

The Paraprofessional Role of Connector

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ABSTRACT

This article presents paraeducators' perceptions of the role they play in connecting the school to its community. Forty-nine paraeducators employed in various educational settings participated in focus-group interviews. Paraeducators reported close relationships with students and their parents that provided the basis for the paraprofessionals to act as connectors between parents and teachers, parents and community services, students and teachers, students and their parents, and students and their peers. The participants shared how they provided connections between the student and curriculum by using specific strategies aimed at helping students learn. The study uncovered the barriers that hamper the paraprofessional role as a connector.

PARAPROFESSIONALS OFTEN RESIDE IN THE SAME community as their students and thus have the potential to provide linguistic and cultural continuity (French & Pickett, 1997; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Nittoli & Giloth, 1997; Miramontes, 1990; Pickett, 1989; Rubin & Long, 1994). Rueda and DeNeve (1999) highlighted the importance of paraprofessionals as a bridge between teachers' and students' cultures. Other researchers have suggested that indigenous paraprofessionals are better able to reach, communicate, and empathize with community residents (Nittoli & Giloth, 1997). Also, parents have reported that they value and regard paraprofessionals as important links between families and schools (French & Chopra, 1999). Some educators regard currently employed paraprofessionals as a potential pool of future teachers for

language minority students, as they are more likely to teach in culturally sensitive ways with students for whom English is a second language (Bruner, 1996; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Kinney, Strand, Hagerup, & Brunner 1994; Lerner & Halpern, 1987; Lerner, Halpern, & Harkavy, 1992).

Yet, little is known about the actual role of paraprofessionals as community liaisons or connectors. The literature ignores paraprofessionals' perspectives on their roles, responsibilities, behaviors, or actions regarding parent, community, and school relations. In what ways do paraprofessionals contribute to these relationships? What specific tasks and duties do they perform that create connections among students, parents, community members, and schools? How do they assume these responsibilities, even if they are not assigned to them?

This study was an initial exploration of the construct of "connector," which has been mentioned in the literature but not defined. None of the literature addresses the construct from the paraprofessional point of view or provides any insight into paraeducators' thoughts regarding their role in creating connections or bridges among students, communities, and schools. We used the words *connector* and *liaison* as general terms, without defining them for participants. The thesaurus in Microsoft Word (Office 98) provides the words *attach*, *join*, *unite*, *tie*, *fix*, and *bond* as synonyms for *connect*. For *liaison* the words *link*, *connection*, *relationship*, and *association* are given as synonyms. We use many of these words interchangeably with *connect* and *connector* throughout this article.

METHOD

Interview Protocol and Process

We conducted focus-group interviews that can be useful in identifying participants' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences (Creswell, 1997). Focus groups encourage candor and allow increased sample size without substantial increase in study duration or expense (Krueger, 1994). Participants provided demographic data on a brief questionnaire. The interview protocol was based on the limited literature regarding paraprofessional relationships with parents and their roles as community links. The protocol included questions under two major themes: (a) relationships among paraprofessionals and students and their families and (b) paraprofessional roles in representing the community to the school and vice versa.

Probing questions were used to elicit responses with more depth regarding the connections among schools, students, families, and the community. Some examples of probes include the following:

- What relationships or connections exist among you, the school, and your community?
- What makes these relationships possible, and what inhibits them?

- How do paraprofessionals support the learning process, and what cultural or community factors affect this process?
- How is knowledge of the family and community used, transmitted, and linked to the school, and vice versa?
- How are the dual roles of school representative and community representative helpful to students?

Five focus-group interviews took place on two different dates within a month's time. Three interviews occurred simultaneously on one date and two on another. Teams of two investigators—one acting as moderator, the other as assistant moderator—conducted simultaneous focus-group sessions of 90 minutes in length. Participants were briefed on confidentiality, purpose, and possible publication of the research. Participants completed demographic questionnaires and signed consent forms. The moderator posed questions, probing for additional details and monitoring group discussions. The assistant moderator operated an audiocassette recorder, kept track of time, and took notes. Although multiple interviewers conducted the focus groups, the faculty advisor of the project rotated among groups to ensure consistency of questioning and to guarantee that moderators adhered to the interview protocol.

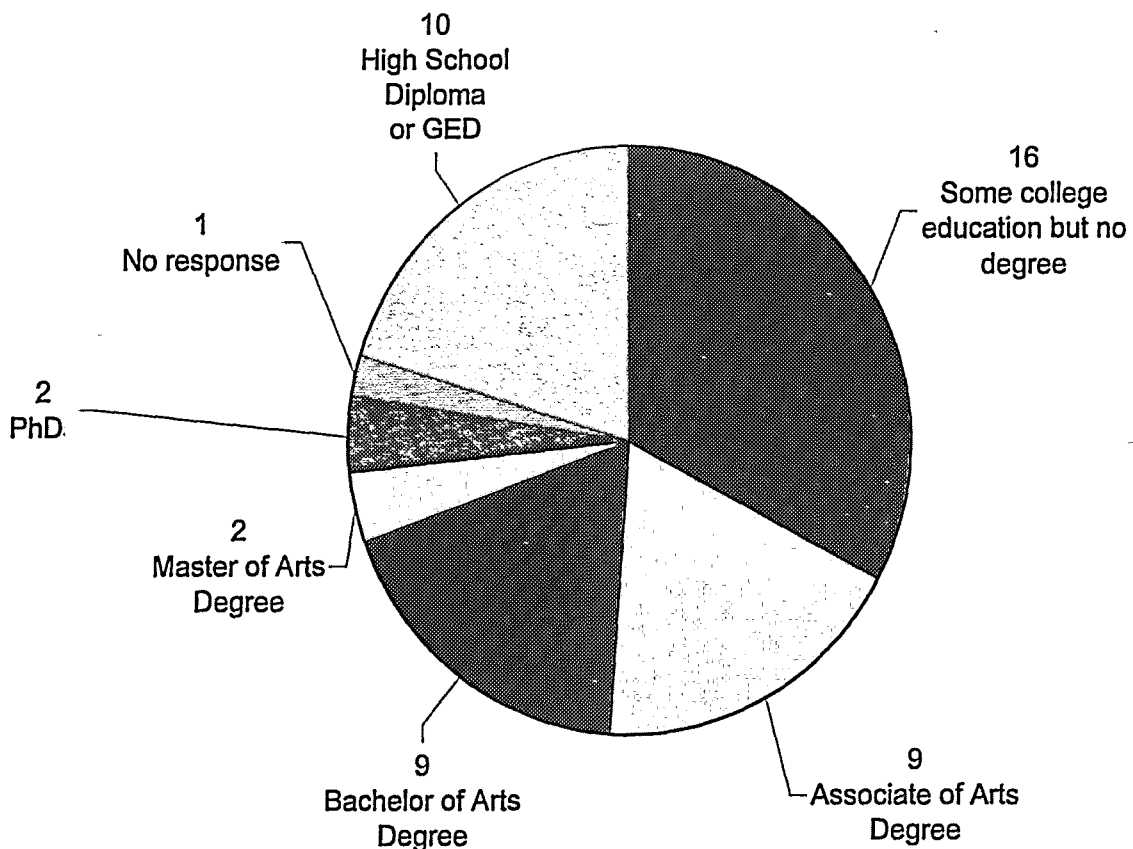


FIGURE 1. Education.

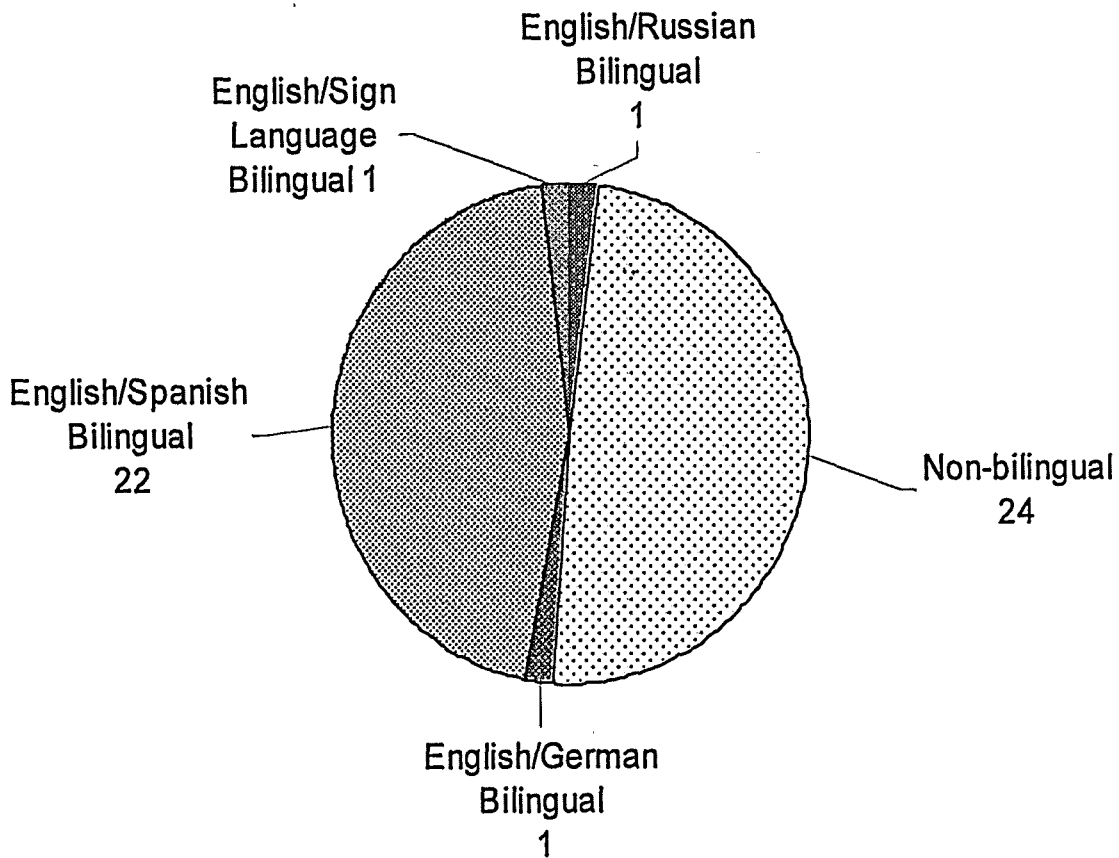


FIGURE 2. Language ability.

Participant Selection

A total of 49 individuals (46 women, 3 men) voluntarily participated in the study; 34 worked in the community in which they lived. Participants were self-selected from the population of paraeducators attending two different paraeducator conferences. Participants had only the 50-word description presented in both conference programs on which to base their decisions to participate.

Participant Work Experience and Setting

Figures 1 through 5 display the demographic data provided by participants regarding their education levels, language abilities, employment duration, place of employment, and community type.

Data Analysis

The audiotapes were transcribed, and researchers read the transcriptions individually to decipher themes, which were noted in the margins of the transcripts. This initial analysis revealed that the emerging themes were common to all groups. Team members met to obtain consensus on the themes and to relate particular statements to each theme. We wrote each theme on a sheet of butcher paper and cut participant quota-

tions corresponding to each theme out of the transcripts and pasted them onto the butcher paper. The paper was then hung on the wall, and notations were added for follow-up discussion, particularly regarding quotations that appeared to relate to multiple themes.

Once we gained agreement on the quotations that related to each theme, we used the cut and paste functions of Microsoft Word to create separate documents for each theme and the related quotations. We continually revisited data and discussed themes throughout the study.

RESULTS

The major themes and subthemes that resulted from the data analysis are listed in Table 1 and are described in the section that follows. This study confirmed that paraprofessionals saw themselves as connectors or bridges among parents, students, and other members of the school and community. However, the relationships that existed between paraprofessionals and students and their families preceded the paraprofessional role as a connector, with the connector role growing out of these relationships. The study also revealed other factors, such as lack of respect, insufficient training, and unclear roles, for paraeducators that had an effect on this connector role.

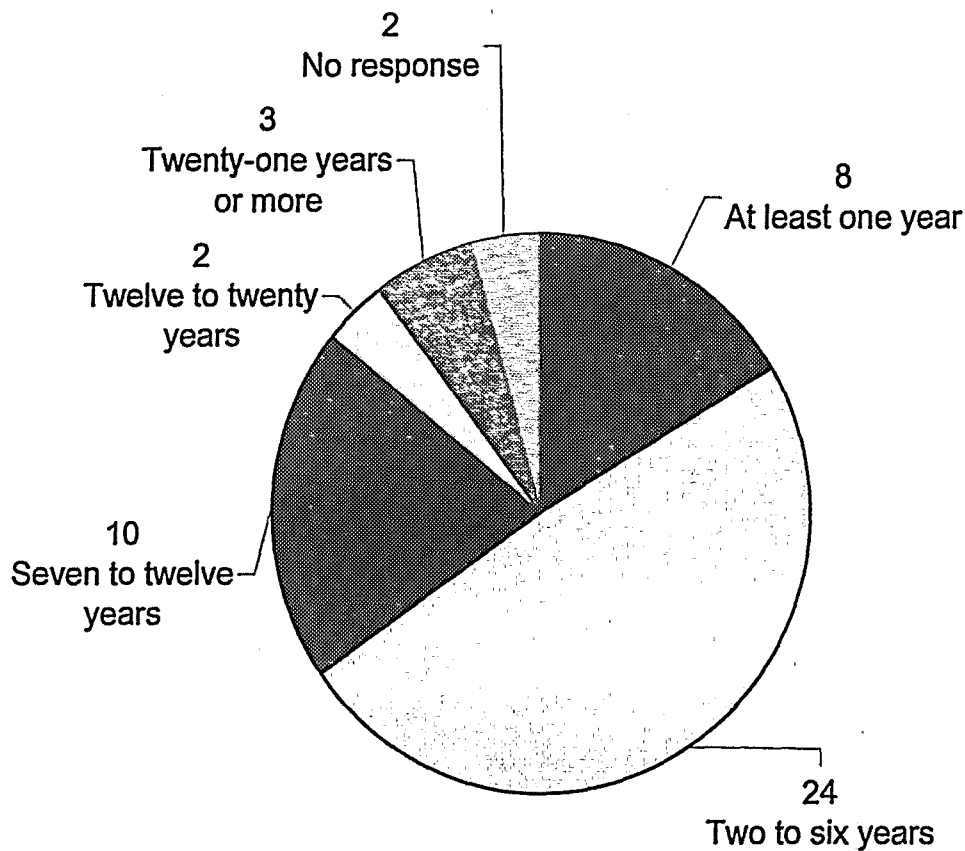


FIGURE 3. Duration of employment as a paraeducator.

Close Relationships Between Paraprofessionals and Parents/Students

In some cases, paraprofessionals considered themselves “friends of the family.” One paraprofessional proudly proclaimed, “My relationship with my parents of my students is very, very good. I like to speak with all of them and talk to them about the children. . . . They’re my friends.” Several participants described a familial relationship. One paraprofessional remarked, “I feel like I am their [the students’] big sister, and I told them they’re like brothers and sisters. I don’t treat them like my students, and I think that some of the families learn to appreciate that.” Another added, “I always felt like my position was more like a grandmother and the teacher was more like a parent. I got the good stuff and the teacher the bad.” Still another paraprofessional explained that his relationship with some families was so close that it extended beyond school hours when he babysat at the parents’ request. Paraprofessionals in this study presented several reasons for the personal relationships they shared with parents and children.

Habitation in the Same Neighborhood. Most participants lived in the same neighborhood as the students, although this was not always the case for the teachers they worked with. As a result, the parents and students often

encountered the paraprofessionals on the streets, in neighborhood restaurants, in grocery stores, and at community events. These opportunities allowed paraprofessionals to get to know the students and their families closely, resulting in what the paraeducators perceived as a mutually beneficial familiarity. One explained, “Kids feel really comfortable around the paraprofessionals that live in the community because you’re somebody else’s mom. . . . You are a person that they feel comfortable going and talking to.”

These relationships raised several issues. Whereas some participants expressed that their supervising teachers appreciated the close relationships the paraprofessionals shared with the families, as it helped their work, some paraprofessionals experienced resentment from the teachers. One participant explained:

We have some new teachers, and it bothers them that they [parents] come to us. But others, because they’ve been there just as long as we have and they know that we’ve had a real close relationship with the children . . . it doesn’t bother them . . . and then there are others who are even relieved that they don’t have to deal with the parents.

Several paraeducators reported that the school, fearing the divulgence of confidential information, discouraged para-

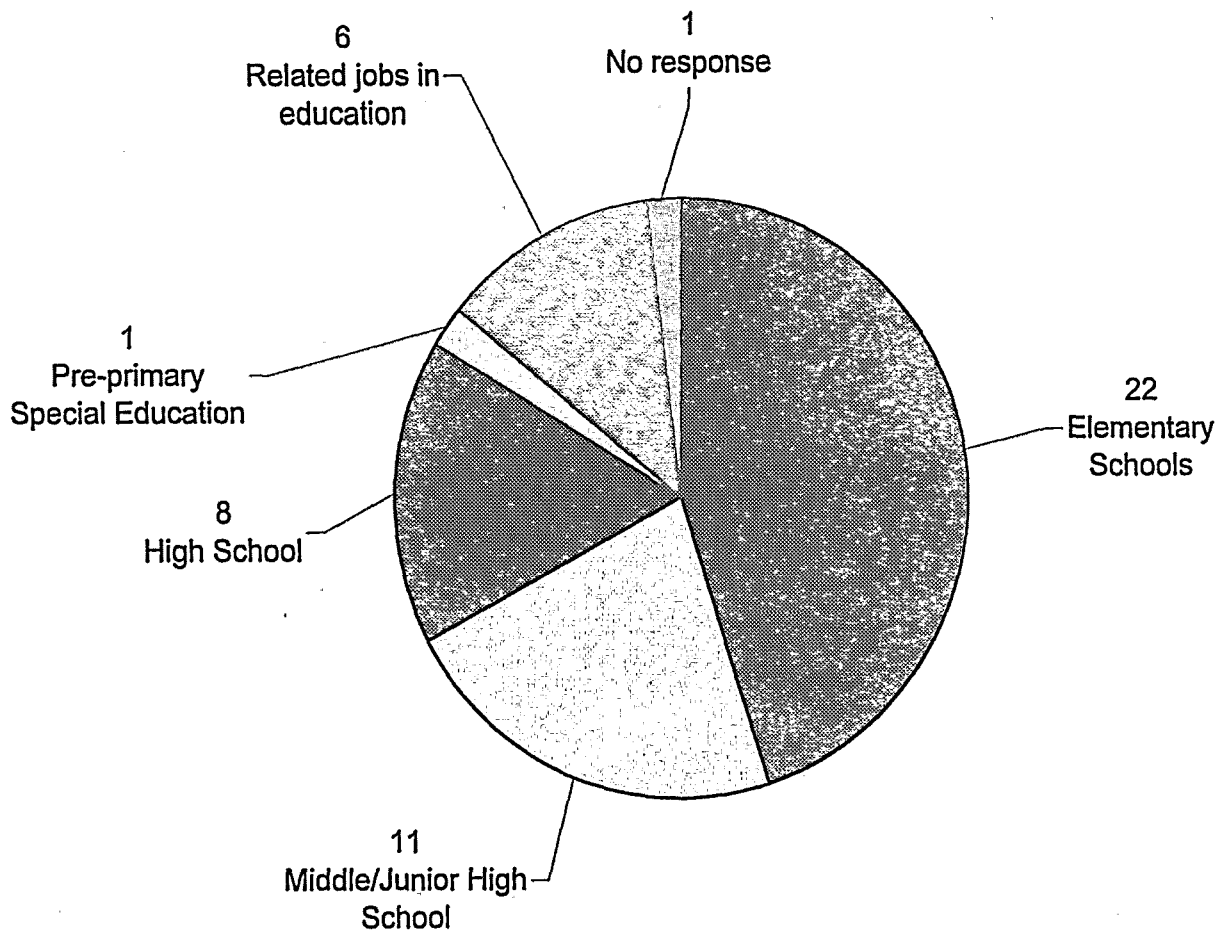


FIGURE 4. Place of employment.

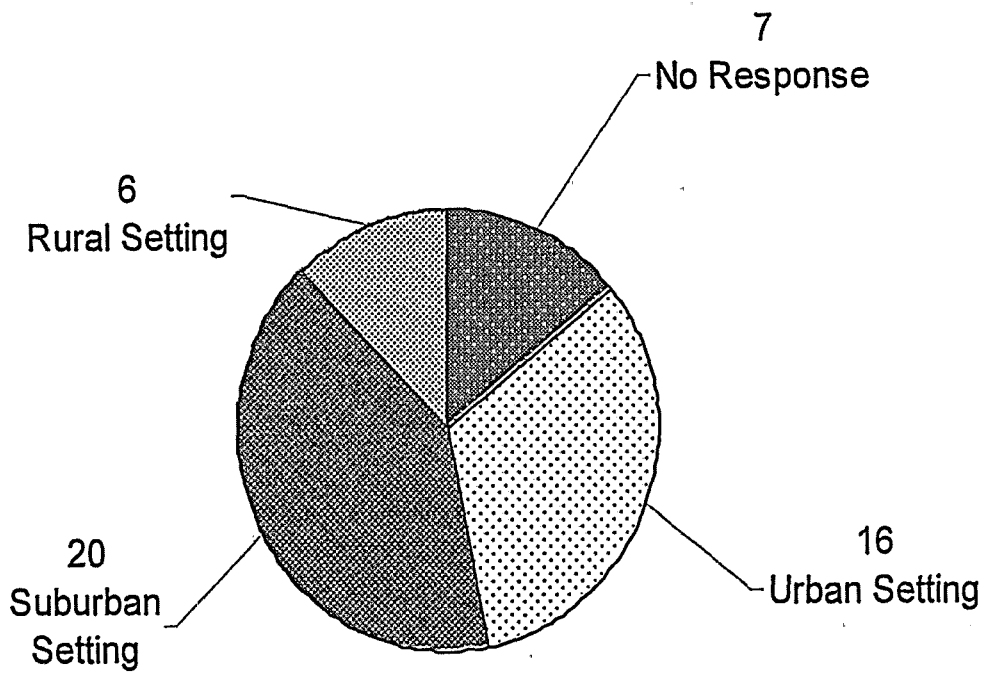


FIGURE 5. Work setting.

TABLE 1. Major Themes and Subthemes Resulting From the Data Analysis

Major themes	Subthemes
Relationships between paraprofessionals and parents/students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighborhood • Availability and accessibility • Communication • Discipline versus support • Trust, faith, and appreciation
Paraprofessional as a connector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between parents and teachers • Between students and teachers • Among students • Between students and parents • Between families and community/social services • Between students and curriculum
Work environment issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect, trust, and appreciation • Undefined role • Inappropriate responsibilities • Lack of training

professionals from interacting freely with parents and students. Another participant strongly objected to the school's instructions to avoid contact with students and their families in public:

No, you [school authorities] do not tell me I cannot speak to a child when I'm at the store because I am trying to build up a rapport with that child . . . and get some trust built. . . . Don't tell me I cannot speak to that child because it's just devastating to them to not be acknowledged, especially if they're on the low end of the totem pole in education. . . . And when they come running and take your hand, what are you supposed to do? Push them away. . . . No, you can't deny them.

Nods from the rest of the group clearly indicated that they agreed.

Many participants expressed that due to school policies around confidentiality, their friendships with their neighbors have been affected. One participant shared the following:

When it's my daughter's best friend, and you are friends with the parents . . . they're looking to you as a friend to tell information that you cannot legally tell them. And it's hard to make them understand that I cannot divulge this information; it's confidentiality and I could lose my job over it. A lot of people don't understand that. So it is inhibiting to have the friendships, the relationships.

In contrast to the views of some of the paraprofessionals presented above, others expressed that they had not faced any problems establishing boundaries and handling confidential-

ity issues with neighbors and friends who were parents of students from their schools. One participant shared how she dealt with such situations: "If they [parents] approach me and want to talk about school things, I can honestly say, 'This is not the time and place but come and talk with me at school.' . . . And they normally take that pretty well."

Besides impacting friendships, participants related other disadvantages and inconveniences of living in the same community as the students and their families. One who worked all day at school as a paraprofessional and then directed a before-and-after school program reported that his contact with some of his students continued during the weekend because they lived on the same block and came to play with his own children regularly. Although he admitted that he loved working with children, his frustration due to extended contact with some of them was apparent: "I am moving in about 2 weeks . . . probably about 2 miles away . . . I'm starting to get really burnt out. This is my third year doing this now. I'm 29, but I feel like I'm 45!"

Availability and Accessibility of Paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessionals were more available and accessible to students in the community, as well as at school, compared to other school personnel. One paraprofessional commented, "I get there an hour before the teacher, and I'm with them all day, and I'm with them an hour after they're with the teacher." Another paraprofessional added,

If they have a meeting there [at school], then they [parents] usually request for our presence. . . . possibly because, I think, the kids go home and talk about me . . . I think they talk more about me because I spend more time with them than they do with the teacher.

Paraprofessionals often became the contact person for parents because they were more visible than other school personnel. One paraprofessional explained,

Typically, . . . you can go to the schools and see that we're the ones in the lunchrooms, on the playground, meeting them at the bus, walking them down the hallway, wiping their noses, as truly the support thing . . . I've always been the contact person, and parents just come to expect that as the role.

Frequent Communication Between Parents and Paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals who worked one-on-one with children with severe disabilities who were nonverbal communicated with parents through telephone or in writing on a regular basis (see Note 1). These paraprofessionals reported that they knew the child and parents better than anyone else in the school and that communications originated from both sides. One participant elaborated,

We, [the child's] mom and I, talk on the phone at least once a week. There are occasions where she does call me at home, mainly because something has happened on the weekend or because I had been away for so long. Once, the student I work with had two major seizures at home during spring break on the same day, and so she [the student's mom] wanted to tell me, and she called me.

Another added, "I call them [parents] any time I need them. They call me anytime they need me, and it works out well. I think you need that or it wouldn't work out like it does."

Knowledge of the language spoken by the parents was key in helping some paraprofessionals establish relationships with parents, particularly with those of children who were English-language learners. One paraprofessional explained, "And many times they [parents] come to us instead of going to the principal . . . they [the teachers] ask me to speak to them or make phone calls for the nurse or whoever [*sic*]."

Discipline Versus Support. The participants shared that students often consider the teacher as the disciplinarian and the paraprofessional as the support person. Several participants proudly stated that they were the student's favorite person and said that the students often felt more at ease with them than with the teacher. One participant said, "Kids will shut down to the teacher and will share a lot more with me." Another paraprofessional shared a story about a group of students who would not read with the teacher, but when they were with the paraprofessional, they not only learned to read but enjoyed reading:

We kind of have fun . . . the rules are a little bit loose, and when I get to have the nonreaders, I'd

say, "We're real special over here." We get to create a little bit different environment for them.

Trust, Faith, and Appreciation. Most participants reported that parents were very respectful and appreciative of them because the parents recognized what they did for the children. As one paraprofessional said, "They know that you care for their kids. They sense that. They come in and observe and see it and watch what you're doing." Paraprofessionals reported winning the trust and faith of parents and the sense of pride that resulted. A paraprofessional working in special education powerfully summed up the discussion by saying,

Parents respect and have faith and trust because they're putting their most precious possessions . . . and these are kids with special needs. And parents have trust that you'll provide for their [children's] health and safety and protection as well as all the education. This little boy at the beginning of the year, his mother came in and grabbed my hands and said, "Oh, thank God, I've been praying for you and that you would be the education assistant." . . . The height of my career, too, is when parents of all the other kids, the regular kids in the classroom, say how much their kids appreciate having me in the classroom.

Paraprofessional as Connector

As a result of the relationships paraprofessionals share with parents and students, paraprofessionals are able to act as bridges, links, connectors, and liaisons between parents/students and other constituents of the school and community. Some salient connections that the participants talked about follow.

Paraprofessional as Connector Between Parents and Teachers. Paraprofessionals reported that they often acted as links between parents and teachers. Paraprofessionals who spoke the language of the parents when the teacher did not reported that they acted as translators and provided a much-needed linguistic connection between teachers and parents. One paraprofessional explained, "A lot of them [parents], I can understand . . . so they kind of use me or go through me, and I go to the teacher." Another participant shared how her role as a linguistic link became important after the school established a Bilingual Parents Advisory Committee that brought increased numbers of Hispanic parents into the school: "In the past [we] have had . . . bilingual teachers who are not very fluent in Spanish . . . we have to be the go-between between the teacher and the parent . . . for conferences, we'll sit in and translate for the teacher."

Several paraprofessionals commented that even when the language barrier did not exist, many parents chose to go first to the paraprofessional to discuss problems, primarily

because the parents knew them better than the teachers. Realizing that the position does not authorize them to solve all problems for parents, one paraprofessional shared how she brought parents and teachers together and provided useful input toward resolving problematic situations:

I'm in the classroom with the teacher of the Special Ed. Department, and therefore, they [parents] know if there's a particular problem, they come to me about it. If it gets too deep, I do bring the teacher in to sit with us to talk about it. I don't feel that I have the position to say this is what the answer is or this is how they should approach it, but I can tell them what's going on in the classroom . . . I feel that it's a very important part of my job.

Paraprofessional as Connector Between Students and Teachers. Another important connecting role participants reported having played was that of liaison between teachers and students. This role was particularly important when the students who spoke only Spanish were in classes with teachers who did not speak Spanish. In such situations, Spanish-speaking paraprofessionals acted as go-betweens for the teachers and students. Describing this role, one participant shared with deep emotion, "I translate for the kids, the ones that don't understand English . . . [They] are really in the heart, right here [pointing to her heart], because they're trying to convey a message, and the teacher is not understanding."

Another paraprofessional explained how she helped students who were disheartened by their poor performance improve by encouraging communication between teacher and students:

So what I tell them [students] is to never give up. . . . I get the student to talk with me . . . eventually I try to get them to talk with the teacher because I find out these little bits of information that will help the student work better, succeed.

Another paraprofessional who worked in a behavioral support program explained, "If I know that something is going on at home, [and] if they're [school staff] not aware of the problems . . . I explain what's going on."

Paraprofessional as Connector Between Students and Their Peers. Several paraprofessionals stated that they encouraged connections between children by creating situations that foster positive interactions. One participant worked with a child with autism who "tends to pull very much into himself." In order to get typical students to interact with him, this paraprofessional encouraged children to play with him

on the playground. The paraeducator believed that without her intervention, the child may not have interacted with anyone. Agreeing, another paraprofessional elaborated, "Rather than you helping the student with a problem . . . get a student that knows what's happening . . . [and] help the other student."

Most paraprofessionals stated that when they were forced to deal with difficult situations between students, they utilize problem-solving and resolution skills. One paraprofessional explained, "We get the students talking, get them to shake hands, and the next thing you know, they go out there and play together."

Paraprofessional as Connector Between Students and Their Parents. Several paraprofessionals shared that they are often a link between the student and the student's parents and that they were confronted with situations in which they were challenged to mediate problems between parents and their children. One paraprofessional stated,

My parents come to me when they have battles with their kids and I go kick their kid in the butt! They know I can talk to them and so they come to me. "He's not doing his homework, he's not coming home until late at night, and what can we do?" So I'll go talk to the kid and find out.

Another paraprofessional shared that because of her positive relationships with parents, "they [parents] feel comfortable talking about the problems they are having with their children . . . I let parents vent to me about their child." This participant established a group to provide parents a forum where they could discuss problems they were having with their children. The only man in this focus group presented an interesting perspective. He worked in an inner-city school where many of the children grew up without a father at home and were "starved for male companionship." Because of this, he had been able to establish "a very good working relationship" with the children and their mothers, who often asked him questions about their children's progress and requested he talk to their children about any problems they were having at home.

One participant described herself as "the peace guy" and went on to say, "I'm more pro-student . . . I support the kids mostly. I'd say, 'She or he tried very hard. . . . We have some problems in these areas, and she excels in these other areas'. . . . I'm a peace guy . . . keep the peace."

Several participants who work in special education settings shared that they were especially prone to serving as a connector between parents and children through sharing books back and forth and having conversations to inform parents about the child's day at school. These paraprofessionals expressed that this connector role "benefits the child." One emphasized this point by saying, "I don't see that my job would be possible without it."

Paraprofessionals as Connector Between Families and Community/Social Services. Some participants described themselves as agents who provided information about the community and its resources, such as those for housing and medical services. Spanish-speaking paraprofessionals reported that monolingual Spanish-speaking parents often approached them with requests to make appointments with doctors, dentists, or other social service providers. One paraprofessional explained, "I get the information for them [parents], . . . write it down, and . . . sometimes . . . call and make sure there is somebody there that speaks Spanish."

The participants, in their self-imposed roles as community agent, clearly viewed themselves as meeting the needs of the entire family, as opposed to the teachers who focused mainly on the needs of the student. One paraprofessional explained,

I'm helping them [the parents] meet the needs of the family . . . where to go, how to go about getting housing, . . . and different things like that. . . . I also meet the needs of the children that are not yet in school. For the most part, my focus is the entire family, not just a specific child in school.

Paraprofessional as Connector Between Students and Curriculum. Most of the participants felt proud about helping connect the curriculum to the child by performing instructional duties that helped students learn. One articulated, "Teachers teach, and we help students learn."

Several participants agreed and expressed that they were able to help students learn by providing more individualized attention to those who were struggling. They conveyed that teachers were responsible for teaching all students, but paraprofessionals have the advantage of working with a smaller number of children. One elaborated, "We work more one-on-one than the teachers do. She [teacher] gives the direction, and the children that can go ahead, go ahead . . . we know which ones need more individual help and . . . are slower than the others." When they worked one-on-one with students, they were also able to better meet the individual needs of the students. As one explained, "Sometimes we can go with a little more thorough approach than a teacher . . . whatever the lesson is." Another explained, "We do one-on-one tutoring with the lower reading-level children in the school . . . if the child wasn't getting whatever it was that we were working on, I try it from another angle." Several other participants remarked on the importance of being flexible and trying different strategies to help the students connect to the curriculum. One paraprofessional stated, "We try various things, whatever it takes, to get them to get the idea or the concept. We are very flexible. We don't stick with one thing because the same thing won't work for all the kids."

When paraprofessionals were asked how they were able to implement instruction in the absence of formal training, they responded that they learned how to work with children

by working alongside teachers. This comment from one paraprofessional summed up the opinions of many: "A lot has come from observing the teachers and working side by side with them."

In addition, one paraprofessional reported that she often found herself in the role of teacher-to-teacher connector. She stated, "I was like the liaison between the ESL teacher and the other classroom teachers, relaying messages back and forth to what's going on in each classroom."

Work Environment Issues

Paraprofessionals revealed several work environment-related issues that helped or hindered their roles as connectors. Respect/status, salary, and a lack of training were recurring themes in all five focus groups.

Respect, Trust, and Appreciation. Some paraprofessionals reported that positive school environments were characterized by paraprofessionals' working as a team with teachers, being viewed as educators, being treated respectfully by all school personnel and parents, and feeling rewarded by their work with children. Those who thought their relationships with other school personnel were positive saw it in the whole culture of the school. One paraprofessional noted,

In our school, everyone is valued, from the custodian to the principal. Everyone is considered the same. If there is something going on, everyone is informed. I don't think anyone feels inferior at all. That's just the way our principal runs our school.

In contrast, some participants reported that a lack of trust and respect from the administration inhibited their connector role. One commented,

Within our building now, the vice principal . . . is going around checking up on all the paraprofessionals. She isn't checking up on the teachers to see if they're where they're supposed to be during a given time . . . But she'll constantly stick her nose in and check up on the paraprofessionals.

This lack of trust made them think that they constantly have to prove themselves with administrators. Some believed that the principal is the one who sets the tone for how they are treated: "There are some who really support the staff, and there is no difference between classified or certified."

Some teachers seemed threatened, paraprofessionals stated, when they developed a rapport with children or when parents came to them instead of the teacher. One explained, "A lot of these teachers resent the fact that I'm there and that

I have some authority and some power. I don't have a degree . . . and I think they feel threatened." Another participant wondered why the teachers felt threatened: "But we're supposed to be a team, all working towards the same goal. . . . And, I choose to be here, I *choose* to be here."

Paraprofessionals expressed that some teachers do not value their work and that damages their relationships. One paraprofessional reported a teacher's rebuff: "We don't want your input; I'm the teacher; I'm certified; I'm the one with the degree." The paraprofessional went on to say, "A lot of them [teachers] don't want to listen to you, they don't care . . . it's their way or no way."

Some participants in the study talked about how their job titles reflect the level of respect they receive from other educators in the district. They commented that they had to prove themselves because they were not viewed as professionals or because they did not have a professional title. One said,

I don't like being called "aide" or "assistant." . . . I'd rather be called a "paraprofessional." I don't even like Para . . . to me that's downgrading. Some teachers make me [feel] equal. . . . But then I've been with teachers that have said, "You are not welcome here . . . you're my assistant" . . . when people talk to us in that kind of language, it can get uncomfortable. (See Note 2.)

Other participants agreed that disrespect is detrimental to their effectiveness. Some mentioned they would like the paraprofessional position to be viewed as a valid profession, one that is as valuable to the school as teachers, principals, and counselors are. They made comments to this effect: "I've heard from many people that being a teacher is having a career and that when you're an E.A. [educational assistant], you're just an E.A."

Some paraprofessionals expressed that low salaries, in addition to job titles, show a lack of respect for what they do. One participant represented the opinions of many participants: "The truth is, if the districts would respect us and compensate us for what we do, that would really be better. Because right now we just have to accept what [rewards and compensation] comes from the kids."

Undefined Role or Inappropriate Responsibilities.

Another problem identified as impacting the paraprofessional's ability to serve as a connector was having an undefined role or being assigned tasks that may be unethical or illegal. Paraeducators reported being asked to serve as substitute teachers, to do secretarial work, to serve as members on district committees, and to assess students. One shared,

I feel like a dumping ground. They give me all the testing when I would rather be in the classroom. I don't mind doing it, but I think they should have a

specific person for that job so that I don't have to give up time with my students. (See Note 3.)

Many of the participants mentioned that they do not receive pay for these extra duties. One complained, "For three years I sat on the Collaborative Decision Making team, unpaid, next to teachers that were paid" (see Note 4).

Others were expected to act as substitute teachers when the teacher was out but were not compensated at the same rate as traditional substitute teachers or recognized for the role. Paraprofessionals reported that teachers told substitutes that everything would go smoothly if they would just let the paraprofessional run the classroom, giving the substitute permission, in effect, to sit back and do nothing. One participant said, "They [the substitutes] are getting [paid] double . . . what you get, for doing nothing. Sometimes the subs will just be sitting there reading a book or something and the para takes over."

The teacher's lack of understanding about what paraprofessionals can do and the undervaluing of their work were other common themes that emerged. One paraprofessional specifically talked about a teacher, to whom she had been assigned, who did not want her assistance and who did not understand how to supervise her: "She didn't want me in her classroom. She didn't know how to use me . . . how to work with me. Most of the time I go into classrooms, and they have me just sit and watch kids do worksheets."

One special education paraprofessional shared that she felt insulted by a general education teacher who thought paraprofessional positions were unnecessary. The paraprofessional was told by this teacher, "The reason I'm not getting a bigger stipend next year is because of people like you."

Lack of Training for Paraprofessionals. Many paraprofessionals lamented that formal training regarding instructional duties, behavior problems, roles and responsibilities, and interpersonal relationships had never been provided. One reported, "They'll hire you . . . toss you into the school, and you just have to figure it out yourself . . . they expect us to know everything and they don't even train us." Under these circumstances, they often drew upon their own knowledge and skills, based on what they had learned by watching teachers and others in their positions, through their common sense, and through their parenting experience. In the words of one participant,

I think you learn as you go. A lot . . . you bring with you, just the common sense, and what you did with your own kids and the involvement helps you. And what I did is I volunteered in the classroom and saw what teachers did.

Lack of preparation for their roles was a source of dissatisfaction for most participants, as one vehemently demanded, "I need more [training]; I want to do more." Some

participants expressed resentment about their districts not sending them to conferences, inservices, or other trainings, although teachers were sent. Participants explained, "They [district officials] say that they don't have money to spend for assistants."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary intent of this research was to determine whether paraprofessionals (from their perspectives) served as connectors to the community and what factors were associated with their performance of that role. Our findings confirmed that paraprofessionals see themselves as community representatives, have close relationships with students and families, and provide cultural and linguistic continuity for students, as others have reported (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; French & Chopra, 1999; French & Pickett, 1997; Genzuck & Baca, 1998; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999; Nittoli & Giloth, 1997; Rubin & Long, 1994; Rueda & DeNeve, 1999). Paraprofessionals reported that they spend more time in and out of school with the students and their families than do the teachers. The relationships of these participants with parents and children were very important and often resulted in paraprofessionals acting as advocates for the parents and children within the school community. Paraprofessionals informed us that parents often approached them first to discuss problems related to their children and the school. Paraprofessionals attributed this to the trust and appreciation parents developed. This familiarity resulted in dilemmas for some paraprofessionals, who occasionally faced situations in which they were torn between their closeness with students and their families and the confidentiality policies of the schools.

In the case of bilingual paraprofessionals, the bond of common language brought paraprofessionals close to the students and their families. This bond resulted in paraprofessionals' acting as interpreters or translators for students and parents when communicating with monolingual English-speaking school personnel. An additional connector role described by paraprofessionals in this study is played by "community agents," who often provide information about the community and its resources to families. Their perception of this role is that they meet the needs of the whole family while the teacher meets the needs of the student within the classroom.

The paraprofessionals in this study reported that they played a vital role in connecting students with other students, just as parents of children with disabilities had reported in another study conducted several years earlier (French & Chopra, 1999). They often facilitated positive interactions and mediated problems between students by playing the role of peacemaker.

This study found that another connection paraprofessionals made by acting as a tutor was between students and the curriculum. Other researchers have reported similar find-

ings in the recent past (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; French & Chopra, 1999; Stahl & Lorenz, 1995). Based on what we learned in this study and from previous evidence (Rueda & DeNeve, 1999), paraprofessionals often possess unique skills that help them know the students in a way that helps students learn. These unique skills are often the result of paraprofessionals' spending more time with the students, knowing them from the community, and sometimes sharing the same culture and language.

The study also revealed that conditions within school culture often inhibit a paraprofessional's ability to act as a connector. Some paraprofessionals felt undervalued, underpaid, or mistrusted by school professionals and administrators who did not understand the potentially valuable contributions paraprofessionals make to their classrooms and schools. Other researchers have raised issues of a lack of respect and pay for paraprofessionals (French & Chopra, 1999; French & Pickett, 1997; Logue, 1993; Passaro, Pickett, Latham, & HongBo, 1991; Stahl & Lorenz, 1995). Consistent with previous research, this study highlights the fact that some teachers do not appreciate or know how to work effectively with paraprofessionals (Escudero & Sears, 1982; Frank, Keith, & Steil, 1988; Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996; Hofmeister, 1993; Orlikow, 1995).

Paraprofessionals in our study expressed resentment about being assigned additional duties that were outside of their roles and responsibilities, such as sitting on accountability committees and serving as substitute teachers. Sometimes these duties were assigned without any extra financial compensation to already underpaid personnel. Another work environment-related aspect that is a matter of concern for paraprofessionals is a lack of training for their responsibilities. This concern has been a focus for other authors (French & Pickett, 1997; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997). The paraprofessionals in this study realized that training is vital in preparing them for their jobs more effectively but resent that their schools and district administrations typically do not provide support in this regard. Although paraprofessionals see themselves as connectors who impact children, parents, classrooms, and school communities, factors within the school system sometimes inhibit them from performing this role effectively.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To establish credibility and authenticity of the research, we followed the criteria outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), who asserted, "Terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity" (p. 21). To meet these constructs, we used several strategies identified by experts, including (a) a thick description of findings with participant quotations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Wolcott, 1990); (b) a detailed description of methodology (Goetz & LeCompte,

1984); (c) a peer review and debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988), which was provided by the faculty advisor who oversaw this research and critiqued every aspect of the study; and (d) an "external check" to the research by reviewing the "methods, meanings, and interpretations," which was carried out by one of the authors who contributed to the writing stage of this article (Creswell, 1997).

Limitations

Despite efforts to establish trustworthiness, the study has certain limitations. One possible limitation is that the findings may not be generalized to the population of paraprofessionals because the participants were not randomly selected. The paraprofessionals who participated were self-selected to attend the research sessions and were attending a conference—something they themselves reported as rare. We cannot identify the reasons they attended the conference or why they chose to attend our research sessions. Although numerous findings corroborate the findings of researchers who reported other perspectives, this study presents only the paraprofessional perspective.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Future research on school culture and how paraprofessionals are integrated into that culture would be beneficial for understanding the kind of experiences described by paraprofessionals in our study. Research in areas that would help educators create and reform school cultures so that they are more inclusive and value the contributions of all members of the school community would reveal the practices of more respectful school communities. It is these types of school cultures, we find, that are most conducive to promoting the positive relationships that allow paraprofessionals to play the connector role. How teachers, administrators, and other school professionals perceive the connector role of paraprofessionals and how they enhance and utilize the paraprofessional role in creating more positive learning environments for the students are two other important questions that should be explored.

This study raises many ethical, legal, and liability issues regarding communication between paraprofessionals and families. We suggest that paraprofessional training content specifically address confidentiality issues, particularly in the context of the paraprofessional's connector role. It would be worthwhile to study the risks that result from parent-paraprofessional relationships, in terms of the kind of information and the accuracy of information that is shared between them. Other research questions could address confidentiality policies in schools and how well teachers, as well as paraprofessionals, abide by them. This study indicates that both teachers and administrators would benefit from preparation regarding supervision and recognition of the paraprofessional's legitimate role. Research on programs designed to

help teachers and paraprofessionals work together as a team could inform practice. ■

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AUTHORS' NOTE

Sue Chandler, PhD, and Barbara Stimson, MS, project coordinators at the PAR²A Center, assisted in data collection for this project.

NOTES

1. In some education programs, parents and paraeducators and/or teachers exchange daily information related to the child in notebooks that go back and forth between them.
2. Throughout this article, we provide exact quotations. The terms *para*, *educational assistant*, and *aide* are reported because participants used them. The authors prefer the terms *paraprofessional* and *paraeducator*.
3. Testing is an example of a responsibility that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 deems inappropriate for paraprofessionals. While this issue has not been tested in a court of law, one interpretation would be that it is illegal for a paraprofessional to be assigned testing for purposes of program eligibility or progress determination.
4. We did not clarify whether the teachers were being paid an hourly amount in addition to their salaries or whether the participant meant that because teachers are salaried, they perform such service work as part of their positions.

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