

FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Students With Disabilities and Paraprofessional Supports: Benefits, Balance, and Band-Aids

Michael F. Giangreco and Mary Beth Doyle

If you have had any connection to special education during the past decade, you already know what a valuable asset paraprofessionals can be to support the education of students with, and without, disabilities. You do not need this article to tell you what the literature has been reporting for years—that too many paraprofessionals have been, and continue to be, inadequately appreciated, compensated, oriented, trained, and supervised (Doyle, 2002; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer & Doyle, 2001; Jones & Bender, 1993; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997).

You are already aware that a variety of approaches and materials are available to train paraprofessionals (CichoskiKelly, Backus, Giangreco, & Sherman-Tucker, 2000; Institute on Community Integration, 1999; Parsons & Reid, 1999; Salzberg, Morgan, Gassman, Pickett & Merrill, 1993; Steckelberg & Vasa, 1998). You probably already know that the numbers of paraprofessionals have increased dramatically in the last decade (French & Pickett, 1997).

TRENDS

The increasing numbers of paraprofessionals and corresponding issues likely are reflected in your local schools. Consider the example of one Vermont school district where the increasing use of paraprofessionals in special education was characterized as “an explosion” given an 83% increase in the hours of paraprofessional services per day between 1994 and 1999, without any significant change in child count (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, in press).

Definitive, data-based reasons for the increasing numbers of paraprofessionals are not available. Nevertheless, a small amount of data and reasoned speculation in the literature suggest that the increases have been fueled by a number of factors (French, 1999; Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 2002; Killoran, Templeman, Peters, & Udell, 2001; Passaro,

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Pickett, Latham, & HongoBo, 1994; Pickett, 1999; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Rogan & Held, 1999):

- Shortages of teachers and special educators
- Increases in early childhood special education services
- Increases in services for transition-aged students with disabilities
- Increasing numbers of students with high-intensity needs, such as those with the labels autism, emotional/behavioral disorders, and multiple disabilities
- Increasing responsibilities being assumed by general education teachers.

Most recently, the advancement of inclusive educational opportunities for students with increasingly severe disabilities has contributed to the increasing numbers of paraprofessionals (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999). For many general education classroom teachers, having a paraprofessional accompany a student with a disability to class is considered an essential support (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; French, 1999; Werts, Wolery, Snyder, Caldwell, &

Salisbury, 1996; Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Synder, & Liskowski, 1995). In many schools, assigning a paraprofessional to support students with disabilities has become the primary or exclusive service delivery mechanism to operationalize inclusive education.

CHANGING ROLES

Undoubtedly, assigning a paraprofessional to support the education of a student with a disability is intended to be a benevolent action. On the surface, it seems like an obvious support solution, is a relatively easy-to-implement response to advocacy for more support, and costs less than hiring professional staff members. When well conceived and implemented, paraprofessional support can be an appropriate service to offer. So what is the problem with continuing the trend of hiring more paraprofessionals? Wouldn't everything be okay if we just were to do a better job of orienting, training, supervising, compensating, and appreciating paraprofessionals?

Even though such actions are warranted and could be helpful toward the goal of having a more qualified and satisfied paraprofessional workforce, those important outcomes presume that the utilization of paraprofessionals as a primary mechanism to support the education of students with disabilities is an effective and desirable direction to maintain and advance. Although we have no doubt that paraprofessionals will continue to have vital and valued roles in special education, confusion about their changing roles has led to a situation in which some students with disabilities receive their special education services primarily or exclusively from paraprofessionals.

In a review of the paraprofessional literature, Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, and Doyle (2001) raised the following concerns that have yet to be addressed adequately in the professional literature:

Are models of service provision that rely heavily on paraprofessionals to provide instruction to students with disabilities appropriate, ethical, conceptually sound, and effective? Does it make sense to have the least qualified employee primarily responsible for students with the most complex challenges to learning? Is it acceptable for some students with disabilities to receive most of their education from a paraprofessional, regardless of training level, while students without disabilities receive the bulk of their instruction from certified teachers?

Do students with disabilities who receive a significant portion of their instruction from paraprofessionals have comparable outcomes as those who have more consistent interactions with qualified professionals? Is it fair to pay paraprofessionals less than a livable wage and expect them to perform duties that typically are expected of teachers, such as planning, adapting, and instructing? (p. 58)

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We are concerned that in some cases the assignment of paraprofessionals as an expedient support solution might be both unfair to paraprofessionals and questionably effective for students with disabilities. Of course, whether paraprofessional supports are or are not effective depends on what they are intended to accomplish.

Consider that in a study by Marks, Schrader, and Levine (1999), paraprofessionals reported their perception 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. These paraprofessionals reported perceptions that their roles included: (a) not 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. If this is what we intend paraprofessional supports to accomplish, it speaks volumes about the continuing devalued status of students with disabilities in our schools and the lack of real support for paraprofessional services.

What also is quite telling in the professional literature is what it *does not* say about the reasons for the increases in paraprofessional support to students with disabilities. Nowhere does the literature say that the expanded utilization and increasingly instructional roles of paraprofessionals have been based on efficacy data suggesting that students with disabilities do as well or better educationally with paraprofessionals than they do with special educators or general education teachers. Nowhere does the literature present a strong conceptual or theoretical rationale that explains the practice of assigning the least qualified staff members to make crucial decisions and provide primary instruction for students with the most complex needs.

In fact, the professional literature is nearly devoid of student outcome data as it pertains to the utilization of paraprofessionals. In response to these types of concerns, and while acknowledging the outstanding work accomplished by many paraprofessionals, Brown, Farrington, Ziegler, Knight, and Ross (1999) simultaneously stated that, because of their learning challenges, students with significant disabilities "are in dire need of continuous exposure to the most ingenious, creative, powerful, competent, interpersonally effective, and informed professionals" (p. 252).

Our existing dual system of general and special education continues to treat some students with disabilities like a hot potato that no one wants to hold on to. In these cases, paraprofessionals often are the ones who step in to fill the void and support the student as best they can with whatever skills, dedication, and energy the paraprofessionals bring to the job. At times when professionals did not provide sufficient direction and guidance, one paraprofessional described her concern this way: "It just got [to] the point that it was just easier to do it than to keep asking people to do it"

(Marks et al., 1999, p. 320). One of the overall findings of Marks et al. (1999) was: "For the most part, paraeducators found themselves in situations in which waiting for teachers and other professionals to make curricular and teaching decisions was not feasible" (p. 312).

QUESTIONS REGARDING PARAPROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS

The remainder of this article addresses five contemporary questions within the sphere of control of school personnel, either individually or collectively, to improve paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities:

1. To what extent should paraprofessionals be teaching students with disabilities?
2. What impact does the proximity of paraprofessionals have on students with disabilities?
3. How does the utilization of paraprofessional support affect teacher engagement, and why should it matter?
4. How can authentic respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of the important work of paraprofessionals be demonstrated?
5. What can be done to improve paraprofessional supports schoolwide?

For each question, we offer pertinent information from the literature and implications for practice. In an interrelated fashion, these five questions address the *benefits* associated with well conceived paraprofessional supports and the *balance* of paraprofessional supports with supports provided by others (e.g., classroom teachers, special educators, related services providers, peers). This is set within a context that challenges us to consider whether our existing or proposed actions to improve paraprofessional supports offer viable solutions that truly accomplish what we intend for students with disabilities or whether they are merely band-aids.

Question 1: To what extent should paraprofessionals be teaching students with disabilities?

What the Literature Says About Question 1

Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.*) allows for

paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised . . . to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities (20 U.S.C. §1412(a)(15)(B)(iii).

The IDEA does not expound upon that provision. How should paraprofessionals assist? What does "appropriately trained and supervised" really mean? This is up to states and

local schools to determine within the boundaries of the IDEA requirement to ensure that *all* children and youth with disabilities receive a free, appropriate, public education.

Confusion about these and related issues have led, over the last decade, to a steady stream of due process hearings, Office of Civil Rights complaints, and court rulings regarding the legal parameters of paraprofessional services in special education (Katsiyannis, Hodge, & Lanford, 2000).

The literature is filled with statements suggesting that paraprofessionals should work under the direction and supervision of qualified professional educators, special educators, or related services providers (Demchak & Morgan, 1998; Doyle, 2002; French, 1999; Gerlach, 2001; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Salzberg & Morgan, 1995; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay & Stahl, 2001). As suggested by Pickett (1999), paraprofessionals "work alongside their teacher/provider colleagues and carry out tasks that support the different teacher/provider functions" (p. 14).

It has been suggested that the increasingly instructional role of paraprofessionals has led to the shifting of teachers' roles. In such models (French, 1999), teachers assume the roles of "*delegator, planner, director, monitor, coach, and program manager*" (p. 70). Although engaging in roles such as these has always been part of the teacher's job when working with others in the classroom (e.g., assistants, parent volunteers, student teachers, peer tutors), the connotation attached to these models seems to be that teachers will teach less and release more of their instructional role to paraprofessionals. This undoubtedly is happening in some locations across the country. But is it a trend that should continue?

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1999), recently clarified its position on the utilization of paraprofessionals by noting, "The intent of using paraprofessionals is to supplement, not supplant, the work of the teacher/service provider" (p. 38). Yet, an emerging descriptive database provides information suggesting that paraprofessionals often operate in isolation and are given relative autonomy to make critical curricular and instructional decisions without the benefit of a qualified professional's designing the plans or being substantively involved in ongoing implementation (Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001b; 2002; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks et al., 1999).

Some teachers have suggested that paraprofessionals should not be responsible for teaching new skills. As one general education teacher stated, (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001b), "Paraprofessionals are not supposed to be teaching new skills. I do that. [A paraprofessional] is used to reinforce them and provide practice." (p. 80). Yet, this statement is merely the opinion of one teacher and does not necessarily reflect a universally accepted standard for the involvement of paraprofessionals in instruction. The lack of

any such standard cuts to the core of an age-old dilemma pertaining to paraprofessionals: What are their appropriate roles, especially as they relate to instruction? Correspondingly, what constitutes professional accountability by teachers and special educators?

There is no doubt that the involvement of paraprofessionals in instruction has increased over the past few decades and now constitutes one of their dominant roles (Downing et al., 2000; French, 1999; Gerlach, 2001; Pickett & Gerlach, 1997; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001b). Yet, the data presented in the literature establishing instruction as a key role for paraprofessionals is based almost exclusively on descriptive questionnaire or interview data that document the opinions and perceptions of professionals, paraprofessionals, and parents about what their role should be (Downing et al., 2000; French, 1998; French & Chopra, 1999; Giangreco et al., 2002; Hadadian & Yssel, 1998; Lamont & Hill, 1991; Minondo, Meyer & Xin, 2001).

It could be argued that much of these data merely reflect what currently exists rather than represent an ideal of service provision toward which we should strive. As suggested earlier, the basis for this more extensive involvement of paraprofessionals engaging in instruction seems to have evolved in response to factors such as personnel shortages and increasing demands for services rather than a defensible conceptualization of how, or under what circumstances, it makes sense for students with or without disabilities to be instructed by paraprofessionals.

Given the absence of student outcome data to assist in making decisions about the role of paraprofessionals in instruction, one of the main challenges in establishing some parameters around this issue is the variation that is present in terms of individual student needs and individual paraprofessional skills, as well as the match between their roles, compensation, training, and supervision. The incredible variability of factors influencing decisions about the type and level of paraprofessional involvement in instruction precludes any highly specific or one-size-fits-all standard for their involvement in instruction.

Sometimes schools are fortunate enough to find or train highly skilled paraprofessionals who can reasonably assume some instructional responsibilities based on professionally designed plans, given corresponding training and supervision. At other times, the paraprofessionals who are hired struggle with academic skills themselves and find it challenging to offer academic support to students. The literature describes teachers' concerns about the academic skillfulness and assignments of some paraprofessionals (Giangreco et al., 2001b).

These concerns relate to paraprofessionals who have less than acceptable skills in spelling and grammar and those who, for example, "don't do algebra." In other cases, academically

capable paraprofessionals are inappropriately assigned to subjects in which they have insufficient background or skills. This is especially problematic in high schools where paraprofessionals may be asked to support students in subjects that require specialized content knowledge in areas such as math, science, and foreign language.

To retain special education's emphasis on individualization and specialized instruction, any standard for the potential involvement of paraprofessionals in instructional roles must be broadly conceptualized. Any such standard must consider relevant factors such as the student's characteristics and needs, potential impact on the student, support needs of the teacher, paraprofessional's skills and training, as well as the match between the paraprofessional's proposed role/assignment, compensation, training, and supervision.

Implications for Practice Pertaining to Question 1

When considering the extent to which paraprofessionals should be instructing students with disabilities, we suggest a simple but important rule-of-thumb to help guide individualized decision-making. Consider the following scenarios that happen to some students with disabilities in our schools, and then ask: Would it be okay if the student didn't have a disability?

- An elementary grade student receives his primary reading instruction from a paraprofessional who is not a trained teacher or reading instructor? *Would it be okay if the student didn't have a disability?*
- A team assigns a paraprofessional, rather than a certified teacher, to provide 75% to 100% of the daily instruction to a student. *Would it be okay if the student didn't have a disability?*
- When a student is having difficulty in algebra, she is assigned a paraprofessional as her tutor. The paraprofessional is unskilled in algebra and is uncomfortable with the subject matter. *Would it be okay if the student didn't have a disability?*
- Throughout the school day a student's workspace is separated from the rest of the class so he can work on separate tasks with a paraprofessional. *Would it be okay if the student didn't have a disability?*
- During a large-group lesson by the teacher, a paraprofessional decides that something different should be happening for a particular student, so the paraprofessional removes her from the lesson without consulting the teacher. *Would it be okay if the student didn't have a disability?*

These are just a few of the situations encountered by some students with disabilities that, though done with good intentions, would likely be unacceptable if they were suggested to support the education of students without disabilities.

These scenarios point out the double standards that exist between education for students with and without disabilities. It is imperative that paraprofessional supports, particularly pertaining to instruction, be offered in ways that do not perpetuate that double standard.

Therefore, the team should explicitly discuss how the classroom teacher and the special educator will interact with students who have disabilities and participate in teaching them (Doyle & Gurney, 2000). If the team determines that the teacher needs assistance, it is important to explore paraprofessional roles that enable the teacher to maintain or improve his or her ability to be the teacher for all of the students in the classroom.

The role of paraprofessionals might include tasks that are both instructional and noninstructional. For example, sometimes having paraprofessionals engage in noninstructional roles—completing clerical tasks, preparing materials, providing personal supports to students, supervising on the playground—can create more opportunities for teachers to teach. These roles can be extremely valuable.

At other times it can be equally important to have paraprofessionals engage in instructional roles such as implementing a teacher-planned small-group lesson, assisting students during independent seatwork, providing individual tutoring as a follow-up to a teacher's lesson, or providing practice opportunities to reinforce previously learned skills. A careful analysis of how the teacher's time is spent can reveal tasks that can be carried out appropriately by paraprofessionals to enhance the work of teachers and special educators.

Question 2: What impact does the proximity of paraprofessionals have on students with disabilities?

What the Literature Says About Question 2

When a paraprofessional is assigned to support a student with a disability, it is not surprising that the paraprofessional would be in close proximity to the student. Sometimes that proximity is warranted and necessary to provide personal care, ensure safety, or provide instructional supports (e.g., verbal or physical prompting/guidance, tutoring). Problems arise when the proximity is excessive or unnecessary.

Only two studies have reported specifically on the effects of proximity between paraprofessionals and students with disabilities. Young et al. (1997) collected observational data pertaining to the proximity between paraprofessionals and three elementary-aged students with autism in inclusive classrooms in the same school. They reported variation in the extent of proximity of paraprofessionals to these students and mixed results pertaining to the relationship between paraprofessional proximity and student behavior (e.g., on-task, in-seat, self-stimulation, inappropriate vocalizations),

as well as initiation of interactions by classmates, teachers, and paraprofessionals. In this study, teacher initiations toward the students with autism were higher when the paraprofessional was more than 2 feet away from the students with autism.

The fact that student responses associated with paraprofessional proximity were varied highlights the importance of individualization when planning supports for students with disabilities. Young et al. (1997) emphasized the importance of further studying paraprofessional supports and expressed their strong concerns about certain models of inclusive education, "particularly when the inclusion is full time with a paraprofessional who has not been trained in the field and whose presence supplants a teacher's involvement" (p. 38).

Davern et al. (1997) suggest that such scenarios, in which students with disabilities are placed in general education classes without appropriately trained support personnel or the classroom teacher has minimal involvement, represent fragmented efforts that are labeled inaccurately as inclusive education. We concur.

In the other study dealing with paraprofessional proximity, Giangreco et al. (1997) reported findings based on 2 years of observational and interview data collected from 134 team members (paraprofessionals, teachers, special educators, related services providers, parents, administrators) who supported the general education placements of 11 students with multiple disabilities in 11 different schools. Based on qualitative analysis of these data, it was reported that paraprofessionals assigned to the students in this study were in close proximity to them much of the time. Sometimes that proximity was considered excessive and was associated with inadvertent detrimental effects.

The assignment of a paraprofessional presented both physical and symbolic barriers that interfered with the teachers getting directly involved with the students with disabilities who were placed in their classes. Further, excessive paraprofessional proximity was associated with creating unnecessary dependence on adults as well as interfering with competent instruction, peer relationships, gender identity, and appropriate personal control (Giangreco et al., 1997).

Shukla, Kennedy, and Cushing (1999) conducted a single-subject experimental study to explore a peer support strategy as an alternative to paraprofessional supports for three middle school students with profound disabilities in general education classes. Although this study did not address paraprofessional proximity directly, it reported favorable evidence for the use of a peer support strategy in comparison to direct assistance from paraprofessionals. Their intervention resulted in higher levels of social interaction between the students with disabilities and peers without disabilities, as well as increased social support behaviors from those peers.

Active engagement of students with disabilities showed no differences in certain activities (e.g., art, industrial crafts) and some improvements in others (e.g., math, social studies). Of the five peers without disabilities who provided supports, two showed no decrease in active classroom engagement and three (who were identified as having academic problems) increased their active classroom engagement as a result of participating in the peer support strategy. Considered together, these three studies highlight the importance and potential impact of paraprofessional proximity on students with disabilities and viable alternatives.

Implications for Practice Pertaining to Question 2

The implications of this initial research on paraprofessional proximity can be broadly categorized as the four A's: *awareness, assessment, actions, and alternatives*. First, it is vital to raise the *awareness* of all team members about paraprofessional proximity and the potential for inadvertent detrimental effects. This can be accomplished by taking simple steps such as sharing the professional literature among team members and devoting team meeting time to a discussion of these issues.

Next, it is important for the team to do an *assessment* of the extent of paraprofessional proximity. This should include both the times and activities where paraprofessional proximity is and is not occurring as well as collective judgments by the team about whether proximity is warranted and is helpful or not academically, socially, and personally. Any such assessment of paraprofessional proximity should include the student's perspective and involve the student directly whenever appropriate.

Based on the information and insights gained from assessment, *actions* can be taken to improve existing paraprofessional supports. Any actions should be rooted in ongoing role clarification, not only for paraprofessionals but for classroom teachers and special educators as well, so their efforts to support students with and without disabilities are collaborative and effective. These actions might include administrative changes in areas such as job descriptions, hiring policies, and staffing (e.g., assigning paraprofessionals to classrooms rather than individual students). Actions also might include specific training for paraprofessionals about how to reduce or fade prompts and supports and to recognize circumstances when it is appropriate to step back from students rather than provide too much proximity.

Finally, while simultaneously strengthening existing paraprofessional supports, teams are encouraged to consider *alternatives* to paraprofessional proximity. This may include more extensive use of natural supports (e.g., peers, parent volunteers), changes in instructional formats (e.g., cooperative learning groups), and increased involvement of teachers and special educators in providing instruction to students

with disabilities within the classroom through co-teaching models.

Question 3: How does the utilization of paraprofessional support affect teacher engagement, and why should it matter?

What the Literature Says About Question 3

The term *teacher engagement* in this context refers to general education teachers having: (a) ongoing instructional contact with students with disabilities who are placed in their class, and (b) active involvement in planning and implementing their instruction along with other appropriate team members (e.g., special educator). Teacher engagement is a critical variable that can affect the appropriateness and quality of a general education placement (Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Villa & Thousand, 2000; York-Barr, Schultz, Doyle, Kronberg, & Crossett, 1996).

To date, only one study has reported a primary focus on the relationship between the utilization of paraprofessionals and teacher engagement. Giangreco, Broer, and Edelman (2001b) reported data based on 56 semistructured interviews and 51 hours of observation in four schools (grades K–12) across a full school year. They found that paraprofessionals were utilized in two primary ways: as one-on-one or program/classroom-based paraprofessionals.

The study's findings suggested that general education teachers were more engaged with their students with disabilities when the paraprofessionals supporting those students were program/classroom-based and that the general education teachers tended to be less engaged when the paraprofessionals were assigned one-on-one to a student with disabilities. The authors cautioned that the differences in teacher engagement were not necessarily the result of the paraprofessional service models alone.

The study described the characteristics when teachers were more and less engaged with students with disabilities as summarized in Table 1. The study further described phenomena associated with teacher disengagement, such as isolation of students with disabilities within the classroom, insular relationships between students with disabilities and one-on-one paraprofessionals, and stigma experienced by students with disabilities as a result of receiving one-on-one paraprofessional supports (Giangreco et al., 2001b).

Implications for Practice Pertaining to Question 3

The primary consideration of the aforementioned information for educational teams and administrators is whether the roles of paraprofessionals and existing models of service delivery are contributing to, hindering, or replacing teacher engagement. The characteristics of teacher engagement (see Table 1) can be utilized by educational team members as a

form of self-assessment or as a set of reflective prompts to identify areas of concern to improve practices. It is vital to take actions that account for variations in the reasons that have contributed to teachers' lack of engagement.

For example, if a general education teacher thinks she is not supposed to be very involved in the instruction of a student with disabilities in her classroom, this might call for role clarification among the team members. If a teacher expresses a willingness to be instructionally engaged with his students with disabilities but does not know how to accomplish this, it might call for capacity building, such as more collaboration with special educators, consultation, training, or structural changes (e.g., class size, ratios of students with and without disabilities). Changes such as these can create conditions for teachers to become more instructionally engaged with their students who have disabilities.

In the rare occurrences in which teachers express unwillingness to be more instructionally engaged with students who have disabilities, administrators may have to provide supportive supervision and facilitate the development and ongoing clarification of expectations, often reflected in their mission statement, policies, and guidelines.

Question 4: How can authentic respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of the important work of paraprofessionals be demonstrated?

What the Literature Says About Question 4

Respect, appreciation, and acknowledgement are important for establishing and maintaining a satisfied and productive paraprofessional workforce, as well as building and sustaining the capacity of a school to serve its students. Although the literature has a limited focus on this topic (Palma, 1994), it does suggest that, in part, shortages and attrition of paraprofessionals are related to lack of respect in the form of low wages, limited opportunities for advancement, and lack of administrative support (Passaro, Pickett, Latham & HongBo, 1994).

One of the more visible ways by which people have attempted to show more respect for paraprofessionals is to use different language to refer to them. Although the IDEA uses the term *paraprofessional*, some people consider the terms *teacher assistant* and *classroom assistant* more descriptive, and these labels often are perceived as more respectful than the term *aide*. Over the past decade the term *paraeducator* has been popularized as a respectful and descriptive term suggesting that the paraprofessional is *working alongside* an educator (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997).

Our only caution is that whatever term is used must be accurate in its definition and connotation. For example, some proponents of the *paraeducator* label equate it with the titles of *paramedic* and *paralegal*. An analysis of these

TABLE 1.
Variations in Teacher Engagement

When Teachers Are More Engaged with Students with Disabilities

- Expressed attitude of ownership and responsibility for the education of *all* students in the class, with and without disabilities
- Highly knowledgeable about the functioning levels and learning outcomes of their students with disabilities
- Collaborated closely with paraprofessionals and special educators based on clear roles
- Planned lessons and activities for paraprofessionals to implement
- Retained instructional decision-making authority for their students with disabilities
- Spent approximately as much time with students with disabilities as those without disabilities
- Had substantial instructional interactions with students with disabilities
- Communicated directly with students with disabilities
- Directed the work of paraprofessionals in class
- Provided mentorship to paraprofessionals and maintained an instructional dialogue with them
- Pursued fading out paraprofessional supports or declined such services if perceived as not needed

When Teachers Are Less Engaged with Students with Disabilities

- Expressed attitude of ownership and responsibility primarily for the education of students *without* disabilities in the class
- Less knowledgeable about the functioning levels of their students with disabilities
- Deferred communication with parents to paraprofessionals
Limited collaboration with paraprofessionals and special educators, roles were unclear
- Did not plan lessons and activities for paraprofessionals to implement
- Relinquished instructional decision-making authority for their students with disabilities to paraprofessionals
- Spent substantially less time with students with disabilities as those without disabilities
- Had limited instructional interactions with students with disabilities
- Communicated indirectly with students with disabilities
- Did not direct the work of paraprofessionals in class
- Did not provide mentorship to paraprofessionals nor maintained an instructional dialogue with them
- Did not pursue fading out paraprofessional supports or declining such services; perceived as always needed

Source: by M. F. Giangreco, S. M. Broer, and S. W. Edelman (2001), *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 26, 75–86. Reprinted by permission.

three professions suggests that they are not equivalent. Unlike individuals hired and given the title paraeducator, both paramedics and paralegals are required to have extensive training and meet national or state standards *before* they are inducted into their respective professions. Virtually anyone with a high school diploma can be referred to as a *paraeducator*.

Ultimately, states or local school districts have to decide how they will refer to paraprofessionals. To be descriptive, respectful, and accurately reflect the job, we encourage the use of any terms that are synonymous with the IDEA term *paraprofessional*.

Only one study was identified that specifically addressed the issues of respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of

paraprofessionals (Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001). The themes of this study included: (a) nonmonetary signs and symbols of appreciation, (b) compensation, (c) being entrusted with important responsibilities, (d) noninstructional responsibilities, (e) wanting to be listened to, and (f) orientation and support.

Beyond the obvious finding that paraprofessionals felt disrespected and “taken advantage of” by low wages, this study highlights the complex and interrelated nature of how paraprofessionals perceived respect. While the paraprofessionals welcomed symbolic signs of appreciation and recognition, they accepted the signs differentially based on who was offering them. Signs of appreciation were most meaningful when they came from those who were in the best position to be authentically knowledgeable about the paraprofessional’s work (e.g., student, parents, teachers, special educators).

Paraprofessionals took it as a sign of respect when professionals oriented and trained them, provided plans for their work, and supervised them. The respectful message embedded in these activities was that the paraprofessionals’ work was important enough to warrant substantial time, energy, and resources from professionals.

Paraprofessionals also felt respected when they were considered an integral member of the classroom team and were given opportunities to provide input into important decisions about the classroom and students. Paraprofessionals indicated that they appreciated being entrusted with important responsibilities.

The challenge related to this finding was that some paraprofessionals considered instruction as their only important responsibility and sought to distance themselves from non-instructional responsibilities (e.g., clerical, personal care of students, classroom set-up and clean-up). As Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer, 2001 stated:

One of our collective challenges is to communicate the value of all of the roles played by paraprofessionals, not just the instructional ones. Having paraprofessionals engage in clerical roles can create time for teacher assessment, planning, or teamwork. We especially need to affirm the value of providing personal care supports (e.g., bathroom, dressing, positioning, mobility, eating supports) for students with the most severe and multiple disabilities as a valued role. Unless we establish and communicate the importance of engaging in such roles (e.g., access, health, personal dignity, readiness for learning), we risk the danger that the devaluing of the roles inadvertently may result in the devaluing of the students for whom those supports are provided. (p. 494)

Implications for Practice Pertaining to Question 4

In considering how we might express respect, appreciation, and acknowledgement to paraprofessionals, an important implication is that they each must be approached individually,

as each has skills, strengths, support needs, and different motivations for doing the job. Although some paraprofessionals use the job as a stepping-stone to becoming a teacher or special educator, we should not assume that all paraprofessionals want to become professional educators or that they all aspire to engage in instructional roles. Therefore, part of respecting the work of paraprofessionals is to respect the nature of the job as it exists and to acknowledge that all the varied functions they serve have value.

Even as school boards, administrators, and unions wrestle with issues such as compensation, school personnel can demonstrate respect and positive regard for paraprofessionals in several ways: extending signs of welcome and thanks, clarifying roles and responsibilities, providing training and supervision that are aligned with their work, and involving the paraprofessionals as valued members of the team.

At the beginning of the year, the classroom teacher should welcome the paraprofessional by:

- Providing the paraprofessional a space of his or her own in the classroom (e.g., desk, table, mailbox, coffee cup).
- Putting the paraprofessional’s name on the door alongside the classroom teacher’s.
- Showing the paraprofessional where the classroom materials are located and communicating that he or she has access to all of them.
- Orienting the paraprofessional to the school, highlighting locations that the classroom teacher frequents and introducing the paraprofessional to other school personnel.
- Being certain that the paraprofessional understands important school policies and procedures by reviewing the school handbook and engaging in conversations around key topics (e.g., confidentiality, communication with families).

When the students arrive, the teacher should model that the teacher and the paraprofessional are a team and introduce the paraprofessional in the same way as other adults in the building. For example, if the teachers and others are referred to as Ms., Mr., or Mrs., paraprofessionals should be referred to using this form of address.

The teacher should make sure that the paraprofessional interacts with all of the students in the class, not just those with disabilities, by encouraging the paraprofessional to greet all the students as they arrive each morning and by giving the paraprofessional morning responsibilities that are helpful in organizing the daily routine. These tasks might involve taking attendance, preparing a learning center, and preparing materials for the teacher, for example.

The teacher should clarify the paraprofessional's role on the classroom team, discuss the associated expectations, and clarify participation in team meetings. The paraprofessional should receive the team's meeting agenda in advance and know how to get items placed on the agenda. In preparing to be an active participant and have input in the meetings, the paraprofessional might formulate written questions to ask and bring student data collected since the last meeting, for instance. Given the paraprofessional's role and schedule, he or she may or may not participate in all team meetings or activities. In a healthy team the teacher and the special educator should know at least as much, and hopefully more, than the paraprofessional about the student's characteristics, needs, and progress. Therefore, if the paraprofessional is not in attendance for some reason, his or her input should be able to be represented at the team meeting by the teacher or special educator.

The teacher should explicitly discuss the paraprofessional's roles and responsibilities relative to (a) instructional and noninstructional tasks, and (b) students with and without disabilities. The licensed teacher or special educator should take the lead in planning the instruction, describing and demonstrating how to implement the planned instruction. Then the teacher and paraprofessional should establish a time when the two will meet to discuss ongoing responsibilities.

It is amazing how important it is to say "thank you" for a job well done. The thanks should be specific: "Thank you for implementing that small-group lesson today; it was a good review that the students really needed." "I really appreciate that you volunteered to do hall duty for me today; it gave me time to tutor James." Sometimes the thanks is especially meaningful when it is expressed in a written note. Gestures of appreciation go a long way in establishing a positive relationship among team members and they also model important social skills for the students in the classroom.

Providing initial and ongoing training, as well as supervision, is a powerful way to demonstrate respect and appreciation for the work of paraprofessionals. Designing training that is in alignment with their roles and responsibilities communicates an understanding of what paraprofessionals do daily. When designed well, paraprofessional training ensures that the range of work that paraprofessionals do is valued within the broader scope of the learning community.

For example, a paraprofessional who assists with instruction in a high school science class might need training related to specific topical areas. Another paraprofessional, who supports a student with severe disabilities, might need training related to individualized mealtime procedures or ways to support the student in initiating interactions with peers. Regardless of the specific tasks, communicating the importance and value of each task is vital.

When paraprofessionals feel valued and respected, the foundation is laid for a productive working relationship. Together, the classroom team can create a positive classroom community in which all students are making progress toward their individualized learning goals.

Question 5: What can be done to improve paraprofessional supports schoolwide?

What the Literature Says About Question 5

Two contemporary resources address paraprofessional supports schoolwide. The National Education Association (Gerlach, 2001) published *Let's Team Up: A Checklist for Paraeducators, Teachers, and Principals*. This booklet offers three interrelated sets of practice statements representing actions that can be taken by paraprofessionals, teachers, and principals, respectively. The checklist statements cover the full range of topics (e.g., roles, orientation, hiring, assigning, training, supervision). Although no data are available on the use of the checklist in schools, it reflects much of the current literature on paraprofessional issues and can serve as a useful reference to assist in schoolwide planning.

A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports (Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 2001a) is a 10-step action-planning process designed to assist school-based teams in assessing their own status in terms of paraprofessional supports. The process guides a team through a self-assessment of 28 key indicators of paraprofessional support. It proceeds by helping the team identify priorities pertaining to paraprofessional supports, develop a corresponding plan of action, implement the plan, and evaluate its impact.

The guide booklet provides more explicit instructions for each step and worksheets to guide the process. The process has been field-tested in four schools (Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, in press) and currently is being field-tested in 47 schools across 16 states. The guide, a list of the field-test sites, and related information are available online at: <http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/parasupport/>

Implications for Practice Pertaining to Question 5

The implications pertaining to Question 5 are brief and straightforward. No matter how much you do as an individual, it never will be as powerful, effective, strategic, or sustainable as it could be if you join forces with colleagues, parents, and community members to take positive steps schoolwide.

If you are concerned about the status of paraprofessional supports in your school, we strongly encourage you to review either or both of the documents referred to in Question 5. They might help you determine if they are applicable in your situation or how they might be adapted to your school's needs.

10-Step Action-planning Process

1. Inform your local school board of your intention to establish a team, or use an existing team, to address paraeducator issues.
2. Ensure that the team includes the appropriate members of the school and local community.
3. Have the team assess its own status and fact-find in relation to the six paraeducator topics:
 - (a) Acknowledging paraeducators
 - (b) Orienting and training paraeducators
 - (c) Hiring and assigning paraeducators
 - (d) Paraeducator interactions with students and staff
 - (e) Roles and responsibilities of paraeducators
 - (f) Supervision and evaluation of paraeducator services.
4. Prioritize and select topics and specific issues that reflect areas of need within the school that the team will work on first.
5. Update your local school board regarding the team's ranked priorities.
6. Design a plan to address the team's ranked priorities.
7. Identify local, regional, and statewide resources to assist in achieving team plans.
8. Implement the team's plans.
9. Evaluate the plan's impact and plan next steps.
10. Report impact and needs to your local school community.

Source: *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports*, by M. F. Giangreco, S. M. Broer, & S. W. Edelman (Burlington: University of Vermont, Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In conclusion, we suggest a three-pronged approach to improving paraprofessional supports for students with disabilities. First and most obviously, we need to do a better job with paraprofessional supports that are already in place at the local level by pursuing role clarification, role alignment with paraprofessional skills, orientation, training, and supervision.

Second, we need to do a better job in determining when paraprofessional supports are warranted and appropriate. Only recently have articles begun to emerge that offer guidelines (Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 1999) or processes (Mueller & Murphy, 2001) for determining situations that call for paraprofessional supports. More development efforts in this area are desperately needed, accompanied by

data-based evaluation of these decision-models to fill the existing void.

Third, we need to explore alternatives to our heavy reliance on paraprofessional supports, especially in inclusive classrooms. Although paraprofessionals undoubtedly will continue to play important roles in supporting the education of students with disabilities, any models that rely too heavily on paraprofessionals to provide instruction present a conundrum. When paraprofessionals remain inadequately supported in terms of training, planning, and supervision, the model is flawed. When paraprofessional roles are not in alignment with their skills, training, or work expectations, the model is flawed. When paraprofessionals are appropriately trained at a level that would allow them to engage in teacher-level activities (e.g., instruction, adaptations) yet continue to be paid a nonlivable wage, the model is flawed.

The conundrum is that if we train paraprofessionals sufficiently to engage in teacher-level activities, align their roles with those teacher skills, and pay them accordingly, why hire them instead of teachers? Even though there will likely be some overlap between what teachers, special educators, and paraprofessionals do, effective models have to clarify the distinctions that allow schools to use resources most effectively to meet student needs.

In closing, we emphasize that substantial *benefits* can accrue for students and teachers when well conceived paraprofessional supports are implemented. These benefits require a *balance* between supports offered by paraprofessionals and those offered by teachers, special educators, peers, and others. When paraprofessional supports are implemented in fragmented or haphazard ways, they may work for a while, but ultimately they are only band-aids.

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