

Roles and Responsibilities of Paraprofessionals: In Their Own Words

Karen B. Patterson

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Abstract

This study focused on the perceptions of paraprofessionals regarding the roles they fulfill while working with children with disabilities in special education and inclusive settings. Students were in grades K-12 and represented a range of disability categories (e.g., autism spectrum disorders, serious emotional disturbance, development disabilities, and learning disabilities). Twenty-two paraprofessionals were interviewed using a semistructured interview guide to establish their understanding of their roles, responsibilities, teacher expectations, training needs, and challenges they experienced while working with others. Findings from this study indicate that paraprofessionals tend to assume high levels of responsibility for managing the academic and behavioral needs for all students. This article addresses ways to improve our own practices in how we work with paraprofessionals.

Keywords

paraprofessional personnel, collaboration, cooperation, educator support, training

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Introduction

As more children with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms based on full inclusion, the need for more teachers, smaller class sizes, more peer supports, more parental involvement, and more paraprofessionals have expanded significantly. For example, over 200,000 paraprofessionals were employed in special education in 1986 (Pickett, 1986) with more than 80% of children having contact with them (Karan & Knight, 1986). National figures estimate that over 500,000 paraprofessionals are employed in public schools across America and more than half of them work with children with disabilities, frequently spending all day with a single child who is enrolled in a general education classroom (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997).

In order to be effective with students who have special learning needs, collaboration that is inclusive of all people who either have a stake in or assist in the education of those children must exist (Stanovich, 1996). Paraprofessionals, who begin their full time responsibilities with limited training, are often unprepared to teach children with special needs, which is most often their primary responsibility. Further, their presence is more evident in schools and classrooms where students with severe or multiple disabilities are included in the general education classroom (Giangreco et al., 1997). With the increasing numbers of paraprofessionals and the current trends such as shortages of special education teachers, increases in early childhood special education services, increases in services for transition-aged students with disabilities, and increasing numbers of students with high-intensity needs (French, 1999; Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 2002; Killoran, Templeman, Peters, & Udell, 2001; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; Passaro, Pickett, Latham, & HongoBo, 1994; Pickett, 1999; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Rogan & Held, 1999), there is an indication that these numbers will continue

to increase (Giangreco et al., 1997).

For children with disabilities, IDEA specified that the services delineated on the IEP should be provided by individuals with the highest qualifications. Findings reported by French (1998, 2001) indicated that many paraprofessionals were providing services without written plans, and few formal sit-down contact meetings with teachers and other professionals who, not only were more qualified, but were also ultimately responsible for IEP outcomes. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) requires that paraprofessionals work "under the direct supervision of a teacher" and "in close and frequent proximity to the teacher." The law also requires the supervising teacher to prepare lessons, plan instructional support services, and evaluate student achievement; tasks that very often are the responsibilities given to paraprofessionals in many schools today (Giangreco et al., 1997). Downing, Ryndak, and Clark (2000) assert that paraprofessionals have become responsible for supporting students with disabilities in typical learning environments that may be quite different from special education classrooms. Furthermore, when supporting students in general education classrooms, paraprofessionals may not have the minute-by-minute supervision and support from a special educator that they usually can depend on in a self-contained special education class. In addition, although general educators are "in charge" of their classrooms, they may not have the knowledge or training to provide appropriate guidance to the paraprofessionals to ensure that the educational needs of a student with severe disabilities are met (Downing et al., 2000). Several benefits have also been cited by teachers who work with paraprofessionals in their classrooms. Tillery, Werts, Roark, and Harris (2003) reported these benefits to include someone with whom to share ideas, a social contact during the school day, assistance with supervising and monitor-

ing students, clerical support, assistance with instructing individuals or small groups, as well as assistance in emergencies and with other related issues.

Paraprofessionals have many different perceptions of their roles, duties, responsibilities, and expectations that often vary among individuals who work at the same school. Marks et al. (1999) used a semi-structured in-depth interview process to investigate the experiences of 20 paraprofessionals working with inclusion students with disabilities and reported that paraprofessionals perceived that they bore the "primary burden of success" for the students with disabilities with whom they worked and the sense that they were responsible for inclusion of those students. In addition, the paraprofessionals also believed that their roles included: (a) keeping students with disabilities from being a "bother" to the classroom teacher, (b) being primarily responsible to provide "on the spot" curricular modifications, and (c) being expected to be the "expert" for the student.

As paraprofessionals assume more responsibility for supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms, concerns have emerged in the field as to whether this increase in responsibility corresponds with increased training and supervision. For example, Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, and Fialka (2005) assert that with the advent of more inclusive models of delivery of special education services, new issues are emerging regarding the training, utilization, and supervision of paraprofessionals, in part because special educators and paraprofessionals often spend much of their day in locations separated from one another.

The overwhelming challenge is to identify the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals while providing appropriate services successfully in inclusive classrooms in a way that is beneficial for all involved. The purpose of this article is to determine the emerging themes related to how paraprofes-

sionals assumed their roles, responsibilities, and expectations and the difficulties they encountered while working in inclusive classrooms with children of varying exceptionalities. An understanding of the experiences of paraprofessionals will lead to a greater awareness of the implications of utilizing the services that paraprofessionals provide daily to students. Improvements can also be made in how we provide mentorship, support, training, and supervision to paraprofessionals as necessary.

Method

Participants

22 paraprofessionals (18 females and 4 males) between the ages of 23 and 57 with experience ranging from less than 1 to 24 years participated in this study (see Table 1). 14 paraprofessionals (64%) had high school diplomas, 6 had associate degrees, and 2 had earned bachelors degrees, all from a range of disciplines. All of the paraprofessionals worked with students in K-12 schools. Primary disability categories of students included autism, Asperger's syndrome, cerebral palsy, developmental disability, Down syndrome, emotional or behavioral disorder (EBD), and learning disability (LD).

Participants were employed by three different school districts in the state of Florida. Schools were targeted if they had one or more special education classrooms and/or if they were using an inclusion model. Letters with return postage paid envelopes were mailed to individual schools for the attention of the paraprofessionals or teacher assistants on staff. Information regarding the study, participant consent form, and a form indicating an appropriate time to call was included. An enclosed letter explained that the participants would receive a tote bag containing school supplies (writing pads, pencils, pens, post-it notes, note paper) for their willingness to participate. 80 letters were mailed to targeted

Table 1. Participants Demographics

#	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Highest level of Education	Years of experience SC	Years of experience inclusion	Grades of students served	% of time in Inclusion
1	F	42	AA	HS	9	1	K-6	100
2	F	37	AA	HS	7	2	4-5	100
3	F	23	AA	A	<1	2	4	100
4	F	40	C	A	12	5	K-6	95
5	F	55	AA	HS	10	4	K-12	80
6	F	57	AA	HS	14	10	K-12	50
7	F	26	AA	HS	4	1	4 -6	50
8	M	35	C	A	0	2	6-12	100
9	F	48	AA	HS	3	1	1-2	50
10	F	46	C	HS	0	2	6	100
11	F	39	C	A	0	4	4	100
12	M	30	C	HS	4	4	K-6	75
13	F	44	AA	HS	6	1	4-6	85
14	F	47	AA	BA	2	5	3-5	100
15	F	51	AA	HS	1	14	K-12	50
16	F	26	C	BA	1	4	Pre - 2	50
17	F	50	AA	HS	8	7	K-8	75
18	F	35	AA	A	4	3	4-6	95
19	M	43	AA	HS	7	2	9-12	50
20	F	37	AA	A	3	3	K-5	100
21	F	31	AA	HS	2	5	K-4	100
22	M	51	AA	HS	1	7	6-12	50

Note. F = Female, M = Male, AA = African American, C = Caucasian, SC = Self-Contained, A = Associate Degree, HS = High School BA = Bachelor's Degree

schools and 35 initial responses were received. 24 expressed interest in participating in the study. Two individuals later decided not to participate. One had a change in assignment, and the other individual gave no reason for the decision.

The author and two staff members interviewed the participants. Participants were informed at the beginning of each telephone call that the interview would be recorded and that they could refuse to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable discussing.

They were also told that their responses were confidential and that written transcripts of their answers would be in locked file cabinets. At the completion of each interview, names and addresses of the participants were verified so that they could receive their gift.

Procedures

22 respondents participated in an interview conducted by telephone. Questions included demographic information (age, gender, and years of experience) in addition to

their perceptions of their typical workday, working relationships with teachers, administrators, and parents, interesting and challenging aspects of the job, overall perceptions, and concerns regarding job satisfaction and experience (see Table 2). This method of data collection provided opportunities for responses to be clarified and provided some measure of freedom of responses. These interviews ran between 30 to 45 minutes followed a semi structured interview format. Respondents worked with students with identified special education needs in grade levels (K-12) and program settings (self-contained classroom, resource room, inclusive general education classrooms).

Data were coded according to the following steps. First, each interview tape was transcribed verbatim and independently read by two faculty and two staff members who

ascertained common themes. Second, topics common to all interviews were noted using the interview questions as a guide. Third, the interviews were reviewed and coded into a data display matrix (Marks et al., 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tillery, et al., 2003) with the assistance of an additional office staff member who was not involved in the telephone interviews of the participants.

Results

Five main themes emerged from interviews with paraprofessionals that included: (a) a range of responsibilities throughout their work day; (b) knowledge of behavior management strategies; (c) a more defined role in job description; (d) concerns regarding financial compensation; and (e) the need for partnership between teachers, parents, and paraprofessionals.

Table 2. Telephone Interview Questions

1. What is your job title?
 2. Are you in general or special education?
 3. How many years of experience do you have?
 4. What grade level do you work with?
 5. Describe what you do during the typical workday?
 6. Describe what you do if you encounter difficulties working with students.
 7. Describe your interactions with school personnel and families.
 8. Were you previously trained?
 9. Did you receive training after initial employment?
 10. Describe the training you received that were related to your job.
 11. Describe what you believe to be the skills and personal characteristics required for your job?
 12. Describe your challenges.
 13. What is your educational level?
 14. What do you wish you knew before starting this job?
 15. What assistance do you need to be supported in your current role?
 16. What do you want teachers to know about paraprofessionals?
 17. What is your age?
 18. What else do you believe is important for us to know?
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Range of Responsibilities

The participants in this study assumed a wide range of job responsibilities and activities that occurred throughout their workday, often without clarification or specific information. Within this category, the following two sub-themes emerged as described below.

Teaching

All the participants in this study indicated that their day included teaching students in one capacity or another. 19 paraprofessionals (86%) indicated a responsibility for their student or “group” of students that included lesson planning, teaching, creating and administering tests, and grading. For example, one paraprofessional reported:

I have my group and the teacher has her group. We both teach the same topics but I teach it at a slower pace, more on their level, while the teacher can move faster with the higher (functioning) group.

77% of the paraprofessionals indicated that they have conducted large groups and whole class lessons on different occasions; for example, one paraprofessional reported:

If the teacher has a meeting or an appointment that lasts for a couple of hours, I teach. It is difficult to get a substitute if the teacher has a morning appointment that will cause them to be two hours late or if they have to leave an hour or so early.

81% of the paraprofessionals reported that they were capable of teaching the class and some enjoyed the added responsibilities. However, 77% reported dissatisfaction at the expectations that they assume these tasks in the teacher’s absence, often without clear instructions and financial compensation.

Completing clerical tasks/modifying activities

All 22 participants reported the expectation to complete clerical tasks that included copying materials, filing, completing invento-

ries (textbooks, furniture), and making the necessary modifications to any material required so that the supported student(s) would be included in class activities. While the overwhelming majority (95%) reported a willingness to help with the many tasks required during the workday, 81% indicated the need to be seen and treated as equals and “not be expected to do the things that the teachers do not want to do”, as reported by one paraprofessional. In response to suggestions that would help to alleviate problems encountered with this issue, 15 of the 22 participants (68%) suggested the need for improvement in the organizational skills of the classroom teacher. In addition, 81% expressed the need for assignments to be given to them in a timely manner. For example, one paraprofessional stated:

It would be helpful to have everything that needs to be copied the day before or at the very least, the morning they are needed. I have worked with some teachers that decide moment by moment what they need.

Knowledge of behavior management strategies

As reported by 90% of the respondents, paraprofessionals indicated that the management of student behavior was perceived by teachers to be their primary responsibility, often taking priority over tasks that are more academic. Furthermore, during the course of the work day, if a student demonstrated inappropriate or disruptive behaviors (e.g., refusing to work, aggression, self-injury, screaming, leaving the classroom), the paraprofessional was most often the one expected to respond to the student, whether it concerned a child with a disability or not. For example, one paraprofessional stated:

It does not matter what I am doing, if a child is disruptive, any child in the room, I am the one that has to get that

child out of there to calm them down whether the teacher is teaching or not.

Another paraprofessional stated:

What bothers me is that I am here to work with one child (full-time assistant for a child with a disability) and the teacher apparently forgets because I am being asked and expected to keep everyone calm and quiet all day. If the students are disruptive, everyone looks at me as if I am supposed to deal with it.

In addition to responding to behavioral concerns within their assigned classrooms, paraprofessionals are also asked to respond to incidents within their school as well. For example, a paraprofessional stated:

Because I am a man, everyone thinks I am a security guard. If a fight breaks out or child is unruly, they call me. Although I don't mind helping, I don't think it is fair for me to leave what I am doing to break up every fight.

77% of paraprofessionals reported spending time with all students, irrespective of their assignments, keeping students on task and working to minimize incidents of disruptive behaviors throughout the school day. Most of the paraprofessionals (95%) indicated a willingness to assist all students, regardless of the specific need. One reported that she would prefer to work only with the students assigned to her because it was:

Chaotic in trying to figure out what to do for all of them and especially the ones who don't know how to behave.

All of the participants in this study (regardless of educational background or experience) reported the need to know more about managing student behaviors and the need for training that includes behavior management strategies. Many paraprofessionals (72%) reported that most training offered by

the school district was academic in nature (i.e., reading, math, or science programs) and while these programs were needed, districts also needed to address the training of paraprofessionals in classroom/behavior management strategies. It is important to note that all of the respondents reported that they perceive student inappropriate behaviors to have worsened over the period of their employment, therefore, making the need for improvement of their management skills even greater. While 54% of the paraprofessionals rated their teachers as effective in classroom management, 64% indicated that their teacher's method of maintaining order is to remove disruptive students by writing a referral to the principal's office. For example, one paraprofessional reported:

I am seeing behaviors now in schools that we never saw years ago. Some of these kids are bold and they are getting away with a lot of things. The teacher I work with writes one referral after another and the students return to class and act out more than before. We need strategies that will work with the children of today's society.

Further, another paraprofessional reported:

Some children are upset before they walk into the classroom. When that happens, anything will set them off. When one student was told she would be sent to the office if she did not get to work, she told the teacher to write her up because she wanted to go home. That is what we have to deal with.

Another paraprofessional emphasized the importance of behavior management by the following statement:

Because we are the ones everyone looks at when students misbehave, we have to be on top of what works in terms of behavior management. If a teacher is weak in controlling her

class but she is a good teacher, no one that I know has a problem, but if a para has no classroom control, she could be asked to look for another job.

86% of the respondents in this study indicated a willingness to participate in any training that would improve their ability to fulfill their responsibilities while working with students.

More defined role in job description

72% of the participants in this study expressed frustration at changes that were made to their schedule at the “whim” of the teacher or principal. For example, one respondent stated:

I get tired of not always knowing where (classroom) I am going to spend my day or what I will be doing once I get to work. If a teacher is absent, I could be asked to cover that class. If there is a meeting or school function, I am most likely to be asked to help. When decisions are being made, everyone gets to speak based on what they want, but we are told what they would like for us to do.

Another participant stated:

We miss many staff meetings because we are taking care of other things, like making sure all the children are being picked up, changing bulletin boards, you name it. By the time we get there, it (meeting) is almost over and we don't even know what's already discussed.

Paraprofessionals reported that if their roles were clearly defined and clarified, everyone, themselves included, would know of their responsibilities, and the expectations of principals and teachers would be more realistic.

Concerns regarding training and financial compensation

When not being asked to assume other responsibilities, several paraprofessionals re-

ported spending most of the workday with the assigned student(s) and in some instances spending all day with a single student. 54% indicated not only a lack of training prior to assuming full time responsibilities on their jobs but also training that was given by the teacher and in some cases, other paraprofessionals. In addition, 13% of the participants in this study indicated no training other than their knowledge gained from working with the students. However, 36% indicated that training was not necessary based on their current assignment. For example, one respondent stated:

I already have a bachelor's degree and I have children so nothing at my job is unusual. If I have to go back to school for more training, then are we going to be paid more? Somehow I don't think that is going to happen so why should I go to class after school. I would be better off getting a second job.

Respondents, in general, expressed what they perceive to be inequity in salaries for their jobs with statements like: “We work just as hard as they (teachers) do”, and “What we are being paid is unfair. They expect us to do everything when we come to work and yet no one thinks that we need to be paid for it.”

Overall, respondents expressed that they were not blaming teachers for the inequity in salaries, but rather were dissatisfied with administrators whom they believed were in a position to change policies.

Need for partnership between teachers, parents, and paraprofessionals

Respondents expressed a need for a collaborative and cooperative working relationship with all involved in the education and care of students with disabilities. 59% of the paraprofessionals reported their input was valued, as they were frequently consulted with matters including instructional and be-

havioral issues. However, 77% indicated the need for teams working together. For example, one respondent stated:

I was working with a teacher who told the parents at orientation that there were two teachers responsible for their children (teacher and para) and that we were partners. That year I never had problems with parents questioning my decision if I had to give a consequence or extra assignment to a student. The teacher I am with now is not like that. She wants all communication and contact with parents to be made through her. She does not understand that we all have the same goals for the children. I am a parent and I know their concerns. Parents would be more supportive if they knew we were working together as a team for their children.

Other paraprofessionals expressed that they were already part of a team that was supportive of their efforts and felt it was critical to their success in the classroom with students. One stated that the teachers he worked with were “role models who inspired him and caused him to want to continue in his role as a paraprofessional.”

Limitations and Implications

This study considered interview responses from a small sample of paraprofessionals. Although the respondents were educators working in special education and inclusive educational programs, direct observations were not conducted to verify their responses and therefore, limited the study. Another limitation of this study is that interviews were not extended to principals and teachers regarding their perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals. This would provide further verification to the interview statements made by the participants.

The purpose of this study was to determine from paraprofessionals, in their own

words, their perceptions regarding their roles and responsibilities in special education and inclusive settings, supporting children with varying exceptionalities. Over the past two decades, one of the biggest obstacles to successful school reform has been the failure of policymakers to detail and clarify the role of paraprofessionals in the mission to improve schools (Campbell, 2002). In their own words, the paraprofessionals who participated in this study have articulated their experiences and further indicate the necessity and urgency for clarification of the many roles and responsibilities they are asked daily to assume.

The findings of this study demonstrate a number of concerns that have specific and direct implications for the field of special education and inclusive settings. The following considerations should be incorporated into future district, school, teacher, and research planning:

- School districts need to clarify the range of responsibilities and job descriptions of paraprofessionals.
- Paraprofessionals need commensurate training and supervision, particularly for placement in settings where they have had no previous experience.
- Professional development opportunities for paraprofessionals must include effective research based behavior management strategies, in addition to instructional strategies.
- Financial compensation needs to be competitive.
- Collaboration between paraprofessionals and all other individuals who either have a stake in or assist in the education of children is critical to meeting the unique needs of students with special needs.
- The organizational and time management skills of the classroom teacher are significantly important and critical

components to working effectively with paraprofessionals.

Given the importance of the role and responsibilities of paraprofessionals, future studies need to focus on how school districts can best provide clarification to all involved. Additional studies are necessary to examine the effectiveness of paraprofessionals who had or have undergone training versus those who have not and whether prior and or length of experience working in special education settings might have some impact on their perceptions.

Final Thoughts

With the mandates of IDEA and NCLB, children with disabilities have the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment, which for many is the general education classroom with their peers without disabilities, lacking necessary services and appropriate supports. As a result, the need for paraprofessionals is now more critical than ever as districts grapple with finding a balance between reducing class sizes, providing appropriate services for all children, and balancing their budgets. The paraprofessionals in this study indicated a wide range of responsibilities that included providing academic instruction, managing student behaviors, performing clerical tasks, and modifying activities for students with disabilities included in general education classrooms. Some of the tasks and needs of paraprofessionals, such as working with all students and having knowledge of behavior management strategies, are highly recommended practices in the field. However, some statements made presented some concerns, a finding similar to the Giangreco et al., 1997 study. For example, all of the participants interviewed in this study indicated that the supported student spent more time with them than anyone else, including the classroom teacher. This presents some concerns given that students with disabilities often have specific needs that require special-

ized care, yet paraprofessionals without training are largely responsible for their education and care. Many of the participants in this study indicated a lack of training and qualification necessary to carry out their responsibilities, a finding consistent in other studies as well (Giangreco et al., 1997; Marks et al., 1999). Further, some paraprofessionals indicated that they received no training since they assumed full time responsibilities. The role of paraprofessionals must therefore be examined and clarified. Policy makers and educational team members must ask if best practice is being demonstrated when paraprofessionals who are unqualified or untrained are asked to assume full-time responsibilities for supporting students who may require more specialized care and instruction.

Some paraprofessionals in this study reported that they were in classrooms with teachers who were “working on certification”, “out-of-field”, or new to the field of teaching. In a recent study addressing issues and trends of special education teachers, Conroy (2003) indicated only 63% of first-year teachers hold certification for their main assignments, 5% are certified out of field, 20% hold emergency certificates, and 4% not have no teaching certification. Furthermore, Conroy also indicated that students with emotional and behavioral disorders not only found themselves in more restrictive settings, but also were more likely to receive services from noncertified teachers. The findings in the current study present additional concerns when paraprofessionals are trained by teachers who themselves have limited knowledge and skills in varying exceptionalities. Not only is adequate training for paraprofessionals prior to starting their jobs critical, but perhaps ensuring that all teachers are trained to teach the students that they are assigned is also necessary.

Principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals need clarification regarding the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of paraprofessionals, particularly those in inclusion set-

tings where the range of duties and responsibilities can vary based on the number of students with special needs that are included. Adequate training needs to be provided before paraprofessionals assume full-time responsibilities so they are more comfortable and proactive with the needs of the supported student(s), while providing instruction that addresses IEP goals and objectives. Along with adequate training and clarification in their roles, education policy makers also need to address the salaries of paraprofessionals as well.

Results from the present study indicate that paraprofessionals tend to assume a wide range of responsibilities for managing the academic and behavioral needs of special education students with disabilities in inclusion settings. Participants in this study indicated the need for additional training in behavior management strategies, specific disabilities, and clarification of their roles and job description. In addition, paraprofessionals indicated the need for partnership between team members, particularly when asked to facilitate large groups of students and/or students with severe disabilities. Most of the respondents in this study indicated an overall dissatisfaction with their wages and the absence of shared responsibility for all children, particularly special education students in the general education classroom. It is imperative that the field of special education carefully considers the roles and responsibilities of these very important individuals. In doing so we can ensure that the services they provide will be mutually beneficial and ethical as they address the more challenging needs of students who often present significant challenges even to those in the profession who are well prepared and highly qualified.

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About the author:

Karen B. Patterson is an Assistant Professor and Program Director in the Department of Special Education at the University of North Florida.