

Paraeducators in Education

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of paraeducators within the American educational system. Although it is unknown whether paraeducators enhance the learning of children or the classroom environment, their numbers are rapidly increasing as they are perceived to be vital to the educational system. As revealed in this paper, despite exceptional growth, the practice of using paraeducators generally remains unregulated, underdeveloped, and unmethodical. It is argued that this current state of affairs leaves teachers, paraeducators, and students in a precarious situation. Important issues discussed in this paper include the (a) changing role of the classroom teacher, (b) teacher-paraeducator matching process, (c) paraeducator-teacher/educational community relationship, and (d) training, supervision, and evaluation of paraeducators.

Paraeducators in Education

Upon their review of data from the U.S. Department of Labor, the National Center for Education Statistics, and other sources, Pickett and Gerlach (1997) reported that, "...employment of paraprofessionals will be one of the fastest growing occupational areas in the job market for the foreseeable future" (p. ix). Ashbaker and Morgan (2001) pointed out that, "Today, there are more than 930,000 paraeducators employed in the United States, a number that is predicted to increase 38% by 2005" (p. 60). The increase of paraeducators has been attributed to the (a) changing roles of teachers, (b) continuing shortages in the ranks of school professionals, (c) expansion of educational and related services to include children from birth to kindergarten and to involve youth in transition programs, and (d) the current educational model providing inclusive education for all children (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997).

According to Ashbaker and Morgan (2001), paraeducator is a blanket term, "...covering such titles as teacher's aid, classroom assistant, instructional assistant, and educational paraprofessional. The term denotes those who work alongside educators in much the same way that paralegals work with lawyers and paramedics work with doctors and nurses" (p. 60).

Paraeducators are employed in both mainstream and special education classrooms (Meyen, Vergason, & Whelan, 1996). Pickett, Vasa, and Steckelberg (1993) have gone so far as describing paraeducators as “specialists” [italics added]. This obsequious description, however, appears without supporting references regarding specialized training or certification. Furthermore, it has been noted that paraeducators seldom enjoy formal training or career development opportunities (Pickett et al., 1993) and do not possess any formal certification (French, 1998). Beale (2001) addressed this latter point and stated,

Professions outside education have recognized the importance of establishing standards and certification requirements. An occupational comparison for paraprofessionals indicates that certification requirements for occupations other than paraeducators include minimum standards for a wide range of professions including bus driver, cosmetologist, dental assistant, home health aide, manicurist, nurse aide, paramedic, and plumber. The question needs to be asked, “Are standards for paraeducators less important than these other career fields?” (p. 245).

The lack of paraeducator training and preparedness brings into question their qualifications, skills, and ability to interact with children and colleagues within the educational context. As discussed below, the reality of this situation leaves teachers, paraeducators, and students in a precarious position. It should also be underlined that despite the history of paraeducators (see Bommer, 1982) and their remarkable growth in numbers over the past forty years, it is unknown whether paraeducators enhance the classroom environment or student learning (French, 1998). A review of the literature indicates that current support for paraeducator involvement is limited to personal testimonials and anecdotal reports. Without a systematic and credible means by which to assess the risks and benefits of paraeducators, their involvement within the educational system will likely continue haphazardly.

This paper discusses the role of paraeducators in the educational system (Pickett et al., 1993). Focus is placed on the potential implications of using individuals from a group that has remained virtually unregulated and underdeveloped (Beale, 2001). Areas that are explored include the (a) changing role of the classroom teacher, (b) paraeducator-teacher/educational community relationship, (c) teacher-paraeducator matching process, and (d) preparedness of teachers to train, supervise, and evaluate paraeducators. From the outset, it should be emphasized that the aim of this critique is not to vilify the good intentions of paraeducators. The aim is to underscore how little is known about the needs or practices of this group and to generate systematic exploration in this important area of education.

Paraprofessional Involvement: A Historical Overview

The post World War II shortage of teachers was a critical recruitment period for paraprofessionals in education. Bowman and Klopff (as cited in Pickett & Gerlach, 1997) reported on a school district in Michigan that recruited and trained uncredentialed, college-educated teacher aids. These individuals monitored students and performed clerical and basic administrative tasks. The rationale for hiring aides during this period included providing teachers with more time to spend on instructional activities.

During the 1960's and 1970's, in response to social, political, and institutional change, the involvement of paraprofessionals in education gained momentum (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). With new entitlement and community action programs, funds were made available to employ paraeducators. Calls to recruit individuals from minority/under-represented ethnic and social backgrounds, who would serve as liaisons between communities and schools, were answered (Genzuk, 1997). Consequently, there was a gradual progression wherein paraeducators moved from liaison roles to interacting directly (e.g., providing instruction) with students and small classroom groups.

Despite previous enthusiasm for paraeducators, federal support during the 1980's waned and interest in paraeducator development receded. Consequently, "As years passed, policies and administrative guidelines concerned with paraprofessional employment, roles, placement, supervision, and preparation became more and more unstructured" (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997, p. 9). As a result of legislative actions (e.g., Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and sublime national educational objectives pronounced in the 1990's (Knudsen & Morrissette, 1998), there was a resurgence of interest in the role and development of paraeducators. Legislative actions were augmented by the ongoing shortage of teachers and the expanding and changing roles of teachers.

Changing Role of the Classroom Teacher

There are major implications associated with teachers assuming the role of "educational managers" [italics added] (e.g., Pickett et al., 1993; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996). Perhaps the most significant implication pertains to teachers delegating and overseeing instructional tasks rather than actually providing instruction themselves. Ashbaker and Morgan (2001) stated that, "...many paraeducators spend up to 50% of their time providing instruction to individual students with no "teacher" [italics original] present. It has also been estimated that special education students may spend up to 80% of their instructional time with paraeducators rather than certified teachers" (p. 62). This finding is supported by Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, and Stahl (2001) who wrote, "Studies have reported that some paraprofessionals believe they are wholly responsible for meeting the needs of students receiving special education services, including the responsibilities of planning lessons, supervising students, and evaluating student performance" (p. 521). In essence, students are taught and guided by individuals who lack curriculum, teaching, and diagnostic expertise. This development conflicts with the position of the American Teachers Federation (2002), which states that, "The paraprofessional's responsibility is to enrich the learning experience for students by assisting in the classroom and performing both administrative and instructional duties that complement and support the instructional plan and educational goals". Clearly, the American Teacher's Federation sees paraeducators "assisting" [italics added] in the educational process and not taking a lead role as indicated above.

An obvious concern regarding paraeducator instruction is that students do not benefit from teachers who are trained to direct student learning and detect learning problems (e.g., Taylor, Anselmo, Foreman, Schatschneider, & Angelopoulos, 2000). Left undetected, learning problems can fester and contribute to behavior problems (e.g., Tsatsanis & Fuerst, 1997) and poor academic performance (e.g., Shimabukuro, Prater, Jenkins, & Edelen-Smith, 1999).

The under-qualification or poor preparation of paraeducators has been identified (e.g., Morgan, Ashbaker, & Forbush, 1998). Wadsworth and Knight (1996) commented that paraeducators will typically have, "... a minimum of a high school diploma and little-to-no preservice training for the job" (p. 166). It can be argued that involving untrained and under-prepared individuals in the schools undermines and contradicts the need for professional teacher training, ongoing professional development, and higher education in general. An obvious question is: "Why should teachers further their education and advance their skills when the curriculum can be offered by untrained individuals"? Although classroom teachers may oversee and monitor the work of paraeducators, in the end it may be paraeducators who teach and guide students (Riggs, 2001a).

As teachers assume managerial positions, paraeducators will be responsible for providing direct service to students. Although sounding reasonable in theory, there are important ethical, legal, and professional considerations with this arrangement. Pickett et al. (1993) asserted that,

No matter what duties are assigned to paraeducators, it is the teacher who has ultimate responsibility for diagnosing instructional needs, prescribing and implementing teaching strategies, and assessing learning outcomes. It is the role of the paraeducator to carry out tasks under the supervision of the teacher (p. 12).

Questions abound regarding the practices of paraeducator instruction and teacher management. In terms of classroom instruction, it remains unclear whether paraeducators possess the necessary skills to effectively teach students. As previously stated, despite the unprecedented growth of paraprofessionals in the classroom, there is no research indicating that paraeducators enhance student learning. In terms of monitoring paraeducator development, it is only assumed that teachers possess the skills to delegate tasks, train, supervise, and evaluate paraeducators. There is no research to support these claims.

Paraeducator-Teacher/Educational Community Relationship.

Although initially employed to fulfill clerical or maid roles (e.g., Self, 1967), paraeducators are now regarded as valuable (Parsons & Reid, 1999) and vital to the educational process (French, 1998; Morgan et al., 1998). What remains remarkable is that in spite of their growing numbers and the central role they play, literature pertaining to the relationship between paraeducators and teachers/educational community remains scant. More specifically, aside from practical tips (e.g., Morgan, Ashbaker, Lock, 2001), ways in which to develop and nurture such relationships have not been articulated. Frank, Keith, and Steil (1988) punctuated this historical problem and wrote, "Although paraprofessionals are common in special education classrooms, there has been a lack of clarity regarding proper roles and responsibilities and effective use of paraprofessionals" (p. 253).

The apparent separation between paraeducators and teachers/educational community is an interesting phenomenon that remains unexplored. Although the value of paraeducators has been touted, they remain on the periphery of the educational community. A review of the literature suggests that teachers are unclear about their relationship with paraeducators and vice

versa (e.g., French, 1998).

Several hypotheses can be presented regarding this particular issue. For example, it can be hypothesized that paraeducators and teachers maintain clear boundaries to ensure that personal time and energy is preserved and that their respective job descriptions are valued. For example, paraeducators may fear additional responsibilities and exploitation if they are too accessible. Similarly, teachers may fear that paraprofessionals will request additional support and supervision. In some ways, this relationship can be likened to the interactions between teachers and student teachers. Student teachers who are eager to learn or who require additional support, for example, may unknowingly infringe on teacher time. In turn, to preserve their energy and protect their time, teachers may withdraw and become less accessible. This reaction should not be misconstrued as callous. In the reality of their work, teachers require time to regroup, plan, and conserve energy. If this hypothesis holds true, paraeducators and teachers will find themselves working toward a common cause with minimal communication and interaction.

Selection and Matching Process

Administrators are generally responsible for paraeducator selection and teacher-paraeducator matching. In essence, teachers have been excluded from the selection and matching process. According to Vasa and Steckelberg (as cited in Pickett and Gerlach, 1997), it is good practice to include teachers in the interview process to minimize potential conflicts between team members. After all, it will be teachers who eventually train, supervise, and evaluate paraeducators. Moreover, teachers possess insight, professional competencies, and knowledge of the classroom environment in which paraeducators will be asked to operate (Hale & Ulmer, 1972). When actively involved in the selection process, teachers may feel empowered and invested in developing a meaningful relationship with paraeducators.

When excluded from the paraeducator selection process, teachers may incorrectly assume that paraeducators possess appropriate qualifications and experience. When this is not the case, however, resentment and conflict between teachers and paraeducators may ensue. In addition, due to personality differences and incompatible philosophies of education, a collaborative working relationship may be strained and difficult to foster. A consequence of poor teacher-paraeducator matching may be inconsistent teaching methods and strategies that may occur at the students' expense and defeat the original purpose of including paraeducators in the classroom.

To enhance a teacher-paraeducator match, a trial period can be employed wherein both individuals are afforded opportunities to interact with one another and experience each other's working style. Once the infamous honeymoon period has ended, teachers and paraeducators can assess the situation and determine what is best for the students. An obvious criticism of this suggestion is that schools do not have the luxury of a matching process. In concrete terms, teachers are told who to work with and paraeducators are given classroom assignments.

Paraeducator Job Description

The importance of a clearly defined job description cannot be over-emphasized and has been well documented in the literature (French as cited in Pickett & Gerlach, 1997). When

clearly articulated employee expectations are absent, role confusion can ensue. According to French (as cited in Pickett & Gerlach, 1997), a personalized job description creates a common basis of understanding about the paraeducator duties and about the circumstances of the work environment. A well-defined job description also clarifies competencies and the necessary training to perform designated tasks. In an excellent review regarding competencies and state standards for paraeducators, Beale (2001) noted that, “States have recognized that the absence of standards and credentialing requirements can negatively impact the instruction of children in the classroom” (p. 247). This review is important because it tempers the paraeducator debate by alluding to the potential problems associated with unprepared paraeducators.

When a formalized job description is absent, and expectations remain vague, resentment may surface when teachers’ requests are declined by paraeducators. On the other hand, paraeducator skills may be under-utilized or misdirected. While commenting on the issue of paraeducator preparedness, French (1998) wrote,

Often, authors make no distinctions among the training topics desired by people who hold different job titles, who perform specific tasks or duties, or who have different characteristics. Sometimes there is no distinction among the types of training needed to work in different placements (e.g., self-contained vs. resource, elementary vs. secondary), locations (e.g., rural, urban, district, intermediate units), or working conditions (e.g., number of hours worked per week, unique combinations of programmatic duties). Additional training in behavior management and interpersonal communication skills are the most commonly reported needs (p. 358).

Inherent in the teacher-paraeducator relationship, is the teacher’s ability to appropriately delegate responsibility to paraeducators and capitalize on their strengths and interests. An additional consideration pertains to the exploitation of paraeducators when their role remains nebulous. More specifically, paraeducators may be assigned excessive responsibility beyond their capabilities.

Inherent challenges in evaluating paraprofessionals can be linked to inadequate job descriptions. Poorly defined employment parameters leave teachers with little guidance when assessing the performance of paraeducators. If teachers do not know what to evaluate, it is unlikely that their evaluation will accurately reflect the performance of paraeducators.

Paraeducator Training and Supervision

Only 13 states have credentialing mechanisms for paraeducators (Beale, 2001). The remaining 37 state departments of education lack standards or guidelines for employment, roles and duties, placement, supervision, and preparation of paraeducators. This lack of articulation is not surprising and is reflected in teacher education programs. For example, formal course work regarding the effective paraeducator evaluation could not be found in a large sample of teacher education programs. It appears that although prospective teachers will likely work with paraeducators within their classroom, they are not provided with the necessary skills through pre-service preparation. Despite longstanding concern regarding this shortcoming within teacher education programs (Frith & Lindsey, 1982), little has changed. Wallace et al. (2001)

emphasized the need for teacher preparation and asserted, “Teachers must be prepared before they enter the educational settings to understand how to work with paraprofessionals as well as students, parents, and others” ... “Faculty in higher education institutions can play an important role in preparing new teachers for the competencies necessary for working with paraprofessionals collaboratively early in their careers” (p. 531).

Two basic assumptions can be drawn from the lack of attention devoted to student teacher preparation. First, it can be assumed that teacher educators/school administrators believe that all prospective teachers possess the inherent ability to assume this formidable task. Second, although declared essential, in reality the task of paraprofessional training and supervision may not be important.

The lack of articulation and standards is disconcerting, de-values the role of paraeducators, and brings into question the quality of their involvement. From a historical perspective, Shuey (1967) discussed the problems associated with the absence of professional credentialing, “One of the challenges of educating aides is that they come into the program with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities. Some of them need to acquire basic skills of reading and writing; others need remedial work in speech” (p. 55). As depicted by Shuey (1967), paraeducators can be perceived as individuals in need of basic instruction. An obvious concern regarding the lack of regulation of paraeducators pertains to their ability to effectively perform assigned tasks.

It may be argued that paraeducators are expected to receive adequate training while on the job. Planning for paraeducator training is unlikely to occur incidentally and should be planned and implemented in a meaningful and effective manner. Who assumes the responsibility for assessing the needs of paraeducators, and developing and executing training programs become critical questions. Once again, expecting teachers to shoulder this responsibility without adequate training or compensation is unreasonable and would likely clash with bargaining agreements.

Accompanying the evolution of paraeducators have been calls for adequate training and supervision (Riggs, 2001b). Unfortunately, the implementation of training and supervision models has been sporadic or has not materialized (French, 1998; Parsons & Reid, 1999; Riggs, 2001a, 2001b; Wadsworth & Knight, 1996). Wallace et al. (2001) asserted that, “Teachers, however, are rarely prepared through preservice or inservice training to effectively work with paraprofessionals in a way that will improve student performance” (p. 522). It is unclear why the aforementioned plans have not come to fruition. Perhaps decision-makers within the educational system remain uncertain about the actual role of paraeducators and the training, supervision, and evaluation they require. More specific questions include (a) exactly what skills do paraeducators need to learn?, (b) how will the necessary training be implemented?, (c) who will be commissioned to deliver the training?, (d) who will provide the supervision?, and (e) who will conduct the evaluations?

Other plausible reasons include workload/union issues, parent reactions, and teacher reactions. Asking teachers to assume more responsibility certainly becomes a contentious workload and union issue. Although this particular issue is beyond the scope of this paper, it is

obvious that expecting teachers to exceed their job descriptions and become involved in activities for which they may not be trained raises important ethical, legal, and professional issues.

It is also possible that parents are unaware of paraeducator qualifications and how central paraeducators have become in the education of their children. It should not be assumed that parents (a) fully understand the differences between paraeducators and teachers, (b) realize the lack of paraeducator preparedness and certification, and (c) endorse the centrality of paraeducators in the areas of instruction and evaluation. Perhaps if parents were more aware of these issues increased concern might emerge. In short, taxpayers expect that their children are taught and evaluated by certified teachers.

Finally, an increased demand for specialized training might result in paraeducators withdrawing their services or demanding increased wages and benefits. Either response would certainly strain an already burdened educational system.

Training Paraeducators

A distinction between training and supervision is also lacking in the literature. Suggesting that both activities are one and the same is misleading. Training mirrors the teacher education process and involves introducing paraeducators to curriculum design and pedagogical and evaluation skills. Supervision on the other hand, assumes that individuals possess foundational information and require assistance in translating this material into practice. Expecting teachers to train paraeducators assumes that teachers (a) are interested in this endeavor, (b) possess the necessary pedagogical skills to train adults, and (c) have the time to devote to this process.

Moreover, expecting teachers to train and supervise paraeducators without formal instruction and ongoing support places these professionals in a precarious position. Unless teachers receive formal instruction in how to supervise and work effectively with paraeducators, both parties are at risk. As noted by Wallace et al. (2001), aside from a few exceptions, competency requirements for the training of paraprofessionals are absent in special education and general education certification or endorsement programs.

Idiosyncrasies of Training

At first glance the training of paraprofessionals may appear straightforward. When considered more carefully, however, the skills required to provide effective, ongoing training are many and include: interviewing skills, effective communication, the development and implementation of on-the-job training activities, the planning, assignment and delegation of tasks, providing feedback, completing performance evaluations, and problem solving.

Providing additional training can inadvertently contribute to eventual power struggles between paraeducators and teachers. As paraeducators gain more knowledge and confidence, they may begin to question the pedagogical practices of the classroom teacher. In essence, the pre-existing teacher-paraeducator hierarchy becomes less distinguishable and a jockeying for

power might ensue.

Supervising Paraeducators

Expecting teachers to provide ongoing paraeducator supervision is both improbable and controversial. For example, French (1999) found that a high ratio of teachers reported a lack of planning time and communication with paraeducators. In another study, Stahl and Lorenz (1995) determined that a high number of paraprofessionals reported no regular planning or meeting time with teachers. Further, paraeducator supervision is usually the responsibility of teachers who are relatively unprepared to assume this role (French, 1998; Pickett et al., 1983). French (1998) found that teachers were reluctant to provide supervision and considered paraeducators as peers rather than supervisees. Riggs (2001a) discovered that, "...paraprofessionals were often unclear about the specific policies and procedures for their supervision and evaluation" (p. 58). The lack of importance attributed to teacher supervisory skills is reflected in the fact that only 2 states require teachers to be prepared to supervise paraprofessionals (Wallace et al., 2001).

It is unreasonable to assume that teachers can perform supervisory tasks without formal instruction and ongoing meta-supervision. Meta-supervision (supervision-of-supervision) models, for example, have been established in other professions to enhance supervisee and supervisor development. Whether such models are utilized within programs that employ paraeducators is unknown. Without a defined supervision model in place, however; there is a risk of continued misguided direction for all involved.

Assuming that teachers are adequately prepared to train and supervise paraeducators, whether they are afforded ample time to exercise these distinctive skills is a further consideration. For training and supervision to be meaningful, there must be a genuine commitment to these processes. In other words, sufficient time would have to be allotted for teachers to perform these additional roles. Further, teachers would require time to interact with their supervisors to process supervision issues and refine their skills.

Paraeducator Evaluation

The problem of teacher bias or the effects of personality conflict are obvious concerns when the evaluation process remains subjective. Whether teachers are trained to competently assess paraeducators remains questionable. As noted earlier, formal coursework in this area was absent in a large sample of teacher education programs. Based on this finding, it can be assumed that teachers are assigned a task for which they are unprepared.

Because there is no formalized evaluation training program in place, teachers may underestimate the importance of an effective evaluation process. Of course, an obvious concern associated with this issue is that incompetent paraeducators are able to remain active in the educational system.

Principals can also assume training, supervisory, and evaluative functions to ameliorate the paraeducator dilemma. This arrangement, however, is beset with major obstacles. Obvious

challenges associated with principal supervision include (a) the effect of the power differential (employer/employee) on the training and supervision relationship, (b) the lack of principal training, supervision, and evaluation skills, (c) the inability of principals to observe paraeducators on a regular basis, and (d) the demand on principals' time to supervise paraeducators and information with teachers. Having principals assume a central role is shortsighted and fails to address the outstanding issues pertaining to paraeducator involvement within the educational system.

Conclusion

It appears imminent that the number of paraeducators within the American educational system will continue to grow and that these individuals will play a central role in the education of children. Based on this projection, three important issues surface. First, institutions of higher education will have to prepare prospective teachers to work collaboratively with paraeducators. This means that faculty charged with curriculum design will need to be convinced that student teachers require instruction and experience in this area. According to literature, and a random review of higher education programs, few are convinced that such a need exists.

Second, as teachers move from a traditional teaching role to a managerial role, these professionals will require additional skills in order to direct and monitor instructional activity. In short, teachers will assume the dual responsibility of overseeing the classroom environment as well as paraeducator development and performance. Third, teachers will need to be invested in developing specific skills to effectively train, supervise, and evaluate paraeducators. Based on the extant literature, it is naïve to believe that student teachers and teachers possess the necessary interest or skills to complete the aforementioned tasks. Nevertheless, paraeducator popularity underlines the importance of designing a curriculum and in-service training modules to prepare student teachers and teachers. As noted by Wallace et al. (2001), "...changes in the traditional educational infrastructure should be considered" (p. 530).

The need for rigorous and systematic research to determine whether paraeducators enhance student learning or the classroom environment is also obvious. Without such information, the growing practice of involving paraeducators within the classroom is highly questionable to say the least. Although the involvement of paraeducators has been championed over the years, virtually nothing is known about the risks or benefits to students. Following this trend blindly without investigating potential disadvantages is irresponsible and does not elucidate the influence of paraeducators.

If the practice of using paraeducators is to be taken seriously, greater collaboration between teachers, administration, and unions will be necessary. For example, the restructuring of bargaining agreements, teacher education curriculum, and teacher expectations will need to occur to accommodate such radical change. As it stands, students and paraeducators are vulnerable due to unsystematic training, supervision, and evaluation practices.

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