

Community Paraeducators: A Partnership-Directed Approach for Preparing and Sustaining the Involvement of Community Members in Inner-City Schools

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Abstract

Inner-city schools located in high poverty communities often operate with insufficient resources to meet the educational needs of students. Community residents serving as paraeducators offer the dual benefits of expanding instructional capacity and fostering family–school relationships, provided they are appropriately prepared and incorporated with professional staff. This paper introduces a community partnership model for preparing members of the local community to serve as paraeducators and for fostering their working partnerships with professional school staff. A theoretical rationale demonstrating the significance of this model for students from low-income and ethnic minority backgrounds is presented, and key elements in establishing it are discussed. The application of the community partnership model for preparing paraeducators is illustrated through a case example, the Reading Partners program. Future directions to empirically advance the community partnership model are presented.

Key Words: school–community partnerships, paraeducators, urban, schools, communities, capacity building, involvement, families, paraprofessionals, instructional aides, inner-city, reading, literacy, tutors, relationships, teachers

Introduction

Improving educational outcomes for children who live in poverty is a priority for educators working in inner-city school systems. Although census data indicate that 39% of children live in socioeconomic disadvantage nationally, most of these children live in inner-city communities (National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], 2007). Additionally, low-income children are most likely to be ethnic minority or non-English speaking and experience a range of social complexities commonly associated with poverty, including maternal educational level below high school, single-parent family constellation, as well as caregiver unemployment (NCCP, 2007).

The disproportionately high percentage of families with young children below the age of 6 years who live in poverty is particularly disconcerting for educators (Children's Defense Fund, 2000; NCCP, 2007). The experience of poverty and related social problems during early childhood may alter healthy trajectories for the development of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies, setting the course for long-term academic difficulties (Dupper & Poertner, 1997; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). The impact of poverty is evident in the high prevalence of underdeveloped school readiness among children who live in poverty (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005; Miller, Andrews, Cuéllar, & Jensen, 2007). Nearly half of these children enter school with substantial weaknesses in early literacy and numeracy skills, as compared to economically advantaged counterparts (U. S. Department of Education, 2000).

In the face of many barriers, urban school systems are challenged to provide learning environments that meet the needs of a high number of students with learning difficulties while preserving appropriate educational opportunities for students with grade expected or higher academic abilities (U. S. Department of Education, 2000). Often, these school systems do not have sufficient educational support services for students nor professional development opportunities for teachers. In addition, teacher retention is poor and the availability of competent applicants for teaching positions is limited (Brooks, 2009). Making matters worse, many urban schools operate with the absence of one of the most important ingredients for student achievement—positive, supportive interrelationships among the school, family, and community (Bempechat, 1998, Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Comer, 1984; Smith et al., 1997).

A promising resource for urban schools is the employment of paraeducators, noncertified staff who can fulfill various roles and responsibilities to expand schools' instructional capacity and foster home-school relationships (French, 1998, Giancreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2003). Affirmation of the importance of paraeducators was evidenced in IDEA '97, which authorized and

encouraged the utilization of paraeducators. Over recent years, the utilization of paraprofessionals to provide educational services to students has been on the rise. At present, the nearly 250,000 paraeducators in our nation's schools are the largest group of noncertified teaching personnel who provide instructional services to students, particularly to those with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2000; White, 2004). For the most part, paraeducators work in special education contexts (French, 1998; Wall, Davis, Crowley, & White, 2005) and are largely involved in instructional activities with students who present with disabilities (French, 1998).

Although the primary purpose for including paraeducators in schools is to assist with instruction, they offer the serendipitous advantage of bolstering the cultural congruence among home, community, and school environments (Monzó & Rueda, 2003; Reed, 2009). Paraprofessionals often live within the neighborhoods surrounding the schools and, therefore, are likely to represent the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students and families. For instance, the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE; U.S. Department of Education, 2000) revealed that paraeducators were twice as likely as special educators to speak the native language of linguistically diverse students. Perhaps due to their familiarity with one another, paraeducators and families often share mutual regard for one another (Chopra & French, 2004; Reed, 2009; Werts, Harris, Tillery, & Roark, 2004). This positive relationship enables families to have a comfortable point of contact within the school, as it is reported that families are likely to maintain communication with paraeducators (Chopra & French, 2004; Werts et al., 2004). Likewise, paraeducators who reside in the surrounding community possess localized knowledge which enables them to function as advocates for children and families among school personnel (Brooks, 2009; Reed, 2009). Paraeducators have also been shown to foster social connections among students within the school setting and to connect families to services within the school and community (Chopra et al., 2004).

Increasing rates of paraeducator employment has raised school professionals' awareness of the need to provide training for them. In fact, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 established prerequisite credentials for paraeducators, including the completion of 2 years post-secondary education, attainment of an associate's degree, or demonstration of knowledge on state or local testing. Beyond this preservice education, specific training in instructional strategies and behavior management techniques have been identified as priorities by both teachers and paraeducators (French, 1998; Wall et al., 2005).

The effectiveness of paraeducators is not solely contingent upon skill training, however, but also requires system-level planning for their integration

into the educational workforce of schools. Commonly, standards for defining and monitoring their roles and responsibilities and incorporating them into the organizational framework of school systems are lacking (Kubiszyn & Oddone, 1998; Lewis, 2004; Pickett, 1996). Giancreco, Edelman, and Broer (2003) introduced a comprehensive framework for guiding school teams in incorporating and supporting paraeducators. This framework includes key components, such as systems-level planning among school administrators, educators, paraeducators, and families; identification of specific priorities and goals for paraeducators; and evaluation of the effectiveness of paraeducators.

Although the training needs of paraeducators are starting to be addressed and the benefits of schoolwide planning are gaining recognition, attention to the need for building productive and trusting relationships among paraeducators and school professionals has been insufficient. Studies have found that paraeducators perceived greater personal competence when they felt valued by their professional colleagues (Chopra et al., 2004; Lewis, 2004). In contrast, paraeducators felt less effective when they perceived a lack of trust and support from teachers and school administrators. Moreover, paraeducators perceived that their close associations with students and families could alienate them from the professional staff rather than attain their appreciation for the unique opportunities to strengthen family–school relationships.

This paper presents a community partnership model for incorporating paraeducators into inner-city schools that maintains a comprehensive focus on training and supervision along with formulating genuine and productive partnerships between paraeducators and their professional colleagues. This paper begins by delineating a theoretical justification for strategically enlisting community residents as paraeducators (referred to as community paraeducators). Second, the community partnership model is detailed and illustrated through a case example, the Reading Partners program. The paper concludes by outlining future directions for empirically advancing the community partnership model as one approach for incorporating paraeducators and improving educational outcomes for urban students.

Rationale for a Community Partnership Model in Urban Schools

The community partnership model delineates a collaborative process for enlisting and preparing residents of schools' local communities to serve as paraeducators. The rationale for this model draws from perspectives on expanding schools' instructional capacity as well as ecological theory of child development.

Expanding Schools' Capacity to Meet Diverse Children's Needs

A natural response to the enormous needs and limited resources is to flood urban schools with remedial educational and mental health services. However, more is not necessarily better. Addressing students' educational and socio-emotional needs through disconnected and discrete services often yields a fragmented approach that lacks accountability and wastes valuable resources (Dryfoos, 1996; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). In contrast, building school capacity to meet student needs requires cultivating and supplementing natural resources within the school and community in conjunction with restructuring service delivery strategies (Brooks, 2009; McLaughlin, Leone, Meisel, & Henderson, 1997). The fundamental steps for building capacity are highlighted in Figure 1 and described below.

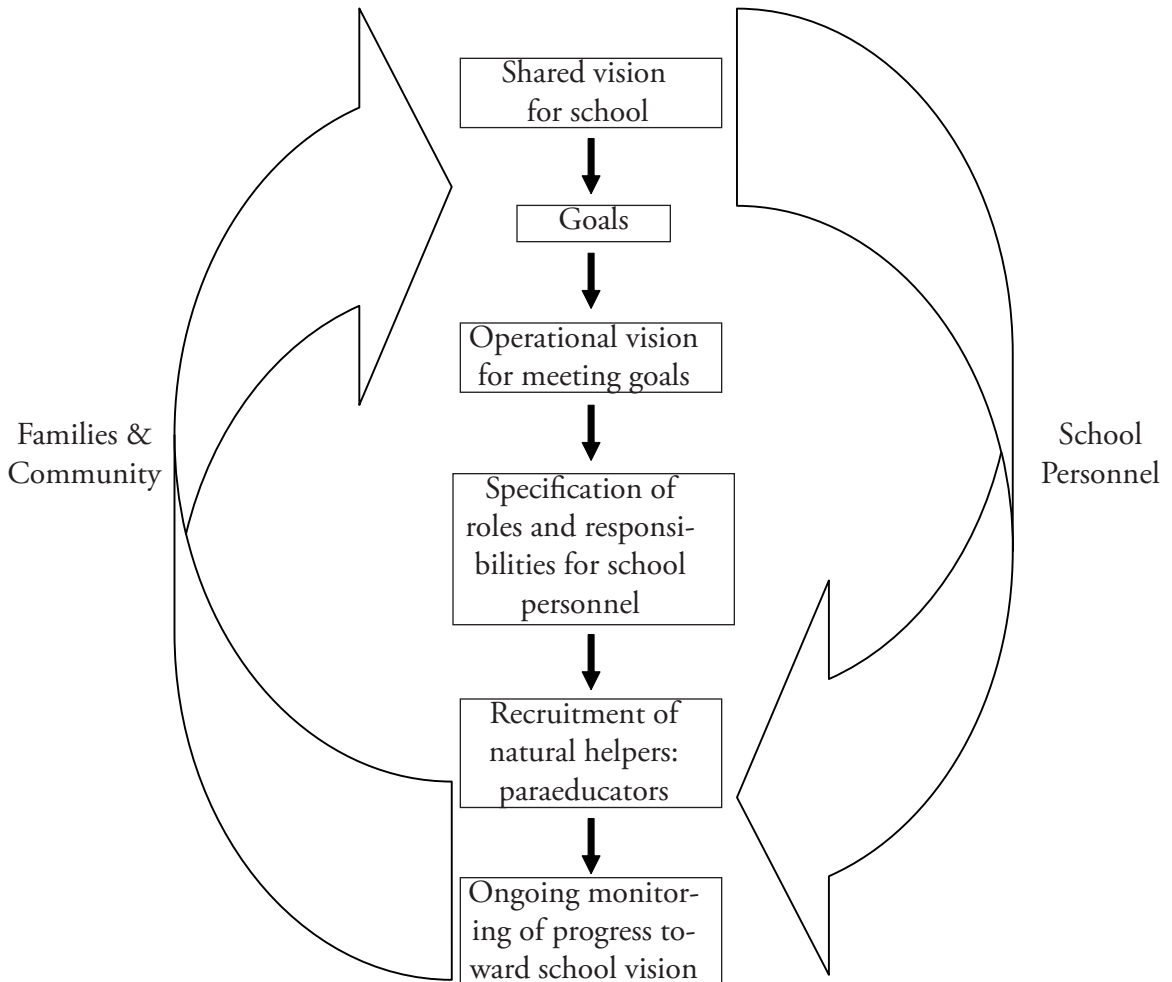


Figure 1. A Collaborative Process for Building School Capacity

Building school capacity begins with a shared vision that is collaboratively created by educators and community members to reflect their mutual aspirations for children's education and development (Charvis, 1995). A school vision delineates goals and an operational plan for achieving the goals, including the specification of roles and associated responsibilities for school personnel and natural helpers from the community, such as parents and neighborhood residents, who may serve as paraeducators. Paraeducators are a tremendous resource for capacity building, provided they are: (a) involved in meaningful roles that are consistent with their interests and strengths, (b) supported in forming relationships with school staff that are based on mutual respect and regard (Cochran & Dean, 1991; Christenson, 1995), and (c) offered adequate training and supervision (French, 1998; McLaughlin et al., 1997). Ongoing monitoring of the progress toward the collaboratively established school vision is equally shared by paraeducators and professional staff (Charvis, 1995; Christenson, 1995). By doing so, paraeducators and professional staff can make informed decisions about the incorporation of additional, possibly external, resources needed to further strengthen and supplement school capacity. In contrast to "flooding" schools with external resources, this approach involves the strategic planning and facilitating of supplemental resources which is consistent with school vision and capacity.

In inner-city schools serving ethnically diverse children and families, the foundation for building capacity must proceed in a manner that is responsive to the values and life circumstances of the surrounding community (Brooks, 2009). Too often urban schools do not share positive, collaborative relationships with the surrounding communities (Comer, 1984). Without such relationships, school personnel may unknowingly restrict the emergence of natural helpers from the community by setting inappropriate standards for their involvement. In contrast, when educators and community members team to develop and progress toward a mutually acceptable school vision, the cultural responsiveness of the school climate and educational programming can be substantially enhanced.

Developmental Importance of School–Community Partnerships

The ecological model of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2006) underscores the value of incorporating community residents as paraeducators in school improvement plans. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2006) portrayed development as a complex web of dynamic, reciprocal interactions between children and adults associated with various contexts, such as home, school, and neighborhood. Unique to the ecological model is the recognition that interrelationships of adults within and across important contexts (e.g., mother

and father, mother and teacher) have a strong influence on child development (Garbarino, 1989; Power & Bartholomew, 1987). Accordingly, objectives for school improvement include creating school climates that reflect an appreciation of students' cultural backgrounds, fostering relationships among students and their families with school staff members, and providing positive models of effective partnership between school and family members.

Given that the culture reflected by schools is often consistent with that of European American, middle-income populations (Vickers & Minke, 1997), students of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds often experience discontinuities in the values and expectations represented in their homes and schools (Slaughter-DeFoe, 1995). For example, there may be differences in communication and interpersonal styles (Ogbu, 1988) and insufficient incorporation of the students' cultural heritages in the school curriculum (Slaughter-DeFoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990). This cultural mismatch breeds school climates that prohibit the formation of strong, developmentally beneficial attachments between teachers and students (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Pianta & Walsh, 1998).

Community paraeducators have a significant impact on the cultural climate of schools by expanding the diversity of cultures represented among school staff and within the social climate and curriculum (Davies, 1991; Reed, 2009). Community paraeducators are able to complement instructional goals and strategies with cultural and historical experiences that are familiar to children (Monzó & Rueda, 2003). They help school personnel incorporate cultural themes and values in school activities, events, and curriculum. Further, avenues for the exchange of useful information between school and community are created by community paraeducators (Chopra et al., 2004). For instance, Brooks (2009) illustrated how the engagement of community members as partners enabled school administration to address neighborhood fears which impacted children's learning and development, including drug trafficking on the school grounds, violent crime, and unemployment, while also creating avenues for enhancing families' engagement in their children's formal education.

In addition to the cultural climate, opportunities to form positive relationships with significant adults in the school are necessary for advancing children's cognitive and social development (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). For young children, relationships with primary caregivers are the means by which they begin to acquire values, beliefs, and attitudes that promote the formation of competencies and self-regard (Slaughter-DeFoe, 1995). As children mature and enter school, the relationships they form with educators are essential for continuing the socialization and developmental processes started at home (Garbarino, 1992; Pianta & Walsh, 1998). However, differences in ethnicity and socioeconomic

status between educators and students can impede the formation of these relationships (Comer, 1984). In the absence of positive relationships, students do not perceive educators as trustworthy and may not respond favorably to their teaching and guidance. Consequently, students may not reach their potential for academic achievement.

In addition to teacher–student relationships, teacher–family relationships significantly influence children’s academic performance (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Schools serving ethnically and economically diverse children often hold expectations for involvement that are not congruent with families’ expectations and resources (Brooks, 2009). This incongruence can lead to ineffective teacher–family relationships that are marked by misunderstanding and mistrust. Seeley (1989) maintained that the interface of schools and families is typically characterized as a process of delegation, whereby educators mandate the roles and responsibilities of families. Such unilateral decision-making does not account for family preferences and values. In addition, such an approach may not be responsive to the constraints and challenges experienced by many low-income families (Harrison, Mitylene, & Henderson, 1991). Consequently, families often become disconnected from school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Educators interpret families’ lack of participation as a failure to comply or to be supportive of children’s educational needs (Harrison et al., 1991). Furthermore, negative assumptions about the families (e.g., delinquency, substance abuse, and promiscuity) may be generated to account for their lack of involvement (Davies, 1988; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Among many ethnically diverse families, these experiences of prejudice are related to a strong sense of distrust in the educational system, which perpetuates their isolation from school and prevents the formation of productive relationships with school staff (Harrison et al., 1991). Additionally, many of these parents have had negative personal experiences as students and do not feel competent to collaborate with educators (Davies, 1988).

The inclusion of community paraeducators in schools provides adult mentors with whom students and family members can form important attachments for fostering students’ academic achievement (Chopra & French, 2004; Doll & Lyon, 1998; Werts et al., 2004). Community paraeducators share similar cultural backgrounds and social memberships as students and families. These similarities facilitate identification and relationship processes necessary for the development of competencies and self-regard in children (Slaughter-DeFoe, 1995). Moreover, the attachment with community paraeducators can encourage and enrich caregivers’ abilities to support children’s education. Through personal exchanges in the neighborhood, community paraeducators can share strategies that families can use to promote academic performance among their children and guide families to interact effectively with educators.

Establishing a Community Partnership Model

Partnership among community paraeducators and school professionals, defined by mutual respect, honest communication, active collaboration, and shared responsibility (Christenson, 1995; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Comer & Haynes, 1991), is the essential feature of the community partnership model. However, in inner-city schools, achieving equal partnership between community paraeducators and school professionals can be challenging. Community residents are likely to have ethnic minority backgrounds and to be socioeconomically disadvantaged. In addition, they may not have completed high school or post-secondary training. Sadly, these background characteristics are commonly associated with unequal social status in our society (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Gorski, 2008), making it difficult for professionals to accept community residents as equal partners and for the residents to perceive themselves as equipped to function as equal partners with school professionals.

Empowering community paraeducators to view themselves as equal partners with professional school staff is a crucial and continuous process in the community partnership model. Empowerment is not a product that is permanently achieved. Rather, it is ongoing, marked by three recurrent advances in the development of self-perceptions of equity and social value (Cochran & Dean, 1991). The first involves a transformation from negative perceptions of self to the recognition of personal competencies and contributions. Second, an evolving personal sense of competence promotes increased involvement in interpersonal relationships and the formation of social networks. Third, with increased social support, community members actively seek opportunities for leadership and advocacy in promoting the well being of their community.

The ultimate challenge in preparing and supervising community residents to serve as community paraeducators is to maintain a dual focus on (a) empowerment and (b) effective training and supervision. Thus, skill development and monitoring activities are intertwined with efforts to promote the empowerment of the community paraeducators. For example, the simple invitation to have an important role within an intervention program can be a salient milestone in the empowerment process for community paraeducators. Implicit in the invitation are expectations that community paraeducators can make valuable contributions to the intervention program and children's learning. The community paraeducators' experience of these positive expectations may initiate the process of transforming negative self-perceptions to self-perceptions of efficacy and positive regard.

In the community partnership model, major components of skill training and program integration are conducted in a manner that concurrently fosters

the empowerment of community paraeducators. The four major components include: (a) definition of community paraeducator roles and responsibilities, (b) preparation and support of community paraeducators, (c) integration of community paraeducators with professional school staff, and (d) data-based decision making and accountability. Table 1 highlights the dual functions of each of these components by listing its contribution to general program development and to the empowerment processes for community paraeducators. The following explicates the unique function of these components in an empowerment context.

Table 1. Community Partnership Program Development in a Context of Empowerment

Key components in program development	Conceptualization of key components in the community partnership model	Contribution to empowerment of community paraeducators
Definition of community paraeducators roles and responsibilities	Co-construction of roles and responsibilities	Foster positive self-perceptions of efficacy and worth among community partners by engaging them as collaborators
Preparation and support of community paraeducators	Reciprocal training Supportive supervision	Promote initiation of positive self-perceptions and formation of social networks among community paraeducators by training in a interactive, responsive context Establish a safe and reliable context for the continuing development of self-efficacy, social networks, and active involvement among community paraeducators
Integration of community paraeducators with professional staff	Community paraeducator – teacher partnership	Support educators in formulating equal partnerships with community paraeducators
Data-based decision making and accountability	Collaborative data-based decision making and accountability	Position community paraeducators as leaders and advocates in determining program efficacy and suitability for children

Definition of Community Paraeducator Roles and Responsibilities

Discrepancies between school professionals and paraeducators about the roles and responsibilities of community paraeducators is a common and often fatal flaw in employing them in schools (Blalock, 1991). For example, principals tend to view paraeducators as primarily providing clerical support to teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, may hold one of two different views of paraeducators' roles in the classroom: assistant to the student, or assistant to the teacher (French, 1998). Community paraeducators also identify confusion about their roles and responsibilities as a hindrance to effective delivery of services to children (Chopra et al., 2004). Of concern, school professionals' confusion about the roles and responsibilities of community paraeducators can be damaging, resulting in misunderstandings and negative perceptions of the potential benefits and competencies of community paraeducators. Therefore, it is crucial that all persons working in the school clearly understand community paraeducators' roles and responsibilities and how they are both complementary and distinct from other professionals in the school.

In a community partnership model, roles and responsibilities of community paraeducators are *co-constructed* (Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; McKenzie & Houk, 1986). Lewis (2004) showed that positive, working relationships among paraeducators and teachers emanated from effective communication that fosters teachers' acknowledgement of the paraeducators' experience and competence with regard to teaching children. Such communication and acknowledgement formulates the basis for collaboratively establishing job descriptions that delineate the nature of community paraeducator roles and responsibilities. Job descriptions should identify mutually defined roles and responsibilities, prerequisite skills, and evaluation criteria and processes. In addition, it is important that the roles and responsibilities of professional staff members who work collaboratively with community paraeducators are clearly delineated (French, 1998; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Lewis, 2004).

Preparation and Support of Community Paraeducators

Effectively positioning community residents in paraeducator roles requires comprehensive preservice and inservice training programs to develop the competencies that they need to fulfill their responsibilities (Pickett, 1996). Typically, paraeducator training occurs in workshops and lectures and utilizes instructional materials such as handbooks and videotapes (Blalock, 1991). This didactic training approach is based upon an expert model, wherein there is a unidirectional flow of information from the expert trainer to the paraeducator. Although training in this conventional manner may achieve the goal of

teaching relevant competencies, it ignores the important objective of empowering community paraeducators.

In the community partnership model, training involves a reciprocal exchange of information between the trainer and community paraeducators. Referred to as *reciprocal training*, the aim is to provide sufficient education in intervention components while maintaining an ongoing dialogue with the community paraeducators that gives voice to their wisdom about the suitability of educational strategies and interventions for local children and families.

In addition to reciprocal training, supervision is a key activity in sustaining the effectiveness of community paraeducators (Lewis, 2004). Ongoing supervision is a means for overseeing community paraeducators' involvement in children's instruction and assisting them with problems that may arise. Sadly, the supervision of paraeducators is typically not addressed in school plans, and by default, it becomes the responsibility of the classroom teachers. Teachers, however, are hesitant to supervise paraeducators, as they feel unprepared for this role (French, 1998). One major challenge for teachers who are cast into supervisory roles is their lack of professional training in supervision methods. Teachers report that their supervision approach is based on professional intuition rather than a systematic approach (French, 2001).

The community partnership model entails a *collaborative supervision* approach, which strives to strategically establish a safe and reliable context for the development of paraeducators' self-efficacy, social networks, and active involvement in children's education. A combination of individual and group sessions provides varying opportunities to effectively monitor and support community paraeducators' ongoing development of effective instructional strategies. Individual supervision allows for a personal review of progress and training needs. Group supervision is beneficial for addressing global issues that arise and facilitating collaborative problem solving among community paraeducators. Regularly scheduled meetings promote the formation of caring and trusting relationships among community partners and professional staff that are important for understanding the personal experiences of community paraeducators and maintaining a proactive focus. Examples of community paraeducators' personal experiences that may emerge in supervision include feeling incompetent to assist a child, experiencing prejudice in an interaction with a school staff member, or coping with a parent's rejection of the paraeducator's services for a particular child.

Integration of Community Paraeducators and School Professionals

Providing training and supervision to build community paraeducators' skills is necessary, but not sufficient, to ensure that they are effective. The success

of community paraeducators is also contingent upon the extent to which community paraeducators are accepted by educators and integrated into the professional network. Like all educational services, those provided by community paraeducators need to be incorporated within the school vision and services as to avoid redundancy, omission of needed services, and limited effectiveness due to poor communication with important personnel from the school (Dryfoos, 1996; Dupper & Poertner, 1997).

Recently, Giangreco and colleagues (2003) introduced a comprehensive framework for promoting schoolwide integration of paraeducators. This multi-step framework encompasses a systemic focus, involving school board members, staff, and families from the target school building in a comprehensive process, beginning with assessing and prioritizing needs for supporting paraeducators, developing an action plan, evaluating its effectiveness, and disseminating findings to school officials and the local community. Although an experimental test of this framework has not been published, schools that have used this framework report numerous outcomes for staff, families, and students.

A vital component of schoolwide planning for supporting community paraeducators is to establish a goal and means for achieving *equal partnerships between community paraeducators and educators*. Educators and other professional staff members generally need direction and support to form working relationships with community paraeducators. Teachers' perceptions that individuals from low-income neighborhoods have little to offer students with regard to academic remediation, social skill building, and behavior management may be a major barrier in forming community partnerships. These misperceptions lead to low expectations for achieving effective community involvement in educational planning and instructional activities (Christenson & Cleary, 1990; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987). For example, professional educators may be uncertain of the competence or reliability with which community paraeducators can provide educational services, or they may question the benefits of providing training and support to non-professional staff.

Changing educators' misperceptions about the competence and contributions community paraeducators offer to children and families is essential for creating a climate of equity. This can occur through professional development opportunities. In their study of parent involvement, Cochran and Dean (1991) identified three training needs of educators in working with parents that are also applicable to working with community paraeducators: (a) empathizing with and appreciating community paraeducators' positive contributions, (b) communicating effectively, and (c) creating meaningful roles for community paraeducators in schools. Educators can benefit from training in an ecological perspective of child development that underscores the significance of creating

positive relationships across school, family, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2006). With this understanding, educators can more readily recognize the value and positive contributions of community paraeducators. Further, educators can profit from ongoing training and support that promotes their understanding of differences in interpersonal styles and enables them to develop effective communication skills for working with community paraeducators (Ogbu, 1988). These skills are a prerequisite for dialoguing with community paraeducators to understand their strengths and interests, discerning meaningful roles for them, and developing partnerships which promote their successful participation.

Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability

Data-based decision making and accountability is standard in best educational practices (Yesseldyke et al., 1997). Students' needs and response to intervention should be assessed in relation to measurable outcomes. In addition, empirically supported intervention strategies should be utilized and monitored for procedural integrity. Given school professionals' (e.g., school psychologists, special educators) extensive training in assessment and research methodologies, they are natural leaders in overseeing and conducting data-oriented activities, such as selecting measures, assessing children, and interpreting outcome data. However, attributing sole leadership to school professionals is consistent with an expert model rather than a partnership model and creates a dichotomy between the professional staff and community paraeducators. Moreover, operating within an expert model may restrict or exclude the unique and valuable contributions community paraeducators offer in evaluating culturally relevant intervention programs.

Alternatively, a *collaborative data-based decision making and accountability process* places community paraeducators in collaborative positions for evaluating intervention programs and making decisions about their continued development. In this process, data-oriented activities are viewed as shared responsibilities for the professional staff and community paraeducators (Fantuzzo, Coolahan, & Weiss, 1997). Whereas the professional staff may possess the technical assessment and research knowledge, community paraeducators have expert knowledge in the life circumstances and cultural values of the students and families. Community paraeducators can serve to ensure that assessment and evaluation activities present a balanced perspective of strengths and needs in addition to facilitating culturally meaningful interpretation of evaluation data (Fantuzzo et al., 1997).

The collaborative data-based decision making and accountability process is crucial for facilitating empowerment among community paraeducators (Nastasi

et al., 2000). This process strategically places community paraeducators in positions of leadership and advocacy. As active decision-makers in developing and evaluating interventions for children and families in their neighborhood, community paraeducators have opportunities to voice the needs within the community, direct resources to address these needs, and make recommendations for improving the effectiveness and cultural responsiveness of intervention programs.

Case Illustration of the Community Partnership Model: Reading Partners

Reading Partners (Dowrick & Yuen, 2006; Power, Dowrick, Ginsburg-Block, & Manz, 2004) is a school-based intervention for remediating reading difficulties among kindergarten and first grade children by providing supplemental, individualized instruction in the context of positive and nurturing relationships with community paraeducators. In the Reading Partners program, community paraeducators provide 30-minute, individual tutoring sessions to children three times each week, focusing on phonemic awareness, letter/word recognition, and oral fluency. Prior to the start of intervention, children's instructional needs are identified using standardized achievement measures and curriculum-based measures of oral fluency. Ongoing curriculum-based measurement is conducted weekly throughout the intervention in order to monitor children's responsiveness to the Reading Partner program.

Reading Partners (Power et al., 2004) emerged from a shared vision among school administrators and professionals, community and family members, and university researchers to improve reading skill acquisition for young children attending two elementary schools located in low-income, predominantly African American, inner-city communities. The following case illustration is presented to highlight the process of preparing and supporting community paraeducators according to a community partnership model.

Co-Construction of Roles and Responsibilities

School personnel (primarily teachers), community paraeducators, and university researchers collaboratively crafted the specific roles and responsibilities associated with designing, implementing, and evaluating the Reading Partners program. The instructional protocol was based upon empirically supported strategies for improving reading abilities among young readers (Power et al., 2004). University researchers shared this literature and a preliminary proposal of the instructional protocol with teachers and community paraeducators. Based upon their knowledge and experience, the teachers complemented this

information by sharing the specific instructional strategies and materials that they used in the children's classrooms. For example, teachers incorporated the word lists required by the school district into the Reading Partner's protocol.

Community paraeducators assisted in determining that reading materials were culturally meaningful and that the instructional procedures permitted the formation of positive relationships with children. As an example, one component of the instructional protocol, a folding-in flashcard procedure (Shapiro, 1992) used to build letter and word recognition, was slightly modified to minimize student frustration, according to the recommendations of several community paraeducators.

In addition to co-constructing the intervention protocol and logistics, community paraeducator roles and responsibilities were collaboratively established and clearly communicated to school personnel. Although the primary role of community paraeducators was to provide tutoring to children, they made equally valuable contributions to progress-monitoring activities and to communication with the participating children's families. In each school, up to two community paraeducators were responsible for conducting ongoing curriculum-based measurement of oral fluency for all participants in Reading Partners. Community paraeducators also sustained regular contact with children's families, sharing progress information and inviting them in to observe tutoring sessions. Similarly, community paraeducators actively planned, with university researchers, periodic celebrations of the children's participation in Reading Partners, events that were well attended by the children's families.

Teachers fulfilled important roles, including ensuring children were available for tutoring and maintaining routine communication with community paraeducators and university researchers in order to monitor children's progress and the alignment of the instructional protocol with classroom curriculum. University researchers assumed primary responsibility for oversight of the operation of the Reading Partners program, support of community paraeducators, and facilitation of communication among teachers and community paraeducators. University staff also maintained the database and continuous processing of progress-monitoring data (e.g., data entry, graphing individual children's progress).

Reciprocal Training

Community paraeducators underwent four hours of preservice training which addressed rapport building with young children, using positive reinforcement, implementing specific instructional strategies for improving word recognition and phonological processing, and monitoring adherence to the tutoring protocol. Consistent with the notion of reciprocal training, the context

was collaborative in that university researchers shared their expertise in reading instruction and managing children's learning, and the community paraeducators provided direction in effectively relating to and teaching the children with whom they had shared sociocultural experiences. As a result of the merging of perspectives from both community paraeducators and university researchers, many improvements were made to the Reading Partners instructional protocol. For instance, when tutoring young children with serious reading difficulties, community paraeducators tended to correct all student errors, resulting in frequent interruption and negative feedback to children who were struggling to read. In dialoging with community paraeducators, they expressed their concern that failure to correct errors as they arose could indirectly promote inaccurate reading. As a team, community paraeducators and university researchers discussed the importance of developing a strategy that provided error correction in a minimally intrusive manner within a highly reinforcing learning context. As a result, alternative strategies for responding to students' errors that were acceptable to all were developed.

Supportive Supervision

Once tutoring began, community paraeducators attended weekly group supervision meetings and bi-weekly individual supervision meetings with university researchers to discuss their students' progress, instructional strategies, and working relationships with teachers and family members. Individual supervision typically focused on the community paraeducators' implementation of the instructional strategies and the children's progress. The group supervision meetings were an invaluable complement to individual supervision and offered the additional benefit of strengthening the social network among the community paraeducators.

Establishing a genuine and trusting climate for the supervision meetings required a shift in university staff members' expectations about the pace and degree of personal sharing that typically occurs in a professional meeting. The professional culture common to the university staff led to expectations that meetings strictly adhere to an agenda, minimize personal conversations, and are completed within a predetermined time period. However, in the supportive supervision meetings, the agenda was more flexible, often allowing personal stories and humor to intermix with the professional discussion.

Although a staff member from the university research team (who was trained in school psychology) served as the supervisor for the community paraeducators, the context of group supervision allowed for peer supervision among the community paraeducators. In many instances, the shared cultural and professional experiences among the community paraeducators were a rich resource

for supervision and an invaluable complement to the direction provided by university researchers. Some issues, including experiences of racism in the school setting and difficulty attaining professional recognition from families and school staff, were best handled through peer supervision by fellow community paraeducators.

Community Paraeducator–Teacher Partnership

The most challenging aspect of this component of the community partnership model was reducing the involvement of university researchers in shaping working partnerships between community paraeducators and teachers. Throughout the Reading Partners program, the propensity for university researchers to serve pivotal roles in community paraeducator–teacher communication was difficult to resist. Similarities in professional expertise and experience among teachers and university researchers created a tendency to discuss children’s progress in professional jargon and to quickly formulate impressions about children’s reading abilities; this resulted in minimizing or excluding community paraeducator involvement.

Establishing routine meetings in which the roles and responsibilities of all were clearly delineated was a crucial activity in fostering teacher–community paraeducator partnerships. Inherent in the Reading Partners program were routine progress meetings (about every 6 weeks) involving the teacher, community paraeducator, and university researcher. The objectives of the meeting were to (a) review children’s progress monitoring data, (b) discuss instructional concerns, and (c) address any logistical issues. Community paraeducators and teachers were expected to assume leadership roles in these meetings, with the university researchers serving to support the communication process.

A key step for ensuring that community paraeducators assumed a leadership role in these meetings was to assist them in preparing their contributions. Prior to the meeting, community paraeducators reviewed the impressions and concerns they wished to share and the children’s progress monitoring data with university researchers. During the meeting, university researchers facilitated direct communication between community paraeducators and teachers by affirming community paraeducators’ contributions and deflecting questions or comments addressed to the researchers to the other party.

Collaborative Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability

Consistent with the community partnership model, collaborative planning with school professionals and community paraeducators shaped the evaluation of the Reading Partners program. Initially, school professionals and community paraeducators were skeptical of the outcome assessment process (which

involved bi-weekly progress monitoring of oral fluency and pre/post-testing with standardized reading achievement measures), voicing concerns that children were being tested excessively. Responding to their concerns, university researchers engaged the community paraeducators and school professionals in an ongoing dialogue about the benefits of the data for illuminating the effectiveness of the Reading Partners program and guiding the development of the program according to its evidenced-based strengths or weaknesses. As a result of these discussions, a mutually acceptable evaluation plan was maintained. In the end, the comprehensive evaluation of Reading Partners yielded favorable outcomes, underscoring its promise as an effective community-based early literacy program for urban schools (Power et al., 2004).

Community paraeducators participated in every aspect of program evaluation. Although most community paraeducators served in tutoring roles, some served as assessors, administering weekly progress monitoring probes in oral fluency. Those serving as tutors were important partners in interpreting students' outcome data. Given the close relationship that community paraeducators shared with the students and their familiarity with school and neighborhood events, they provided insights into students' progress that we would not have otherwise been able to readily access. For example, one student was showing expected improvements in his oral fluency (e.g., gradual increase in words read per minute on curriculum-based monitoring probes). Suddenly, his progress dropped. His community paraeducator informed us that the onset of his decline corresponded with the child witnessing a shooting in the corner store, offering the plausible explanation that the emotional impact of this event was interfering with his academic performance.

In addition to examining children's literacy outcomes, the evaluation of Reading Partners involved a thorough plan for integrity monitoring, which was potentially alarming to community paraeducators. Integrity monitoring procedures required that community paraeducators audiotape each tutoring session and complete a checklist indicating their adherence with major intervention components. University staff randomly selected 15% of the recorded sessions and corresponding checklists to assess adherence to intervention components. In order to offset the potential for these strict procedures to undermine the partnership and empowerment processes (e.g., convey doubt as to community paraeducators' abilities to deliver proper tutoring), university researchers invited the involvement of community paraeducators in integrity monitoring processes. To begin, we had discussions about the value of integrity monitoring for the enhancement and dissemination of the Reading Partners program. In this dialogue we repeatedly assured them that integrity monitoring procedures were not in place because of our doubt in their competencies.

Community paraeducators were engaged in routine reviews of integrity data and problem-solving discussions, which lead to refining intervention procedures and directing ongoing training (Power et al., 2005). Consistent with prior research, the opportunities for performance feedback in these ongoing discussions were likely to contribute to the high rates of compliance obtained (Bolton & Mayer, 2008; Burns, Peters, & Noell, 2008). As reported in Power et al. (2005), adherence to intervention procedures exceeded 93%.

Future Directions

A community partnership model is a promising approach to build the capacity of educational services within inner-city school systems. The foundation for the development of effective and culturally meaningful educational programs is the formation of equal and productive partnerships among community residents and school professionals. To further develop the community partnership model, research investigating the fundamental processes inherent in establishing and sustaining this model in schools is needed. Achieving an empirically based understanding of the community partnership model requires a comprehensive evaluation approach involving the use of ethnographic and quantitative research methods (Miller, 1997) and examining multiple domains of child, school, and family functioning. Identifying the underlying processes and essential components of a community partnership model of intervention is essential to delineating a well defined, replicable approach. Ethnographic research methods can yield a rich examination of the salient intrapersonal and interpersonal processes associated with developing community partnership interventions. An intrapersonal process of primary importance to the community partnership model is the empowerment of community paraeducators. Understanding the environmental and programmatic influences that facilitate or inhibit the empowerment of community paraeducators in school settings can inform the development and evaluation of specific, generalizable strategies for enlisting and supporting community members to serve a paraeducators. The formation of partnerships among community paraeducators and school professional staff is a crucial interpersonal process to examine. Identification of the factors that foster or impede community paraeducator–teacher collaborations is necessary for designing a replicable approach for forming working relationships between them.

An ethnographic examination of these intrapersonal and interpersonal processes can direct the development of quantitative methods for formulating and testing strategies to implement programs based upon a community partnership model (Gaskins, 1994; Hitchcock et al., 2005). For example, psychometrically

sound assessment methods are needed for measuring community paraeducators' self-perceptions of efficacy to improve student and family outcomes; teachers' perceptions of community paraeducators' competencies to assist students and families; and important components of the relationship between community paraeducators and teachers, such as satisfaction and effectiveness. With the availability of these assessment methods, strategies for promoting empowerment and working partnerships can be developed and evaluated.

In addition, evidence of the community partnership model's impact on the effectiveness of schools serving low-income, diverse children and families is needed. The evaluation plan should include measures that reflect outcomes that are related to the theoretical principles of the community partnership model. Relevant student outcome variables include academic and social skills, personal sense of academic efficacy (Bandura, 1997), achievement motivation (Gottfried, 1990), and racial identity and socialization (Stevenson, 1998). Improving the involvement of families in schools is also an important outcome of a partnership-based program, because a fundamental principle of the model is that community paraeducators provide points of attachment for families in schools and can facilitate families' involvement in their children's education. Further, the impact of the community partnership model on the cultural climate of the school can be evaluated by examining curricular and environmental changes, such as assessing the incorporation of significant cultural events into the classroom curriculum, recording the presence of culturally appropriate artwork in the classrooms and hallways, documenting school visits by community residents and leaders, and noting the frequency of school announcements about community events.

School professionals in urban settings face the challenge of educating a disproportionately high number of vulnerable children who experience poverty and associated risks for academic failure. Schools serving these children are in need of an empirically validated, culturally responsive model of intervention that cultivates and supplements natural resources within the school. Interventions must bring schools and communities into partnership so that children profit from mentoring relationships with community members and school staff and to ensure that the cultural heritage of the students is valued and celebrated in schools. A community partnership model offers the advantages of expanding school capacity to provide educational interventions for students and the formation of developmentally salient linkages among children, members from families and communities, and educators. Although this model presents significant systemic and institutional challenges, our efforts to continue its development and examine its effectiveness are justified, given the potential benefits to the children, families, and communities served by under-resourced, inner-city schools.

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Authors' Note:

Portions of the work described in this article were supported by grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts and U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (#H185A200211-95).

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