one Midwestern state according to procedures approved by the university’s institutional review board. Responses were anonymous. Because paraeducators who were people of color and/or men were easily identified in many districts, the paraeducators who participated in the validation process for this survey recommended that neither gender nor race/ethnicity be requested on the survey. The letter to participants included with each survey indicated that information would be confidential and reported as group data only. Completion and the return of the survey were considered each respondent’s consent to participate. According to the December 1 child count for the school year when survey data were collected, school districts in this state provided special education supports and services to 167,584 children and youth ages 3 through 21. According to state full-time equivalent (FTE) reports for that same year, students ages 3 through 21 were supported by 8,161 special education teachers and 6,981 special education paraeducators.

Participants
A total of 1,867 paraeducators returned their survey via U.S. mail. This represented 27% of the reported number of special education paraeducators in the state for that year. All of these respondents indicated that they were high school graduates or had received a GED. In addition, 19.0% (n = 348) had completed a 2-year college program, 16.0% (n = 309) had completed a 4-year undergraduate degree (126 of whom were also graduates of teacher preparation programs), 3.0% (n = 52) had completed a graduate degree, and 0.6% (n = 11) had advanced graduate work beyond a master’s degree. Their years experience as a paraeducator ranged from 3 months to 34 years (Mdn = 5).

Workday and assignment. These paraeducators worked an average of 6.8 hours per day providing services in kindergarten through postschool settings to students who were eligible for special education services under various eligibility categories. Approximately 85% (n = 1,586) served children across multiple categories. For example, of the eight children a paraeducator supported during the day, four might be eligible under learning disability, three under mild mental disability, and one under emotional disability. In all, 68% (n = 1,271) served students identified as having learning disabilities, 54% (n = 1,002) emotional disabilities, 53% (n = 989) mild mental disabilities, 50% (n = 930) autism, 48% (n = 883) communication disorders, 36% (n = 669) moderate mental disabilities, 31% (n = 584) multiple disabilities, 28% (n = 509) other health impairments, 26% (n = 477) orthopedic impairments, 23% (n = 420) hearing impairment, 23% (n = 417) vision impairments, 20% (n = 377) development delays, 19% (n = 362) severe mental disabilities, 11% (n = 209) traumatic brain injuries, and 9% (n = 171) dual sensory impairments.

Of the group, 5% supported preschool-age children. Just more than half supported children in Grades K through five. Another 21% of this group worked in Grades 6 through 8, and about 20% at the high school or post–high school level. The grade level breakdown for this statewide group reflected the national staffing patterns reported by Hampden-Thompson, Diehl, and Kinukawa (2007), who found that the majority of paraeducators are assigned at elementary school sites, with a lesser number assigned to secondary placements.

Work settings. One fifth of the group (n = 367) spent the entire workday in general education settings. Just less than one fifth (n = 331) spent more than three quarters of the day in general education settings, 11% (n = 205) spent half of their day in these settings, and 16% (n = 289) spent about one quarter of their day in these settings. Also, 35% (n = 639) reported spending no time in general education settings. The time spent in general education was higher for those paraeducators serving students whose categorical label was considered “high incidence” and matched the state licensing requirement for mild interventions rather than intense intervention. With regard to team membership, 22% (n = 410) reported that they were assigned to general education teams or teachers and 78% (n = 1,458) were assigned to a special education teacher.

Special education teachers developed the schedules for 76% these paraeducators, special education and general education teachers together planned schedules for 22%, and less than 3% noted that they were responsible for developing their own schedule. Of paraeducators, 44% (n = 821) indicated that they had a regular meeting time at least once each week with a special educator. The length of these meetings ranged from 10 to 27 minutes. In all, 5% met at least once each month, 4% met once each semester, and 44% indicated that they had no meeting time. Of paraeducators, 22% met at least once each week with a general and special educator. These are the same 22% of respondents who were assigned to general education teams. The average length of these meetings was 14 minutes.
One-to-one paraeducators. About 20% \( (n = 369) \) identified their assignment as working one-to-one with students for the entire day and about 16\% \( (n = 295) \) reported this type of assignment for only part of the workday. These paraeducators provided services to students across all eligibility categories. The majority of this group was assigned to students with autism and at the elementary level. One-to-one paraeducators supported students in both general education and special education settings. Interestingly, a number of these one-to-one paraeducators \( (n = 140) \) spent none of their day in general education settings.

Procedures

Survey distribution and data collection. The survey was designed initially for distribution to paraeducators and their cooperating teachers who were working in general education settings only. When the first author approached the state director of special education to enlist his endorsement for the survey project, the director determined that it would be helpful to distribute it on a wider basis throughout the state and offered to support the cost of survey distribution. The possible pool of respondents then was expanded to include paraeducators who worked in both general education and special education settings. In advance of survey distribution, we also shared the survey study plan with the Executive Committee of the state’s Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) group at a regular monthly meeting. The state director of special education also announced at the annual fall state CASE meeting that a survey was forthcoming and he would appreciate participation by the local districts. Thus, participation was invited and strongly encouraged but not required. (Although the instruction to directors indicated that special education teachers [SE] and general education teachers [GE] were invited to participate, whether teachers received surveys was left up to each local director. Anecdotal reports to the authors during various professional development and conferences sessions over the course of the year following survey distribution suggested that most directors presented the survey as “for paraeducators only.” Only paraeducator responses are addressed in this article.)

Survey packages were distributed through the office of the state director of special education to local district special education directors via U.S. mail. Each director’s survey package included a letter to the director with (a) a copy of the survey and instructions for distribution of the surveys to paraeducators and their cooperating teachers and (b) a set of individual survey packages for distribution. The individual survey packages included a letter to the potential participants explaining the study, a survey, and a stamped return envelope addressed to the first author. The number of individual survey packages in each set was based on the previous year’s FTE paraeducator count for that district. The local districts in this state are divided into seven geographic regions for administrative purposes. The list of districts within each geographic region was ordered randomly. Survey packages were distributed to the districts evenly across each region according to the random list until 4,358 surveys were distributed, thus ensuring that each geographic region had the same possibility for representation—about 570 surveys per geographic region. The number of surveys distributed was limited by the dollars allocated by the state director for copying, distribution, and return mail costs.

A total of 4,358 surveys were distributed to local special education directors; 1,867 surveys were returned by respondents who identified themselves as paraeducators. An additional 440 surveys were returned by teachers. Teacher data are not included in this report. The overall response rate was about 53\%, and the paraeducator response rate was 43\%. Distribution was dependent on district special education directors, and the actual number of surveys that directors did distribute to teachers and paraeducators was not collected. Because the exact total distribution was unknown, the return rate may be a conservative estimate.

Measure. The survey was developed by the first author and revised prior to distribution based on critiques by three university-based education researchers, one state-level administrator, and 12 paraeducators. The survey comprised four parts. Part 1 addressed the background and current experience of the respondents: four items were related to education and work experience (length of work day, years of experience, level of education); six items captured descriptive information about their usual work day, their assignment, and team membership (type of assignment, number of students served, eligibility category of those students, time allocated for meetings with teachers, person responsible for schedule); and one item addressed preparation provided prior to beginning their work in this role. Part 2 addressed paraeducator roles and responsibilities. The role categories were selected based on the literature (Downing et al., 2000; Doyle, 2008; French, 2003a; Minondo et al., 2001; Pickett, 2007). Participants were asked first to indicate whether or not a particular task category was a primary role, a secondary role, rarely their role, or never their role. They were next asked to indicate whether they believed each role listed was an appropriate role for a paraeducator. In Part 3 the respondents were asked to indicate their level of concern (i.e., major concern, minor concern, concern but addressed, or not a concern) regarding five key issues associated with paraeducator support in general education settings: (a) lack of appreciation by others (Downing et al., 2000; French, 2003b), (b) turnover (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Pickett et al., 2003), (c) insufficient experience for roles paraeducators are required to do (Carter et al., 2009; Giangreco & Broer, 2005), (d) the less likely interaction of GEs with students who have individualized education programs (IEPs) when the paraeducator is present (Giangreco
Fisher and Pleasants et al., 1997; Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006), and (e) the paraeducator rather than the GE instructor viewed as the primary instructor for students with IEPs (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, & Al-Khabbaz, 2008). An open-ended item requested any other issues that the respondents considered to be of concern. Part 4 addressed the respondents’ perspectives on (a) content for preservice teacher preparation relative to working with paraeducators and (b) staff development needs and preferences with regard to various topics and staff development formats. A final item at the end of the survey requested any additional comments. Part 4 data were used for statewide professional development planning and are not reported here nor published elsewhere. The survey is available by request from the first author.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software. For each quantitative survey item, frequencies were tallied. A chi-square analysis was used to explore differences among respondents on categorical variables for two factors: (a) assignment as one-to-one or group paraeducators and (b) percentage of the day (all day, nearly all day, some of the day, none of the day) spent in general education. Each open-ended item response was analyzed using a constant-comparative technique and categorized into emergent categories. The first author used an iterative coding process whereby she assigned an “open code” to an initial set of text that from her perspective represented a key point (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). She then compared the next set of text with each previously coded set of text to determine whether it represented a new key point or could be represented by a previously identified code. Using this set of codes she and the second author coded the remaining data. The authors each reread the coded data set and then met to generate thematic categories in response to the research question of interest. At several points throughout this process the authors met and discussed disagreements to reach consensus. As a result of this discussion, some categories were renamed.

Results

Which Roles Are Primary, Secondary, or Rarely Roles for Paraeducators in This State, and Which Roles Are Appropriate for Paraeducators?

Respondents were asked to rate a list of usual paraeducator roles in two ways: first, whether the role was a primary, secondary, rare, or not their role; and, second, whether they believed it was an appropriate or inappropriate role for paraeducators. Responses are summarized in Table 1 for 1,742 participants. A total of 6% (n = 125) did not respond to every item, and so their responses were excluded from this descriptive analysis. The primary role engaged in by 53% of this group was providing “behavioral and social support” to students. Furthermore, this role was considered an appropriate role by 94% of the respondents. The next most frequently reported primary or secondary roles were “implementing teacher-planned instruction” and “supervising students.” This rank order was the same for reported current roles and the perceived appropriateness of the role for paraeducators. Although 26% of paraeducators identified “attending planning or meetings” as either a primary or secondary role, 75% indicated it was an appropriate role for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Extent of Role (%)</th>
<th>Believe Role Appropriate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral and social support</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing teacher-planned instruction</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervising students</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal care support</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending planning meetings</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapting lessons designed by GE</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing information between GE and SE</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical duties</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending faculty meetings</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing information between school and parents</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing lesson plans</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting for families</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 1,742. GE = general education teacher; SE = special education teacher. Only surveys that were complete for all items in this section were included.
Table 2. Extent to Which Paraeducators Considered Each Issue to Be a Concern

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Major Concern (%)</th>
<th>Minor Concern (%)</th>
<th>Not a Concern (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of appreciation by others</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover of paraeducators</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient expertise for roles required</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE teacher less likely to interact with student who has IEP when paraeducator present</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraeducator viewed as primary instructor for students with IEP rather than GE teacher</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 1,782. GE = general education; IEP = individualized education program. Only surveys that were complete for all items in this section were included.

What Are the Concerns of Paraeducators?

With regard to the issues identified in the survey, lack of appreciation ranked as the highest concern for this paraeducator group—40% rating it as a major concern, 38% a minor concern, and 22% as not a concern. This was followed by turnover, GE less likely to interact with a student who has an IEP when paraeducator present, and paraeducator viewed as primary instructor for students with IEP rather than GE teacher. Table 2 provides a summary of these ratings.

In an open-ended item, respondents were asked to identify any other issues that they felt were major concerns in their practice. Of the respondents, 30% (n = 541) replied, and the content analysis generated 599 separate comments. These were sorted into six general categories based on an emergent content analysis process. The first category was “treatment on the job,” which emerged from 159 comments. About one fourth of these comments addressed specific issues about treatment such as being “required to do the teacher’s job,” having “received little respect,” and feeling they “had no authority.” For example, the following two comments were coded as “required to do the teacher’s job”:

[We are] expected to do all or most of the education of the student with no or little feedback from the teachers. General education teacher and special education teacher do not teach or do lessons for student with one-to-one assistant.

According to what I understand about my job description, I am expected and asked to do things that I am technically not responsible for such as lesson planning, organization—taking work home, dealing with parents. It seems like a rock and a hard place.

Some respondents were concerned that paraeducators were excluded from having a voice in decision making despite their in-depth knowledge of a student. In their own words,

I feel that paraeducators are not respected when it comes to their opinions and concerns. Paras are not part of IEP sessions and are usually not given any of the instructions (IEP requirements) about the child.

The second category was “compensation,” with 123 comments. Some expressed frustration with administrative decision making as reflected by a lack of information and support related to hiring practices. For example, participants reported that some districts rely on a year-by-year hiring practice. Another group of responses (about 20% of the comments) centered on concerns about compensation, mainly low pay and lack of benefits. Many respondents prefaced their wish for increased compensation with an acknowledgment that indicated they knew the position did not pay well along the lines of, “We’re not in this for the money, but. . . .”

We have a problem with major turnover each year because the pay is so low—a grocery store checkout person is paid more! We work directly with the students, yet often the students we work with earn more money at their part-time jobs. This makes it hard to find good paraprofessionals.

The comments included recommendations that pay be differentiated based on either experience or skill levels of paraeducators. The third category that emerged was “concerns about teacher colleagues” (n = 113 comments). Respondents did report some worries about teachers, both IEP related and interpersonal. Some respondents noted that GEs needed to have more information about the content in student IEPs as well as needed to meet regularly with their special education colleagues and the paraeducators themselves to share information about these individual student plans (and upcoming lesson plans).

Sometimes they use the special education aides inappropriately (or try to). Mostly because they don’t fully understand how an IEP works. The GE and the
SE should team up and make lesson plans for 1 on 1 students.

Twenty respondents shared their concern that GEs did not want children with IEPs in their classes.

If a student is on a pass/fail grading scale, the general education teacher gives the student very little attention. The student is given a pass grade the majority of the time, but without “teaching” effort from the general education teacher.

The fourth category that emerged in the analysis was “need for preparation” (n = 100) and captured comments about a need for preparation in general and for particular staff development topics. The fifth category was “administrative concerns” (n = 67). A majority of these comments were coded as “lack of support” and “lack of needed materials.” Other codes included “lack of attention to staff shortages,” “concerns about quality in hiring practices,” and “need for communication.” The sixth category for these responses was general “concerns about inclusive schooling” (n = 37). These included worries that students were treated differentially (in an unnecessarily stigmatizing manner), discipline was inappropriate, supports were not provided as outlined in IEPs, and scheduling was a headache. Also, 5 respondents noted that they themselves did not believe some children belonged in a general education setting.

Do Paraeducators’ Views Vary Based on the Respondent’s Assignment or Amount of Time Spent in a General Education Setting?

Chi-square results about appropriateness of roles by role assignment and time spent in general education appear in Table 3. The analysis of responses by role assignment regarding the appropriateness of that role indicated significant differences for 5 of 12 items. Higher percentages of one-to-one paraeducators reported personal care support, adapting lessons designed by the GE, and providing information between school and parents as being appropriate to their role. A higher percentage of group paraeducators (63%) reported clerical duties as appropriate relative to one-to-one paraeducators (55%).

Differences in responses by time spent in general education were significant for eight roles. For four of the items, a greater percentage of respondents who spent all day and nearly all day in general education believed the role to be appropriate relative to those who spent none of the day in general education. These included planning meetings, adapting lessons designed by GE (general educators), providing info between GE and SE (special educators), and providing info between school and parents. For two of these four items (i.e., adapting lessons and providing info between GE and SE), those who spent some of the day also reported a higher percentage than none. The remaining four significant items represented the reverse of this pattern. A higher percentage of respondents who spent none of the day or only some of the day in general education responded that the following tasks were appropriate for paraeducators: supervising students, implementing teacher-planned instruction, personal care support, and clerical duties. Based on chi-square analyses, no differences were significant for any issue by either role or time spent in general education.

Discussion

These responses suggest some need for concern about how well practices in this state reflected the intent of IDEIA as the law defines the role and purpose of a paraeducator. Those paraeducators who were assigned to general education teams reported regular weekly meeting times with general educators, although meetings were short. Nearly half overall reported regularly scheduled weekly meetings with either a GE or SE. The remainder reported no meeting time with any teacher, special or general education. This was the reported case despite the commonly held understanding that teaming and regular communication are the means through which paraeducators engage in their work.

One-to-one paraeducators. The categorical labels of the students whom these paraeducators supported spanned every disability category. Approximately half of this group spent a majority of their work day in general education settings. This information supports the common perception in the literature that paraeducators are assigned one-to-one to support students in general education settings where other adult support might not be readily available. Interestingly, the other half spent some or none of their day in general education settings. Across this state there were a large number of paraeducators assigned to support students with both low- and high-incidence disabilities as one-to-one paraeducators in self-contained settings, not general education settings. These overall findings suggest that issues surrounding one-to-one assignments may be a concern whether the placement is in a general education or self-contained special education setting.

Roles. Overall, the current roles reported by this group were typical of those reported in previous studies and generally reflected what experts consider appropriate (cf. French, 2003a). We noted two exceptions. One exception (and we would say problematic response in light of IDEIA regulations) was lesson planning. More than one fourth of the paraeducators identified this as an appropriate role, whereas federal law clearly identifies this to be the role of the certified teacher. Because federal law and state law clearly specify that teachers and not paraeducators are responsible for
Table 3. Percentage of Respondents Who Believed These Usual Roles Are Appropriate for Paraeducators by Assignment and by Time Spent in General Education Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usual Role</th>
<th>Assignmenta</th>
<th>Time in General Educationb</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Nearly</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral and social support</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>1.381</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
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<td>Implementing teacher-planned instruction or lesson plans</td>
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<td>82</td>
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<td>76</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>12.836*</td>
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<td>81</td>
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<td>71</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>36.217*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal care support</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>71</td>
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<td>68</td>
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<td>13.411*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attending planning meetings</td>
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<td>74</td>
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<td>81</td>
<td>71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adapting lessons designed by GE teacher</td>
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<td>66</td>
<td>16.138*</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>72</td>
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<td>74.790*</td>
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<td>74</td>
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<td>49</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54.162*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Providing information between school &amp; parents</td>
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<td>28.135*</td>
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<td>30</td>
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<td>Language interpreting</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

GE = general education teacher; SE = special education teacher. Only responses from respondents who completed each item are included in this analysis.

a. \( N = 1,742 \).

b. \( N = 1,720 \).

* \( p < .005 \).

lesson planning, the fact that *any* number are involved in lesson planning as either their primary or secondary role is a cause for concern. Furthermore, the belief of those who responded that lesson planning should be an appropriate role suggests that some of this group of respondents either are unaware of the intent of IDEA or may disagree with the notion that lesson planning is a skill that requires teacher certification. Again, this perspective did not represent respondents with more rather than less education or experience or only respondents having a “one-to-one” assignment. A second exception for which a similar argument might be made was adapting lessons designed by a GE. Half of the group reported this as either a primary or secondary role; nearly three fourths believed it was appropriate. This role could also be considered the responsibility or purview of the teacher.

In general, a majority of these respondents expressed a clear interest in having more opportunities to participate as members of student planning teams and as members of the broader school community. They not only wanted to learn about teaming but also wanted to be part of the team, and nearly all indicated it was appropriate for paraeducators to attend planning meetings. Most reported that they should attend faculty meetings. They wanted teachers to share IEP plans of the student with whom they work.

Current issues in the field. From these paraeducators’ perspective, the primary issue related to the increased use of paraeducators in general education was “lack of appreciation by others.” More than half were concerned about the identified issues including “turnover,” the “paraeducator as the primary instructor when students are in general education settings,” and the “general education teacher less likely to interact with the student who has an IEP.” The “additional comments” sections for this item also supported these same concerns—expectations that they assume a teacher’s role, concerns that general educators (as well as paraeducators) were not well informed about (or, for some, even interested in) their students who had IEPs, and paraeducators not invited to participate in planning. Other noted issues were compensation, need for paraeducator preparation, administrative issues, and concern about how inclusion is “not” implemented. Although “turnover” was not explicitly mentioned in comments, issues associated with leaving and staying in a paraeducator position (see “treatment on the job”) were prominent.

Clearly, these findings suggested that paraeducators see problems with the status quo. Based on this group of paraeducators, the following general observations can be made:

1. The roles reported by these paraeducators in general are those that would fall under the direction of a supervising teacher and thus meet the IDEA definition and intent for this role, except those who currently develop lesson plans and who rarely or never attend planning meetings.

2. Irrespective of the time spent in general education settings or special education settings, too many paraeducators do not participate on teams or meet regularly with teachers. This does not reflect a lack of interest on the part of paraeducators. These paraeducators want to be included as members of
individual planning teams and the larger school community.

3. The greatest issue from the perspective of paraeducators was the lack of appreciation about their role in the school. These paraeducators were concerned that GEs (and SEs) may interact less with students when paraeducators were present. A number of paraeducators noted that they are expected to do a teacher’s job and did not view this as appropriate.

Limitations

This data set is based on the report of paraeducators who elected to respond to an invitation to participate in a statewide survey. These survey data are self-report only. Because responses were anonymous, no follow-up observations to determine the reliability of responses occurred. In some cases paraeducators, according to the report of respondents, never saw student IEPs, and so particular individual information such as eligibility categories may be inaccurately reported because a paraeducator simply did not have access to accurate information. We did not request information about gender or ethnicity from the respondents about themselves or their students. Additional demographic data and data sources could contribute a rich context through which to better understand and interpret these responses.

Implications

The findings reported here affirm the need for careful consideration of the role of paraeducators in special education. These paraeducator responses supported in part the concerns expressed by Giangreco and others regarding overstepping the role as it is currently defined in IDEIA. Furthermore, the responses suggested that these are not problems in general education settings only. Issues associated with one-to-one paraeducator support in general education may be equally problematic in special education settings.

Administrators. School administrators are key to nurturing the local efforts that establish an innovation as a homegrown initiative. Although ideas for welcoming and including paraeducators have been promoted in the literature (e.g., having a mailbox and inclusion on the staff roster and listserver), these suggestions remained steps to be implemented. This seemingly simple kind of change and complex change such as the implementation and evaluation of instructional teams are best addressed by district- and building-level administrators. Administrators can assume a leadership role by valuing paraeducator voice through the assignment of paraeducators to district-level planning teams and setting district expectations for paraeducator attendance at individual student planning meetings and faculty and staff meetings.

State and local administrators can bring stakeholders together to examine data summaries (state and/or local) and discuss hard questions raised by these data. For example, why are GEs assigned one-to-one paraeducators for students with high-incidence disabilities (students who presumably having less significant support needs)? Why do paraeducators perceive their role to be a “one-to-one assignment” even when they spend all of their day in special education settings? Who is designing instruction for children with IEPs?

Teachers and teacher preparation. Based on the experiences and recommendations of this group, a first step for GEs and SEs is to appreciate and demonstrate concern for paraeducators with whom they work. A second step is to include their voices in conversations about students and their work. Teacher education programs (TEPs) can encourage and promote this collaborative stance toward paraeducators through strong emphasis on collaborative skills in course content and teacher candidate performances. TEPs can model collaboration by working together with student teacher mentors to examine critical components of instructional teamwork and their impact on academic and social growth of K–12 learners.

Paraeducators. Because their voice is not often sought, we encourage paraeducators to speak up and ensure their recognition on the team. These responses suggested that paraeducators view and experience their role as one of direct support to students and not as one of direct support for teachers. Even though they are “in this for the kids,” paraeducators must also understand that teachers are the other direct recipient of their support (Pickett & Gerlach, 2003). Assuming a teacher support stance may generate more and different opportunities for voicing one’s ideas.

Researchers. The growing number of paraeducators calls for careful and ongoing assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness of this manner of “intervention” as has been recommended by Giangreco and his colleagues (Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007). Some questions that remain and require systematic examination for this state (and other states, we believe) include the following: What do existing active planning teams look like in terms of membership, meeting topics, frequency of meetings, and distributed leadership on the teams? How is a paraeducator’s voice represented as a team member, and what impact does it have on a student’s academic or social growth? Who are these students with high-incidence disabilities in self-contained settings to whom paraeducators are assigned? Are issues associated with role differentiation for students with more significant disabilities in general education settings also issues for students with high-incidence disabilities in either general education or special education settings.

Examination of these questions can provide opportunities for a state, districts, and university researchers to work
collaboratively. Such a group might begin by inviting stakeholders (including paraeducators) to revise an existing survey instrument and then disseminate it widely to elicit a strong paraeducator voice. Building on recommended practice in teacher research, this state-level group might facilitate development of local communities of practice where researchers, teacher educators, and K–12 practitioners—teachers and paraeducators—explore relevant and meaningful questions of practice that emerge from and are studied in practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Murrell, 2009). Even as our communities of practice systematically examine critical questions, they can also facilitate paraeducator work as a member of an instructional team. We might think of this as a variation on adult proximity.

Although paraeducators may be the right kind of support some of the time, the findings from this survey suggest that many of these paraeducators have not been supported as a team member. Certain aspects of the problem may be fairly straightforward—a lack of time for role clarification, a lack of time for teaming, or perhaps a general lack of knowledge about collaboration. It may be that a sometimes reasonable and useful intervention—the use of paraeducators to support teachers of students with IEPs—is implemented inappropriately. Other critical aspects of the problem may be much more complex and symptomatic of larger issues (Giangreco & Broer, 2005).

Given the rising number of paraeducator FTEs in recent years, we think paraeducators will not disappear from our schools tomorrow. How they remain involved requires our immediate attention. These voices provide a place to begin for one state and for others similarly situated. We hope that the findings from this study will encourage others to invite and include the perspective and voice of paraeducators as this conversation about their roles moves forward in this state and across the United States. Paraeducators have a great deal to say about their role when asked.

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References


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